

Troubridge Shoals

Stephen Orr

Anne wondered why they'd come, how she'd pay for the fuel and motel, why she was humouring him. She was pissed off about the 200 kilometre drive from town, the purple roadhouse with its bra-wall, the girl with the upside down 'Kayesher' badge who wiped her nose on her arm as she bagged their chips. She was unsure of herself, her stand on all this Terry stuff, and she was worried about their small aluminium, tin (whatever it was) boat; two crumbling lifejackets packed beside FRESH GENTS; her eight-year-old son, Jack – buck teeth and roman nose – rowing towards Troubridge Island. 'And what if it's not the place?' she asked him.

'It is... was... will be.' Glaring at her, like she'd lost faith. 'I know it for sure.'

'But you've never been there.'

'I've *lived* there,' he said, his eyes pleading, his brow marked with the bare-backed corrugations of the shoal passing a few feet below them – cool water, copper-coloured seaweed (Jack told her they'd used it for stew), rocks, the occasional bit of wreck (sixty-seven of them, between 1856 and 1909).

'That was the worst night's sleep I've ever had,' she said. 'Jack?'

'What?' Staring out to sea, to the island, sitting low and unremarkable on the western edge of Gulf St Vincent.

'I said that was the worst night's sleep I've ever had. If they're gonna charge that sort of money...'

'It's not like it's the city. It's not Sydney, it's not New York' – peering into the spring-clear water, ecstatic dances of red, orange, violet above a budget Noumea, their boat lifting and dropping as the current magnified the smallest changes in hydrography. Spinning, like some sort of sideshow, as Anne waited for the vortex, 20,000 leagues of misfortune that came from believing in Terry.

Jack gazed into the distance and said, 'I think I can remember...'

'What?'

'My dadda brought me out here.'

'Your dadda... Bruce?'

‘Yes.’

‘Brought you out to do what?’

‘Maybe we fished.’ Glancing up at her. ‘Maybe.’

‘So you can remember it?’

He didn’t reply. Just pointed to the candy-striped lighthouse on the island and said, ‘I told you it was like that.’

‘What?’

‘Red and white, like that. With the big lens on top. Dadda said it was from France.’

‘The lighthouse?’

‘*The lens.*’ Just staring at it.

‘Dadda?’

‘Yes.’

‘Bruce?’

‘Yes.’

‘What about *your* dad?’

Jack looked at her like she was stupid. ‘He’s my dad *this* time.’

Not even that. Jack’s father had packed his bags and moved out a few weeks after his son’s birth. He’d made some attempt. Brought him home, warmed his milk, got up and changed his nappy during the night – but soon after, after the realisation of what it took to be a dadda, he was gone.

‘It’s a nice spot,’ Anne said, but Jack wasn’t interested in small talk. He indicated the island again, growing bigger as he rowed, the sheds and lean-to, the lighthouse, a set of rusted steps surgically inserted halfway up its side. ‘Dadda reckoned that before we lived here some ship floundered on the shoals...’

‘Floundered?’ She’d never heard him use this word before.

‘Wrecked. But all the people were fine. And the next morning at low tide they got off and walked over to the island, and this lady, the lighthouse keeper’s wife, made them breakfast. I can remember that story.’ Smiling at her.

She never felt good when it got like this. When he forgot his Adelaide life – Scotch College, Friday night cubs and Saturday morning soccer. She never felt good. Like she’d lost him, again. Like he’d gone mental, become some other boy. Or maybe he hated her so much he was making

it all up. At first, she'd tried to ignore it, saying, 'The sort of nonsense you come up with...' But he'd kept saying it: 'Mum, do you reckon we can go back to where I used to live?'

'Jack, stop that rubbish.'

'What?'

'This island... this lighthouse. You used to live in a lighthouse?'

'Yes.'

Then, after several years of it, after realising her son wasn't joking, she took him to a psychologist, and this man presented several theories, finishing with: 'If you're so convinced, Jack, there's only one thing for it, isn't there?' At first, she'd refused to give in to the silliness. But after so many years of living with two sons – Bruce and Molly in their lighthouse, Terry and his god-damned *dadda* catching sea birds in nets – the suggestion didn't seem so stupid.

Jack stopped rowing and said, 'And what happens if it's not the place?'

'Then we'll know,' Anne said.

'What?'

'That there's some other explanation.'

'Like what?'

She took a moment. 'Like Dr Smith said. Maybe when you were little you saw a movie, an article in a newspaper, a story about a boy on an island. And maybe because you wanted to believe this story...'

