

Residue Solutions

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Awls and bric-a-brac lay scattered along the bare boards of the hallway.

Towards the rear a dump of old, if not collectable, hand tools held ajar the back door. Their upturned crate stood on the landing. The last step below had caught a porcelain dog's head, while the rest of the English bulldog whited brightly in a dewy green lawn, all neatly trimmed beneath the Hill's Hoist.

Knowlsen turned, looked up toward the mountain, stepped around the crate, and went back to the front door of the old stone house in Pine St. Saying nothing, he stood next to the new chum looking over the scene.

Hanging upside down from a bare apricot tree, was a middle aged man. A big toe caught in a forked branch held him, but most of his overweight lay in the winter wasted peony at its base, so not quite hanging. He was dead because a very large chisel (probably for turning) stood out of his eye.

"Tell me Pierce—"

"Call me Anne, I'd prefer it."

"—Anne, tell me, who done it?"

Behind them forensics finished moving through the house dressed as ghosts, trying to reverse the flow of time. In demarcating the context from the crime, these unresolved souls wound up clues, so after, handing the ball over to the prosecution, it would be played forward in court.

Where some very well rehearsed stories would battle it out for a placing in the mean world. This old stone house in West Hobart would be virtually recreated, data points scattered in four dimensions, all datum-ed to the time of death that no one had noticed for three days. Not until a morning jogger glanced over a thick hedge of roses as she ran on the grass between the footpath and the street.

"Well, someone close, family or partner."

"Sure? No clumsy burglar? Discovered noisily sorting through the tools. No stylish psychopath with a penchant for wearing 13th century girdle books. No alien abduction gone wrong. No double agent discovering their lover cover is actually a sleeper agent for a fourth agency?"

Anne creased her brow with dark eyes.

Knowlsen went back to the living room, stood by the neat mantelpiece and looked again at the first thing that had caught his eye in the undisturbed room. An antique clock in a bell jar whirled its dumbbells and spun its gears, its workings open to the eye.

"Correct time." Anne looked up from her phone. "A murderer who keeps good time perhaps."

"No such thing as a murderer. People don't kill people, Anne, their mean stories do the murdering, people story people and then they are dead."

"You've a way with words there."

Knowlsen could only sigh. "It's always the same story." Knowlsen walked out of the living room, "What did the jogger say?"

"She talked about the origins of the modern rose on Mauritius."

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At home finally, Knowlsen stumbled along his hallway to the kitchen, the fridge was empty. He kicked the door shut again.

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“There’s never any mystery.”

Gibbet shook his head.

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“They all get caught,” Knowlsen said, yet again. This time to Anne. “The exceptions are famous, maybe once a decade, all the others require the brainpower of a leech to solve. The exceptions are probably simple to solve too, but for chance, or the laziness of investigators, perhaps in taking the stupidity of Tasmanian’s for granted, or even, maybe, a lack of care on the exceptional day.”

“And this time?”

Blasko interrupted with a mouse click. On the screen the CCTV footage stilled, a short woman in a blue blouse stood with her back to the camera. Her bare elbows were tucked in tight by her waist. Head bowed, she was probably looking at her phone. The play button was hit and not a lot changed. Then she just fell over.

“Yeah, he was caught, on a camera looking the other way.”

“The mystery here is, where did her phone go?” said Knowlsen.

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“So Anne, I used to hate them.” Knowlsen began as they headed off towards Monday morning’s bright and early interviews.

“That’s not very professional.”

“I used to want to get them.”

“You want to let them go now?”

“I want to save them.”

“Save them from what? Themselves?”

“From the story,” Knowlsen proclaimed. “But the story always gets them first. Just look at Gibbet for example.”

“Who?”

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A soft interview room contained two cops, a mother and aunt, and a plastic crate emptied of it’s plastic toys to distract the babies not old enough to care.

Knowlsen just wanted to ask about the clock. He let Anne do all the procedural questions. Young and keen and newly appointed. She thought she was collected background on the victim in the tree. All about, clubs & pubs, forums & chat, and his favourite TV shows of the 80s.

The mum and aunt was helpful too, bitching away, for when it is storytime, routine questions are an opportunity too good to be missed.

