

PENINSULA CRIMES



GARRY DISHER

TWO-TIME WINNER, NED KELLY AWARD FOR BEST CRIME NOVEL

SNAPSHOT

'Crime fiction at its riveting best.'
Woman's Day

On Saturday she watched Robert have sex with four women. She had sex with two men. And now it was Tuesday and she was driving along the highway with her seven-year-old daughter. Sex with strangers on a Saturday evening, driving around with her daughter in the family station wagon on a Tuesday morning: were these the twin poles of her existence? Not any more. Janine McQuarrie had done something about that.

‘Are we there yet?’ asked Georgia in her piping voice.

Another cliché in a life of them. ‘Not yet, sweetie. Bit further.’

She needed to concentrate. The weak, wintry sun was casting confusing shadows but, more than anything, she’d be obliged to make right-hand turns pretty soon. A right turn off the highway, another off the Peninsula Freeway, and another off Penzance Beach Road, which wound in a dizzying climb high above sea level. She slowed for an intersection, the light green. She should make a right turn here, but that meant giving way to the oncoming traffic, which was streaming indifferently towards her, and what if some maniac failed to stop before she completed the turn? She tried to swallow. Her mouth was

very dry. Someone sounded their horn at her. She continued through the intersection without turning.

All those people there last Saturday, as close as bodies can get to one another, yet Janine hadn't expected, sought or found any kind of togetherness. She knew from past experience that the other couples would look out for each other, the wives watching out for their husbands, always with a smile, a kiss, a comforting or loving caress, 'Just checking that you're happy' kind of thing, and the husbands checking on how their wives were doing, 'Are you okay? Love you' kind of thing, even stopping to have sex with them before moving on to another play area. But that wasn't Robert's style. He would never so much as say 'Enjoy yourself' but go after the single women and younger wives, a glint of grasping need in his eyes, and last Saturday hadn't been any different. He'd kept her there until three in the morning, long after most of the others had gone home.

'Mum?'

'What?'

'Can I have a Happy Meal for lunch?'

'We'll see.'

Beside her, Georgia began to sing.

It had taken her husband about three months to wear her down. When he'd first proposed attending one of the parties, late last year, Janine had thought he was joking, but it soon became clear that he wasn't. She'd felt vaguely discomfited, more from the tawdriness and risk of exposure than realising he probably didn't want her sexually any more. 'Why do you want to have sex with other women besides me?' she'd asked, putting on a bit of a quiver.

'But you can have sex with other men,' he'd said reasonably, 'as many as you want.'

'You're pimping for me, Robert?'

'No, of course not, it will spice things up for us.'

Things had been low-key to non-existent, she had to admit. They still were—with Robert at least.

For three months she'd let him think his wheedling and cajoling were seducing her into it. 'You'll meet lovely people,' he said one day. 'Very open-minded.'

That confirmed it: he'd had experience already. She waited a beat and said in a little voice, 'You mean you've already been to one of these parties?'

Yes, he told her, trying not to sound ashamed or evasive but open, honest and a little defiant and courageous. She'd felt a surge of anger, but kept it bottled. He was so plausible, so *small*. Playing shy and a little threatened she'd asked, 'So they let single men in?'

'Some parties do,' he said. 'It costs more, and you're soon barred if you're a sleazebag.'

Robert wasn't a sleazebag, or not to look at. Nondescript, if anything. His morals were sleazebag, though.

'There's no need to feel threatened or jealous,' he'd said gently, stroking her arm, her neck, her breasts, and she'd actually tingled, her body betraying her. 'It forges a deep trust between couples,' he went on. 'It's not just physical, it's also spiritual. A mutual trust. It's a fundamental thing.'

On and on, for three months.

'I don't want to have sex with a boilermaker,' she'd told him finally, knowing just what to say.

He shook his head, the picture of top-drawer gentlemanliness. 'Potentially, you have people from all walks of life,' he said, 'but I'll make sure we attend only the better parties.'

Yeah, those that admit right-wing, think-tank sons of police superintendents, she thought now, at the next intersection, her insides clenching. Finally she found the nerve to turn right across oncoming traffic. Soon the car was climbing steeply inland from the coast and heading across the Peninsula along narrow roads lined with pines and gums, sunless, dank and dripping on this early winter morning.

Eventually she'd let Robert see that he'd worn her down, and in February had let him start taking her along with him to his banal

little suburban orgies. She went partly out of curiosity and partly to get something on him. On the first three occasions she'd insisted they attend as observers—Robert itching to get into it, of course.

At her fourth party she drank a lot first, to convey the impression that she needed Dutch courage—but then discovering to her irritation that she *did* need it. 'Good on you, sweetheart,' Robert said.

To her surprise, it all turned out to be quite erotic. A house in Mornington, lots of plane trees along the street, tall hedges to screen the house from passersby or nosy neighbours. Robert pointed it out to her, and then parked in the next street. 'What we're doing isn't illegal,' he said, 'but we don't want to attract unnecessary attention.' They walked to the house, dressed as if for an ordinary party, and were greeted at the door. Ten o'clock, and most people were already there, about twenty couples and a dozen single women. Janine recognised several of them from observing on earlier occasions. They stood around, drinks in their hands, talking about football, the stock market, who was minding the kids tonight—in Janine's and Robert's case, Janine's sister, Meg.

