

'Dialogue so fast and caustic it doesn't leave prints at the scene.' Jock Serong

BLUE HOTEL CHAD TAYLOR



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BLUE
HOTEL

 **brio**
BOOKS

0

I am an old-fashioned reporter. I type with two fingers and mark up copy by hand. I was taught to write stories with a lede: the important information up front and everything else behind. That's how newspapers work: treat every word like it costs a dollar, keep yourself out of the story, file for the deadline and when the story is printed that's what becomes the truth. But life doesn't work that way. In life what matters reveals itself only at the end. Until that moment, you will always be wrong.

1987

1

The first time Blanca Nul died was at the White Stream Tavern, an authentic colonial homestead with an unworn wagon wheel on the gate and a hitching post where no horse had ever been tied up. Although that summer had been wetter than usual, on the Mahurangi Peninsula they had seen no rain for weeks. By ten p.m. the dry air was still and insects were clustering on the car park sign that announced COLD BEER COLOUR TV OPEN LATE BAND TONIGHT. Patrons drinking on the balcony of the Northland tavern said Blanca arrived on foot, her high-heeled boots slipping in the loose metal. As she crossed beneath the illuminated sign her face was white and her eyes were black and her leathers were zipped to her throat. Painted and wrapped in dead skin: the walk had brought her out in a sweat.

Some teenagers were loitering on the tavern steps. As Blanca approached the kids one of them stood and blocked her. The boy held four five-dollar bills. He and his mates had been waiting all night: none of the locals was willing to buy them beer.

‘So can you?’ he said.

‘Why don’t you buy it yourself?’

The boy thought her accent sounded fake. ‘I don’t have ID.’

‘Then you should get some.’

'I'm not old enough.'

'Then you're not allowed to drink.'

'You can get us some. We can pay you for it.'

'But that would be against the law.'

The banknotes felt damp in his hand. 'What do you care?' he said. 'It's just beer.'

'Then just buy it.'

'I told you – I can't.' He wasn't grinning anymore. 'What's your problem?'

'I don't have one.'

'So why won't you help?'

'You do not deserve it.'

Like she was a cop: like she was the one making the rules. The boy was nervous and impatient and all he wanted was a drink and it was late, the pub would be closing soon and then where would they go? She was acting weird, like she had a problem or something. She was just being a bitch.

Her painted face didn't move. 'What did you call me?'

'You heard.'

'No, I didn't.'

'Then it's too late. You know what I said.'

'No, I don't. I don't understand. Explain it to me, why you use this word.'

'Don't you speak English?'

'Explain it to me.'

The boy wiped his nose. He stuck out his chest. He was bigger than her. He was the one in control. But his posturing seemed to have no effect. Her stare was black. He looked back at his friends but they didn't know what to do. A mosquito was buzzing around his face. This was turning into the wrong sort of display.

'Don't look at them,' the woman said. 'Look at me.' Making him turn to face her once more. Letting the moment sink in. 'Say it.'

'Bitch.'

He spat out the word. He thought he was being bold. But as soon as he spoke he realised his mistake: he was doing what she told him. He was losing face. He needed to break this off. He stepped back and she stepped forward into his space and he stepped back again and his heel hit the bottom step. Now he was pinned. He could smell the stranger's breath. She leaned in close and took his hand and squeezed. Her grip was calloused, like she'd been climbing rope.

'You're pathetic,' she said loud enough for everyone to hear.

The boy said nothing. His friends stood back.

Blanca released him and climbed the steps and the crowd on the balcony parted for her like water.

Inside the tavern the mirror ball was making the room spin. Locals were seeing out the end of summer. The cover band was pounding out a real band's song. Dancers were bumping the furniture. The mounted deer's head above the bar was laced with a toilet roll. The queue for drinks was three deep. Blanca waited until people registered her presence and made room for her as people always did when they sensed they were in the company of their superiors.

