



THE LONG SHADOW



Old crimes cast long shadows

ANNE BUIST

'A brooding story about small town secrets and the lies
we tell to protect ourselves.' EMMA VISKIC

The baby killer is going to strike again. Soon.

Five women sat looking at me, waiting. I was aware of the shuffles from our children next door, the ticking of a clock that was three hours slow and the hiss of the coffee urn in the kitchenette. And of my hand, holding the note I was supposed to read out, beginning to shake.

It was my first time running a mother–baby therapy group—my first session. My supervisors back in Melbourne would have said: ‘See, Isabel? That’s why you need to interview participants before you take them on.’

Interviews hadn’t been an option. We’d only been in town a week, and Yvonne, the child-health nurse, with the long neck and darting eyes that reminded me of a chicken, hadn’t been available until this morning.

‘I run a group sometimes,’ Yvonne told me when I arrived at the small house that was the town’s child health centre, set in the narrow road behind the main street’s three shops. Her look suggested that it was she who ought to be running this one, not some jumped-up junior psychologist. ‘The GP and I put this lot together for you.’

She’d taken me through the files—three minutes for each

of four clients and a quick read of the fifth before we'd been interrupted by the first woman, Sophie, arriving with her son Tom. The Sydney law graduate who had married into the Barclay family—sheep and politics. If she was anxious, as Yvonne had indicated, her smile was masking it well. 'Is it okay if I call you Issy?' She didn't wait for an answer.

Yvonne took the children, my own son Noah included, into the room next door, where babies were usually weighed and measured; during my groups it was being turned into a playroom. This left me in the bigger meeting space for the mothers; half a dozen plastic chairs with faded cushions organised in a circle, a few beanbags had been thrown in the corner and a whiteboard was pushed against the wall, one wheel looking precarious. The room had an air conditioner, but it was turned off and the room was stuffy, with a smell of talc, cleaning fluids and mould. My thighs were stuck together; I wished I was wearing my thin cotton trousers from Bali but they were a ten-hour drive away in Melbourne, along with my friends and family. I risked being labelled a wimpy city-girl if I turned on the aircon; besides, the control wasn't in the wall holder.

The start was less than auspicious. The women hadn't said more than a curt hello to each other as they arrived and there was a definite sense of them not wanting to be there. I figured it was my nervousness combined with country wariness of talking about emotions. Later, I wondered if there could be more behind it.

I waited until Teagan Moretti arrived—ten minutes late—before suggesting we all introduce ourselves. Pregnant Teagan. Indigenous; with *issues* according to Yvonne. There was an undisguised message that they went together. It was unclear if the baby's father was going to stick around—

Yvonne seemed to think this was no surprise either.

Starting a group in a small country town was always going to have its challenges, but they kicked in early.

‘We already know each other,’ Teagan said as she pushed a chair back and pulled out a beanbag. She looked at me from under her spiked red fringe and fiddled with the stud in her lip. Her T-shirt, decorated with a hand-sewn image of an owl with round yellow irises, strained over her bulge.

‘What exactly is this group for?’ Kate’s arms were crossed. Reluctant mother, reluctant group participant. A solid woman with muscle to match the baby weight, short brown hair and fierce eyes. Her T-shirt was only half tucked in; she looked like she hadn’t checked the mirror before leaving home.

‘To help us be the best possible parents.’ Sophie, the politician’s daughter-in-law, jumped in before I had a chance. ‘Isn’t that right, Issy?’ Her lemon silk dress—great fit, no puke stains—made me regret the Bali trousers a little less. My post-pregnancy bump still hung over them even though Noah was a toddler now.

‘Motherhood can be daunting,’ I said. Sophie frowned. Did I sound patronising? ‘Fun sometimes but also hard work. Constant demands, and a lot of our own stuff to deal with because things from the past—our own childhoods—come to the surface. It’s a pretty fertile environment’—I tried a little smile: no response—‘for problems like anxiety and depression.’

Sophie took out a notebook and paper; one woman at least prepared to play along. Kate glared—arms still crossed over her chest. Teagan got up to make herself a coffee. My final two clients weren’t any more engaged. Róisín, whose name I didn’t know how to pronounce and the oldest by

probably ten years, curled a strand of hair around her finger; she looked as much depressed as anxious. Zahra, the Persian doctor, appeared bewildered. She had suffered from post-partum psychosis and just returned after an admission in Sydney; ‘Never seen anyone get so sick so quickly,’ Yvonne had told me in a conspiratorial tone. ‘They had to give her shock treatment.’

That was the point where I handed out the pens and paper for the getting-to-know-you exercise. ‘Write down something about yourself, about how you are as a mother, that worries you,’ I said. ‘Something other people don’t know. We’ll put the notes in a bag with no names attached.’ My own note included.

Sophie asked for clarification and then repeated what I had said to Zahra, who I was pretty sure had understood the first time.