By 10.30 everyone had loosened up. Jackets came off, lights were dimmed, there was kissing, a porn film flickered on a widescreen TV in a corner of the sitting room.

Soon men and women were in the 'change' rooms, hanging up trousers, jeans, dresses, shirts, and emerging, the men in G-strings, the women in sheer black slips, camisoles, knickers. Janine was accustomed to this by now, after those three preparatory visits. You had to 'dress down' in order to watch.

She drank another vodka, then stripped to her knickers and walked topless to one of the bedrooms, a large room where two double beds had been pushed together. Black satin sheets, candles placed where they cast a suggestive light but couldn't be knocked over, a bowl of condoms and a pump dispenser of lubricant on a side table. Two couples were having sex; others watched in the shadows, fondling themselves, sometimes darting forward to peer at all that moist

coupling. Cruising nicely now after the vodkas, Janine felt desire hit her, a little hot and nasty in the pit of her stomach. She perched on the end of a bed and touched a woman's breast, a man's penis, saying, 'Do you mind?'

It was important to ask and not simply barge in. They smiled. No, they didn't mind. Join in, why don't you?

She still wasn't sure. Most of her wanted to, part of her didn't. Perhaps if she just stretched out on the bed...Time passed. People stopped to watch, moved on to another play area, or joined in. 'Like this?' they asked, 'or like that?' 'Here, or there?' 'What would you like me to do?' 'Do you mind if I do that?' 'What turns you on?' By midnight, that first time, Janine had had sex with three men.

It had been her awakening—though not in the way Robert intended—when, a few weeks ago, she'd found love and excitement in the arms of a man who *wasn't* part of that scene.

She shook off the memory and concentrated on her driving, feeling safer now that she was on Penzance Beach Road. She was heading through a region of sealed roads and dirt side roads, amid wineries, berry farms, craft galleries and more cars than she cared to encounter. And a heavy fog had rolled in from the Westernport side of the Peninsula. She tried mentally to map her way, but she'd never driven this route before. Robert was the driver in the family.

Robert and his bullshit about a higher form of sexual freedom. Right from the start Janine had known that Robert and the others were trying to put a spin on things to make themselves feel better about what they were really doing. 'The suspension of jealousy' they called it. 'True sharing' and 'The highest form of sexual freedom'. Janine, checking out a couple of the websites, had found more of the same: 'All-in-together fun and erotica,' one site said, and featured personal ads aimed at getting like-minded couples together.

The same tone came through in the rules. Of course, they didn't call them rules, but 'etiquette': shower before you arrive; practise safe sex; no anal sex; respect the wishes of others; no means no; ask first

and choose the right moment; feel free to watch, but erotic dress in the play areas, please; by all means have a drink to loosen up, but no one wants to partner a drunk.

Despite the claptrap it had been exciting, that first time, and for a while continued to be. Sometimes all of the elements—the smells, the sounds, the images—conspired to make her really horny. But she'd never felt liberated, alive or sweetly wicked, to quote some of the garbage the others spouted from time to time. None of it had translated into a better relationship with Robert—not that she'd wanted that at the time, and certainly not now, with a genuine man, genuine love, in the wings. It all seemed like hard work to Janine, and she felt contempt, everyone so nice, so conscientious about making sure everyone got an opportunity to enter this, touch that, suck this, stroke that, do this, please, do that again, please. By profession she was a psychologist but you didn't need a university degree to see that the whole sex party scene suited the needs of men, not women, and was symptomatic of fundamental anxieties, like desperately clinging to youth, seeking self-esteem, and wanting to be desired.

It was all about needing to be loved, and that was pathetic and illusory. Robert and his mates needed a good dose of reality, and the means to that had fallen into Janine's lap. Exactly a week ago, the *Waterloo Progress*, a small weekly newspaper, had published a long article on the swingers scene. The editor had apparently attended a party somewhere on the Peninsula and written it up with the blessings of the organisers and the participants. Caused quite a stir amongst the good and the decent who secretly hankered for a bit of spice in their lives. No photographs, no real names used—and that had given Janine her idea. Yesterday Robert and three of his mates would have opened their mail and found photographs of themselves in all of their glory, having sex with women not their wives in front of a bunch of other naked people.

There was no way she could have used an ordinary camera, not even a little spy camera. But a mobile phone with camera and video

facility, that was a different story. You needed to have a mobile handy at these parties, wrapped up in your towel, G-string or camisole, in case there was an emergency call from the babysitter.

A few quick snaps, a few seconds of video, family doctors, businessmen, headmistresses, lawyers and accountants bonking strangers in some ghastly suburban bedroom. Even a few snaps of Robert. Janine shivered with glee. What if she showed them to his father, the superintendent of police, the custodian of good order?

Nah, maybe some other time.

