

## The Lost Child

Ricky pulled over too quickly, wincing as his left front tyre bit into the gutter. He switched off the motor which switched off the radio, and sat in a silence marked by the slow ticking of the engine and its lingering stink of petrol. Trying to put his head together. Stupid to feel anxious, rattled, nothing to be anxious about, simply the tail-end of the speed. Hopefully by now he had almost worn the stuff out and could catch a couple of hours' kip after this last shift. Not if he was like this.

He had been up two nights, by design. When he found the envelope at the back of his socks drawer with the three little white pills he immediately rang up the two different shift teams, one for disability, the other for aged care, and put in for the overnights plus some day shifts, before he could think the better of it. It was against the rules but it was unlikely the teams would cross check. They were too flat out. The pills were Jennie's but she was long gone, over a year now. He knew it would keep him going, and it was an inspiration too, a spur to earn much needed coin. It was just that at this point, predictably, he felt like a piece of shit. His mouth was dry, his underarms damp, his head buzzing and he was woozy in the gut. Still, after these final two hours the weekend beckoned: rest and recuperation. He reached into his jacket pocket where, rooting amongst hardened balls of Kleenexes, he found a pellet of chewing gum which he popped in his mouth to work up some moisture. He had just driven from his unit two blocks away, briefly dropping in for a shower and two slices of toast-and-vegemite that he had, with difficulty, washed down with half a can of flat Red Bull.

The clouds shifted and early afternoon autumn sunshine broke blessedly through the windscreen onto his face. He glanced at his reflection, hair thinning, already. Maybe he could use the money to replace the tyres which were now worn smooth. He'd surely be picked up sooner or later. The car hadn't had a service in ages, it was over-revving and the gear shift didn't feel right. But if he wanted to do all of that he'd need to pop another little white pill. Maybe next week, or after.

Anyway, this would be a nice easy one to end the week: Gertrude Schmidt. He hadn't seen her for months—Jackie must be ill or something—a lovely lovely old soul. Hopefully her dementia was steady, the office file notes said it was still only mild, although they were probably out of date and realistically she would have gone downhill a bit. Invariably, after a cuppa and a chat, all Gertrude wanted to do was drive to Cornelian Bay and watch the river and bird life. Easy as. It was warm enough for that today, but she liked going there in the winter too, just to get out he supposed.

He marked the commencement of the shift but sat a little longer. Gertrude's house was hidden by an odd fence constructed of bound saplings, presumably by the original owner. They built everything themselves in those days. Like the other houses in the street it was a Federation—he was

bringing it to mind—big junk-filled rooms with cobwebs looping from the ceilings, but like most of his clients she only lived in one, a spacious kitchen at the back. There she had everything she needed: stove, fridge, heater, a day-couch for sleeping and a Laminex table at which she could while away the hours studying her Lutheran Bible, all in her native German. She didn't like the television, said she was too old for it.

He shifted the gate aside, re-positioned it, it was still broken, walked up the porch, rang the bell and called out her name. Nothing. He noticed that one of the panes in the left front room was held together with packing tape. He rang and called her again. She had to be home. He pushed up through the overgrown side path and looked in through the kitchen window. There she was, hunched over her Bible, miming the foreign vowels and gutturals. He rapped sharply, she looked up confused, then gave him a smile of recognition. He returned to the front where she was waiting for him and she gave him a tight hug.

'Ricky, Ricky, how are you?'

The warm frail body like a bird's. Tears welled in his eyes, she was squeezing them out.

'How are you Gertrude?'

'Oh, alright I suppose.' Her face focused as though she was reaching for a forgotten thread. 'I don't know. Come in.'

The place was an icebox. Stale dead air. At least in the kitchen they had the sun. The kitchen looked orderly—all the framed family photos and other knick-knacks Ricky recalled—but the garden through the back windows was an unruly tangle.

'Doesn't your son come and do the lawns?'

'He's moved to Melbourne. I don't know.'

They sat quietly over big chipped steaming mugs. The tea was strong, good, just what he needed. He checked her over quietly. Some time had passed, but still, her hair definitely looked thinner (what about his own?) and also she appeared to him just that little more shrunken into herself. Yes, she was gradually withdrawing, voluntarily, involuntarily, it was difficult to know.

