

GARRY DISHER  
UNDER THE COLD  
BRIGHT LIGHTS



TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

*for Tony and Helen*

Text Publishing

ON A MILD OCTOBER morning near Pearcedale, south-east of Melbourne, a snake slid over the edge of a veranda on a shortcut to somewhere. Nathan Wright, blearily contemplating his parched lawn from the front door after breakfast, caught the movement in the corner of his eye: a big fuck-off copperhead rippling over his veranda. Heading where? Towards his wife and daughter? Jaime was pegging jumpsuits to the clothesline on the side lawn, Serena Rae on a pink blanket at her feet.

Finding his voice after a few seconds—weeks—Nathan pointed and squeaked, ‘Snake!’

Jaime straightened from the clothes basket and followed his pointing finger. Dropping a tiny pink singlet, spitting a peg from her mouth, she scooped Serena Rae from the blanket and stumbled backwards with a little squeal of terror. The snake slid on, over the patchy grass and dirt, towards a weathered concrete slab the size of a couple of tabletops. No one knew the original purpose of the old slab. The base of a garden shed, now demolished? Chook shed? It was cracked and holed here and there but seemed solid enough and

Jaime had set a garden seat on it, crosswise in one corner, where she liked to read in the sun, shell peas, nurse Serena Rae.

The oblivious snake stuck its nose into a hole that seemed to Nathan impossibly small and began, with a series of long, muscular pulses, to squeeze its way under the concrete. Soon a quarter of the body length had disappeared. Jaime and Nathan watched, appalled. Serena Rae popped her wet thumb and pointed. 'Yes, darling, snake,' said Jaime shakily.

Nathan roused himself from paralysis. A snake living right beside the house? No fucking way. He ran to the lean-to behind the garage where he stored the firewood and garden tools.

'Nathan!' Jaime clamped Serena Rae to her chest. 'Where are you...'

'Axe!'

She gaped, then understood: he was going to chop the snake in two. She watched him vanish, then reappear with the axe, charging the visible half of the snake at a clumsy gallop.

'Don't!' Panic in her voice.

He pulled up, confused. 'What?'

'It could be pregnant.'

Something she'd read, dozens of baby snakes escaping from a severed body, disappearing in all directions to thrive and breed and bite baby humans.

'Plus,' she said, trying for calm—Nathan looked even more rattled than she felt—'snakes are protected.'

'What? Fuck that.'

'And what if the head section comes back out to bite you?'

This seemed unlikely to Nathan, but he hadn't fancied getting close to the snake to begin with, and now it was too late. The snake had disappeared into its burrow.

Still. The fact remained: they had a snake.

Nathan lumbered back to the lean-to and picked up a couple of old red bricks. Approaching the concrete slab as if it was a bed of

hot coals, he skittered across the surface, plonked the bricks over the snake hole and retreated. Brushed the brick dust off his hands and joined his wife, who had withdrawn to the veranda.

She seemed unconvinced by his command of the situation. 'What if there's another hole we can't see? What if it knocks the bricks off? What if it digs another exit hole?'

'Jesus, Jaime.'

Nathan resembled any young husband of the district: a little beefy, lawnmower haircut, baggy shorts and surf-brand T-shirt, a couple of meek tats, sunglasses perched on his baseball cap; given to belligerence when he didn't grasp things. Which happened often enough that Jaime had developed a habit of impatience.

'We need to call the snake catcher,' she said sharply, masking the jitters she still felt.

'Oh for...' Nathan remembered Serena Rae in time to bite off his words; she gazed at him as if she shared her mother's view of him.

'The number's by the kitchen phone,' Jaime went on.

Nathan knew that. He'd stuck the snake catcher's name and number there himself after reading a story in the local paper. Baz the snake catcher advising residents it was going to be a 'good' season for snakes, particularly copperheads, tigers and red-bellied blacks.

'Nathan...' said Jaime, her tone carrying the rest of the sentence.