'But,' he said, continuing towards the island (a few Pacific gulls coming out to greet them), 'I actually lived there, I did. There.' Pointing.

'But maybe there's another explanation?'

'No!' He got shitty, rowed as hard as he could, glared at her. 'You're always telling me it's not true, but it is. See! That pen, there, where we kept the chickens. If I'd seen it in a movie why would I pretend? I'd have to be wrong in the head, wouldn't I? And I'm not, am I?'

'No.'

'So why do you always say that?'

This seemed to do the job. He settled. He slowed his rowing. 'That tree's where Dadda would string up a sheep, if we had one, and cut him up for us to eat.'

Troubridge Island sat three metres above sea level. It was part of the sea, the sand, the shoals. Just higher. High enough for a lighthouse to warn ships moving between Adelaide and

Perth, a to and fro of barley and iron that helped forge a civilisation built upon its own shifting sands. Three acres of nitre- and saltbush, boxthorn (Jack explained) that kept catching and tearing his clothes (Mumma shouting at him, slapping his bath-bare arse). And birds (everywhere, he'd told his mum): cormorants, gulls and terns, hundreds, thousands of penguins that came to breed. Although she'd become suspicious. The way he listed the flora and fauna in alphabetical order. The facts, like some sort of tourist brochure. One day she found Volume Seven of his encyclopaedia, looked up Troubridge Island, the page well-worn, turned back. Although that didn't prove anything, she guessed.

The small boat from Edithburgh Fish-and-Tackle beached itself on Troubridge Island. Jack and Anne got out and dragged it a few feet up to the spinifex. Anne said, 'So this is where you played?'

He studied the expanse of sand, the scattered pockets of marram grass, an old clothes' line. Anne said, 'Is that where your mum hung out the washing?' But he didn't reply. He walked the few metres to the highpoint of the island and said, 'See... there's hardly none of it. Dadda always said they'd make the light automatic, and they did.'

They looked up. A small, iron balcony surrounding the lamp.

'We'd sit up there of a night and watch the ships getting closer.'

'You and your dad?'

'I reckon.' And biting his lip. 'You believe me, don't you, Mum?'

'If that's what you reckon.'

Jack ran down to the beach, checked north and south, called to his mother: 'This way I reckon.' Then darted out of view.

Anne's shoes were no good, so she kicked them off, picked them up, and followed him. 'Careful of snakes.'

'They never had snakes,' he called back.

'They might now.'

A high dune, covered in grass, and he stood looking. 'Maybe it was here.' Turning to make some sort of comparison, before she caught up and said, 'What are you trying to find?'

'Where it happened.' He took off again, and she chased him again, past the ruins of a well, a pile of old steel and wood and bricks, and he pointed and said, 'That's where Dadda put the rubbish.'

‘Slow down.’

Now, the beach went out further, presented pools for the sun to warm, a few patches of sea grass, like someone had painted it and wanted to make it believable. Jack turned a few circles and said, ‘This is it. Too far from the house... I was stupid, Mum.’ He stood in front of a small dune. ‘This is the one.’

‘You sure?’

‘I had a spade. I dug a cave because I thought if pirates landed I’d need somewhere to hide my treasure. My salvage. My shells. I dug in till it was cold and dark but then it... I shouted out... I told you, didn’t I, Mum?’

‘You did.’

Even now, she wasn’t sure if he was making it all up. The psychologist had a name for it. It wasn’t uncommon. And it wasn’t that the child needed attention – he or she just wanted to be in a different, better world.

‘Dadda said I should always play near the house, but this day I went exploring, and they wouldn’t have known where I was. So it was my fault, wasn’t it, Mum?’

‘No, it wasn’t your fault.’ She held him close and rubbed his arms. ‘Anyway, you’ve seen it now.’

‘I can remember Dadda calling, and someone digging.’

She’d found a box of old VHS tapes, movies, and gone through them, fast-forwarded them to see if there were any scenes of remote islands with boys playing in sand dunes. She couldn’t find anything. But he could’ve read it in a book at school, or seen it on television. She wondered whether this psychologist really understood. ‘So what happened next?’

‘I don’t know... I suppose I was dead by then.’

Strange. And stranger still that he didn’t see the problem with this logic. Knowing details, sounds and smells, but not what happened next. ‘I guess they got me out.’

‘And maybe they buried you somewhere?’

She got the feeling he didn’t like this. What did it matter? He’d died, they’d got him out, buried him, he’d gone to heaven or perhaps the realm of Angry Ghosts or Animals, and somehow made his way to her womb, to 7A Stuart Road Millswood. ‘So if you don’t know everything that happened after you died,’ she asked, ‘how do you know...?’