'Another tea, Ricky?'

'Yeah, sure, thanks.'

But generally she seemed alright, probably in some ways better than him. He scanned the shift notes, Jackie's spidery handwriting. All pretty much as usual. The fridge had milk, eggs and

meatloaf that she made herself. No vegetables, but there were lemons and bananas in a bowl on the table. Oats, bread. No strange smells. She was cleanly dressed, decently groomed.

‘Gertrude, are you up for a walk at Cornelian Bay?’

‘Yesterday a little girl died.’

‘Sorry?’

‘A little girl was hit by a car, in the front of my house.’

‘Here?’

‘She was killed.’

Ricky thought for a moment. Any accident like that would have been in *The Mercury*, the last few days’ editions of which he’d read back to front and back again along with a heap of other crap, *New Idea*, *Women’s Day*, through the long graveyard hours. Anyway, she couldn’t see the road from the house.

‘Are you sure?’

‘A little girl. She was killed. She used to come and visit.’

He looked into Gertrude’s pale blue eyes, her kindly creased face.

‘What was her name?’

‘I don’t know. She used to come and visit.’

Some memory, or fantasy nightmare.

‘Can you take me to Cornelian Bay today, Ricky?’

‘Of course. We’ll just finish our tea.’

‘We walked in the garden together. Would you like some lemons? They’re from my tree.’

‘Sure. I’ll take some.’

‘Come.’

Gertrude rose stiffly, reached for a plastic *Woolworths* bag, and opened the back door. Ricky followed. The garden was terrible, wet grass knee high, windfall fruit covered in wasps. Next week he’d contact the Case Officer, see if they could do something about it. Gertrude methodically filled the bag with lemons.

'That's enough. Thanks.'

He bent down and picked up a bright red, what did Jennie call them? Scrunchies. A bright red scrunchie buried in the grass.

'Here, you must have dropped this.'

'Not me, that little girl.'

She took it from him and turned it over in her papery hand.

It did look like the type of hair-band a girl would wear. Gertrude's thin white hair was always severely pulled back into a bun held in place by a tortoise-shell comb.

'So sad.'

'Gertrude, how did that front window break?'

He already knew the answer.

'That's how I met her. It was an accident. She didn't mean it.'

'Thanks for these. Let's go down to the Bay, shall we.'

'Yes. Cornelian Bay.'

The usual confusion with the house keys, then he eased her into the car. When he switched on the ignition the rock music immediately blasted, affronting them both. He flicked it off.

'I'm sorry.'

'It's horrible, Ricky.'

'We'll go to the Bay.'

Some staff couldn't cope with the dementia clients because of the conversations. When Gertrude talked it was in large jagged pieces, with silent spaces between, and also smaller pieces, which over many shifts you fitted together to make up a series of pictures or parts thereof, something like the huge multi-piece jigsaws that his parents used to play with as kids that now only existed in the nursing homes Ricky had started out in. Of course many of the pieces were missing. The trick to listening was to semi tune-out, not concentrate or focus, and just let the fragments float around in your mind until you could join up a few. You didn't really need to respond, not precisely anyway, for the clients weren't so interested in actual conversing as reliving. And anyway what was most important to them, always, was the company. You simply had to be there for them. Company, and

also a witness. Over time, and with the addition of a few biographical case notes, Ricky had pretty much assembled Gertrude's story.

Gertrude Schmidt had been born in 1931 in the Sudetenland in what was then Czechoslovakia. She was German, as was her entire community. Her father was the local schoolmaster and taught alone at the only school in the area, half an hour's walk from her village. It still amazed Ricky how with many dementia clients, the mind, perhaps in some bizarre compensation for losing its grasp on the present, brought back such incredibly detailed remembrances of the past. One memory sharpening as another faded.

And not just the past, but distant childhood. Ricky was twenty-five but there was no way he could recall his own childhood with the crystalline clarity that eighty-four-year-old Gertrude could and did. She had described to him time and again, in slightly variant versions, the long walk to the school through the starkly different seasons of the year—it was like a fairy-tale for her—and also the various personalities of her family, neighbours and schoolfellows. All long lost to her.