“You’ll find prison has its new routines,” Knowlsen eventually said. Anne looked across to her new mentor, as did the perpetrator, “but no more clock winding for you.”

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The three French tourists, backpackers really, were busily wrenching the “No Camping” sign backwards and forwards.

The post did not bend. The ground was soft enough that the whole concrete footing was a pestle grinding the earth. Their campervan (expensive) was parked next to them.

Sergeant Blasko hit 2x re-wind. The three Frenchman were put back in their Sisyphean labours.

“I still find it hard to see what you’re describing Blasko.”

“Its not easy but...”

“You’re eyes are younger I guess.”

“I am also not ashamed to wear glasses.”

“Well... Yes. Have the Frenchmen been tracked down yet?”

“Jones here is on it.”

“Hired in the name of Marion,” he piped in.

“Not that they would have noticed the guy on the beach.” Blasko scrubbed backwards and forwards allowing a movement on screen to repeat and extend the moment into a clue. “There, he is looking straight at them, and thus at the camera. I reckon it’s Chipman.”

“Or his twin brother.”

“Or anyone from New Norfolk,” he piped in again.

“Say Knowlsen, why do you think they are pulling down the sign, they still aren’t allowed to stay overnight there.”

“Might be a French law about sign’s, or a chic thing about signs... such that they’ve got odd laws, when you sign something you have to write down next to the signature that you are signing something... You have to sign that you have sign it, *ad infinitum*...”

“Tasmanians would just ignore it and camp anyway? —you know, ‘What sign?’ ”

“The benefits of islander education... Maybe the tourists kept it as a souvenir of their visit to Long Beach Reserve.”

“With a bit more effort they could have stopped a murder,” said Gibbet.

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Sitting across from the court reporter Knowlsen watched his sergeant, Gibbet give evidence. Prosecution lead, his subordinate danced.

Gibbet played stupid cop. It worked well with stupid people, he kept it up in the interview rooms too, as well as on the street. Knowlson got the not so stupid.

Knowlson realised now he was glad Gibbet the dancing man worked for him, despite the loathing. It would be impossible, unbearable if he met him outside the structures, the protection of a workplace. Imagine Gibbet knocking on your door late at night— which Gibbet did often enough, but with a devil you know, you never invite him over the threshold.

Of course his real name was Jones. Gibbet was just a nonce for fliberty-gibbet. Gibbet only knew his real name.

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“Just tell us,” began Gibbet, “with what you can remember.”

“We’re staying here while our kitchen and bathroom are redone,” he said. “It was Annette’s idea.”

“George likes to iron his own shirts. He’s an engineer,” said Annette.

“Not quite a holiday,” commented Gibbet.

“No, but it is a change.”

Knowlson looked out the window to the snow on the mountain, and then down into the street.

The vehicles, well, the cars mostly, gridded and locked up all the one way streets. Some blamed the local construction boom, some blamed the construction spilling out onto the street. Some blamed the big white boats whose inmates hired cars to escape to Salamanca’s cafes; a 300m walk away. Especially in the afternoon when they had to return before the sailing curfew, but had no idea where they were, or where they were going, or why that one way street was taking them up the mountain. The big white boats were big but not that big.

“Yeah, and, suddenly we have Sydney traffic,” said George, “I guess time finally figured out where Hobart was.”

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Memories are more like the party than the video of the party. Memories are not a record. Memories throb like a mystery in reverse.

They come upon you while you wait in line to buy bread and milk. Her throat cut for forty dollars, blood on that EFTPOS machine.

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“I’ve tried absolution. I’ve given them absolution, even without a confession.”

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The heavy hum of the woodchip machine lazily wanged in and out as the office bod thought a little too long and hard about replying to Gibbet’s inane observation about forestry. Knowlson rarely

intervened but, as duty must supply a lubricant occasionally — “what’s the official title for your position here David?”

“Duty manager.”

Gibbet barely nodded.

“And you're responsible for?”

“The drivers mostly.”

“I thought they were independent contractors?”

“Yeah, well, herding cats as they say, herding cats. I mean they cause all the —umm, they’re very wide ranging and are affected by conditions, the weather..”

“So they aren’t officially the core of your duties on your PD.”

