

'Disher is a master at controlling his material, taking his readers along the dusty, rutted roads that always pop up when we expect bitumen smoothness. But it's a journey worth taking, for the pure joy of the writing.'

HERALD SUN

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SANCTUARY

NOWHERE LEFT TO RUN



1

IT'S A TUESDAY evening and you're watching *Caught Out* on YouTube. If not *Caught Out*, maybe *Born to Kill?* or *Killer Couples*, one of those. A murder that shocks a small town, the victim usually a young woman offed by her husband or boyfriend, although they like to drag out the reveal. But you know it's a close male connection because he's the only one they don't interview: he's locked up. Meanwhile, you get plenty of screen time with the mouth-breathing parents, rednecks who look too stupid to have had a child in the first place, the victim's shock-and-awe girlfriends,

all lip fillers and smoky eye, and fat cops faking tears and gasping ‘Sorry!’ as if thirty years hadn’t passed since they’d worked the case. Not much in the way of IQ or planning in these shows. Still, you’re kind of hooked.

Hooked on the CSI-type shows, too. Finding a suspect’s car in CCTV footage. Spraying luminol to show blood-spray patterns. Connecting a gun to a crime from firing-pin impressions and bullet lands and grooves, hair testing for poisons, cell-tower pinging used to trace a phone.

And the cock-ups. Some guy jailed for arson because an expert mis-read the charring patterns in a house fire, another for rape because the lab tech spent the whole day testing samples from other cases without changing her gloves. Cases that fell over when it came out that the forensics hero had lied about his qualifications for twenty years.

Caught Out specialises in CCTV. Solving murders where people’s movements—victims, suspects, perpetrators—hold the key. It’s a Canadian show that sometimes looks at cases from other countries. Tonight’s is Australian, so you’re maybe a little more interested than usual.

July 2022: a man walking his dog—what else?—stumbles upon the body of a young blonde in bushland near Tailem Bend, southeast of Adelaide. Alisha Kennedy, reported missing four days earlier. Raped and strangled, her car abandoned in a sports-centre carpark. And here’s footage of the car: as the narrator points out, there are cameras everywhere these days. ATMs, dashcams, traffic lights, above shop windows, bristling on the corners

of buildings, aimed down at cash registers and along department-store aisles.

It's easy to multitask when you're watching a show like *Caught Out*. Emails, Facebook, eBay, the dark web—see if anyone's bid on your lock of the Sydney granny killer's hair. Even sew on a button. Tonight you're polishing your netsuke pieces: a boxwood rabbit, a cherrywood lunar hare and an ivory wild boar. All authenticated, genuine Edo period, and valued by Christies at \$250,000.

You look up. The big TV washes the sitting room with murky colours but the voiceover narrating the standard banal re-enactment is aiming for edgy tension. Not that easy to inject tension into a couple of 'detectives' with bad suits and worse hair looking up at a carpark CCTV camera, then checking out grainy footage on a tiny monitor. It's made on the cheap, this show. Dragged out, too: they could cover everything in ten minutes. You return to the little boar you're buffing with a lens-cleaning cloth.

Here's Alisha on her last day alive, locking her Kia and weaving through a field of parked cars. The time stamp reads 4.38 p.m. Winter. Grey, gloomy, getting dark outside. A cold light drawing in. And here she is again, entering a big hardware barn—a TradeWorks, judging by the logo—and heading straight for the paint section. Tins, brushes, rollers. Talking to a guy mixing paint for another customer. He points to a shelf behind her and she turns.

And here's the killer, lurking at the end of the aisle. An opportunistic killer in this case, a stranger.

As if to reinforce that, the show jumps to Alisha's boyfriend, then her father, her uncle and a handful of old boyfriends, none of them currently doing time. All with alibis, all choking up as they pour on the clichés: 'So much to live for.' 'Just a beautiful soul.'

Now here she is again, reading the label on a paint tin tilted in her hands. And here's her killer, watching from behind a stand of colour charts.

But this is a solved-by-CCTV show, and it's leaning hard on CCTV footage it doesn't have enough of. Let's go back forty-five minutes to Alisha leaving work—a primary school—and driving along a high street. She steers into the TradeWorks carpark again. Locks up and weaves through the cars again. Now a twelve-minute jump forward: the killer's black Dodge Ram pulls in. He hasn't followed her here. He's just randomly prowling at this stage.

See him sidle his way through the parked cars too. A stocky, bearded guy in jeans, a hoodie and a beanie. You couldn't pick him in a line-up, the camera's too far away.

