

Mangroves

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Gav struggled to find his phone among the caravan's mess. It buzzed and clacked against the laminate floor as he rifled through the stacks of empty plant pots and dirty clothes. Bloody stupid thing, he thought. Margaret said it would make his life easier but he never once lost a landline. He lowered himself on to all fours and searched underneath the camp bed. He didn't normally bother to answer the phone, but Lenny hadn't been home in two days and he'd left without his pills.

Gav reached under the bed, grabbed the mobile and felt the nylon sleeping bag brush against his cheek. He recoiled from the funk of it and answered the call — Margaret.

'Turn on the news now, Gavin.'

'What news?'

'The *ABC*, quickly.'

Gav shuffled across to the portable box television. He reached behind it and fiddled with the power-cord until the picture flicked on.

'It's Lenny, Gavin. He's done something bad.'

'Oh, he has not.'

'Just watch.'

A young man was being frog-marched along the beach. His bird-thin arms twisted behind his back by two police officers. The sea frothed and swelled behind them. And then the footage cut — a pink-faced man in a navy suit stood sweating among the tussocks of kangaroo grass on the edge of the bay.

'This is exactly why we need the development here,' he said. 'This young man is a victim of his circumstances: poverty-stricken, drug-affected, I feel for him but this attack will not halt our progress. It will act as a symbol of everything we are working hard to prevent.'

'They're saying he attacked Steven Donnelley with a shovel, Gavin. He's an MP for God's sake.'

The footage cut again — the young man was being forced into the backseat of an unmarked car. He was trying and failing to hide his face behind his shoulder. The camera zoomed and focused on an eyelid drooping like an unwatered flower over a dead eye.

The first time they went out on the flats, Lenny told him he'd lived on the coast his whole life but he'd never bothered to walk along the water's edge. Ya can't swim here so who cares? he'd said. But Gav showed him. Put him to work to pay off his debt. Up at sparrow's fart six days a week. A white bucket filled with bamboo sticks, a bundle of PVC offcuts and a crate of White Mangrove seedlings: *Avicennia Marina*. Gav tried to make him practice the Latin name. He'd make him repeat as they walked along where the loose yellow sand meets the claggy mud. They watched a goshawk float over the scrub, as Lenny chanted: *ave-I-seen-ya marinara, ave-I-seen-ya marinara*.

The television screen snapped to black as Gav ripped the power-cord from the wall. He stood and paced and walked the length of the caravan again and again. Stupid bastard, he thought, I'll beat the shit out of him myself if he ever gets out. He kept moving, running a leathery hand over the smooth patch on the back of his head. Then he caught sight of Grace. Her photo posted on the wood panel wall above his bedside table. It was from before the chemo. Before she lost her hair. A big smile plastered across her face and that blonde-grey hair falling round her shoulders. He paused.

'It's your fault, you know. Drilling all that Good Samaritan shit into me. You happy now, Gracie?'

Dirty glasses had piled up on the peeling formica table. Gav collected them up and placed them in the sink. Behind them was a candle in a ceramic pot. He wiped up the watermark rings and then returned to light the wick. Thin wisps of smoke sailed up towards the photo.

'I don't really mean it,' he said.

Everybody hits me. That's what Lenny said the night they met. Gav was driving home from the bi-monthly dinner Margaret insisted on when he saw the light shining through the caravan's lace curtains. His palms were slick with sweat as he pulled the ute into the dirt

driveway. He knew somebody was inside. Not tonight, he thought. Not after having to endure an evening with Margaret.

They weren't family anymore, that's what Gav reckoned. Margaret was Grace's sister. Any in-law obligation they had to each other died with her. Marge was nothing like Gracie. Marge was all bingo pink hair and floral prints. Gracie was soft neutral tones, a bit "Country Road". They used to call Margie *The Hysteri-sister* because she was always in the middle of some kind of drama. There was always some new bloke she'd picked up. And he'd always be broke and sad and needing her.

'Two beers. Just whatever you got. And one glass,' Gav told the waiter.

'Clean glass,' said Marge.

Cheap Greek, she'd called the restaurant. And it was. Soggy dolmades and suspiciously off-white tablecloths. The owner's chubby son sat in the corner plucking tunelessly at a bouzouki. Marge droned on about her book clubs and fundraisers. Gav watched the television above the bar. Donnelley was speaking at a press conference. He keeps getting balder, thought Gav. He looks like a lollipop that's been dropped on dirty carpet.

'This resort is not our way of exploiting the region, it's our way of saving the region. The beachfront is deserted, it's a swampy wasteland, a breeding ground for mosquitos and disease. This resort means jobs, opportunity, a chance to start again.'

'They'll send the whole place crumbling into the strait,' said Gav.

Margie scowled. 'You have to get out of this little place, Gavin. You really have no chance of meeting anyone decent out here'.

He nodded.

'At least not anyone with all their own teeth'.