“No, only in fact.”

“Would that be why you had no idea how many, shall we say, uncaring serial killers you have on staff?”

“Did you hear that!” Gibbet cut in, “it’s sounds like something bloody soft hit the chipper!”

• • •

“What’s the story, Jones?” Knowlsen began, “with the phone?”

“Dead end, says Trepetnik here.”

“Computer?”

Trepetnik shook her head.

“Wiped?”

“Possibly. Appears to be unused since it was set up. Shows no signs of wear and tear. Mint.”

“Phone account?”

“Prepaid, topped up, well paid when the time’s up, probably from some user of the number but I’m checking that.”

“Not their phone?”

“Maybe.”

“So why have any of this?”

“Appearances?”

“A dead phone or a phone with no sim would do as well.”

“Fears the appearance will be tested. By the way, there are no apps installed besides the OEM’s.”

Gibbet added, “no call log, all message bank is off.”

“Nothing?”

“No, it’s a five year old cleanskin.”

“So all the use it got is still on it.”

“Which is nothing.”

“And it looks like the laptop is the same.”

“Sounds like an old person bought it..”

“A parent, a gift from a son, or daughter, they set it up but it was never used.”

“What’s the browser history got?”

“Local library, google got pinged for example, see if the internet is working, a search for ‘asdf’.”

“And that’s it.”

“Tested but not used.”

“Maintained but not used.”

“The OS on the laptop has never been updated, but the phone has, even though it’s wifi only.”

“It’s been turned on a few times, I don’t think cypherensics are going to tell us much more.”

“What are the saved wifis?”

“Library and 12321.”

“So who has the phone number and who or what are they waiting for?”

• • •

“Terence, all done?”

Terence let the lidded camera hang by his side and replied with an off-hand wave that shrugged his shoulders.

Knowlsen nodded and got out of the car. There seemed to be uniformed twelve-year olds stationed on every driveway in Primrose Sands.

“How did the owners take the shut down of the mill?”

“They shouldn’t care,” said Knowlsen, “the pile of woodchips is mountainous.”

“You can’t call them that,” said Terence rubbing an eye.

“What?”

“Can’t call them woodchips anymore.”

Knowlsen raised his eyebrows.

“It is not politically correct to call them woodchips.”

“What?”

“Residue Solutions,” said Terence, nodding, “you have to call them Residue Solutions.”

• • •

The text message had been particularly coherent. “There are thirty witnesses so far, so we are bringing in the bus to Sea Eagle Road.”

It was the too early of a morning after The Angels played the night before.

Apparently.

Knowlsen looked across to Little Falcon St from Sea Eagle’s corner on Falcon St. He looked at the light on the water as he walked over. The sun was coming but yet...

Under Knowlsen’s feet the dolerite’s diabase gravel was redder than the clothing of the prone adult male as he lay bled out on the dormitory suburb’s unpaved back street. The still air of an autumn morning carried the sound of a car alarm late from far away. A some place else.

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“After a while all the mystery’s, all the stories, blur, and all that’s left after a lifetime of suicides, murder and manslaughter... what I can see is bits, pieces of this, flashes of that...”

• • •

Slipping on the steep greasy bank Knowlsen caught himself with a quick grab on the branch he was ducking under. It was a *Prunus* in spring, and tiny bright green leaves hid the thorn that pierced his thumb, the red on pressed flesh appearing slowly as he inspected the pain.

“You’ve contaminated the site.”

Knowlsen raised both eyebrows and put gloves on.

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The vigorous Anne wore a jacket that smelled of mothballs. Knowlsen realised he was standing too close.

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The middle was the heart of the story, where ever it happens; the failure, the muddling attempts, and so, the part most hidden, the private parts. What you aim for when you want to kill them, as if it was to be the end of it, but never is.

• • •

With the empty fridge acknowledged Knowlsen left his apartment at Long Beach and walked across the carpark to the wood fired pizza place not yet closed. Knowlsen could still remember when pizza was a new thing in Tasmania.

Gibbet appeared from around the corner, walking from the park side, and danced back away hiding a phone in a puffer jacket’s pocket.

“They all get caught,” said Knowlsen.

Gibbet nodded.