Two bartenders were on duty. The first shouted what'll you have and Blanca said vodka and he said what do you want with that and she said vodka and he said do you want ice and she said vodka and he got the message eventually. He said so where're you from and she said Frederiksberg and he said he didn't know where that was and she said she didn't care. She paid with a fifty-dollar note which pissed him off. When he returned her change she took his left hand and turned it to check the time on his wristwatch. As she touched him the barman felt the hairs on his neck stand up. He felt hypnotised. She released him and he went back to work.

Blanca remained at the bar. She knew people were watching her and remained in plain view to emphasise that she was ignoring them. The band launched into another number. She didn't need to have heard the original to know how wrong they were getting it.

When she finished her drink she walked out back. Patrons were stumbling around the toilets. The wall behind the public payphone was scored with names and numbers: for a good time and so on.

A local in her second trimester was making her selection at the cigarette machine. The woman didn't see what number Blanca dialled but whoever she was calling picked up fast because a second later Blanca pressed the button to drop the coins in the tray.

At first Blanca said nothing. She held the receiver and leaned back, rocking on her high heels. Resting her feet, probably: you couldn't walk far in those. The other woman was lingering deliberately now, making a show of taking out a cigarette. Blanca was aware the woman was listening to her but didn't care. She cut in over the person on the other end of the line, snapping:

'There's nothing you can do.

'It's too late.

'It's too far.

'Don't even try.

'I don't care.'

The local woman was later able to recall the stranger's words so precisely because Blanca had to shout over the band to make herself heard. But then the song finished and for a second there was almost a silence and the woman caught the sound coming from the receiver in Blanca's hand. It sounded like screaming.

The woman froze. Blanca hung up. The music started again. As the stranger left she leaned over to shout at the pregnant woman that it was foolish for someone in her condition to be smoking.

Back in the bar the energy was unravelling. The band was hitting more bum notes. The dancers were stumbling. The drunks were glued to the wall. Below the balcony the group of teenagers had scored a half-bottle of Ballantyne's and one of the girls was already throwing up beside the steps. The kid who asked Blanca to buy beer was too drunk by that time to recall anything more that might be useful to police or anyone else making inquiries.

The blonde woman in the black motorcycle leathers left the tavern and walked to the car park, her shadow growing longer and more faint against the blackness until it finally disappeared.

It was the night of Saturday, 21 February 1987. Beyond this point, Blanca Nul enters the realm of conjecture.

2

At ten a.m. my hands started to shake so I put the cover on my Smith-Corona Sterling and announced I was going out. Because it was summer, I took my coat. Auckland has a dry season and a wet season and in the wet season it rains.

The pubs wouldn't be open for another hour. I hunched against the drizzle as I walked downtown.

Queen's Arcade was a Georgian-style promenade built in the 1920s. The mall was empty of shoppers at this hour. Mine were the only footsteps echoing beneath the coffered ceilings. My wet shoes sounded like a cough.

Cafe Elize at the far end of the little galleria was a display of everything that could be fashioned from turned wood: handles and railings and pepper grinders and spice racks. Elize was already reaching under the counter as I came in. She topped up my coffee with vodka until the beverage formed a lens.

I carried the cup over to the window. The radio sitting on the turned wood bookcase was broadcasting the news about Blanca Nul. The story was blowing up. A missing person was a headline and a missing woman was front page but a missing female tourist was gold. The international desks had picked up the story in syndication.

Blanca Nul was born in Frederiksberg, Denmark. The *Bladet*-something dug up a photograph of her at a summer island with her parents: an insurance clerk and a bus driver. Their daughter left home aged sixteen. She squatted in red-light districts in Vesterbro, then Istedgade. Then Pigalle, Reeperbahn, De Wallejtes, Malmskillnadsgatan.

