

Raw

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I am not sorry for anything that has happened. It has taught me to know myself better.

-The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde

As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.

-Nelson Mandela

Prologue

It's after midnight. I'm standing out the front of his house on Ash Tree Drive, Armidale—a lone figure on a dead quiet street in a country town. My heart is racing, my left fist pumping open and closed, my chest dripping with sweat. It's November, and the temperature is still quite cool, but the bulletproof vest I'm wearing doesn't breathe well. The rest of my ensemble—combat boots, tactical pants, hoodie, ski mask, Kevlar gloves—isn't helping either. Still, the heat is only a mild inconvenience. Everything I'm wearing and carrying has been carefully selected for a reason.

I rest the petrol bomb on the front lawn and reach for the lighter in my pocket, my hand brushing one of the knives I'm carrying. There's one on each side of my belt, plus smaller knives strapped to each of my ankles. I figured if he managed to tackle me to the ground, no matter which way I was pinned, I'd be able to reach at least one of them and stab him. I've always been overly prepared for everything. I've got a second lighter in case the first one doesn't work, and two boxes of matches spread between my multitude of pockets as well. And my handgun, of course. The knives are just for tonight, but I rarely leave home these days without my handgun. Unfortunately, you can never prepare for every variable.

By this stage I'm supposed to be standing over his badly beaten body and deciding the best thing to do from there. When I left my house tonight, I still wasn't sure if I'd kill him or not. I figured I could make that decision when the time came. Only it didn't. After months of my accomplice gathering and passing me intelligence, I knew his flatmate was out of town for the next few days. This was my best chance of catching him home alone, but fate was not in my favour.

The empty paddock behind his house was the perfect observation point. From behind a shrub, I watched them through the kitchen window. There was no way they could see me. The dogs, however, could smell me. Every now and then they started barking in my direction, and I threw them another few biscuits to shut them up. As the hours rolled by, the only activity I saw in the house was my target and his friend taking turns to get another couple of beers out of the fridge—just two unremarkable men in their mid-twenties passing the time. Kneeling in the dirt, I felt the little patience I had left drying up. A year of repressed anger curdled in my stomach as I waited for his friend to leave.

When they ended up leaving together, my hatred turned to despair. They'd no doubt gone to a pub, and I bitterly wondered if he'd ever realise the schooner he's probably drinking right now might have saved his life. I didn't know when he'd be back, or if he'd be alone when he returned. The only thing I knew is I couldn't go home empty-handed.

I do, of course, have a plan B. The rag on the petrol bomb roars to life. For a few seconds, I hesitate. One voice asks me if I'm actually going to do this. The other asks if I'm actually going to let this scumbag get away with what he did. The wine bottle and its payload of petrol smash through the front window, the thin pane of glass offering no resistance at all. The dark little house bursts into life. The smoke alarm's shrill cry pierces through the night only a split second after I hear the bottle smash inside. I run. I have no desire to watch it burn. The fire is just a means to an end. Anything that will get him out of our lives.

It's barely more than a kilometre back to my place. I take the route I planned, first through the vacant strip of land next to his house, then I follow Northcott Street

right down to the bike track, which takes me the rest of the way, ditching the ski mask and the gloves down the first drain I go past. It would be quicker to cut down my street the first time the bike track traverses close to it, but there's less chance of being seen on the track, and I can always duck into the scrub if anyone is here. But the night is empty—just me running into the wind and the shadows. I reach home before I know it, catching a glimpse of flashing blue and red lights in the far distance as I cross the street in front of my house.

'Kain, Missy,' I repeat in a loud whisper as I run up my driveway, hoping not to startle our dogs and have them rouse the neighbourhood. Thankfully they recognise my voice. I scale our locked driveway gate to save time fiddling with my keys and land on the other side. I collapse against the back wall of our house, and Kain starts licking my face. Normally this would annoy me, but tonight I'm too exhausted to stop him.