‘What?’

‘You were three and a half before all this began, so something must have triggered it, because you never mentioned it before then.’

He shook his head. He wiped his sweaty brow. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I’ve been trying for a long time, Jack. I thought coming here would help, but now I’m more confused.’

He held her arm. ‘I couldn’t breathe. I could feel the sand in my throat. I tried coughing but it went all dark and I remember shaking, and I was so scared, Mumma!’

Anne noticed first. A small runabout, with an old motor that kept stopping and starting, the glint of aluminium off to the west. ‘Didn’t you say the place was deserted?’ she asked Jack.

‘They haven’t had a lighthouse keeper since 1961.’

They stood in the sun, waiting. As the boat came closer, they made out a single figure, old and wrapped up, grey and bearded, some sort of wet weather cap. ‘Maybe we shouldn’t be here?’ Anne said.

The boat glided through the shallows, the old man reached over and switched off the motor, drifted closer to them. He waved. Anne waved back. But Jack seemed concerned, like he couldn’t work out how this man fit into the scheme of his life, his adventure, his revelation. ‘He’s a hundred years old,’ he said, and the old man replied, ‘Eighty-six.’ Before his boat beached too, and he stood, stepped ashore and said, ‘Out for the day?’

‘Just a bit of a look-see,’ Anne said.

The old man came closer, took off his hat, revealed a mop of white hair and said, ‘You oughta have a permit.’

‘Really?’ Anne asked. She checked with Jack, but he just said, ‘You don’t need a permit.’

‘You do,’ the old man said.

‘Anyone can come.’

‘Not without permission, son. I’m Barry, and...?’

‘Anne,’ his mother said, and they both waited for Jack, but all he said was, ‘I can come here when I like. I used to live here.’

The old man was confused. ‘Live here?’

‘Yes.’

‘No one’s lived here for years. Unless you had a permit to camp?’

‘I lived here,’ Jack said, loud, defiant.

‘And how’s that?’ Barry asked.

‘I don’t have to tell you.’

Anne soothed the situation by saying, ‘We were in Edithburgh, and they mentioned it was a nice spot, but they didn’t say anything about a permit, did they, Jack?’

But he was just glaring at the old man.

‘So we thought... the birds, especially.’

‘It’s a good time of year for that,’ Barry said, pushing hair back over his head. ‘But the thing is, if you had an accident, got lost, lots of things.’

Again, glaring at Jack, who said, ‘Who are you, anyway?’

‘I’m paid to look after the place, son. Since the National Parks took over.’

‘I used to live here.’

‘So you said.’ He smiled at Anne. She wondered whether to explain, but realised that would take too long, and the story was hardly believable, to someone like Barry, especially. But it didn’t matter, because the caretaker said, ‘So when did you live here, Jack?’

Jack refused to be drawn.

‘Who did you live with?’

‘His parents,’ Anne dared.

‘Ah, your parents. Who were they?’

Jack crossed his arms, sat in the sand, thought about showing the old man about his cave, but decided no, why should I, who the hell are you, *Barry*?

‘Bruce something, wasn’t it, Jack? And Molly?’ Anne said.

The caretaker wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and said to Jack, ‘Bruce and Molly?’

Jack wouldn’t reply.

‘The last to leave in 1961, when the place was automated?’ Looking at the child. Anne, too. Whatever delicate balance had been formed, was lost. ‘Which makes you Blake, their son?’

Jack didn’t reply. Anne didn’t reply.

‘Who went to school in Adelaide and studied engineering, I think. Either way, he worked for BP for years, before he went to live in Hong Kong. So you’re him? Blake. Must be nearing forty, eh? Looking good for your age.’

Jack watched his mother. The way her eyes narrowed, her face set hard and unwilling to listen anymore.

‘He came back for Bruce’s funeral... musta been ninety-one, ninety-two, came out here to see the old place. I showed him around.’

‘He says he’s some kid called Terry,’ Anne said.

‘*Terry?*’

Jack stood, said, ‘You shouldn’t go ’round making up stories, Barry. I was Terry.’

‘*Terry?*’ Tilting his head to try and remember.

‘I was him, I am, I got killed in that dune and you can’t say I didn’t because that’s not fair, it’s not right.’ He stood, ran back towards the lighthouse, calling, ‘You shouldn’t talk about what you don’t know.’

Anne said to the old man, ‘He was reading some stories about the old place and...’