Now he's on another camera as he enters the shop and pauses for a moment. A clearer shot now, and faintly comical because two other young women, potential prey, are just leaving, one passing each side of him. *You can almost see him thinking*, breathes the voiceover. *Have I left it too late?*

Cut to the 'detectives' still peering at the monitor, tracking his every move. Up and down aisles, fingering a shovel, a sander, a wheelbarrow. A counterfeit of casual

browsing, except that a couple of times he goes very still. He's spotted a potential victim. *You can almost see his growing excitement.*

But these women are going to be lucky. One is joined by a kid in school uniform, another by her husband or boyfriend. The killer veers away.

Now he's wandered into a broad display space dotted with portable barbecues and outdoor furniture. We see a slender young woman testing a recliner, a deckchair, a garden bench. The killer lurks, one hand feeling the quality of a roll of sailcloth. He's only five metres from her. *With the scent in his nostrils, you can almost feel the cruel heat in him.*

Caught Out has no aversion to the bleeding obvious.

Uh, oh. The slender woman is hailing a male staff member who takes her around the corner to an aisle full of garden equipment. She pushes a hand mower experimentally to and fro. She nods, and the staff member delivers it to the cash register for her. *She doesn't know what a close call she just had.*

And so the beanie-clad killer swerves away again and resumes his prowling. Up one aisle, down another. Out to the gardening section—he hunches his shoulders against the chilly air—then back on the hunt indoors.

That's when he sees Alisha Kennedy in the paint section. *She has less than one hour to live.*

But you don't give a shit about Alisha Kennedy. She's not real. None of them are, these true-crime victims. You

have no stake in who they were or what they went through.

Right now, you give a shit about the woman who bought the mower, not knowing how lucky she was. You lean forward with the remote and the boxwood rabbit topples gently from your lap to the carpet of your new apartment. You press rewind.

Watch her testing the garden furniture again. You quiver, a sudden jolt of adrenaline. Tears sting in your eyes.

Found the bitch.

2

SHE'D BEEN CALLING herself Grace for a while now. Too long, probably. She'd be safer using one of the other names, of which she had a few stashed away, culled from death notices and gravestones over the years. But she'd grown into Grace, somehow. It was a long way from Anita, her name in the orphanage in western Sydney.

'Neet', Galt had called her. Murmuring as his cruel, slender fingers roamed over her. Grace was happy to know she was a long way from him, too. About as far as you could get, really, since he was dead. He'd finally got himself

into a situation where being a copper didn't make him untouchable—she'd left him bleeding out on a sandy lane behind some sand dunes and moved on.

Kept moving. A few weeks here, a few months there, in places where she'd stashed small caches of safety-net funds over the years. Trying to look like just another citizen wherever she went. Act like one. *Become* one. But every time, something happened. She might run out of money, or her old habits and muscle-memories would start to twitch.

Right now, a Thursday evening in June, Grace was in the conference room of a fancy Brisbane hotel for the opening of the biannual Brisbane Stamp Expo, a long weekend of trading and unscholarly conference papers. According to the name tag on her lanyard she was Sue Wilson—a name to slide off the mind; evaporate in the memory. And she looked as plain as her name. In this vast, elegant room of lounge suits and little black numbers, Sue Wilson was lost in a dowdy dress two sizes too big, with hair and glasses a few seasons out of date and huge, distracting hoop earrings. You'd think, if your gaze did hesitate, that she might be the harried personal assistant of a buyer from one of the big firms: Sotheby's or Prestige Philately, for example. You certainly wouldn't think to pause for a chat. You wouldn't imagine someone like her had anything interesting to say about the rationale behind the different areas of focus in rare stamp collecting or the deep appeal of printing flaws to some collectors. She was probably there to fetch and carry.

Certainly no one noticed her as she slipped through the crowd, a champagne flute in one hand, a spring roll and a dab of soy sauce on a paper plate in the other. Motion was important: wallflowers got noticed. People felt sympathetic, or perhaps contemptuous—they felt something, anyway.

She lingered sometimes, peering in at the treasures on display: an 1847 Blue Mauritius; an 1854 Western Australian inverted swan; a mint block of four £1 Brown and Blue Kangaroos. Her fingers itched. She liked stamps—for what they were worth and what they looked like, their beauty, exquisite or humble. And stamps were small. They didn't set off metal detectors and were less likely than gold ingots, jewellery or paintings to be on a register. But she wasn't stupid enough to try for one of tonight's treasures. They had cameras, sensors, alarms, unbreakable glass—the works. And guards, big Islanders in black suits and earpieces occupied every corner of the vast room. They were watching restlessly, and later they'd escort the display stamps to the hotel's main safe for overnight storage.