Gav looked at her seriously. And then flashed her a single-tooth denture on the tip of his tongue.

'Oh really that's too much, Gavin'.

It took him a few minutes to work up the nerve to get out of the ute. Even as a young man he was never one for a blue. All bite and no bark, Gracie said. But still he wasn't going to let some lowlife rip him off. Not that he had much to rip off. But that wasn't the point. He picked up a handful of stones from the dirt and lobbed them into the air like birdshot. They crashed down on the caravan's roof.

'Oi!'

A croaky voice slunk out of the window. 'What do you want?'

'You to get out get out of my house.'

'It's not a house it's a caravan.'

'It's still bloody mine.'

'I didn't know it was yours.'

'Well whose did you think it was?'

'I don't know. Somebody else's.'

That still made Gav laugh. Somebody else's. As if that made it alright.

Gav sat on the empty bunk and called Margaret back. He picked at the laces of his steel cap boots as the phone rang.

'It's impolite to hang up without saying goodbye, Gavin,'

He rubbed at his face. 'Sorry Margie, it's just that I may have had other things on my mind at the time,'

'There's no need to get snarky with me. I didn't make any assassination attempts this morning,'

'He's not a bloody assassin. He's just an idiot,'

'You did this, you know that, Gavin? Putting all that eco-warrior waffle in his head. He thought you were Batman and Robin saving the town. Now he's locked up,'

'Yeah, well it wouldn't be his first time. It's nothing to do with me,'

Outside, two seagulls shrieked at each other.

'You have to do something, Gavin,'

Gav fiddled with the hairs surrounding his bald spot. 'You want me to stage a jail break?'

The seagulls cawed and flapped louder.
'Just do something,'
'Oh piss off!'
'Gavin!'
'Not you,' he said, 'the bloody birds.'

Lenny learnt pretty quick how to dig the little pits in the saltmarsh mud, place the seedling inside and press the wet earth over the hole carefully as to not obstruct the pencil-like breathing tubes at the plant's base.

'They're called *pneumatophores*,' Gav told him.

'*New-ma-toe-fours*,' Lenny repeated.

It was early and the tide was way out. Clouds had settled over the channel that stretched across to French Island and a herd of black swans had gathered in the bay.

'They form a little a trap for the sediment. Stop it from floating away. Without the mangroves, the whole bay will deteriorate, fall to pieces. They're the only thing protecting it from the waves.'

Lenny mumbled an affirmation and slipped a piece of PVC pipe over the seedling. He worked slowly and methodically, placing two bamboo X's on either side and fixing them to the pipe with cable ties. Gav knew that he liked the work. He seemed to lose himself in it. It was the only time he wasn't bouncing round or tugging at his tangled mess of hair.

He was a pathetic sight, the night of the break-in. Gav had come rushing through the door brandishing a shovel like a battle-axe. And there was Lenny, cowering in the corner next to the bar fridge wearing only a wife-beater and running shorts. He was so thin his elbows and knees stuck out like twig knots. The whole place was trashed, everything overturned. He'd broken half of Gracie's old crockery riffling through the cupboards. Gav told him to get up but he refused. Why the bloody hell not?

'Cause you're gonna hit me. Everybody hits me.'

How could he stay mad after that? Gav could tell that he was dope sick. There was a shadow of sweat left on the wood panels when he finally did get up and he was shivering too hard to stand still. Thinking back on it, Gav thought, it was probably the shakes that stopped him calling the cops. He remembered when Gracie had decided the painkillers were doing her more harm than good and stopped them cold turkey. Her calves cramped up so hard they felt like a couple of unripe apples. They had to keep her laying on her side half the night so she wouldn't choke on her sick before the ambulance arrived.

Gav stepped over the shattered plates and reached up to a high cupboard. He pulled open the door and removed a large plastic container. Taking the lid off, he sorted through the boxes: *Neulasta*, *Ibrance*, *Herceptin* — and stopped at a box marked *Tramadol*. He flipped out the foil package and pushed his thumb against an airtight pill coffin until it popped. Then moving slowly and deliberately, careful not to spook the intruder, he slipped a pill into the man's hand.

'You'll be right, mate,' he said.

So, Lenny moved his camp from behind the abandoned medical centre in town to a clearing near the caravan. A blue pup tent amongst the dry scrub. And he stayed there for a few weeks. Rising with the retreating tide, planting tiny forests in the saltmarsh, and then retiring to his tent and medication.

Then Margaret came to visit. Gav watched from the window as she came flying up the driveway in her silver Benz and nearly ran the tent and its owner straight over. Lenny came skittering out shirtless like a spooked possum and nearly climbed a tree from fright.

'Gavin!' she yelled.

'It's alright, Marge,' he said.

Lenny stood there staring. He had a tattoo on his chest. It was fine-lined black and scratchy. A dingo-looking dog head with a banner underneath that said *Lenny*.