She'd posted one photograph to each of the four men whose faces were clear enough for ID purposes. No demands for money, no note of any kind. She wanted to infect the swinging scene with a bad case of nerves, that's all. She grinned now, like a shark. The fear of finding themselves posted on the internet can't be too far from the surfaces of their tiny little minds, she thought.

Clearly Robert had opened his envelope at work yesterday. She'd had a little fun when he got home, rubbed up against him, felt for his cock, and said, 'Can we go to another party next weekend? I can't stop thinking about it. You were right, it's been liberating.'

He'd squirmed away from her, mouth wrenched in panic and distaste. 'I don't think that would be a good idea,' he'd said in a choked voice, before turning nasty and almost striking her. She'd always suspected that he had a propensity for violence. Robert was the kind of man to kill his wife and plead a provocation defence, and Janine knew there were plenty of other men—judges and defence lawyers—who'd allow him to get away with it. In the end, he'd shut himself in his study all evening. At 6 a.m., he'd flown to Sydney.

Just then her daughter's voice cut in on her reverie. 'Can I put the heater on?'

'Sure.'

It was chilly for early July—meaning a long, dreary winter, Janine supposed. She watched Georgia expertly adjust the Volvo's heater and fan controls, the concentration fierce on her sweet face with its halo of

fine blonde curls. How did Robert and I produce her? she wondered. They drove on through the misty landscape, and eventually Georgia was perched alertly on the edge of her seat, asking, 'Mum, is it far now?'

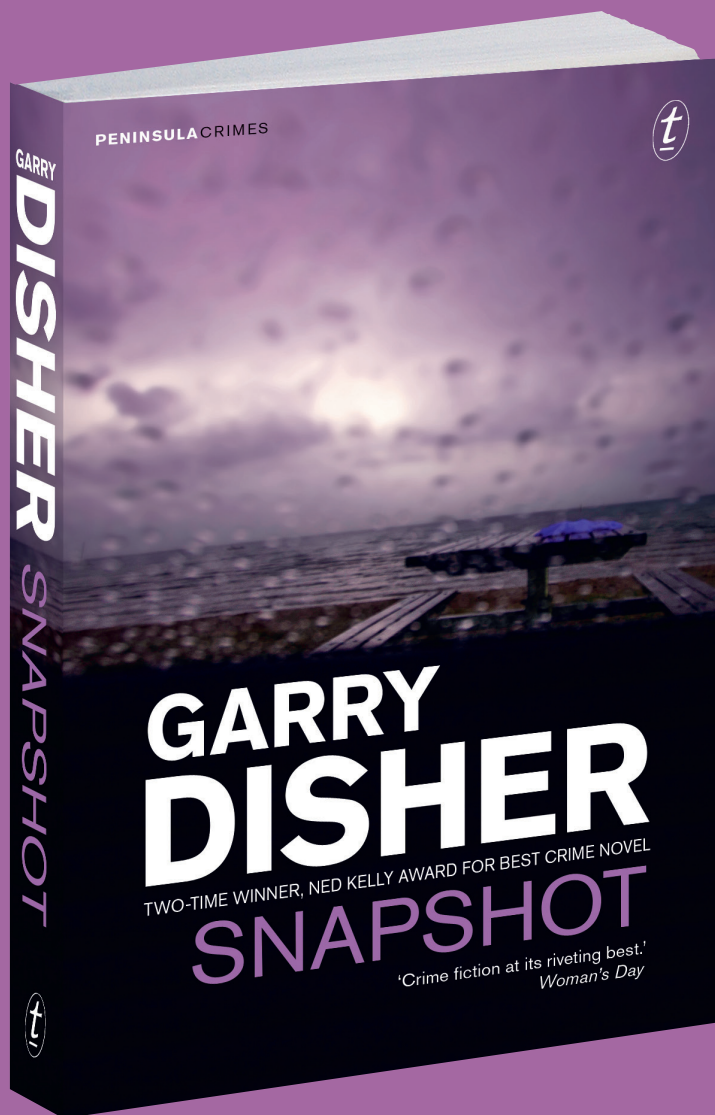
'Don't think so,' Janine said, sounding more confident than she felt.

They were on a ridge road, with milk-can letterboxes every couple of hundred metres, signs for 'horse poo', and dense trees and bracken concealing driveways that led down to houses and cottage gardens tucked into the hillside. 'I think it's this one,' Janine continued, indicating squat brick pillars and an open wooden gate. She braked cautiously, not wanting to alarm the driver of the car behind her. She signalled, steered off the road, and drove in a gentle curve down a gravelled track to a parking circle beside a weatherboard house.

'Look, sweetie,' she said, pointing ahead, the fog parting briefly to offer gorgeous views across a dramatic valley, the sea and Phillip Island beyond. But Georgia wasn't buying it. 'It's creepy,' she said, meaning the grimy old weatherboard house. 'Do I have to wait in the car?'

'I'm sure you'll be allowed to watch TV or something,' Janine said.

She was double-checking their location with the street directory, completely rattled, and welcomed the sound of the car that came in behind them with a growl of its tyres.



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