‘We all wish to be good mothers,’ Zahra said softly in the slightest of accents, as she bent to the task. ‘And good people.’

‘No names, eh?’ said Teagan. ‘So, could we write something we’d like people to think was from someone else?’ If it was a joke, nobody laughed, but Teagan was already putting the note into the bag.

The first five contributions generated some useful discussion about universal problems. Sleepless nights; the idea of ‘good enough’ parenting that I had contributed. But I was conscious of a growing feeling that something wasn’t right about the group.

Then I pulled out the last note. About the baby killer.

It was surely just a melodramatic attempt to stir up the group—or me. It seemed to sum up where my life had taken me: out of my depth, to places I didn’t want to be. I probably

should have laughed. But I couldn't overlook the possibility that there was a serious issue underlying it.

The silence was becoming awkward. I cleared my throat. Squashed the unease.

'I'm not going to read this one out.' I folded the piece of paper; looked around the room for any indication someone knew what was going on.

Teagan was checking her phone. Sophie waited, tapping her pen on her notebook. Zahra smiled hesitantly then looked down, hands fidgeting with the already-crumpled white top that hung over her jeans. Róisín turned away, distracted by a squeal from the playgroup; Kate was looking at the clock.

'This group is about our anxieties, and about trust. The author of the note has shared her motherhood fear, as I asked, and I want to honour that. But I am concerned that...it falls outside what we can address productively in this group.'

'Not like we can talk about much in here anyway,' Teagan muttered, eyes on the phone in her hand. Sophie shot her a look of irritation. Everyone else was looking at Kate. She kept her gaze steady.

This tension hovering around Teagan: some small-town dynamic? A racial thing? Or just my own anxiety?

'Yvonne didn't tell you?' Kate smiled without humour. 'I'm a cop.'

I could think of trickier challenges to my authority—maybe a professor of psychology in the group—but it was line ball.

'While Kate's here,' I said firmly, 'she is off duty. Short of a situation where anyone is actually at risk, everything else stays in this room. Are you okay with that, Kate?'

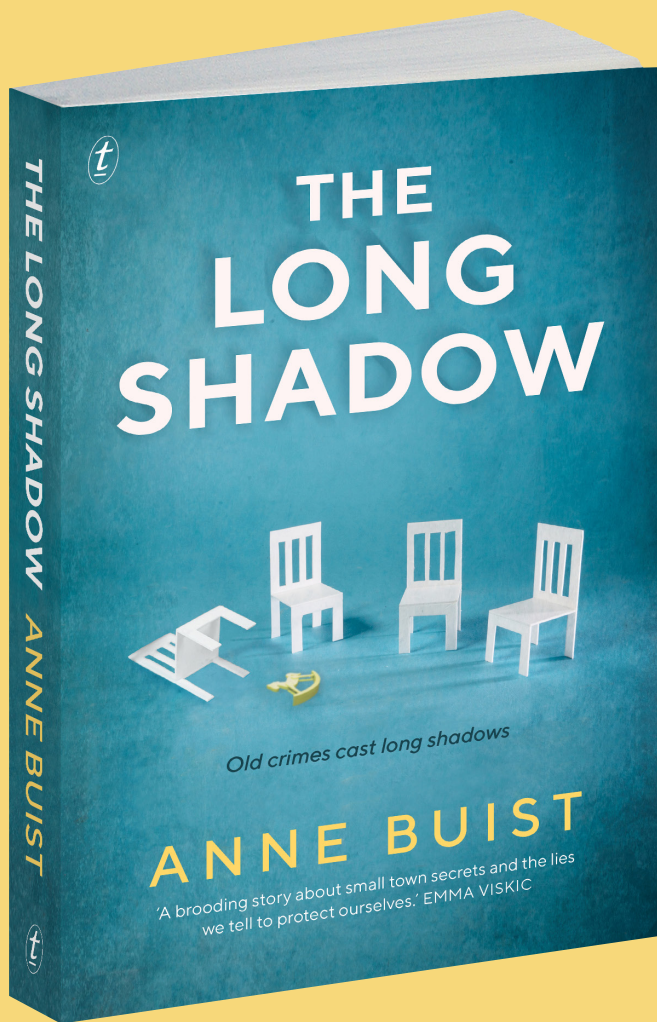
Kate caught my eye. Hesitated, then nodded.

‘If the person who wrote the note would like to talk, I’m happy to discuss it with them in confidence.’ I paused. ‘Okay, moving on.’

I returned to the standard first-group discussion topics—expectations of motherhood, where they diverged from reality and the impact. I set homework: write down any negative self-talk you notice; think of a positive message to yourself and jot it down somewhere you’ll see it often during the day. I outlined a plan for future sessions; Sophie suggested they all take it in turns to bring morning tea, and there was a murmur of agreement.

By the time they left I was exhausted; plenty about the dynamics and individual client issues to work on before next week’s group.

But it was the note, and the ominous *again* and *soon* that dominated my thoughts.



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