The afternoon of her disappearance Blanca booked into the motel in Northland half a kilometre from the White Stream Tavern. The motel had a kidney swimming pool and wraparound balconies and an electric kettle in every room and a sign that read NO PETS. When Blanca skipped her checkout the motel owner called the police to report some foreigner who'd done a runner: he had a couple waiting for her room. The passport in the missing woman's luggage was stamped for France, Germany, Bali, Indonesia and Australia. Her visitor's visa expired in 1984. There was no record of what she'd been doing for the last three years. The missing person inquiry was codenamed Operation Copenhagen. Every spare cop in Auckland had been sent to help with the search.

I sat tapping my wedding ring on my coffee cup. I didn't know anything about Vesterbro but on a wet morning in Auckland it sounded rather exotic.

I had another special coffee. I did the crossword. The rain was falling harder. A young couple under a shared red nylon parka leaned on the window, taking more than shelter. I had a good buzz on now. I checked my watch. I didn't feel like going back yet. I hiked up the collar of my raincoat and ran across the street to the bus terminal.

The turnaround stank of diesel. Commuters were huddling beneath the leaky awnings. Blanca Nul was lying face-up in the front window of Stuart Wicker's Books and Magazines. All the newspapers had run her passport photo on the same page.

I wiped my feet on the rubber mat. There was a plastic crucifix on the back wall and a frame heater, neither of which was plugged in. Alongside the stacks of newspapers were the horse

racing weeklies and *Hot Rod* magazine and *Scientific American* and *Reader's Digest* and *National Geographic*. Romance novels and comics were by the counter.

The store fell silent after the bell stopped ringing. There was more than must in the air. I had walked in on an argument.

Stuart's son Nigel was helping his father load stock. At thirty-five, Nigel looked like his father used to look before he suffered a stroke. The stationer's slouched face left him half-cheerful. As a result of the stroke he was rotten with names but he counted off every title I'd popped in to buy over the years like beads on a rosary.

'*Railway Modeller, Southern Yachting Quarterly, World War Two In Colour.*' Every issue of the *World War Two* thing came with a different part of a Spitfire stapled to the cover. '*Financial Times, Scientific American, Observatory Enthusiast, Gardener's Quarterly, Amateur Photographer, Leisure and Travel, Vintage Caravan, Sky and Telescope.* Dammit.' Stuart snapped his fingers: my name still eluded him. 'Don't tell me. Don't tell me. It'll come to me in a minute.'

Nigel continued stacking shelves. He'd heard this conversation before. He and his four brothers grew up with the business. The first time I saw him working behind the counter he'd come in after school still in his college uniform. Some of the customers probably liked that. Between them and the publications Nigel was witness to a lot of things.

The magazines and videotapes were organised by category: health and outdoors, pin-ups, gay, interracial, hardcore. The bondage titles were protected by clear sleeves: *Xtreme Punishment, Life in Chains, Magazine Sado, Kidnap, The Adventures of Miss Green.*

The labels on some of the videos were hand-lettered. I tipped my head.

'Are these homemade?'

Nigel was sour. 'The correct term is "homegrown".'

But his father was approving. 'Kids make their own movies

now. You need professional photographers to shoot a magazine, and designers and printers – I suppose even someone to write words here and there. But anyone can make a video. Punters love it. Fresh faces, new ideas – it's a whole new market.'

Nigel snorted. 'It's a time bomb.'

'It's like instant photography,' Stuart said. 'People enjoy the intimacy.'

'It's a tool for blackmail. Christine Keeler was a model. Lord Lambton was photographed with Norma Levy. Wilbur Mills was kicked out of Congress after he was filmed with a stripper.'

I was impressed. 'You know your scandals.'

Nigel wasn't amused. 'They kill people on video now.'

Stuart rolled his eyes. 'That's an urban legend.'

'You should have taken it to the police.'

'They weren't interested.'

'Interested in what?' I said.

Nigel shook his head, disgusted. He wanted no part of it. Stuart waved me into the back of the store.

