



THE CARNIVAL IS OVER

...THE CARNAGE ISN'T



GREG WOODLAND

'Haunting, tense and unforgettable.' CHRISTIAN WHITE ON *THE NIGHT WHISTLER*

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SEPTEMBER, 1971

Spring had finally hit Moorabool, draping the winter streets and back roads with bright yellow explosions of wattle and creamy eucalyptus blooms. Even the cop shop parking area looked tarted up, with its pink and white magnolias. The jacaranda branches were spreading tentative flashes of lilac over the verandah steps as Constable Petrovic came sauntering down them, heading off to trout fishing or pig shooting or fox baiting, whatever he did on weekends to escape his mother's bad temper.

When the phone rang, Petrovic glared back at it, mouthing curses. Senior Constable Ross Bligh watched him, and grinned at Neridah Wakeley.

‘I’ve got it. Go.’ Neridah waved Peter away and answered the phone while he scurried to his car, never in danger of looking back.

Grateful wasn’t a word to be found in Petrovic’s limited vocab, but if it was, even he would have been. Neridah was twenty-one, blonde, smart and considerate for her age. Any age. Gutsy too. Petrovic would half-jokingly call her Dickless Tracy, and she would half-jokingly wave her little finger at him with a wink and say, ‘Really no need to feel threatened, Petey.’ Which made Ross and Mick laugh, and confirmed their view that the only thing standing between Probationary Constable Wakeley and a successful police career was the fact that she was a woman. And one that was, all said and done, very easy on the eye. Ross, casually observing her slim back and the curve of her hip as she leaned over the counter, thought not even the hideous policewomen’s blues could take that away from her. He heard her call his name. All loose thoughts scattered as he took the phone.

‘Yep? Where? Uh-huh...uh-huh.’ He spoke in his usual steady way. But when he hung up, his big fleshy face was pale.

‘Sounds bad...’ Neridah raised a hopeful eyebrow. ‘Why don’t I come with you? Ross?’

He looked at her lovely bright face, her ambitious eyes. And he thought of Mick Goodenough’s daughter, Cheryl, who was about Neridah’s age. She worked as an intern at ABC radio in Sydney; declared herself a feminist and went on demos with the bra-burning brigade. She called police ‘the pigs’ to her dad’s face, on the rare occasions she saw him.

Thank God feminism hadn't reached Moorabool yet. But any fool could see the writing on the wall.

He shook his head. 'I need you to mind the fort, love. You'll thank me for it—it'd only give you nightmares.'

She gritted her teeth and smiled, 'OK boss,' and he knew he'd done the right thing.

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The stunted scribbly gums stretched from road to horizon, draping the miles in New England olive-green. There was a thin yellow carpet of everlasting daisies either side of the police Falcon and a few patches of new green in the paddocks. But apart from that, Ross thought, the only thing that had benefited from last week's rain was the parasite spreading its tendrils over the branches. It strangled the life out of the eucalypts, leaving twisted grey skeletons that could provide no shelter for livestock and no cover to hold the ground firm against the rains.

Dieback, they called it. It was denuding the land even faster than farmers could clear it. Which was saying something. Committees had formed. Councils couldn't agree if it was the mistletoe choking the canopy or the larvae of the scarab beetle eating the roots, or if it was a two-pronged attack that wouldn't cease until the land was as torn up and bereft as a WWI battlefield. One thing for sure: they'd all concluded there was no political mileage in fighting dieback.

'Fuck 'em,' Ross said as he approached O'Leary Street and threw a right into the side road. A hundred yards from the corner he nosed the prowler up to the ambulance parked

opposite the new Monaro. Checked his watch: four o'clock more or less.

Ambulance officer Jimmy Keynes was slouching, arms folded, mouth down-turned, against the gleaming maroon and black bonnet of Tony Poulos's shiny new GTS. As Ross walked over, Jimmy flicked a grim look at the passenger-side window and ran a hand through his shock of white hair. Ross noted the smears of blood on Jimmy's sleeve and the front of his shirt, then stepped up to the window.

Deputy Mayor Poulos's mouth was open, but not in his usual magnanimous grin. One eye was closed. The other seemed to squint out the window as if surprised, perhaps by the blood-filled hole in his left temple. The flesh around it was peppered with black powder and half-covered by a layer of blood that blanketed one side of his head and neck. Thick red ropes of blood had run down his left shoulder, chest and stomach, congealing into a dark brown pool on the bench seat. With his left arm stretched wide by the rifle still in its hand, and stiffened by rigor mortis, he looked to Ross like some uncommitted Christ who'd tried pulling himself off his cross but had given up half-way down.

The rifle was a Remington 552, a common and garden (or, more accurately, paddock) Moorabool implement. Poulos's thumb was hooked clumsily into the trigger guard, as if trying to shake itself free. Not easy to shoot yourself in the side of the head with a rifle, Ross thought, even a lightweight .22. You'd want a steady arm. And a damn good reason.

