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## **Crocodile Hunt**

*Saturday, 24 July 1971, Tower Mill Hotel*

The man juggles the brick, gauges its weight. His stout hand, a flash of his watch dial, the sleeve rolled back, muscles on the upper arm bundled tight. His face half-erased by the dark.

There's something going on beneath the surface that Murray can't grasp. He thinks of the three witches in Polanski's *Macbeth*, huddled together on the beach, digging a circle in the sand with bare hands, unwrapping their filthy bundle.

A ritual.

The brick's in the air and it's funny but Murray expected it to spin but it doesn't, it holds its position, arcs forward, as though someone's taken the sky and pulled it sideways to give the impression of movement, like those chase scenes in the Punch and Judy shows you don't see anymore. The brick hits the cement and fractures. Red dust on cops' shined shoes.

Murray feels the same sense of shock he'd felt, sitting in the sagging canvas seat at one of his film nights, recognising the witches' bundle, a severed human arm, hacked off just before the elbow; both times looking so intently, he had no distance or defence when the realisation came.

'What is it?' says Lan.

Murray points to the man who threw the brick but she is looking the other way, at a cop in a white riot helmet, head like a globe, swollen up as though bitten.

Lan stands on Murray's feet to see.

The pig yells through a megaphone: 'You're occupying too much of the road. It's illegal. Step back. Step back.'

Lan's back is pressed against Murray's stomach; her bum fits snugly to his groin. He resists the urge to plant his cold hands on her warm stomach, to watch her squirm.

She turns her head so her mouth is next to his ear, says, 'Don't move.'

She sounds winded, her voice without force. He's pinned to the ground by her feet.

Again, 'Step back. Step back.'

Next to him, Roger begins a chant.

'Springboks,' he yells, the rest of the crowd picking up the chant, 'out now!'

'Springboks!'

'Out now!'

Murray looks up, sees a hand pressed against the glass in one of the hotel's windows, quickly withdrawn. The hand belongs to a white man, for sure. It must be one of the footballers, although the gesture is out of keeping with his image of them. Too timid. He feels tired all of a sudden. But Jacobus Johannes Fouché's voice is in his head, *these men—the Springboks—represent the South African way of life*, and the thought of the bastard Bjelke inviting them here.

He, Roger and Lan were there the day before when the footballers pulled up outside the Tower Mill Hotel in a black and white bus.

'Can you believe the cheek of those bastards?' said Roger when they saw them bounding off the bus, legs the span of Murray's two hands.

A group of five Nazis had been lined up in front of the glass doors reflecting the city, all in uniform: five sets of white shirts and thin black ties, five sets of khaki pants and storm-trooper boots, each with a red sash printed with a black and white swastika tied around their left arms, just above the elbow. The Springboks strode inside, ignoring the Nazi's salute. The protestors were shouting. An apple splattered wetly on the sidewalk.

*Friday, 7 April 1972, St Lucia*

Lan left in broad daylight. Murray didn't know why this upset him, except that he had a vague sense that she should've gone in the night time, under the cover of dark. The guilty should sneak away, with bowed heads and faces averted, not boldly, as though going for an afternoon walk.

Lan had pulled down half his jumpers getting the suitcase from the top of the cupboard. She left his clothes scattered across the bedroom, victims of an explosion, an excess of emotion.

In the two days after Lan left, Murray scours the house looking for some clue to where she was, maybe a note to him, blown off the table in the wind, or put down and forgotten in the rush. Perhaps there was a letter from her parents, bankrupt, demanding she return to Vietnam. Or a relative had died. A cousin in the Viet Cong napalmed.

He finds a packet of her tampons in the bathroom cupboard, tries to flush them down the toilet, but they keep floating back up. They bloat; the knotted strings make them look like some strange water-dwelling creature, paddling in the bowl. He pees in the shower for a while, but in the end he scoops the tampons back out again with the holder for the toilet brush.

The house doesn't yield anything, so he takes to the garden, circles the place, investigates its underbelly. The previous tenant had laid squares of green carpet underneath, off-cuts that met in jagged lines, patches of dirt visible. Murray had set up two sofas, mouldy with age, on the carpeted part, would invite his friends to sit with him there, booze, discuss the state of the world and the problem with America.