'That's Lenny,' Gav said. 'He's staying here and helping out with the planting for the moment'.

Marge looked him up and down. And then started to gush. 'Oh poor boy,' she said, rushing to embrace him.

They sat around the fire-pit that night after dinner. Gav and Margaret in foldable camp chairs and Lenny cross-legged in the dirt.

‘I like your tattoo, Lenny,’ Margaret said. ‘You know, I’ve always been meaning to get one myself, but I could just never decide what to get. Janine, she’s one of my girlfriends, has a butterfly with her daughter’s name. But, you know, I never had children. No, not me. Or Gracie. No grandkids for our mother, and they were all she wanted, God rest her soul. But you’ve sorted it out. Your own name! What could be more important?’

Lenny bounced his legs and pretended to search through scrub for something. ‘It’s not my name,’ he mumbled.

‘Oh, so what is your name?’

‘No, I mean, Lenny is my name. But the tattoo isn’t my name’.

Margie leaned forward in her seat. ‘I’m afraid I don’t follow, sweetie.’

The firelight shuddered on Lenny’s face. ‘My dog’s name was *Lenny*.’

Gav paused his sip of beer and chuckled.

‘Oh, don’t listen to him,’ snapped Marge. ‘I think it’s a wonderful name for a dog.’

Margaret wouldn’t hear of the boy sleeping outside like an animal. She pulled the cot out of the shed and dragged it inside by herself.

‘He’s a thief, Marg,’ Gav whispered.

‘And what do you have worth stealing?’ she replied. ‘Besides, what were you before Gracie got hold of you? A layabout and a drunk. Not much different to what you are now if I’m being honest. And you’ve got the nerve to judge?’

And that was that. Settled.

Gav remembered seeing Donnelley on the beach one morning. Lenny had run off to wash his hands in the low tide and Donnelley had come treading up the mud in a pair of overpriced Chelsea boots. A mob of reporters surrounded him. Gav could tell it was trouble because

Donnelley was wearing a hardhat. That meant building. He watched them set up the press conference using the manna gums as a backdrop.

Donnelley faced the cameras holding a rolled-up script.

‘We’re proud to announce the first stage of our three-stage plan to rejuvenate the coast. To bring economic prosperity and jobs to the region. To ensure a future for our young people in the hospitality and tourism industries—’

‘I hope you’ve planned for a swim up bar,’ yelled Gav. ‘The whole place’ll be underwater by the time you finish that monstrosity.’

Two men in black suits sidled up and gripped his arms. Donnelley ignored him, mouthing silent apologies to the journalists.

‘It’s eroding at more than a metre a year now. And still ya do bloody nothing. It’s people’s homes on the line, mate. It’s people’s lives.’

And now there was this clip on the telly that they kept playing over and over. *The Attack*, they called it. Lenny didn’t even get close to him. Didn’t even have a chance to lift the shovel before he was mobbed by security. And now this nobody MP was all over the news being treated like a hero. And Lenny was a nobody. Worse. A loonie. Better off locked up. A threat to democracy. Crap.

They talked very little during their time in the caravan. Gav would wake first and put the kettle on. He’d take two mugs out of the sink, rinse out yesterday’s dregs, dump in two teaspoons of instant coffee and fill them back up. Then they’d sit at the table next to the portrait of Grace and drink quietly. It was her idea to buy the land here, Gav told him. I was happy enough to stay in the suburbs, but she wanted to look out over the water, wanted to watch the swans circling the bay.

‘Lenny would’ve liked it here.’

Gav laughed. ‘Come on. You didn’t really name a dog after yourself, did ya?’

Lenny looked down into his cup. ‘I didn’t name him,’ he said. ‘It was the other resi kids at the group home. They let us keep dogs in the back. And somebody brought back this little dingo looking thing. He was heaps tiny aye. Real scrawny. We put him out with the

other dogs but they didn't want nothing to do with him. Wouldn't even take a ball off him when he wanted to play. One of the youth workers reckoned they could smell the wildness on him. Knew he wasn't one of them. Reckoned they should name it after me cause I was a reject too. Wanker.'

Lenny was too sick to do much the first morning they went out planting. He collapsed in the brackish shallows and sat where the waves cut ripples in the mud. Gav nudged him with a gumboot but soon realised it was hopeless and sat down beside him.

'You know before the British came, all this water was covered with forest. Big thick salty trees everywhere growing right out of the bay. They reckon so many fish lived in the mangroves you could just walk in and pluck them out with your bare hands. Then the poms cut them all down and burned them. Used to use the ashes to make soap apparently. Now there's barely any left and the land is crumbling. It's like somebody ripped out its skeleton. But we'll keep showing up. You and me. And we'll keep putting the seedlings in. And this other mob might come out in kayaks and rip them out. But we'll keep going. Because we're going to hold it all together. What else can we do?'

Lenny trailed his fingers under the surface of the water. 'What else can you do?'

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