He opened the car door, reached two fingers towards Poulos's throat and felt for a pulse: going through the motions.

Nothing there, of course. The skin was firm and cool to his touch. He cast his eyes over the plump youthful face of the late Deputy Mayor of Moorabool and Deputy Chairman of Moorabool Abattoir. The man who would be king...and by all accounts should have been at the next council election, had he only managed to stay alive.

Ross heard a match strike. The ambulance officer sucked on his cigarette and muttered something.

‘What, Jimmy?’

Jimmy exhaled smoke at his shoes. ‘Why? Tony Fabulous? Makes no fucken sense. He’d just throw it all away like that?’

‘Looks that way.’ *Did he leave a note?* Ross wondered. *Family man like Tony Poulos surely would.*

Handkerchief wrapped around his fingers, Ross opened the glove box and used the end of a pen to prise apart the contents: manual, logbook, rego papers, 1970 Gregory’s Street Directory for Sydney. He flipped pages apart. No note. Not in the car. *Might be one at his office. Or at home, for his wife to find. Or not.* Suicides often didn’t bother with notes. Nothing more to say. Nothing to apologise for. Just fed up to the back teeth and wanting out of the struggle.

He shut the glove box and brushed the fat blowflies off the blood. They buzzed right back.

With Mick Goodenough away at the Manilla Dog Show and out of touch until tonight, it occurred to Ross that he would have to call Mayor Streton and break the news. Even if Mick wasn’t needed back immediately, that would put the kibosh on his weekend with the mayor’s wife. Ross wasn’t supposed to know about that, of course. But Eileen Streton

would be required back in town, even though the funeral might not be until next week. Of course, telling the mayor would be nothing compared to breaking the news to Linda Poulos, a prospect he shuddered at.

Ross backed out carefully, avoided touching anything, closed the door with his elbow. It might still be a crime scene and the dees would have a chunk out of anyone they thought had mucked it up before they trampled their big feet all over it. He opened the Falcon's boot, pulled out his Instamatic and started taking photos. He snapped off half a dozen shots of the late Tony Poulos—or was he now the deceased? Victim of suicide? He turned to Jimmy Keynes, who was stubbing out his cigarette.

‘When did you find him, Jimmy?’

Jimmy picked a tobacco flake off his tongue. ‘Quarter past three. Driving home, end of shift. Seen his car. He's in the driver's seat, all hunkered down with his arm out like he mighta been sick. So I slow down and wave. That's when I seen the blood. All over him. Shock of my life.’

Ross eyed the bloodstains on Jimmy's shirt. ‘So, you stopped and...?’

‘Checked his pulse. Nothing. So I left him there and went home to call the Doc and yourself. Then I come back here and been waiting—twelve, fifteen minutes?’

‘Did you think of taking him to the hospital?’

‘I thought of taking him to the morgue. But I reckoned you'd want to see him first.’

Ross jerked his chin at the body. ‘Doctor Fischman hasn't...?’

‘Nuh. That’s her now.’ He watched the car approaching along the windy road behind them. As the doctor’s Beetle rattled closer, he waved her over.

She got out clutching a scuffed brown leather doctor’s bag. Ruth Fischman was tall, well-groomed, about forty, her body all limbs and sharp angles, softened by the kindness in her face, her black hair set in a glossy wave. Unusual-looking, Ross thought, but not unattractive. For a doctor.

‘Doctor Fischman,’ he hailed her. ‘We’ve been waiting for you.’

‘And here I am.’ A cool nod to the two men, Fischman leaned down to the driver’s side window and peered in at Tony Poulos. She clucked her tongue sadly, then walked around to the passenger side, and manoeuvred past Ross. Wrapping his handkerchief around the handle, he opened the door for her. She bent over the corpse, touched nothing, then took a couple of instruments from her bag. She was unhurried and methodical with her procedures, Ross was glad to see. Three minutes later she emerged, snapped her bag shut, and announced life was extinct. *Do tell*, he thought.

‘In my opinion Alderman Poulos has died as a result of an intracranial haematoma caused by a bullet wound to the left temple. There is an exit wound through the skull above his right ear. No suspicious circumstances,’ she declared.

‘Suicide then?’ Bligh said with relief, and closed the car door behind her. ‘We don’t need the detectives?’

She pursed her full, strangely glamorous lips. ‘I’d be more inclined to say death by misadventure.’ She said *dith*, betraying the remnants of a South African accent, softened

but not yet expunged by the five years she'd been Moorabool's resident GP.

'Misadventure.' Ross rolled his eyes. 'What, he was cleaning his rifle in the front seat and it just happened to go off when he leaned it against his head?'

'Stranger things have happened.' She shrugged. 'Perhaps he was getting riddy to go rabbit-shooting, there's no shortage of them out here. We'll never know for sure. But I do kno-ow...' she dragged the vowel out like toffee on a spoon, 'they are devout Catholics, the Pouloses. And I don't think telling Linda her husband committed a mortal sin is going to help her deal with all that she's about to go through. What d'you think, Constable Bligh?'