'Okay, okay.' He stomped back along the veranda to the front door. Christ, he'd left it open. Who knew how many snakes had slithered into the house? Quick glance back over his shoulder: Jaime was still eyeing the slab, jiggling Serena Rae on her hip. Serena Rae was eyeing *him*. He gave her a sickly wave, entered the kitchen and dialled the number. Waited. Gazed over his yard to the side fence and the neighbour's pine trees and the acres of undulating grassland all around him. All of it crawling with snakes.

EVENTUALLY BAZ ARRIVED, wearing a blue Snake Catcher Victoria polo shirt, jeans and heavy boots. A cap shaded his face, his big mitts clasped a long crook. Staring from Nathan to Jaime, he said, 'Lead the way,' as if time were valuable.

Nathan indicated the slab and Baz shook his head. 'Jesus, you're not making it easy on me, are ya?'

'That's where it went.'

Behind them Jaime said, 'Can you catch it?'

'Give me a jackhammer and a Bobcat, maybe,' said Baz.

Nathan stood with him, eyeing the slab, and wished he'd just ignored the stupid woman and chopped the fucking snake in half. 'Shoulda killed the bloody thing.'

Baz turned to him, slowly, calmly, and said, 'Bud, I didn't hear that. And for sure I don't want to hear you say it again. It's illegal to kill snakes. You're looking at a six-thousand-buck fine.'

'I'm just saying...'

'Well, don't.' Baz pointed to the discarded axe. 'Even if you chopped it up, the head section is capable of biting you for a long time afterwards.'

'That's what I *told* him,' Jaime said.

Nathan's meaty hands clenched and unclenched. 'So, what, we just leave it where it is?'

'Mate, if it can't get out, it dies,' Baz said. 'By blocking off the hole, you've in effect killed it. Six thousand bucks.'

'You'd report me? Jesus fucking Christ, what the hell are we supposed to do? We've got a little kid. You're saying we remove the bricks so a venomous snake can roam free and me and my wife and kid barricade ourselves indoors for the rest of our lives?'

Baz, unimpressed with Nathan, was nonetheless a fair man. He had kids. He'd even suffered a snake bite, ten years earlier, throwing his family into a panic. He chewed his bottom lip. 'Okay, this is what we do. You need that slab for anything? Intend to build a shed on it, for example?'

‘You can cart it away for all I care.’

‘I’m not carting it away, *you* are. Or disposing of the pieces once we’ve broken it up, anyway. I’ve got a mate, a concreter, specialises in house slabs, verandas, foundations. He’ll dig it up, no worries. We’ll start at the hole, widen it a bit at a time, enough for me to get an idea what’s under your slab, like a big cavity or a network of burrows. Soon as I see a snake, snakes, I’ll go to work with me hook.’

Snakes, plural. Brilliant. ‘What’ll you do with it? Them?’

‘Release into the wild.’

‘Right,’ said Nathan. ‘And what if your average copperhead has a, I don’t know, a homing instinct?’

‘Mate, there are snakes all around us all summer. Most of the time, you never encounter them. I get rid of this snake, who’s to say you won’t see another one in your garden tomorrow?’

Nathan glanced at Jaime. He sighed. ‘Okay, let’s do it.’

‘Might not be today,’ Baz said, with a troubled look that hinted he didn’t like to think of a snake in distress.

BUT BAZ’S CONCRETER mate agreed to come around mid-morning, so Baz made himself at home—coffee, Anzac biscuits and a chinwag on Nathan’s veranda—while he waited. Had Jaime in admiring giggles with his snake stories, the prick.

Finally a small truck trundled in, grey as cement, Mick the concreter himself a grey, powdery wreck of a man in shorts, a blue singlet and heavy boots, his years of heavy labour manifest in a stooped back and bow legs. He shook Nathan’s hand with a crooked, lazy grin full of sly knowledge. Nathan blushed, quite sure Baz had said something to make the concreter think he was a dickhead.

‘Hear you got a problem,’ Mick said, releasing Nathan’s hand.

‘You could say that.’

‘I did say that.’ Mick eyed the slab and rubbed his hands together. ‘I’ve been laying concrete all my life. Not often I get a chance to rip it up.’

‘Be ready to back off if a head pops out,’ Baz said.

‘Yeah, well, you be ready with your hook thingy,’ the concreter said.