When the Nazis invaded, life went on pretty much as usual, a few deprivations, but with the eventual defeat, the Czechs took their revenge. The German population that had lived there for centuries was savagely driven out. Gertrude's parents and the two girls came as penniless refugees into a camp in Bavaria. First her mother, then her father died of typhus. She was quarantined from her sister, became ill herself, then got well, then was sent to the other end of the world, to Hobart, as a DP, a displaced person.

Decades later, a settled married middle-aged woman with a working husband and two grown sons, she travelled alone back to her village which had been completely erased and built over. Not one building survived, not even the school or the old stone church. It was a Czech housing estate, a decaying communist relic. It would also be torn down shortly. The fairy-tale childhood—the established traditions and community and little apple-cheeked Gertrude securely loved and cherished within it all—existed now only in her conversations with Ricky and the other carers.

In her long life she had moved on from this of course, but now at the end it seemed she couldn't leave it alone. The husband dead, both sons in Melbourne; other than the three weekly visits from the carers, there was nothing to interrupt her mind brooding on what it would. Except for her Bible, which Ricky thought, was probably a further vehicle for brooding in a way, particularly considering the language. Alone with her Bible and her memories Gertrude shifted into a parallel world. *Die Bibel*: a vast compendium of visions, holy men raving in the desert and elsewhere. What did they see and hear? What was he missing that Gertrude knew?

He parked the car, carefully, and the two of them sat looking out at the calm river. It was a popular scenic spot. To the left, the long bushy headland embracing the Cornelian Bay Cemetery that still served Hobart; to the right, the sweep of the Bay past bright boxy boatsheds up to the Tasman Bridge elegantly spanning the Derwent. There was a layer of mist hanging over the water. Sign of cold weather on the way.

‘Do you want to go for a walk?’

‘A walk. Yes.’

He helped her from the car. She had a walking stick, her left leg was stiffer than her right, but despite her limp she set off at a determined pace towards the boatsheds. He grabbed his jacket from the back seat, locked the car and caught her up.

‘It’s sunny now. A nice day,’ he said.

She didn’t respond; perhaps she didn’t hear. And in fact, one of the things Ricky really liked about old people (thinking back to the conversations) was that they never showed any particular interest in him, what he was doing, what he was going to do, all of which presently didn’t bear much scrutiny. Post school he had moved out of home and embarked on a science degree at Tas Uni with genuine enthusiasm, but then had dropped out after only a year and a half. The courses were interesting and the teaching fine but for some reason he had lost motivation. Then there were various jobs and now this one, casual aged and disability carer. A job without much pressure and no expectations, unless he wanted to create them. His present life had no direction or purpose, which was why Jennie had finally returned to Perth, leaving in her wake a mild melancholy that he hadn’t managed to slough off.

‘You’re still a child, Ricky.’ Touching his cheek tenderly as she left.

He had never been to Perth, imagined it full of sunshine and vitality, a sort of fantasy Australia that the Brits might conjure from *Home and Away* or *Neighbours*. He hadn’t had a girlfriend since Jennie, hadn’t had sex, save for the hand-held kind. All this worried him, but not sufficiently to do anything about it. He needed to go back and finish his degree. He intended to, but he just never seemed to get around to it.

Truth was, he could do this job forever, he liked it, but the low pay meant he would never be able to afford a home, or a family. He didn’t have a great deal in common with his work colleagues who he never saw much of anyway. Almost all of them had working-class backgrounds and lived in the northern suburbs, and they all seemed to know one another. It was a female heavy workplace,

but most of the woman were middle-aged plus and many of them were gay. Back when he was with Jennie he had made a bit of an effort, kept up, got together with old mates and their partners for drinks and films. After she left all his school and Uni friends seemed to drop away. Nobody rang him because he didn't ring. Except for occasional dinners at the family home across the river at Lindisfarne (where he endured the rote family criticisms), he was now basically living an isolated life. Just like his clients.

Gertrude was heading for an aluminium bench. She sat with a sigh. Her blue eyes scanned the bay.