Being a lapsed Methodist, Ross didn't think much about it at all. But Jimmy Keynes, who to his knowledge was not remotely religious either, nodded vehemently.

'Misadventure then, doctor?' Ross stared in at the dead man, his thumb in the trigger guard, all that blood from the two holes—front and back of his head—flies buzzing around the meaty-smelling interior, and felt his own judgment clouding. She might have a point. And who was he to consign a good man to everlasting purgatory?

'Look, you and I and Mister Keynes know better.' The tall woman stretched herself to her full height, two inches taller than Ross. 'But for the sake of the family, that is what I'll be putting on the death certificate. Misadventure. Accidental discharge of gun. Who's to say it wasn't?'

Maybe Angus Hawley the coroner, Ross thought. He might have something to say about it. But he held his tongue.

Jimmy Keynes let out a cloud of smoke, and a decisive cough. 'I concur,' he intoned, sounding like some specialist flown up from Macquarie Street for his opinion.

'Well, I'm not that sure,' Ross said, aware of the possibility that he was just being indecisive. 'There must be a reason someone like Mr Poulos kills himself? Not like he's the first suicide we've ever had, he'd be the third this year. But I saw him last week. He seemed...on top of the world.'

'We can't know everything that was going on in his mind,' Dr Fischman said. 'Any number of issues could have been troubling him.'

'Eating away at him,' Jimmy echoed. 'Under the happy facade.'

He wasn't looking so happy now, Ross thought. He sighed. 'Well...suppose I'd better go and tell Mrs Poulos.' He felt a surge of bile and gulped it down, under the doctor's scrutiny.

'Don't like delivering bad news?'

Too sympathetic was his problem, he'd heard it said. Too cowardly to give them the news nobody else wanted to give, he suspected. Tough as nails on the outside, Ross, but under his prop forward's bulk and barrel chest he was too bloody soft. 'Not my area. Normally Mick would...'

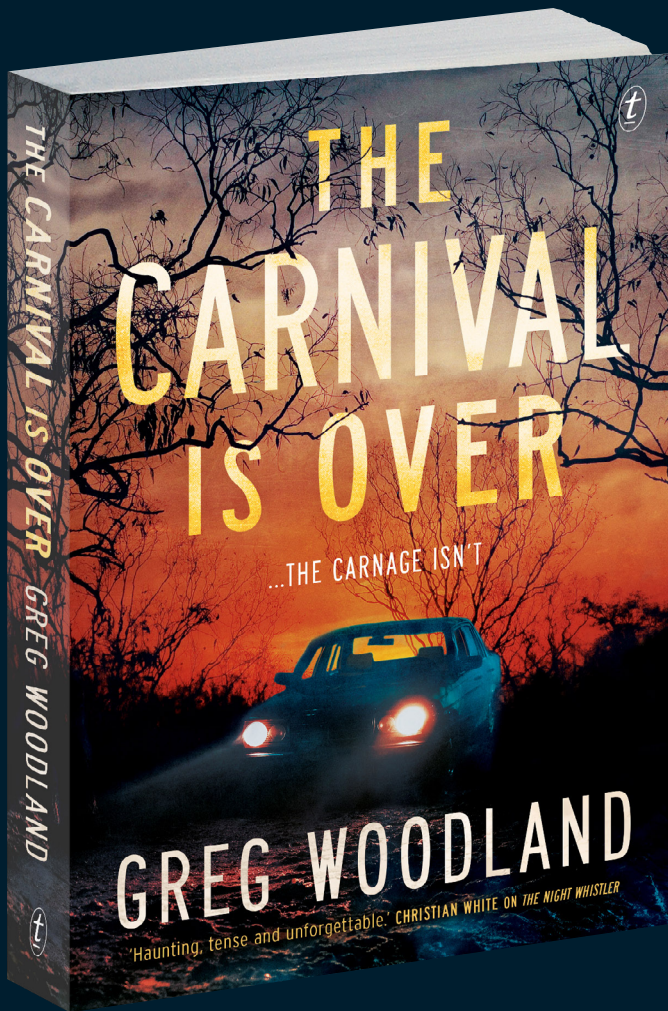
Right. Mick liked that part of the job about as much as Ross did. Same thing: couldn't bear to dump all that pain and grief on them. Petrovic, with his rhinoceros hide, sometimes volunteered, but you wouldn't send him to break the news that someone's budgie was dead.

Ross gave Dr Fischman a look. It softened into gratitude. 'You don't mind?'

‘Part and parcel of being a GP. What will you write in your report, constable?’

‘Senior constable,’ he corrected her. *What business is it of hers anyway?* Except that she was the examining doctor signing the death certificate, and she had just offered to help him out of...

He gazed into the sky. Big clumps of grey cumulus whirling above the azure horizon. *More rain.* He took a deep breath. ‘No suspicious circumstances.’



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