Stuart's office was a little room behind a repurposed shower curtain. The space was furnished with a La-Z-Boy and a bowed card table balancing a mug and an electric kettle. The air smelled of something I didn't want to think about.

The magazine was propped up against a milk bottle. *Brand* was a glossy four-colour hardcore printed on greasy stock. The model on the front cover was dressed in a zippered black leather suit. Her face was painted white and her eyes were painted black and her blonde hair was scraped back. Stuart pointed to her proudly.

'See? It's her.'

'Who?'

'The missing girl.' He wiggled his fingers. 'The Dutch woman.'

'Blanca Nul? She's from Denmark.'

'So's the magazine.'

Brand's publishing address was a post office box in Frederiksberg. The cover model was credited.

‘This woman’s called Krystal,’ I said.

‘That’s a stage name. They’re like Hollywood stars – they have fans all over the world. They do appearances at conventions. That’s how this industry works. But it’s her – Blanca. She looks exactly the same.’

‘Anyone would, with all that on.’

‘That’s what the police said.’

‘When did you show this to them?’

‘A while ago. They sent round some joker. Can’t remember the name. He took all the other copies. He said not to call the press – that’s what made me suspicious. I told them at the TV station.’

‘You called the TV?’

‘I spoke to some woman at the desk. She said they’d call me back.’

‘Did they?’

‘No. I’d remember that.’

I wondered if he would. I flicked through the magazine. The pictures were easier to follow than the words. The protagonist was drawn into a maze of different rooms. Desire overcame its anonymised subjects in English, German and French. I wonder what’s going on here? thought Irene: *Was ist denn da los?* To begin with Elke appeared rather shy: *Au debut, Elle s’était montree réservée.*

‘Collectors will pay a fortune for this,’ Stuart said.

‘Who collects porn?’

‘Porn collectors. All the customers are talking about it.’ He was confident. ‘Why else would the police have taken the other copies if it wasn’t her? I can let you have it for thirty.’

‘Thirty dollars for a second-hand magazine?’

‘I told you – it’s a collectible. I’ve been trying to find someone from one of the papers to tell them. I couldn’t remember your name but I knew you were at the *Examiner*. From a couple of years back. What was that thing you did?’ He couldn’t recall.

I would have liked to have blamed his memory but I hadn’t had a byline for a while. I looked at the faces in the sealed plastic

bags with their wide eyes and glossy lips and skin brushed with oil.

Stuart leaned in. 'Tell you what – I can let you have it for twenty.'

He put it in a brown paper bag so I could carry it back.

3

It felt wrong taking hardcore porn into the library. I pulled atlases and travel guides. Denmark's topography looked complicated. There were four copies of *Copenhagen This Season*: 'Emergency Assistance', 'Museums And Sights', 'Four Delightful Strolls'. Denmark legalised pornography in 1969, the guide noted, reassuring a certain kind of traveller. The mailing address for Brand Publishing was in the east Amager district. *Shortcut to Danish* translated 'Brand' as Danish for 'Fire'.

I tucked the travel guides under my arm. I had some titles waiting on hold: *Napoleon's Marshals*, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, *Essays in Architectural Criticism*, *Practical Hi-fi Sound*. I am a magpie reader. But I also needed something to distract my colleagues from the travel guides and the brown paper bag.

Outside it was pelting now. The rain hitting the *Examiner* building streamed from the mock Greek pillars and the pediment crowded with workers and soldiers in bas-relief and the brass lettering that unfurled the masthead at ta-da intervals.

The foyer tiles were slippery. Editorial was guarded by pneumatic-hinged doors. Merv Tapsell glanced up from under his comb-over. I ignored his stink-eye. The other reporters were all

glued to the newsroom TV. The black-and-white portable was broadcasting a lunchtime presenter stripped of his studio and forced to stand in daylight.