Grace made another pass through the Hinze Plaza's elegant function room, a place of dim lighting, a soft jazz quartet and cute little hors d'oeuvres. Tomorrow it would be transformed into a few aisles of booths, and the glossy men and women into just another bunch of swap-meet traders. That was going to be the best time to act. This evening she was looking for different opportunities, such as a drunken hook-up or a snatch of conversation related

to a buy or sell rendezvous—some kind of inattention she could exploit. The edge of a room key card or an envelope of \$100,000 stamps glimpsed in the corner of a handbag, for example. Her hunger and focus were intense but her eyes didn't betray it and her smile was thin and polite. Unreadable—if anyone had bothered to read it, which they didn't. Otherwise they might have blanched, seeing there an unreachable core and the sense of a mind clear, alert and sceptical. Grace knew the need to hide these things about herself. Knew also that she didn't always hide them well, behind that smile.

She listened to snatches of conversation. Now and then someone would call it a night, another would say, 'Me too,' and twice Grace accompanied these dribs and drabs of expo-ers into the lift and out along corridors, striding briskly as if to her own room. She never used the stairs when she did this: guests and hotel staff look at you twice if they see you emerging from a stairwell. She noticed room numbers, and she was on the lookout for carelessness. At a rare-banknote convention two years ago she'd watched a door fail to latch, waited until the pissed snoring began, then entered and found a briefcase beside the bed. An 1881 Bank of Van Diemen's Land £1 note, and a Second World War Hay Internment Camp two-shilling note with the words *We are here because we are here* concealed in the outer border. She hadn't risked selling them herself, but a fence had given her \$3,000, a fraction of their worth.

No such luck this evening. She spent her remaining

time downstairs, watching and listening. She was prepared to attend each day of the expo: she'd forked out a \$450 attendance fee for that privilege, offset by a room in a cheap hotel in Spring Hill. Travelling light, in case she had to make a quick exit without her belongings, and she'd be sure to wipe everything she'd touched before leaving each morning. She took all her rubbish with her. The soap wrapping, the soap itself, anything that might hold prints or DNA. Tomorrow, and again on the weekend, she'd hover in the Hinze Plaza's public spaces wearing a basic disguise of wig, glasses, lanyard, ugly pantsuit and iPad. The part she played was an efficient woman taking care of business—yet still not leaving a trace of herself on a glass or plate. And not wasting emotion, either. She might end up with a 1928 imperforate threepenny Kookaburra worth up to half a million dollars, or a packet of 1970s Queen Elizabeths worth \$10—or nothing.

The room was looser now, everyone flushed and shouting. The heat in them: boasting, flirting, making deals. It was as if an optimum skin temperature had been reached and perfumes, deodorants and aftershave lotions were vaporising, spreading. It might go on for hours.

Then, around 11 p.m., the crowd began to thin until only the barflies remained, along with a few Brisbane locals claiming bags from the cloakroom and calling taxis. Grace didn't want to latch on to a drunk, all grunts and sour breath as she slid a hand into his pockets. There was a time, before Sergeant Galt, when she'd done that kind of

street-brat thing: purses on Oxford Street, lifting iPods on Bondi Beach, trying car door handles and rolling bar drunks.

Poor takings. Simpler days, though. Fewer cameras back then, too.

That amazing year when she was sixteen and had worked the carousel at Sydney Airport arrivals, claiming suitcases as if they belonged to her. The cases themselves—the good ones, Samsonites and the occasional Louis Vuitton—she'd pawned or sold. The women's clothing she'd kept or sold. The men's clothing she'd let Adam pick over.

It was Adam who'd shown her that some suitcases rewarded closer attention. The good jewellery tucked into the hollow handle of a hairbrush. Cash, cards or drugs in secret lining pockets, memory sticks inside roll-on deodorants. And, once, a bearer bond folded into a BHP envelope marked *Your Prospectus*. She didn't even know what a bearer bond was, let alone a prospectus or the significance of BHP, and would have tossed that envelope aside if not for Adam. She let him fence the bond to some guy and was pleased to have the \$500 he handed her later. She knew he'd ripped her off, but that was okay. She hadn't known what she had, or how to move it.

She knew now, of course: Galt had introduced her to the kinds of anonymous-shopfront men who handle bonds, paintings, stamps and coins.

Speaking of airports and luggage: everyone would be flying out on Sunday. If she had no luck here, maybe

she could spot the most smug-looking stamp dealer at the airport and swipe his carry-on?

She was uneasy suddenly. Why had Adam Garrett popped into her mind? Adam, who'd been chased off by Galt? Adam, who'd never forgiven her? Adam, her foster brother from the last of her arid foster homes, on an arid street in Sydney's west?