‘Be careful,’ called Jaime from behind the screen door.

Mick gave the other men a sleepy look and walked back to his truck to fetch a jackhammer. ‘I won’t start in the middle,’ he said, approaching the slab, ‘in case there’s a thumping great hole underneath and I fall into a nest of copperheads. I’ll start at one edge, dig out, say, a square half-metre at a time, check underneath, move on to the next section. What do you reckon?’

‘Go your hardest,’ Baz said.

Nathan wondered, prise out each section barehanded? Sooner him than me.

Not barehanded: Mick used a crowbar. And after four half-metre-square sections had been removed, it was clear that a large proportion of the concrete had been poured straight onto bare dirt. Except that as the newly bared edges crept closer to the snake hole, a degree of soil subsidence was becoming apparent under the middle of the slab.

‘There he is!’ Nathan said.

Baz nodded. ‘He’s trying to burrow deeper away from us.’

‘I’ll cut out another section,’ Mick said.

‘Yeah, all right. But be ready to backpedal,’ Baz said. ‘Our boy won’t be a happy chappie.’

Mick cut out a small segment of concrete this time, taking in the original hole. It crumbled as he tried to crowbar it out. ‘Whoever the fuck poured this didn’t know shit about concreting,’ he said, irritated. ‘Too much sand, and badly mixed at that.’ He reared back. ‘Fucking shit!’

The friable concrete had crumbled onto the snake, which tried to strike but was hampered by the masonry on its coils. Baz darted in and pinned the head with his crook. Then he crouched and used his other hand to flick away lumps of concrete until the snake was



free. He picked it up, keeping the whipping front section clear with his crook, and poured it into a hessian sack.

‘Piece of cake,’ he said, grinning at the others.

Who were more interested, it seemed, in a depression under the middle section of the slab.

‘What, we got a whole family of the buggers?’

He looked. What they had was a rotting cotton shirt over a rib cage, and a wrist bone encircled by a knock-off Rolex Oyster.

ACTING SERGEANT Alan Auhl was late for work, saying goodbye to his wife. Time alone with her was rare. And it wasn't as if the clients of the Cold Case Unit were clamouring for his attention.

'If I'd known I'd be performing cunnilingus,' he said, 'I'd have shaved more closely.'

Liz snorted, cuffed him around the ears and yanked on his greying ginger hair. 'Pay attention.'

He paid attention, and later they spooned and dozed until Liz said, 'I need to finish packing.'

Falling into kissing, followed by falling into bed, seemed to happen to them once or twice a year. They'd glance at each other and something—habit, mutual regard, mutual regret, chemistry, the memory of love—exerted a pull. This time Auhl had merely wandered into his wife's room to see if she needed help with her bags. And, after sex, the spooning, the talking, the irresistible slide into sleep.

Later, when he returned from her bathroom, which was along the corridor from her bedroom and study, Auhl found her

on top of the covers, staring unblinkingly at the ceiling. He'd lost her again.

'I didn't so much fall *out* of love with you,' she'd said, tears in her eyes, back when it was clear his general air of distraction and disconnection was never going to change, 'as into a different kind of love.'

Mindful of that now, he bent and kissed her and uttered some banter about the beautiful woman in his bed.

Liz blinked, a flinty intelligence returning to her eyes. 'Last time I looked it was *my* bed. And don't get carried away.'

No. Never that. That wouldn't do at all.

AUHL LEFT HIS WIFE TO finish her packing and went downstairs. Chateau Auhl—three cavernous storeys on a quiet street in Carlton—amplified his footsteps on the stairs and in the hallways. Typically for mid-morning on a Thursday, no one else was at home. Auhl's daughter, and his tenants and waifs and strays, were away until late afternoon.

His bedroom was next to the front door; he shared the ground-floor corridor bathroom with some of the others. He showered, dressed, made two sandwiches and wrapped one for Liz.