I dumped the library books on the desk and took out my address book. The book's spine was broken. I snapped off the thick rubber band that held it together. The business card for Senior Constable Clark Wells was pressed between the pages like a dead butterfly. I'd written his wife's name on the back along with the ages of his daughters. I hadn't made any other notes. When we first met I was distracted.

I phoned the Auckland central station. On the TV the presenter was keeping a firm grip on his microphone as a line of searchers in high-vis waistcoats prodded the waterline with sticks. The cop on the front desk wouldn't say where Clark was at the moment but I could make a pretty good guess.

Arch Pound was in his office with the door open playing the radio news at a volume to rival the television's. He waved me to sit. The breakfast DJs had gotten through to the receptionist at the Danish consulate and were asking if she thought New Zealand was a beautiful country.

'Where do they get these fucking idiots?' Arch's grin revealed the black line of fillings in his molars. 'They haven't even told her she's on air. This is about to turn into an incident. Is anyone getting this down?' He tipped his head out the door. 'Any of them? Of course not. They're all watching the bloody TV.'

He pulled a bowed notebook from his drawer and started making notes in his impenetrable shorthand. On the bookcase behind him alongside a much smaller framed photograph of his wife and kids was an eight-by-ten press snap of Kiwi crossing the finishing line. Arch's winnings in the 1983 Melbourne Cup were in five figures. Since then his luck had not been as good.

The consulate receptionist was struggling to understand the DJs' New Zealand accents.

'Big story,' I said.

'You think?'

He was still writing notes. I slapped the magazine on the desk. Outside, Merv Tapsell was craning to look at whatever I was showing the editor. Arch wasn't.

'What's that?' he said without looking up.

'*Brand.*'

'Who?'

'It's a magazine. Look at the cover.'

He glanced at it. 'So what?'

'It's her.'

'Who?'

'Blanca Nul. She's from Denmark. This was published in Denmark.'

'Open and shut, then.'

'It'd explain why she was dressed like she was. Who walks around wearing black leather in February?'

'Someone in fashion.'

'What would anyone fashionable be doing in Northland?'

'Showing the place up. Fuck.'

He tossed his pen. The consulate receptionist had hung up before the DJs could cause a newsworthy scandal. On the TV the presenter was pointing at a line of trees. Arch leaned back in his chair and dragged his fingers across his scalp.

'Broadcasting boy up there says the navy are going to dredge the bay. It's only a matter of time before the body turns up and what have you got then? Some missing tourist who fell in the water.'

I tapped the cover. 'Maybe the body is here.'

Arch sighed. He picked up the magazine. He flicked through the pages. He squinted.

'Says here her name's Krystal.'

'It's a stage name. Stuart Wicker's customers spotted the resemblance.'

'Stuart called you?'

'I dropped by this morning.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Bit early for Elize's, isn't it?'

I ignored that. 'Stuart said the cops confiscated the other copies. Why would they do that if it wasn't important?'

'Who's talked to the publisher?'

'There's only a postal address.'

'Write to them.'

'I don't speak Danish.'

'They type this shit in three languages.'

'I want to do the legwork before someone else finds it. I know a cop on the search.'

'What if it's a no?'

'“Police Deny Rumour”.'

'“Girl Looks Like Other Girl”.'

'Nobody else is covering this.'

'Maybe there's a reason for that.'

Arch tossed the magazine to one side. He threaded his fingers and knocked them on the table and leaned forward, examining me.

'How are you holding up, Ray?'

'Good.'

'I mean, how are you holding up – really?'

'I mean, really good.'

'Because if you need a break, you can take one.'

'Why would I need a break?'

'It's been a while since you've had anything in.'

'I've been working.'

'On what?'

'This.'

The radio DJs were telling jokes now. The TV presenter was droning over the noise of a police outboard. Merv had gone back to his typing. The radio flicked to horse racing. The rundown for Northern Oaks was coming up. Watching Arch pretend not to listen made me smile.

