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Much later, the newspapers would write that she was thirty-five, a part-time beautician married to Gregory Payne, a sales representative with Trust Us Insurance, and that she had no children. The photos accompanying the text would show that she was slight, of average height with short fair hair. The photos and the text and the television reports would attempt to bundle everything together and draw a line under what had happened, but there would always be at least one stray question or one blurred image that would refuse to remain above the line. What happened to Sandra Payne was impossible to confine: it could have happened to anyone.

The train had been packed, and she had no choice but to stand for most of the thirty-minute trip into Sydney's CBD. She hated being pushed up against lots of other people, especially now when it was so hot and the air conditioning was not working. When she finally alighted at the underground station, she was feeling slightly irritated. It was obvious that the transport system was inadequate: no wonder people were demanding more trains, better trains, faster trains.

She followed the crowd up the stairs and through the ticket barrier and entered the arcade that was an extension of the underground station. A variety of shops, their windows gleaming with a profusion of colours and lights, were doing their best to coax her inside. There were people everywhere, and the air was polluted with loud music: Christmas carols that had been squeezed through some popular-music machine to emerge at the other end scarcely recognizable.

She was almost knocked over by a man completely absorbed in his phone, and when she moved to one side to avoid him she just missed being collected by a formidable wall of three young women walking arm in arm. It had not always been like this; she was sure of that. She believed that she could still remember when it had been possible to stroll through the city in one's own personal space.

But now there were so many people, and everyone was in such a dreadful hurry.

She reached a short flight of stairs that took her to a lower level: same type of shops, same rush, same noise. She noticed a tall, thin man manoeuvring a large maroon suitcase through the crowds of people. For a moment, she felt vaguely sorry for him, but then her attention was caught by a window display showing rows of brightly coloured shoes.

She thought: I really should buy some new shoes.

When she finally reached the escalator going up, it was not moving: it had stopped. It was, however, the only way to reach the street above, and although she disliked walking up (or down) non-moving escalators she stepped on to it. Halfway up she could see the man with the suitcase. Now that she was closer to him, she noticed that he had unkempt grey hair, that he was around fifty years of age and that he was wearing a nondescript beige coloured summer suit and a purple shirt. It was obvious that he was not at all happy about having to carry the suitcase up the escalator when he had most probably been expecting a relatively easy ride. At the top, he placed the suitcase on the ground, pulled up the handle, and, with the weight of the case now resting on the small black wheels, he quickly disappeared around the corner of the building and into the sea of people outside.

Sandra followed the man away from the escalator, moved to the left of the footpath and adjusted her speed to those around her. She would have preferred to have sauntered but that was completely out of the question: she would have been mowed down in an instant. When she saw the bookshop, she dived across the oncoming crush of pedestrians and headed for the open door.

Inside the shop, the air-conditioned coolness was a relief after the heat outside. She breathed in the synthetic, fresh smell of new books and moved to a table that was further from the door. It was piled with discounted books that Sandra recognized as having once been bestsellers. She picked up one of the books and turned it over to read the blurb on the back. Her mind, however, was elsewhere, and after reading a couple of sentences she returned the book to the table and moved on.

The eager young man in the crisp white shirt and dark tie smiled at her as she approached the information desk. He listened politely as he tapped the details into his computer and then scrolled down the screen. The smile waned a little as he slowly shook his head and said that the book she was looking for seemed to be out of stock. But he was there to help, so he suggested that she ask his colleague on the first floor; there was always a small chance that they might still have one copy left. 'Straight up the escalator and then turn left,' he said, his smile once more firmly in place.

Thankfully the escalator was moving.

As she was about to step on to the bottom step, she heard the wail of sirens. The sound was very loud and came to an abrupt halt outside the shop. Several people put down the books they were holding and moved towards the door. A wave of uncertainty swept through the shop. Someone said that a man had been killed, knocked down by a bus.

For a moment Sandra was almost inclined to join the small scattered procession of people moving towards the door, but then she stopped herself and stepped on to the escalator. Part of her could agree that the need many people had to gawk at the misfortune of others was completely macabre. Was it morbid curiosity, or was it simply a feeble attempt to ensure that such a thing would not happen to them? She was not sure.

At the top of the escalator, she turned to the left. She had no idea where to look for the book and sought the help of an assistant.

'*Virtual Reality and Abstract Truth*,' said the assistant, tapping in the title on one of the computer stations. She looked at the screen and then at Sandra. 'Sorry,' she said, 'nothing in store at the moment, but I could order it for you. It wouldn't be here until after Christmas though.'