And soon she was clattering down the staircase. As she reached the bottom he stepped into the hallway, one hand offering the sandwich, the other reaching to take her heaviest suitcase. She nodded as though both were her due, a lithe, fluid, dangerously attractive woman dressed in a skirt, T-shirt, denim jacket and running shoes. But gone from him now. Distant, untouchable, focused: her mind already on her other life. Even so she was pleasant, almost warm as he carried the bag to her car.

No, she wasn't sure when she'd be staying again.

Drive safely.

Auhl ate his sandwich at the kitchen's chipped and grooved wooden table, Radio National current affairs barely registering.

*Her car heads across town, over the Westgate Bridge, down to Geelong.*  
Auhl mapped it all the way.

AT NOON HE RINSED HIS lunch dishes and walked to the tram stop on Swanston Street. A generalised anxiety rode with him down through the city centre and across the river to the police complex. Liz. The job. The Elphick sisters calling him this morning, as they did every 14 October, because it was the anniversary of their father's death and they were still waiting for answers he couldn't give.

John Elphick, born 1942, found dead of head injuries on his farm in the hills north of Trafalgar, in Gippsland, east of Melbourne, 2011. Widower, lived alone. His daughter Erica lived in Coldstream—a nurse, married to a doctor, three kids—and Rosie was a primary school teacher living with her long-term high school teacher boyfriend in Bendigo. All had alibis. None had financial woes. No gambling or drug debts, no iffy friends, no secrets that investigating police could find. Besides, Elphick had bequeathed the farm to the Red Cross with his daughters' blessing.

His friends and neighbours also had alibis. None had a reason for wanting him dead. And without being the life of the district, John Elphick was well liked and reasonably active: lawn bowls, church, an occasional beer in the local pub, an occasional Probus meeting. No lady friend. No young farmhands hanging about or in residence. 'Lovely old bloke' was the general view.

And that was the extent of Auhl's recall. It wasn't his case, originally; he'd been seconded to the team late in the investigation, in the dying days of his marriage and his years in the Homicide Squad. So you could say he'd been pretty distracted at the time. And he'd retired soon after that. Fifty years old, burnt out and sad.

But something about him must have appealed to Erica and Rosie because every 14 October, they'd get together and call him. Just touching base. Any new developments? And every 14 October until now he'd been able to say he was no longer with the police. It

hadn't deterred the sisters. Yes, but you have friends in the police, they'd say, you keep in touch. Not really, he'd say.

This morning he'd had to run a different line when the call came. He'd rejoined the police—invited to come back, in fact, ending five years of time-killing. Desultory travel, reading, adult education classes, hopeless and/or disastrous romantic entanglements, a bit of volunteering for various charities.

And somehow the sisters had heard he was back. 'I was just saying to Erica,' Rosie said as Auhl chewed his muesli, 'you're so well placed now.'

*'Extremely well placed,' Erica said.*

In the Cold Case and Missing Persons Unit, to be precise: brought in to free up younger detectives for other duties, mainly. Also valued for his ten years in uniform, ten in various specialist squads, ten in Homicide.

Auhl the retread, expected to run an experienced eye over unsolved murders, accidental deaths and missing persons cases thought to be suspicious. Identify those that might now be solved with the benefit of new technology. Identify those that had been mishandled or underinvestigated; those in which new information had come to light. Liaise where necessary with other squads, including Homicide and Major Crimes. Push for the retesting of old DNA samples. Have another shot at any alibi witnesses who might have fallen out with the suspects. Track changes wrought by time—a crime scene that was now a car park, for example. A key figure since deceased, disappeared overseas, suffering dementia or now married to the chief suspect.

Piece of cake.

Liz had urged him to take the job. 'You're made for it, darling heart.' She still called him that from time to time. Out of habit, probably. She reminded him what he'd been like back in his Homicide days, a case dragging on. 'Obsessive—in a good way.' Meaning he'd agonise that he'd missed something. That a liar had sucked

him in. That among the dozens of names he'd collected during an investigation, one was the killer's.

'We have every confidence,' Rosie Elphick had said that morning as Auhl drained his breakfast coffee.

'I can't promise anything.'

'We know that.'

'The coroner ruled it an accident, I seem to recall.'

He didn't, though. What he recalled was that Elphick, J. hadn't been ruled a murder.