Because he was here. She was abruptly aware of it. In this room, glimpsed just now through the dwindling expo delegates.

Grace pivoted neatly, stepped out of the hotel and out of her role, then ducked around the museum and into QEII Park. From there to Victoria Bridge. As she went—swiftly, seeking the shadows of the city—she removed and binned her wig, her dress, her snap-off heels. Until, if you didn't look too closely, she was just another lycra jogger under the city's streetlights.

3

GRACE RAN LIGHTLY in shoes not meant for running. Across the river, then left into George Street and right into Adelaide Street, the Brisbane nightlife patchy, teeming on one block and inexplicably quiet on the next. Reaching Edward Street, she turned right again, heading back towards the river, passing through a region of cheap eateries and trying to plan her next thirty minutes.

Know when to walk away from a job, Galt had said, and that's what she was doing—albeit in the guise of a jogger. Halfway down Edward Street, just before Charlotte, a taxi

nosed into the intersection, the driver eyeing her before speeding away. Nothing to do with her on this strip of hard, grey buildings. But it was the fright needed to jolt her from woman with a striving heart to woman with a striving brain.

As she loped on, nearing the Mary Street intersection, she sorted through her impressions of the man she'd just seen at the expo. If it was Adam, he was in disguise too. His hair, for a start. Once upon a time—before it all went wrong for her—she'd loved running her fingers through it, a dense brown curtain that fell to his shoulders. Tonight it was darker, short, conservative—as if he meant to merge with the other young, on-the-make dealers in that crowd.

And his eyes...In her memory, warm, wry, pale blue. Concealed this evening behind chunky black frames that made his bony face rounder, softer.

Bony long legs and torso, too, bulked up tonight in a sharp lounge suit with a black silk shirt open at the throat.

A representative outfit. You looked at the clothes, not the man. Her gaze had probably passed over him a couple of times during the evening. Of course she had been wary of everyone in that room—alert for undercover police, Galt's old associates, or expo staff questioning her presence—but it hadn't occurred to her that Adam would be there. Yet he'd popped into her mind. As she hurried now, keeping close to the shadowy walls, she guessed that something about him must have registered subconsciously as she made one of her passes through the room. That louche

stance of his: head cocked, chin tilted amusedly, one hand in his pocket, the other twirling a glass. Or his voice in the babble of voices. Something had set off a quiet charge deep in the pathways of her memory.

But had he seen her?

Reaching the partial cover of an Australia Post mailbox, she chanced a quick look back along Edward Street. A middle-aged couple heading home from a cinema. Two couples leaving a restaurant. Two jaywalking young women screeching on perilous heels, fighting down their thigh-length hems.

She turned and hurried again, sorting through various scenarios. Adam had recognised her. Adam had not recognised her. Adam's attendance was coincidental. Adam's attendance was not coincidental—he wanted her, and he knew how she operated. Or he was the pawn of others equally ill-intentioned: Galt's old crime-squad crew, even legitimate police. Find her and we'll give you ten grand. Find her or we'll kill you. Find her or we'll throw away the key.

Adam would be the perfect spotter, she thought as she ran. Didn't matter that she was a chameleon, he'd be as good as facial-recognition software at isolating her face in a sea of faces. And he knew the way her mind worked.

A car drew beside her and slowed, the driver leaning to the open passenger window: 'You call an Uber?'

She started violently, then relaxed. The car was a Camry, fairly typical for Uber drivers, but this was a guy

hoping she was drunk enough to pick off. Grace could disregard him, but he gave off a whiff of persistence. She said, 'Let me take a photo of you and your numberplate first,' fumbling in her purse, and he spurted away with a squeal of tyres.

She continued. She had no one to look out for her, only her wits and innate wariness. But there was a time when Adam had looked out for her, and she for him. In a sense, they'd grown up together, twelve and thirteen and placed by Children's Services in the same Bankstown house. Too many kids, too much noise, too many chores. Greedy, distracted foster parents Colin and Eileen. The predators who thought they'd 'just pop in' if Colin and Eileen were out. The sticks, stones and hurled abuse—on the street, at school, in the mall. Everyone knew the kids in that house were foster trash.

She and Adam, close in age and older than the other kids, gravitated to each other. Adam was dyslexic and could barely write, so she'd often done his homework for him—or transcribed it at his direction. He always knew the answers. And he kept the creeps away from her.