After several minutes of getting my breath back, I empty my pockets, take off my vest and put the rest of my clothes straight on cycle, mixing them in with the assorted laundry I deliberately left in the washing machine earlier. In the unlikely event the police come to my house in the next few hours, the wash will hopefully remove any forensic evidence I picked up, and the fact there's a full load of clothes on will make it look like I wasn't just cleaning one odd-looking outfit. I wash the boots in the sink and put them by the back door; I'll take them and the clothes I was wearing to the local dump in the morning. I step inside, making sure the dogs don't sneak in behind me like they always try to. I take a shower then crawl into bed next to her. She stirs and looks at me expectantly, her beautiful brown eyes appearing black in the darkness.

'It's done,' I tell her.

'What did you do?'

'He wasn't home, so I burnt down his house.'

She pauses, mulling it over. 'Good,' she says.

I curl against her body and she kisses me.

I don't sleep very well that night, but then again, I rarely do. My mind always becomes more active once my body slows down. Usually I think about a hundred different things. Tonight I'm only thinking about one. How did it ever come to this? To answer that, I guess I have to start at the beginning.

Chapter 1

He was screaming at her again. It's my earliest memory, but I distinctly recall not being surprised when I pushed the door to my parents' room ajar to find my father standing over her and yelling. He turned and saw me, and whatever was so important he felt the whole neighbourhood had to hear was put on pause until I turned around and shuffled out. The all-too-familiar screams recommenced before I'd reached my bedroom. I must have been about two and a half.

My parent's relationship was doomed to fail from the beginning, but what do you expect when a romance begins on opposite sides of the criminal justice system?

Mum came from a working-class family in Brisbane, the only child out of five to obtain a university degree. Dad came from a poverty-stricken family in New Zealand, the only child out of five to spend most of his adolescence in juvenile detention.

'I guess it all started at my cousin Bill's wedding,' my mother told me. I've never met Bill, but by all accounts, he was the black sheep of her family—in and out of juvenile detention as a teenager, before upgrading to the prison system as an adult. In 1984, during one of his periods outside prison, Bill married. Among the attendees of his wedding was one of the senior welfare officers he'd met in prison. My mother, who was fresh out of an arts degree majoring in sociology and looking for work, struck up a conversation with him. He ended up offering her a six-month temporary contract as a welfare officer at Long Bay, a notorious prison just outside the Sydney CBD, which has been warehousing the city's least desirable residents since 1909.

Welfare officers are there to assist prisoners with certain logistical concerns, and my mother met my father, Paul, when he came to the welfare office in the remand section of the prison.

‘I need you to call my co-offender and let him know something, but if his father answers the phone, just hang up.’

‘Umm, I don’t think I can do that. I mean, I can’t hang up on someone,’ she said.

Dad slammed his fist into the table and left.

My mother might never have seen my father after this rather unromantic first meeting, but fate drew them together again. After he was sentenced, he was sent to the Central Industrial Prison, the main prison complex at Long Bay. For some time my mother had been rejecting the sexual advances of her boss and found herself transferred from remand to the main prison complex as well. It was a much tougher area to work in, and she’s always believed her boss sent her there as punishment for rejecting him. In any case, my father was much more talkative and friendly when he came to see her in her new office. He was in for burglary, and would brag to her about sneaking through people’s houses while they were sleeping, even feeding their dogs to keep them quiet.

When my father was nearly due for release, he made another appointment to see my mother. He brought her a marigold flower. I can’t imagine where he would have found it in Long Bay. Nor could she. He’d heard about Glebe House, a halfway residence for parolees that is still operating today, and asked my mother to arrange for him to live there post-release. When she asked why he wanted to live in a house specifically for parolees, he explained he didn’t have any family in the country. He’d come to Australia from New Zealand shortly after he turned eighteen. He looked distinctly Polynesian,

but he was actually half-Chinese, half-Maori, or Chaori as they have been called colloquially.

I never met my Chinese grandfather, and I'm not entirely sure when he died, but I probably wouldn't have been able to get to know him anyway. He didn't speak English very well, and my father didn't speak Chinese. Naturally, this caused some communication barriers between them. I never met my Maori grandmother either. She died of lung cancer before I was born.