Roger rings in the afternoon, says, 'What gives? We were supposed to have lunch.'

Murray says, 'Lan's left me.' He knows he will cry soon.

'Oh Christ. I'm so sorry,' says Roger.

Murray inhales, snuffs up snot. Roger coughs into the receiver.

‘It was just out of the blue,’ says Murray.

‘Where’s she gone?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘She didn’t say anything?’

‘No,’ says Murray.

‘She could be anywhere. Maybe you should call the police, put in a missing report,’ says Roger.

‘I’m not too friendly with the cops,’ says Murray, and coughs.

‘You sound a bit crook. I’ll come over,’ says Roger.

‘That’d be good,’ says Murray.

Roger turns up at the house an hour later, wearing wide pants and a tight collared shirt with thick white and red stripes. He’s growing a moustache, only cuts his hair when he visits his parents.

Murray says, ‘I’ll make us a cuppa.’

Roger nods, sits down at the vinyl table with his hands resting on his knees.

He says, ‘Are you coming to 291 on Sunday?’

291 St Paul’s Terrace is the Brisbane Communist Party’s headquarters.

Murray says, ‘What’s on?’

‘Billy needs someone to look after the bookshop.’

Murray gives Roger a mug of tea, sits down with his own mug between his elbows, and cradles his head in his hands so his hair falls over his wrists.

After a minute, Roger says, ‘Does her family know?’

Murray makes a strange noise through his hands. ‘I don’t even know how to contact them,’ he says. ‘She wrote them letters—couldn’t afford to phone—but she’s taken everything with her. The address book. Everything.’

Murray knows nothing of the specifics of Lan’s life before she met him. She was the first Asian he’d ever spoken to. She wore wrap-around skirts that changed colour in the sun; grew her hair below the waist; sat in the front row in class and never spoke. He liked the shape of her calf as it emerged from her skirt. He saw her on the great lawn filming her reflection in a window with a Sony Portapak and knew that he wanted her more than anything.

Murray seduced her by saying almost nothing and touching her as often as he could. He was worried about offending her. What reading he had done made him aware of his own ignorance, and his friend in Psych told him that when you touch a girl enough — especially around the aureole — a hormone is released that bonds them to you, makes them sad when

you leave them or they leave you. In conversation, Murray would put his hand on Lan's elbow, once on the top of her head.

Lan was ready to be seduced. Murray invited her to a winter party in his backyard. They kissed next to the fire and he didn't notice until the next morning that the rubber on the bottom of his shoe melted in the flames. She moved into his house quickly, her clothes bundled in three plastic bags. He wanted her to stay in bed with him all day, imagined he was John Lennon and she Yoko Ono. Their mattress became a soup of discarded clothes, bread crumbs, wine stains, come stains, ash and flakes of pot. He resented her when she told him that she was bored, and left him, sheets pulled aside to reveal his erection, to go to class.

Lan tutored high-schoolers for a while, but they complained to their mothers that they couldn't understand her accent. She told him her parents wanted her to come home. The next night he tidied the house, and cooked her dinner. Over the green peas and potato—Lan grated ginger over hers, mixed it with chili and soy sauce, which she travelled all the way to Chinatown on a bus to buy—Murray proposed. They were married in the botanic gardens, surrounded by Murray's friends.

The night before his father called him up and said, 'It's not too late to get out of it. You won't be betraying the cause.'

Murray said, 'You have no idea what this means to me,' and hung up on him.

*Sunday, 9 April 1972, 291 St Paul's Terrace*

Murray perches on the backless stool behind the counter in The People's Bookshop. He has the sense he is on the brink of something. His body is ready for movement.

When a man walks into the shop, Murray panics because Billy hadn't shown him how to use the cash register.

He says, 'Can I help?' anyway.

'No,' says the man.