‘Mixed up a bit, is he?’ But something was still gnawing.

She knew there was no point explaining. She ran after her son. She slipped in soft sand, fell over, got up and said, ‘Maybe it’d be best if you didn’t mention it Mr...?’

‘Carson. I was just gonna say, maybe Bruce and Molly...’

This time she found hard sand, then grass, and ran along a ridge that led back to the lighthouse. When she arrived she pushed the door open and went inside. Dark, except for light through a waxy window. A small kitchen, and a spot for three or four people to eat at a small table. A few inches of bird-shit crackling under her feet. ‘Jack?’ She pushed the window open, a pane of glass fell out, fell to the rocks and smashed. The same salty breeze, and squares of sun across her hand.

And from higher up: ‘He’s making it all up.’

‘I know.’

‘This is where we lived, up here.’

‘Careful.’

Like someone, one day, had just decided to leave Troubridge Island. A few utensils in the drawer, three plates and bowls, a pile of dishcloths, ready for use. A magazine, a story about a boy and an accident with a mangle, how he’d lost both legs but kept working with his father the book-mender. A bowl, and inside, half a dozen shells, a piece of powdered cuttlefish with ‘Terry’ carved into the back. She held it, examined, it, thought for a moment, then called up the cast-iron steps, ‘What are you doing up there?’

‘Where I slept.’

She climbed up, two treads at a time, stopping to look out the misted windows, until she got to a landing, and three beds set out on old boards. Her son was sitting on a mattress on the smallest, and he said, 'This is where I slept.'

'The old man must have been confused.'

'He's a liar. I know better than anything that I was Terry. You gotta believe me, Mum.'

'I do.'

'You don't. You believe him. You think this kid... it's not true, Mum, I'm *Terry*.'

At which point he started howling, hammering his face with his fists. 'You think I'm crazy. You think I'm mad.'

'No, Jack.'

Far below, she heard Barry coming into the lighthouse and calling, 'I think I mighta worked it out, Anne, was it?'

'Go away!' Jack shouted. He hit his body hard, turned, saw a hole in the floor, and stepped towards it. Round, jagged, big enough for an eight-year-old. He turned to his mother and said, 'You shoulda believed me.' Then he lifted a foot, floated, and fell. Anne reached out, but she was too late. Just the thump of his body on the concrete, and the old man saying, 'Jesus Christ.'

Anne screamed, ran from the small room, down the few steps, three, four, five at a time. Perfectly regulated, like the tide. And when she arrived she saw the old man staring at her son's body, and blood soaking into the bird shit, his face still and perfect and peach-like. She knelt beside him, ran a hand through his hair, said his name, over and over.

Like this, for half an hour, the old man coming in and out, Anne screaming, pleading with him to fix the boy, the body, the missing father and son and spirit floating, as they spoke, up into the ether, making plans for other worlds, other bodies, other lives. Barry trying to explain, 'I remember, missus. Years before I come here. Some kid they'd lost. Maybe...'

Soon, it was getting cold, and Anne felt sick and just wanted to lie down and curl up and pretend none of this had happened. Barry tried to move her, take her outside, but she wouldn't go. He knew it was no good, her sitting looking at the body, so he slowly, carefully lifted Jack and carried him from the lighthouse. Thirty, a few more yards. Towards a lean-to where Bruce used to sharpen tools, hang out salted meat, work on bits of broken mechanism. He placed Jack's body in soft sand, in long grass, and stood back admiring him.

Not the place, really. Because there were a few mounds where bodies from shipwrecks had been buried over the years. Mostly nameless, one with a granite headstone that read ‘Jackson Parson Asleep in the Arms of the Lord.’ Two simple sticks, joined together, with the word ‘TERRY’ burned into them. 1947-1952. But the caretaker didn’t see any of this. He just sat beside the boy, staring out to sea, remembering his wife saying something like, ‘They never liked to talk about it... especially after the adoption.’

Eventually Anne came out of the lighthouse. She looked up the hill towards Barry, and the small body beside him. Then she noticed a silver gull, flaring across the sky, settling on the rusted handrail, thirty feet above.

Stephen Orr says this is the bit where he either a) writes about how many books he has written, how many awards he has (almost) won, or b) makes some witty, disparaging remark about the lives of writers and the futility of rearranging words to make one of the millions of (soon to be forgotten) books published annually. He chooses to do neither. Just to say, he could never think of anything else to do that he actually enjoyed. Maybe, as Beckett said, it’s all a stain upon the silence, but for what it’s worth, the results are here: www.stephenorr.com.au