‘Who’d you fancy for that?’ I said.

‘Victoria Star’s the favourite.’

‘But who are you going to bet on?’

Arch and I started out in regional newspapers at the same time. He thought he was smarter than me because he was an editor and I thought I was smarter than him for the same reason. His grey smile flashed.

‘Tomorrow – when you’re sober.’

4

I left late-morning to avoid the rush hour. My Honda Accord was dropping water. There wasn't a spot under Eva's Mercedes. The German sedan had been parked on the street for over a year. I gave it a little choke and it started first time.

The Mercedes was a present from Eva's father after she passed her driver's licence. Sitting behind the wheel was like travelling in disguise. Cold War spies said the trick to trailing a mark was to watch people's shoes because it's the one item of clothing a target can't change. Here, it was cars. I kept notes on people's vehicles like names and phone numbers. Reading the make and model is as good as opening a bank statement.

Warkworth was over seventy kilometres from South Auckland but I told myself in miles that was only about forty-five. The skies cleared as I left the city and the heat of the East Coast rolled in. I wound the Mercedes's windows down. Keeping my raincoat on had been a mistake.

The township was tucked in the folds of the Mahurangi River. Summer had dealt the place yellow lawns and faded red iron roofs. The police operation was set up at the local primary school. Marked vehicles were parked on the clay. A TV broadcast van was set up on the netball courts behind a line of orange

safety cones in case someone threw a ball at it.

My armpits were sweating. I took off my raincoat and rolled up my sleeves.

Green tents were pitched on the playing fields. I ducked under the canvas to chat with the volunteers while I tried to eye their map-boards and coloured lists. I did pick up some tattle. Blanca Nul's passport photo was being circulated at ports of entry. Someone heard she came in on a yacht from Bintan. Does anyone speak Malay, I said. We all laughed.

In the school hall a junior constable was setting out plastic chairs for the afternoon briefing but I skipped that. There was nothing to be learned from media events: the slow release of statements was like feeding time at the zoo.

When I got back in the Mercedes the leather seats were hot to touch. I wound down all the windows again for the minute's drive to the pub.

The gravel car park of the White Stream Tavern was empty except for a ute with an empty dog cage in the back. When I braked the Mercedes fishtailed on the aggregate and stalled. I cursed, angry with myself. I'd forgotten how heavy it was to steer. I restarted it and backed up and parked in textbook fashion.

The air was dry but I could smell the ocean. Mosquitoes buzzed around my face. I held my hand over my eyes. The White Stream Tavern overlooked the point of the river where Blanca Nul was last seen alive. On the opposite bank the search party was winding its way between the trees. There were conspicuous gaps in the line of vessels moored along the river where boat owners had set out before the police could question them. Growing and selling dope was the local industry here. The search for the missing woman would be putting a dent in business.

A mosquito landed on my neck. I slapped it and missed.

The steps of the White Stream Tavern puffed dust. The pub looked like settler-period until you got up close. After the original building burned down in the 1970s a brewery paid to have it

rebuilt. As I entered the quiet room it somehow fell more silent. The only customers were three sunburned men in singlets and cut-off jeans sitting at a table. There was no sign of their dog. The bandstand was roped off. The TV in the corner was playing a motor race on mute.

The bartender had the same glassy stare as the deer's head on the wall. I ordered a beer in an effort to fit in. I introduced myself to the trio of locals at the table and made chit-chat about how I was from Auckland and it must be a pretty amazing thing to live around here and wake up every day seeing this and so what did they do, were they on farms or something and they told me to fuck off.

I didn't take it personally. I did a story once on a Wiri print worker who lost his hand in a guillotine. When I walked onto the factory floor every worker was ready to have a go at me. The accident occurred because the owners hadn't put a safety pedal on the machine. After my story came out the worker received compensation. His chapel printed me five hundred business cards for free. The cards were delivered wrapped in green paper in a package about the size of a man's hand. I still had them in the kitchen drawer. After a tragedy everyone shares in the guilt.