The man walks the length of the shelves too fast to read the titles. He stops at a display of Australiana on a tiered shelf, slides his hand down the covers on display. He pauses at *Crocodile Hunt*. The cover shows a drawing of a bulky crocodile, scaled body bent in an S, its jaws under the man's thumb. He picks it up, examines it. Murray thinks it odd that he doesn't flip it over to read the blurb. He walks around the whole room once, scanning the shelves, reaches Murray at the counter and puts the book down between them. Murray picks it up, turns it over, looking for a price. It's stuck on the back in faded ink.

He opens his mouth to tell the man how much, and finds him staring intently at the ceiling. Murray looks up too. A hairline crack runs along the surface and there are bulges in the plaster where the wooden framework's swollen. It's lower than Murray remembers. He thinks that if he stood on his toes he could reach it with the tips of his fingers. Murray looks down again to find the man staring at him.

Caught out, Murray mutters the price, says, 'You don't have it in exact change, do you?'

The man nods, fumbles around in his pocket for a bit and brings out a note, which he lays at an angle along the bench top. He counts the coins in the palm of his hand. He makes a fist

around the coins, brings his hand over the note and lets go. The coins fall, clinking, over the bench. One spins wildly, rolls past Murray's arm and across the bench. Murray lets it fall.

He recognises the man now; it is the act of release that triggers the memory, the fingers spread wide, the wrist bent, the black watch band. This is the man who threw the brick in the Springbok protest. Dead set. He looks up again, expecting to see the same sense of recognition in the man, but he is walking out of the shop.

Murray follows him outside, leaving the door open and the money still on the counter. The man is walking right along St Paul's Terrace. He tucks the book under his arm to cross Barry Parade, as though he might need both hands free to wave off the oncoming traffic.

Murray stands on the other side of the road, unsure of what to do. When Murray came outside, he'd planned to hail the man, tell him he recognised him from the strike and was a fellow comrade. They give discounts to Communist Party members. Outside the shop, it strikes him that perhaps the man is not one of them at all. Just because he was at the march doesn't make him a communist. Despite the unpopularity of the cause — 'It's just fucking football,' one of Murray's friends had said. 'What's it got to do with anything?' — there had been many types there, a mixture of labour party members; unionists; people in the Radical Club and the Eureka Youth League; those not particularly attached to anyone.

He remembers again the brick shattered on the ground. It hadn't hit anyone, but was an incitement to violence. This man is dangerous. Murray is filled again with nervous energy, which leaves him both dull-witted and super-charged, as though he is a wind-up toy twisted tight and then released, unable to do anything but move in the direction he's facing.

He crosses the road about five metres behind the man, sticks to the outer edge of the pavement, head down. If he moves his eyes upwards, while still keeping his neck lowered, he can see the shoes of the man, his white socks flashing with each step.

The man turns the corner into Brunswick Street. He stops at a car parked in front of the old Masonic Temple. Murray walks past fast, unsure of what to do next. The Temple's entry is set back in the building, four steps leading up to a red door. Murray ducks inside the alcove, looks up to see the man sitting in the driver's seat pulling out the pages of *Crocodile Hunt* and feeding them through the half wound-down window where they land, fanned out, on the road. When he's finished dismembering the book, the man spreads the page-less cover across the back of the car. The crocodile, snout on the side, one eye turned outwards, stares out into the street. The man flicks the ignition and drives, the pages flying out and onto the road in his wake.

Murray sits down on the steps of the guild and smokes. He isn't exactly sure what just happened. The man must have bought the book just because he liked the picture on the front of the cover. But it's odd though that he had bothered to spend so much just for one picture. Murray remembers how he had paced the shop and studiously examined the ceiling. He'd given the impression of someone picking out furniture for the room, working out the dimensions so some chair or table would fit.

A cough. Murray looks up. The man's standing above him, his forearm resting on the wall, elbow bent. His other arm hangs at his side, hand bunched up around a bundle of keys.

'I wouldn't of bothered following me, if I was you,' the man says. 'The police are on my side. Special branch are on my side.'

He pushes himself off the wall, stands up straight, and says, 'Heil Hitler.'

*Tuesday April 19, 1972, 291 St Paul's Terrace*

Murray brings his curled fist down on the door. It opens with the force of his knock and he feels like an idiot for even bothering. The hallway's dark. Murray runs into a filing cabinet, swears, and stands in the centre of the corridor, with his hand still on the cabinet, calling, 'Roger! Roger!'