There was a silence on the line, a subtle communication of disappointment. 'Wrong,' chided Erica gently. 'The coroner was quite equivocal.'

And Rosie said fiercely: 'Read his findings again, please, Alan.'

AUHL HEADED STRAIGHT for the file room when he reached the police complex.

Hated that room. Thought they'd find his body in there one day, sandwiched somewhere in the massive compactus. Or stretched out on the floor tiles, one hand reaching, desperate fingernail scratches on the door. Back when he worked Homicide he'd rarely needed cold-case files. His cases were hot, or at least tepid. You solved them with shoe leather, phone work, computer searches and questioning. Now he seemed to spend half his time pulling files—and ancient paper files at that. Since the 1950s, two hundred and eighty unsolved murders on the books of Victoria Police. A thousand missing persons cases—of which a third were probably murders.

Looking this morning for *Elphick, J., 2011*, he rolled four grim beige slabs of shelving to the left, creating a narrow aisle. He stepped in, grabbed the file box and stepped smartly out, half-expecting the shelves to abhor the vacuum. Would he even hear a warning rumble?

He took *Elphick, J.* to the small tenth-floor room that was home to Cold Case and Missing Persons. The boss was on the phone in her

glass cubicle at the far end of the open-plan room, door closed. One of the detective constables was in court. The other, Claire Pascal, was slumped at her screen with her back to him. Auhl was content to leave it that way. The first time he'd gone out on a job with Claire—a witness re-interview—she'd got in the car and threatened to blind him with capsicum spray if he laid a hand on her.

Dumping the Elphick file box on his desk, he pulled out the contents item by item, scenting the air with a stale mustiness. A bulging file in a rotting rubber band, an envelope of crime-scene photos, crime-scene video. He eased off the rubber band. It broke.

The overview crime-scene photos showed John Elphick on his back in thick spring grass at the rear of his Holden ute, parked beside a wire fence. Closer to, the dead man was heavyside with thick white hair, wearing faded jeans, a flannelette shirt and elastic-sided boots. There were gashes to his head and blood seepage on his forehead, cheeks, neck, shirt collar, down inside the shirt. Auhl thought about that: Elphick was upright when he received the injuries?

Auhl read every report and statement, then turned to the autopsy findings. Elphick had died of massive head trauma. Blood and skin tissue had been found on the roof bar of the ute, which tended to argue against murder. But the pathologist had also noted the pattern of blood flow from head to upper body, and the presence of blood in the cabin of the farm vehicle: he couldn't rule out assault.

And for years now the victim's daughters had politely, gently tried to convince Auhl that he'd dropped the ball back then. 'Inclined to agree,' muttered Auhl now.

'Talking to yourself,' Claire Pascal said, still with her back to him. 'Sad old bastard.'

Auhl ignored her. Name-calling by the youngsters wasn't going to hurt him. He would do what he'd been hired to do.

Next, he slotted the crime-scene DVD into his laptop. Photos were useful for close detail, but a video drew you into the scene. You

walked through it with the videographer. When you worked a cold case, a video was the best alternative to having been present.

Auhl saw a hill slope softened by dense spring grasses, a dam at the bottom, half-full, and four nearby gum trees. Distant hills rising to a mountain range in the north and a broad valley to the south—a vista of squares, stripes, dots and dashes that were roads, paddocks, hedges and rooftops. And now here was the wire fence, the ute and the body. At one point the videographer had stood on the tray of the vehicle, the elevation giving Auhl a clearer impression of the body in relation to the fence and the tailgate. Hope the guy cleared it with the techs before climbing aboard, he thought. Pressed pause.

Another benefit of the elevation: he could see *two* sets of tyre tracks in the grass. Elphick's Holden had arrived at the scene after coming through the gate beside the dam at the bottom of the paddock. The second set of tracks ran parallel to Elphick's, but on the other side of the fence. Whoever made them had at some point U-turned and gone back down the slope.