'It is very still,' she said.

It was. The wind had dropped, the sun shone, Cornelian Bay was picture postcard. Ricky needed to piss, the speed still, he'd pissed not long ago at home. He looked around and spied a toilet block further up the hill behind the boatsheds.

'Gertrude, I need to go to the toilet. Will you be alright here?'

'Yes, you go. I'll sit.'

She'd be fine. What could happen? She couldn't move quickly enough for him to lose her. He hiked up towards the block. It looked fresh and bright but inside was full of filth and graffiti. He went behind it into some bushes and emptied his bladder of virtually nothing. When he walked around the front and looked for Gertrude, she had left the bench. He spotted her at a considerable distance down on the beach. He couldn't see her clearly, he was looking into the sun. She was bent talking to someone, a kid. There was an enclosed playground nearby jumping with kids, their shrieks and cries mingled with those of the gulls. He jogged down. When he reached Gertrude she was alone. The 'beach', hard river mud, stank of low tide, natural but nauseous.

'You were talking to one of the children.'

'No, no, only the birds. We bring some bread next time.'

She was smiling at a family of ducks.

'I thought I saw you talking to a child.'

'Think how happy they must feel, Ricky, flying over the waters.'

It must have been a trick of the light, it was because she'd talked about that child earlier. He was becoming crazy as his clients. God, he felt wrung out.

'I want to go to the graveyard.'

She had never asked this before.

'Sure. Do you want to walk or drive up there?'

'I don't know. We can walk. Ricky, I want to try and find that little girl's grave.'

'But you don't know her name.'

'Her name was Sophie.'

'Sophie.'

'That's right. Let's go.'

May as well humour her. She'd probably tire out before they reached the graveyard.

She set off with her determined limp in the opposite direction onto the path leading up around the headland. Ricky strolled beside her, hands clenched in his jeans' front pockets. Even with the gum his mouth seemed foul. His head was throbbing and he wanted to lie down.

'Sophie had a message for me.'

'What was it?'

'I can't tell you.'

'You don't remember?'

'No, I can't tell you.'

The path rose but Gertrude climbed steadily with the incline. To their right were the waters of the Bay, pleasure boats idle; to their left, the forest, cool and beneficent. Ricky inhaled the resin of the gums. At times it was as if a gauze curtain had interposed itself between him and the world. Then, suddenly, he would feel incredibly raw, exposed; a bird call or a sharp reflection off the water piercing his brain. He only had to hack it another hour or so. Eventually the path levelled out, the bush receded, and they walked into the outskirts of the graveyard. Gertrude started up the nearest row, leaning forward and reading all the graves, one after another.

'Do you have any idea where she might be, Gertrude?'

'No.'

The site was extensive. Did she have a plan? Did it matter?



'Do you mind if I have a little rest while you look at the graves.'

'Of course not.'

'You promise you won't leave the graveyard without me or if you find what you're looking for you'll come and get me.'

'I won't leave without you Ricky.'

'Good.'

She continued on, head bent, and he lay down gratefully beside a tomb on the cool dry dirt with the beetles and ants. God's fellow creatures. As soon as Ricky closed his eyes, he saw a little girl talking to Gertrude in her tangled backyard. She had a child's serious face and was telling something she needed to tell. He strained to understand the words but couldn't. She was ringing her hands together with the gravity of what she was saying. At some point she impulsively reached behind her head, pulled off a bright red scrunchie and shook out her hair. As she talked on, he saw her negligently drop it into the long grass.

He woke. He was cold, shivering. How long had he been asleep? He staggered upright, brushed himself down, looked around for Gertrude but couldn't see her anywhere. He started up the row she had gone. Where was she? There were infinite rows. It was a nightmare. Each time he looked up one he thought he caught sight of a small figure at the end of it, but when he focussed there was nothing. Someone tapped him on the shoulder scaring him half out of his wits. He spun around. It was Gertrude.

'Come Ricky. I have found it.'

She led him to a fresh grave of a young girl. Some awful tragedy. Emily Nettlefold, aged seven.

'You said her name was Sophie.'

'No, Emily. Her name was Emily. This is her.'

*To be continued.....*