Murray told Roger he'd come here when he called him. Murray was walking back from uni, and on the other side of the road to his house, ready to cross, he saw there was someone standing underneath the house, looking out into the street. Murray didn't stop. He didn't need to. He knew it was the man from the bookshop, the Nazi. Murray kept walking until he reached the end of the street, turned the corner and then ran. Back on campus, he shut himself in a phone box and dialed Roger's number.

'I can't get to my house,' Murray said when Roger picked up.

'Lock yourself out, did you?' said Roger.

'You know that Nazi? He's back again.'

'I don't get it,' said Roger.

'It doesn't matter. I need to stay with you,' said Murray.

'You can't. I'm going to a party meeting.'

'I'll meet you there.'

'Ok. If you want.'

Roger hung up.

Now, Roger stands framed in the doorway of the meeting room.

'Hey Murray, shut up. I can hear you. Get in here.'

Roger switches on the hallway light and Murray walks into the meeting room. There are about seven people, sitting on hard metal chairs around a long table. Murray sits next to Roger, nods to Patsy, who has nice breasts but is married.

Vince says, 'Hi, Murray, we're talking about the moratorium on Friday.'

'You should bring your pretty little Vietnamese girl,' says Billy.

'She's not around anymore,' says Roger.

'That's a shame,' says Patsy.

'Yeah,' says Murray.

'Helen Dashwood told me her school has banned them from wearing moratorium badges,' says Billy.

'Far out,' says Patsy.

‘We should get her to speak at the rally,’ says Stella, taking notes, and then, looking up, says, ‘Can anyone smell burning?’

Murray sniffs, says ‘I’ll go look.’

They all follow him down the hall.

Patsy says, behind him, ‘Is it coming from the kitchen?’

Roger says, ‘No,’ and then the windows around them shatter. Next to Murray, a filing cabinet buckles and twists like wet cardboard in the rain. A door is blown off its hinges.

Murray feels a moment of great confusion, a sense that things are sliding away from him spectacularly. He’s felt this once before. He wanted Lan to sit down with him, but she said she didn’t want to be touched. He’d pulled her to him, playfully, a joke, but he was too hard and she went limp in his hands. Like she’d been expecting it.

Her head hit the table in front of him with a sharp, quick crack. He didn’t understand what happened; he had never experienced violence this close. He imagined her brain as a line drawing with the different sections coloured in, like his Psych friend had once showed him, except squashed in at the bottom. She had recovered, of course, opened her eyes a second later to him gasping.

He remembered saying, ‘I just want to hold you. Why do you always do this to me?’ and even to him it hadn’t made sense because he was the one doing it to her.

Afterwards, Murray had felt hungry, but couldn’t think of anything that he’d wanted to eat. He sliced an apple in half, traced the star of seeds with his finger, then decided he didn’t want it. He left it, already turning brown, on the kitchen bench.

### **Author’s note**

No one was killed in the April 19 explosion, nor did the roof fall in. The bookstore, kitchen and press on the first floor of 291 took the force of the blast (Evans and Ferrier).

The same night, a man called *The Courier Mail* (1) saying he was a member of a right wing group and had just bombed the Brisbane Communist Party Headquarters. He threatened to bomb more on Friday if members attended the anti-Vietnam war moratorium that day. He ended his conversation with ‘Heil Hitler.’

Gary Mangan, a known Nazi party member, later confessed to the bombing. He was taken to court, but the Judge ruled that the body of evidence was inadmissible, citing a legal technicality. Mangan was not charged.

Ian Curr, in his article, *Radical Books in Brisbane*, publishes an image of the Communist party quarters in Brisbane. The image, entitled ‘[After the Bomb, April 19 1972](#),’ shows detectives interviewing those who were in the building at the time. One man, with his back to the camera, is unidentified.

I imagined this unknown man, in thongs with the long hair, to be Murray. It is in these gaps in historical knowledge that the writer of fiction is free to imagine.

### **References**



“Bomb in the Valley, then City shots.” *The Courier Mail*. April 20 1972: 1.

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