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The bit you do not notice.

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The recently tinted windows of the curiously unburnt abandoned car in Strickland Ave were an attempt to add more sinister overtones, as was the incompetent but dearly loved muffler. This automotive gothique was de-tuned however by a missing rear left wheel and a strip of police tape holding the driver’s side window together like packing tape.

“Arh,” sang Gibbet, “South Hobart, Land of the Muddled Message.”

“Don’t forget the Permian mudstone,” added Knowlsen, “where *Keenia* and coralline algae roam.”

• • •

The unlabelled wine bottle's pieces lay unscattered, completely crushed, as if stepped on by a big boot, but then left undisturbed while the moss grew in the cracks.

Or rolled on. Not thrown. But there were no ruts in the soft ground. Did the bottle lie on a rock, or, no— Knowlsen looked up but Gibbet was gone. Dead and gone. Or gone and dead.

When was that replacement due?

Knowlsen pulled the moss aside with a probe and revealed a concrete slab, or rather, a concrete block used in car parks, that had somehow made it's way down here in the late anthropocene. It was that type of place, the sort for which bodies had a certain affinity.

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The dead are beyond saving.

It's always the same killer.

Storytime.

• • •

The bin lid fell bouncing, allowing the bin to drum a hollow release. Stacey still had six hours before her shift at the bar was over. All over. Even that shouting which came out of the doorway behind her.

The ticket was hot in her hip pocket, she'd dare not leave it in her bag, even in the locker. Anyway she had left in head, this was just a lay over. Keep the travel documents close.

It was not an unexpected delay, and there'd be more soon. Soon, and so far away. Stacey could smell the aviation fuel.

Turning back to the alley door and it's broken latch Stacey smiled free of the frown she'd worn for six months or more. A deep breath and she stepped back up the steps and inside. But Davo and Stu weren't waiting to complain at her absence with a short sharp barb.

Davo's sliced palm's gripped a knife blade stuck in Stu's chest, but Stu was the one moving a little.

“So, Stacey,” said Knowlsen, “you’ve got a ticket to ride and you didn’t see anything?”

• • •

“It’s like patenting the human condition,” said Reynolds slumped in the armchair, heavy on the metal frame, the well sprung fabric grimy with oft born burdens.

Reynolds waited for Knowlsen to stop waiting.

“It’s like...”

The facts of the case were going to take a while arriving.

“It’s like...

Francis Trevor Reynolds had not even started lying yet.

• • •

The drip from the shower head caught the slink of light allowed by a heavy blind, as dusk fell out from the mountain. The water sparkled a moment mid-fall, animating a star in the dim bathroom.

Just now, maybe like yesterday, the curtains had not moved for some days, but tomorrow it would be all process and police tape.

• • •

“You’ve a good memory, I supposed you have to be a detective.”

“Good? Gina said I had a long memory.” said Knowlsen, “This is a bad thing apparently.”

Anne laughed.

• • •

“So you get all the bits that you can find, you remember them all, and as the universe falls apart, you stick them together into something meaningful.”

• • •

The passport sized photograph of a smiling maternal looking head and shoulders with big hair was soaked from the nose out with a deep dark bloodstain. There were no drying rings, it did not fade out at the ears, it just stopped. The blood came from the body it lay on.

“Thrown there a while after they lay dying? Or—”

“They came back. They hung around.”

“Stupidly.”

• • •

Putting the fresh vegetables in his fridge, Knowlsen suddenly remembered that conversation again. With Gina, of Jetsonville. Well, Scottsdale really.

Impossible to forget a name like that.

He met her when she was studying ceramics. Her great great something grandfather jumped ship, in Hobart. Some viking from Bergen.

They named the township in north eastern Tasmania after him.

Or was it just Malmo.

Impossible not to cringe.

Knowlsen realised he must think about their discussion about Fred Williams’ landscapes every six or seven years. She didn’t say ‘dear’, but Knowlsen hears it.

Gina had called Williams' painterly marks runes.
And Knowlsen had just finished police college. Gina had called him on his aims.
"Read my future," he shrugged, pointing at her scratches in the wet clay.
"I am not Odin dear, but you'll be wanting to be a detective then."
"You watch too much television, Gina."