Sandra nodded. She had hoped to give it to Greg for Christmas; it was actually the reason she had taken that awful train into the city. Now she would have to do a rethink. She was disappointed, because Greg had been talking about the book for weeks, and she had wanted to surprise him. There was nothing to do about it, he would have to wait.

She gave the girl her details and returned to the lower level of the shop. So far her day had been a definite failure; she would have a coffee and then she would decide what to do. Perhaps she would buy some new shoes.

Outside the shop, the ambulance was just pulling away, and a small group of curious bystanders was beginning to disperse. Two policemen were interviewing a rather nervous-looking teenager and an elderly couple. Witnesses, no doubt. Sandra looked past the policemen to the edge of the footpath where a large maroon suitcase was standing as if abandoned.

So, it was the man from the escalator - someone she knew. Well, not exactly *knew*, but she *had* seen him, walked behind him, even thought about him (if somewhat briefly). For some reason, she felt a strange sense of loss. Should she mention to the police that she almost knew him? She discarded the thought even before it had settled properly in her mind and decided that what she needed was some strong coffee.

She found a small coffee place tucked in between a homewares shop, with a nineteenth-century façade, and a modern building that seemed to be nothing but glass held together by steel supports. She ordered a double espresso, found a vacant table in a reasonably secluded corner and, while she drank her coffee, studied the furnishings and thought about the man with the maroon suitcase. It was strange that she should have seen him, not once but twice,

and that he should have then died so tragically, but the more she thought about it the less strange it became. The fact that he had stood out from the crowd because of his suitcase hardly meant that she had a special connection with him. She saw lots of people every day, and it was more than possible that many people she had once seen were now dead. The connection was tenuous to say the least.

A large blue ceramic clock on the bright yellow wall behind the cash register showed that it was almost noon. She left the café, deciding to look for shoes before taking the train home. The shoe shops, like most other shops, were packed, and she could not find exactly what she was looking for, so after a frustrating half an hour she decided to forget about new shoes and head for the station.

Standing on the escalator, travelling down to her platform, she was startled to see the man with his maroon suitcase riding on the up escalator. As far as she knew he should have been fighting for his life in a hospital somewhere, if he was not already lying in the morgue; obviously she had misunderstood something. But, if he was not the man run down by the bus, why had his suitcase been standing at the scene, alone and abandoned? There was something strange about it all. Or was there? She really did not know, but she did feel as though she was beginning to lose any hold on reality that she may have previously thought she had.

As they passed, the man looked at her and almost smiled. It was simply the vacant, neutral smile of one person on an up escalator passing another person on a down escalator, but she still felt that she needed to grab hold of the rail to steady herself.

On the platform she made an impulsive, if somewhat insane and completely illogical, decision: she had to find out who he was and why he was still alive. She had a vague feeling in the pit of her stomach that she was going to regret her decision, but she needed some answers. The social complications of approaching someone and asking him why he was alive and not dead had not yet fully occurred to her. She stepped on to the escalator and quickly disappeared up towards the concourse.

2

The last straggling houses were behind him, and he was already surrounded by paddocks. There was a wide, unsealed shoulder on each side of the road, beyond which narrow, fairly irregular, lines of blue-grey eucalyptus trees partly obscured barbed-wire fences. In parts he could see that the wire had broken away from the posts and was trailing or coiling on the ground. Further away there was only dry colourless grass and the occasional solitary eucalyptus tree.

He drove for another three or four kilometres until he noticed a substantial area of bush: a conglomeration of trees and thick scrub climbing a rise on the right-hand side of the road. He immediately did a U-turn and parked the small blue rental car off the road, beyond the shoulder. As he stepped out of the car, he became aware of the overpowering sound of cicadas and other insects, sounds which seemed to magnify the word *summer*. He was thankfully aware that the oppressive heat of earlier in the day had all but disappeared.

He opened the back door and removed his camera from the seat. Then he locked the car and stepped on to a rough track that ran at a ninety-degree angle away from the road and towards the rise.

The medium-sized rural country town, situated on a wide flat below a range of small rounded hills, was one of the towns west of the Great Dividing Range that Greg usually visited several times a year. With the plethora of present-day communication possibilities, there was much that could be organized directly from head office, but Greg knew that face-to-face interaction was vitally important. Moreover, he enjoyed the change of scenery.

He had spent two days in the town, and he was booked on a regional flight back to Sydney early the following morning. Everything had gone well: the office, with a number of new

initiatives and several new clients, was functioning beyond his expectations.

As he stepped on to the track, which led up into the hills, he was aware that beyond the hills the land flattened out towards the west as far as the eye could see. That was the reason he was here: to capture an image of the setting sun.