By their mid-teens they'd begun to roam at night, later falling in with a set of older kids. Car theft, B & E, shoplifting. An older member of the gang—nineteen—taught them all the tricks. If you're out at night, it's better if you're wearing dark blue than black. Blue, you're out for a walk. Black, you're a thief. And: if you're carrying a prise bar, make it a little one and keep it in a bum bag under a loose

fleece. Not a hoodie, cops hate hoodies. And: don't flash a light around inside a vacant house. Might get a neighbour putting his bins out, someone who knows the owner's not due back for another week.

And then she was arrested.

Detective Sergeant Galt said he'd been watching her; had developed quite an appreciation for her abilities, in fact. But now she had a decision to make: enter the New South Wales youth justice system or work for him. That was easy. He could put better jobs her way—based, she guessed, on real estate and security agent tipoffs—and it was certainly safer to have a cop in your corner.

As for her friendship with Adam? Galt told her that was finished. Adam, slow to get the message, had been beaten up one night. He'd retreated from her, badly hurt. Not just physically. She heard that he'd started gambling heavily. And, apart from tonight, she'd only seen him once since then.

What kind of reach did he have these days?

Grace couldn't really afford to take any chances. Tracing a long, meandering route through the Brisbane CBD to flush out possible tails, she finally caught a cab to a McDonald's on Musgrave Road. Here she sat at a window, nursing a burger and chips while she watched a multi-level parking garage on the other side of the street. She knew Adam might have people in there, staking out her car, but first she checked for street surveillance. She gave it

twenty minutes. Seeing nothing that troubled her—feeling no twang in her bones—she binned the remains of the stone-cold burger and stepped out onto the street.

She headed a hundred metres down the block, crossed to the other side and entered the parking garage via a side street entrance then took the lift to the first level. She waited a while, watching, listening. No new vehicles arrived; none of the parked ones departed. And, behind her, the lift remained stationary.

She began to walk up the ramps, through the second, third and fourth levels and out onto the open roof. Her Hertz Hyundai was the only car there, just as it had been the only car there when she'd parked it at 6 p.m. There were plenty of vacant spots on the way up, but she'd wanted to flush out anyone else with an illogical desire to park under the stars.

Keeping well back, she watched the Hyundai for a few minutes. Nothing moved. She dropped to the greasy floor: no shapes under the chassis. Pressing the unlock button, seeing the parking lights flash, she crossed to the car with the ignition key between her knuckles. She checked the rear footwells, got behind the wheel and, with a succession of little tyre squeals, drove down and out onto Musgrave Road. Here she merged with the traffic and followed it for three kilometres before turning off and taking a long loop north and east to the rental-car precinct at Brisbane airport.

She left the Hyundai in a Hertz parking bay, dropped

off the key and made the long walk out along Southern Cross Way to the parking area behind a motel where she'd left her Golf earlier in the day. It was white, anonymous, reliable. She'd never owned anything flashier, even in windfall times. Remaining on edge, she drove to the M1. Down to Nerang, turning off on Highway 90. There was a constant flicker of headlights in her rear-view mirror as the vehicles behind her twitched left and right on the winding roads, but no one sped up, drew level or switched places in any noticeable way. Whenever the road levelled out, she sped up to just under the limit, locking it with cruise control. The adrenaline alone would have had her flooring it.

The evening and the highway unfolded. Little settlements slumbered behind looming trees, and two hours later Grace slowed for one of those forgettable towns. There was some life at the pub; a two-star bistro was closing. Otherwise the place was quiet, as it generally was. Cruising through to the other side, she pulled in to the kerb a hundred metres past the entrance to a caravan park and watched it for a while in the rear-view mirror. She checked for other observation posts on that street: parked cars; the windows of the houses opposite the caravan park; pedestrians who didn't belong.

Nothing.

She restarted the car, U-turned and entered the park, coasting past the front office and into a network of permanent and visiting vans. When she reached her slot, she

didn't pull in. She drove past, checking this time for any alteration to the configuration of the curtains inside the windows of her rental van. For people or vehicles she didn't recognise, a dark shape suddenly moving in the back seat of a car.

Nothing obvious. This corner of the world was settling in for sleep, with here and there a bluish light flickering, night owls watching TV.

Grace prowled right the way around the park and finally pulled up next to her van. Locked the Golf. Stood with her ear to the van's metal skin for a while, then unlocked the door and stood on the step. Listening, adjusting to the darkness, nostrils flaring for smells that didn't belong: aftershave, perspiration, cigarette smoke caught in the weave of fabric. Finally, she knelt to gaze across the top of a little rug that she kept just inside the door. She'd vacuumed it before she left: no unwelcome visitor had trampled the fluffy raised pile.

Doing all of these things was completely routine, necessary and automatic. It was what kept her alive.