Auhl made a note: *Check who owns or owned the land next door.*

He pressed play again. The video now lingered over the body, top to bottom, soles of the boots, trousers, hands, bloodied head and torso. Then it took him to the cabin of the Holden. Vinyl, the drivers seat sagging, black electrical tape on a couple of splits. Dusty dashboard, also split in a couple of spots. Worn floor mats. Frayed, grubby seatbelts. Air bubbles under the registration sticker, bottom left of the scratched windscreen. A roofing nail, a paperclip and a few coins in the open ashtray. Owners manual, a 2010 phone bill, matches, a pale blue towelling hat and a pair of pliers in the glovebox. In the console between the seats: more coins, Cancer Council sunglasses, a tiny spiral-bound notebook, a chewed carpenters pencil.

Auhl re-read the reports. The investigating detectives had not mentioned the notebook. The crime-scene manager had. Elphick



had used it to jot down rainfall figures, shopping lists, reminders: *buy firewood, service mower, re-hang the front gate.*

Auhl went back to the video: the notebook was closed, the cover creased, faded, coming away from the spiral binding. He pressed pause and enlarged the image. Elphick had scribbled something on the cover of the notebook. Random letters. A number? The pencil strokes were indistinct on the shiny surface.

He was dimly aware of Claire Pascal's desk phone, Claire muttering and finally swinging around in her chair. 'Oi, Retread.'

'What?'

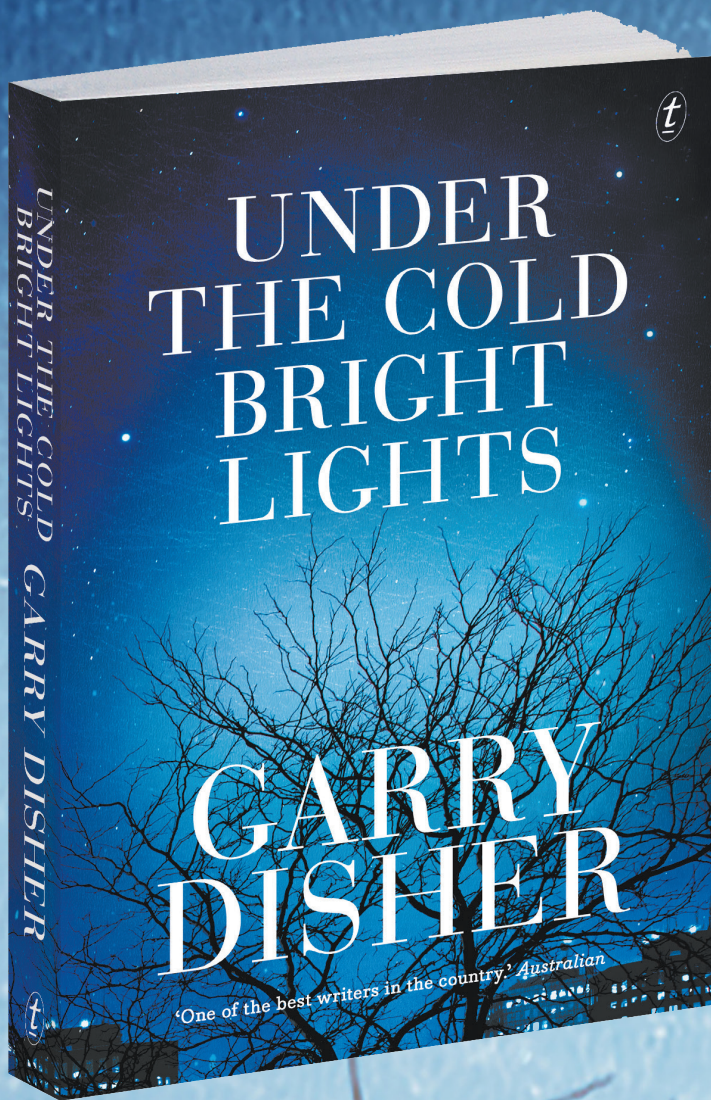
'The boss wants us to take a little trip to the country.'

'Concerning?'

'Come on,' she said testily. 'I'll tell you in the car.'

Auhl stood, shrugged into his jacket, checked for phone and wallet.

Pascal wasn't finished with him. 'Don't forget your Zimmer frame.'



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