Greg was thinking of Sandra as he walked. He had last spoken to her that morning, and she had mentioned something about taking the train into the city. He was also thinking about the previous evening at the pub - three of the fellows from the office and himself. It was while they were at the pub that Doug had suggested the view from the end of Shane's track: 'Great sunsets. Great views. Flat as far as you can see.'

Doug knew that Greg was an amateur photographer.

The other two had nodded and had then continued to drink their beer. Not that they were really interested in photography, but they both agreed about the flatness, and they could accept that an unbroken expanse of red and pink and purple dipping down to spread over the unbroken earth was something special, or, as Evans put it: 'Awesome; bloody awesome.'

Doug's eyes had been fixed on the glass in his hand when he said, 'Follow Shane's track to the very end; that's where you'll get the best view.'

The conversation meandered off in another direction, but eventually looped back to Shane's track when Greg wondered about the name. It was then that Doug mentioned that a man named Shane had disappeared somewhere near the track. 'It must have been at least five years ago, and he hasn't been seen anywhere since,' he said. 'Perhaps he *wanted* to disappear, no one knows for certain.'

Evans had only been living in the town for six months. He had moved there from northern New South Wales after completing the insurance certificate that he hoped would set him on a new path. He had not heard anything about anyone disappearing, but he could understand someone *needing* to disappear - for Evans, disappearing was really no big deal.

Greg, on the other hand, had a strange, uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach. Perhaps taking photos of sunsets was no longer a number-one priority.

Shane Lachlan had lived on the edge of the town. He did odd jobs and occasionally picked up work on the surrounding properties. He used to get around in an old green ute with his dog, Alf, standing on the tray at the back. Then on a summer's day about five years ago Alf turned up in town minus Shane. The people who knew Alf realized that something was wrong, because Shane and his dog were inseparable. The police did some checking and discovered that Shane had been working on a property about ten kilometres south-west of the town but that he had finished the job around three the previous afternoon and had then packed up and left.

'The police searched the whole ten kilometres of road,' Doug continued, 'and they finally found his ute a short way in along Shane's track.'

Brian added, 'It wasn't called Shane's track then... '

'Not then, but later... ' Doug said, 'they wanted to do something to remember him, you know how it is?'

Shane's box of assorted tools and an old waterproof jacket were still in the tray, and there were eleven dollars and twenty-five cents in the glove box. The keys were still in the ignition. Nothing made any sense.

The police searched the surrounding area without finding anything that could explain what had happened to Shane. It was as though he had simply evaporated. A sniffer dog managed to follow Shane's scent to the end of the track, and the police wondered if perhaps Shane had fallen from the ridge. A new search was initiated and police and volunteers fanned out across the ridge all the way down to the plains, but there was no sign of Shane. Not anywhere.

Someone suggested that Shane may have needed to disappear, but the suggestion was shelved early in the investigation. Shane's way of life might have seemed rather serendipitous, but the police could find no indication of financial stress or scorned, revengeful women. It was

also argued that Shane would not have voluntarily disappeared and left Alf behind. There were too many questions and no answers. The only thing that was certain was that Shane had completely vanished. Whether he had died as a result of an accident, whether he had been killed or whether he was still alive was anyone's guess.

They finished their beer.

'Don't forget that photo,' Doug said as they all left the pub.

The feeling in Greg's stomach was becoming more pronounced by the minute.

However, after a good night's sleep everything looked and felt very different in the warm, bright sunlight, and Greg decided that he would take a trip out to Shane's track after he was finished in the office. It would be a shame to pass up such a wonderful photo opportunity.

Initially the track was fairly easy going, but it became rougher and narrower as it began to climb into the hills. Prickly bushes and dry grasses fought with gnarled eucalyptus trees for space, while many large rocky outcrops caused the track to loop and wind back on itself. In places the track dropped several metres, almost without warning, before picking itself up and climbing even more steeply.

Greg pushed on. He was not much of a walker, and he found the many ascents and descents, together with a multitude of very small, irritating black flies, extremely trying. Several times he saw wallabies on the track, but before he could aim his camera they disappeared into the undergrowth. He was not overly disappointed; he was saving all his creative enthusiasm for the prize at the end of the track.

A couple of times he thought he may have heard sounds: snapping twigs, sliding stones, footsteps... but he reminded himself of the wallabies and other creatures in the bush and told himself that he had to keep his imagination in check. Now was definitely not a good time to let his fears run riot.