I sat at a table at the back of the tavern and contemplated the industrially distressed timbers. The sepia photos of local cement mill workers were licensed from the national library. The beer on tap was the same brew as the bottled stuff. The deer's head was a sambar species introduced from Asia. Even calling itself a tavern sounded American. The place was a lie only tourists would buy into. Blanca Nul didn't seem like that sort of traveller. A counterfeit pub on the corner coast of nowhere was the wrong place for her to be.

I switched to vodka. It came with a little straw. The motor race finished just before five. I folded the straw into a little triangle sculpture. I wondered if leaving another message for Clark would sound desperate but then again I was starting to feel a little desperate.

Two other reporters came in and said a cautious hello before sitting on the far side of the room where they could confer in private. This decision was fine by me. I didn't want them grilling me about the skin rag in my pocket. At five o'clock the three sunburned locals got up to look for their dog. I lifted my chin to signal goodbye. One of them gave me the finger.

The evening news led with an interview with the leader of Operation Copenhagen standing on the basketball court outside the school grounds. The senior detective in charge was a soft-cheeked man who said what everyone already knew. After the news there was a news talk show which consisted of talk about news. The air cooled as night drew in. I got another vodka and started work on folding the straw into a square.

Around nine p.m. a young man came in and stood at the counter with one foot up on the rail. He ordered an orange juice which he sipped while he wasn't looking at the other reporters and definitely not looking at me. His blond hair was shaved short. There were few sights as awkward as a cop out of uniform.

The two reporters left. The barman cleared their table. By this stage I'd assembled a real little exhibition on mine: a triangle, a square, a loop, a zig-zag. My neck was sticky. I dabbed myself with a napkin.

Senior Constable Clark Wells arrived half an hour before closing, tall and square-shouldered and reddened with sunburn. There was more grey in his moustache than I remembered. His search party clothes comprised a heavy bush shirt and big shorts and boots damp with sand and river mud. His policeman's stare was bright as a badge. He came over to my table and hiked his thumb at the car park.

'Is that you in the Mercedes?'

'No.'

'You're pissed. Give me your keys.'

'I'm getting a taxi.'

He snapped his fingers. 'Keys.'

I tossed him a set. He stuffed them in his pocket. As he ordered from the bar the young blond cop didn't look at him either.

Clark came back to the table with a jug of beer and vodka shots and we talked shop for a bit. The Auckland nightclub shooting that was probably gangs. The Palmerston North eight-year-old who went missing and was found wandering by the motorway, not a scratch on him. The dog fight ring busted in Napier: the fights took place in a portable shipping container. The Taranaki family shot by the father: the daughter survived by hiding in the roof. Normally gossip would have been distracting. When Clark leaned back in the chair the bones of his neck clicked.

'Tired?' I said.

'Bugged.'

'I didn't know if you'd turn up.'

'I've been busy.'

'I left a few messages.'

'I know.'

'So what have you heard?'

'Didn't you go to the press conference?'

'I wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth.'

'Cheers for that.'

'I heard Blanca Nul made a phone call from here.'

'They're tracing it. The phone company says they have to work backwards.'

'It can't be that difficult, surely.'

'That's the only payphone for two miles. Drunk calls, hang-ups: I'm not au fait with the process.'

'Who was she meeting?'

'There's no proof she was meeting anyone.'

'What did they find at the motel?'

'Cash. A change of clothes.'

'How much cash?'

He spread his hands. 'She could do anything she wanted.'

'Drugs?'

He shrugged. 'A recreational amount.'

'With that much money?'

He shrugged again.

'Booze?'

'None to speak of.'

'And that's it?'

'You need more?'

'Black leather in February? What was someone like that doing out here?'

'Riding a bike.'

'What bike?'

'Do you have a better theory?'