He reached the top of the ridge just as the first long lines of pink were stretching across the sky. The view was unbelievable and definitely worth the trek. He sat down on a boulder, his camera in his hand. From where he sat he could see how the ridge dropped down to the vast plain in front of him: a sea of grey and brown stretching as far as he could see.

The sun was dipping towards the horizon. The sky was colouring quickly, and it was very quiet.

Then he thought he heard footsteps. And voices.

He decided to take notice of what might turn out to be an overwrought imagination, and he squeezed himself behind the boulder and then scrambled further along the ridge. He did not stop until he found a large outcrop of rocks partially covered with vegetation. Although the full panorama of the sunset was now somewhat obstructed, he had a fairly good view of the track, and he would be able to see if anyone was following him.

His disappointment at not being able to take the perfect photo was completely swept away by an overwhelming feeling of anxiety. He could not stop thinking of Shane Lachlan. Had he actually been murdered, or had he simply missed his footing somewhere along the ridge? Perhaps his body was still caught between rocks where no one had thought to look, or perhaps he was actually alive, enjoying a new life in a new town.

The sunset, or what he could see of it, was magnificent. No one appeared along the track, and he heard no more sounds. Obviously, he had been spooked by the story about Shane. He decided to move back to what he regarded as the viewing area and take his photo. The sky was already beginning to darken a little, and he knew that there was not much time left if he wanted a reasonably good photo.

Then he heard the footsteps again, and he also picked up the vague smell of cigarette smoke. He drew back behind the rocks.

As he stood there with the sky darkening around him, he wondered if he were not being a trifle ridiculous. Perhaps the people (whoever they might be) were simply people like himself who had come out to look at the sunset. Looking at the situation realistically, he decided that the chances of someone actually wanting to abduct him, or kill him, were extremely remote.

Part of him wanted to return to the track; the other part was reluctant. In the end it was the

other part that won. A breeze blew up, and it became dark. He found it difficult to see his immediate environment much less the track. He could hear voices, and he guessed that the people who owned those voices were now at the viewing area. The smell of smoke was closer and more obvious.

He tried to hear what was being said, but it was impossible. He wondered if ordinary people stood on bush tracks in the dark, smoking and talking, but his thoughts always came back to the same question: Why were they there if they were not looking for him?

They did not seem to be in any great hurry to leave. Perhaps they knew that he was there, and they were simply waiting for him to show himself. He heard them laughing: was it at a joke one of them had told, or was it because they knew that they had the upper hand? Greg was worried that the anxiety was completely unhinging him. In all probability there was a perfectly reasonable explanation for the men being where they were.

Greg was, however, not prepared to show himself. The darkness became even darker and a couple of owls filled the sound space that the other birds and insects had vacated. He became aware that the voices had stopped and that the smell of smoke had drifted away. The men had almost certainly left.

"Almost certainly" were, however, the two words that Greg could not let go of. He could not believe that the men had actually left: they were probably hiding further back along the track. He knew that he would have to stay where he was: not only was it dark and the track, in parts, was relatively dangerous, but there was also the possibility of his meeting up with the men. There was nothing to do about it; he would have to stay put. He settled himself in a wedge between the rocks to wait out the night.

Very early in the morning, as soon as the light began to return, Greg stood up and stretched himself. He had barely slept; he felt stiff and he desperately wanted a shower, a shave, a change of clothes and a cup of very strong coffee. Shouldering his camera, he began the walk back to the car.

Although it was a beautiful morning with the new sun glistening on leaves, and the birds waking up after a night of silence, Greg was not in the right mood to be appreciative. He was still not sure whether he had been a complete idiot or whether someone had actually been following him. He doubted that there was any way he would ever be able to find out.

As he neared the end of the track, he was relieved to see that his car was still standing where he had left it. Next to the car, on the ground, were several cigarette butts, so perhaps he had not been imagining things after all.

He unlocked the car, lowered himself into the driver's seat, put the key in the ignition, indicated and pulled out on to the road.

At the hotel, he had a quick shower, changed his clothes and packed. Outside, on the footpath, he ran into Doug, who asked him, 'Did you get out to Shane's track?'

Greg wondered if he detected something sinister lurking behind the question, but he quickly decided that he was being hypersensitive. He shook his head with a wry smile. 'That's a long story; I'll tell you about it sometime,' he said.

On the plane, during the flight back to Sydney, his mind was still trying to find a logical explanation for what had happened. Did the people on the track have some ulterior, unpleasant reason for being there, or were they, like himself, simply interested in the view? Or was it a case of the boys from the office pulling his leg? Then he suddenly remembered: none of the boys who had been at the pub with him smoked.