I took out the copy of *Brand* magazine and slapped it down on the table. Clark scowled.

'Put that away.'

'You know about it?'

'I know about everything. We've got every crackpot on the line. Cranks and psychics. Everyone's playing silly buggers.'

'So is it her?'

'No idea.'

'So you're denying it?'

'No comment.'

'Oh, come on.'

He held firm. 'No comment.'

'I thought you'd have more for me, frankly.'

'We're pursuing a number of lines of inquiry.'

'What does that mean?'

'You want a story?' Clark sucked in his moustache. 'We've spent two days searching from dawn to dusk. We walk up and down poking shit with sticks. We've turned up cattle bones and sheep skulls and car tyres and a lot of broken glass. When you drag junk out of the water it kicks up the mosquitoes. They come up in clouds. We're getting eaten alive. The repellent is like putting on paint. It's hot in the sun and it's cold in the shade and the water

is fast. One of the volunteers slipped and his waders filled up and dragged him straight out. There was nothing we could do. We were all shouting to the Zodiac but they couldn't hear us. That's why they give searchers a whistle – your throat's too dry to speak. The boat saw him eventually. They hooked him and he came up choking like a seal. At night I fall asleep before my head touches the pillow.'

'Do you dream?'

'Of what?'

'When you sleep. It's the bad kind of sleep when you don't dream. Someone did a study.'

'Sleep's sleep.'

Clark got up to get another round. The young blond cop couldn't resist looking over. I put the magazine back in my pocket. Clark returned tucking the change in his wallet. There was a photo of his smiling daughters in the little plastic window.

'Thirteen and fifteen,' I said. 'That's a difficult age.'

'Fourteen and sixteen. You need to update your files.'

'How's Susan?'

'Good. How's Eva?'

'No idea.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'You never met her.'

'I feel like I did.'

We finished our drinks. It took Clark a second to focus on his watch.

'One more round?' I said.

'They're closing.'

'You could have a word.'

'Not here.'

He pushed back from the table and marched into the night. The young blond cop stepped back from his empty glass and followed him out.

When I stood up I discovered I was less in control than I

thought. I staggered down the steps. The VACANCY sign was black with insects. The air felt cool on my face.

The Mercedes was the only vehicle outside. I felt in my pocket for the keys. The set I'd thrown to Clark was for my old Accord back in Auckland.

I gunned the sedan's big engine and pulled out. I'd forgotten to ask the policeman where the motel was but there was only one road to take.

I'd been driving for less than a minute when the other car came up behind me. I waved it to overtake but it stayed where it was. I slowed to let it pass and it fell back. I accelerated and it caught up again. I sounded the horn and it flashed its lights, the full beam throwing my shadow across the interior. I braked and the other car braked and I sped up and the other car swung towards me and I veered off and everything turned to white.

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ISBN 9781761280269 (print)

ISBN 9781761280276 (ebook)

Published in Australia and New Zealand by:

Brio Books, an imprint of Booktopia Group Ltd
Unit E1, 3-29 Birnie Avenue, Lidcombe, NSW 2141, Australia
briobooks.com.au

Printed and bound in Australia by Ligare



**Proudly Printed
In Australia**

booktopia.com.au

1987, at the height of New Zealand summer, a leather-clad tourist turns up in a small town only to disappear. Exactly one year later, to the day, the same woman is sighted a second time only to mysteriously go missing again.

Local reporter Ray Moody gets a scoop that leads him to a forgotten place called the Blue Hotel. He will use this chance to revisit the missing person story and revive his career.

There is, however, a problem: since Ray's wife left him he's bumped up his drinking – a lot. In his dogged pursuit for redemption Ray learns how desperate, damaged and lonely people from all walks of life can be, and that the truth is hard won – and painful.

'Blue Hotel's wily, tangled narrative is pure enjoyment, and the tenderness of its damaged characters is deeply affecting.' Tim Rogers



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