Once my father was living there, Mum deliberately arranged for one of her external visits to parolees to include Glebe House. She asked him to go for a walk, and they spent the afternoon walking around nearby Sydney University. Mum thought my father would find it interesting as he'd never seen a university before, and was hoping to show him the beginnings of a new world. He seemed to enjoy taking in the surroundings but kept asking her why she hadn't met that special someone at university herself. Mum didn't really know the answer to that. She said she was initially drawn to my father as he looked similar to someone she'd been attracted to as a teenager. She was also desensitised and even intrigued by prisoners, thanks to her cousin Bill being one for so much of his life. 'There was just something appealing about someone who grew up on the other side of the law', she told me, which I'd say is a euphemism for 'I like bad boys'.

My mother's temporary contract at the prison ended, and shortly thereafter, my father managed to get himself sent back to prison on a historical burglary charge that had finally caught up with him. My mother started visiting him. One day he called to let her know he'd received bail and asked if she could spot him the two hundred dollars he needed to be released. He also told her he needed somewhere to stay, and Mum said

he could move into the spare room at her house. One thing led to another, and before long, they were an item.

My father returned to a life of crime, the only lifestyle he'd known. Along with at least two heroin-addicted friends, he committed an armed robbery which he was never caught for. Mum had no idea until one day, for no apparent reason, he decided to show her the gun they used in the robbery. Mum thinks my father didn't actually know why he would do certain things, such as showing her the gun. Maybe he just liked seeing what people's reactions would be.

My mother's reaction was to demand he get it out of the house. He did; however, he also became paranoid she'd tell someone about the robbery. Mum says my father was frequently both verbally and physically aggressive. Having lived with the man myself, I have no reason to doubt her. She says he only ever hit her once, at the climax of one of his paranoid rants about whether she was going to rat him out to the police. The beating was so bad she ended up in Lewisham Hospital for a week. To my mother's amazement, the Catholic nuns who operated the hospital kept allowing my father to visit her, even though they'd been told he was the one that attacked her. He was very charming during the visits, bringing her flowers and making jokes.

Somewhere along the line, he decided he wanted to give up his life of crime and go straight. Mum helped him enrol in a literacy course at TAFE. Her father, a leading figure in the Waterside Workers Federation, helped get him a job on a building site through his union contacts. My father was poorly educated and didn't even know how to use a ruler until my mother showed him. But being bright, he caught on quickly and was amazed at how much money you could make through a steady job. Evidently, his new wage paid better than the driblets and drabs that came with a life of crime.

A few months later, Mum found out she was pregnant with me. My father's reaction was somewhat less than romantic. 'Wow, I've never got someone pregnant before. Guess I'll stick around.'

I suppose other men have reacted worse to the same news.

I was born in March 1986. I would spend the first three and a half years of my life with my parents in a duplex in Ashfield, but my only strong memory of it is that fight between them.

Mum didn't have a good relationship with her own family at the time, and still doesn't to this day. At any given point, she's not on speaking terms with at least one of her three sisters, and at least one of them isn't on speaking terms with one of the others. My maternal grandfather was always kind to me, but the only thing my mother and her sisters seem to agree on is that he was busy working and rarely at home when they were growing up, and often drunk when he was.

Mum decided she'd make the most of her situation with my father and try reaching out to his family instead. She ended up tracking down and writing to his sister, Tanya, in New Zealand, who was very happy to make contact. Tanya hadn't heard from my father for over fifteen years, since he'd moved to Australia, and invited us all to visit her and the rest of the family. However, my father vetoed any idea of going back. He was afraid there were outstanding arrest warrants for him there.

My father was very concerned about my future. He'd frequently say he didn't want me to have to struggle like he had. He wanted me to have a stable childhood, something he had always dreamed of. He rarely spoke of his own childhood and his sisters don't want to talk about it to this day. His family was dirt poor, and moved frequently due to their father's unstable employment. Wanting me to never be in that

position, he arranged to borrow about \$60,000 from my grandfather. Added to the \$15,000 he'd managed to save himself, it was enough to buy a property in the eighties. Well, in the country anyway. Sydney was out of their price range.

Mum had completed her undergraduate degree at the University of New England in Armidale, a small town several hundred kilometres north of Sydney that she'd grown fond of. They bought a modest three-bedroom home there when I was about eighteen months old. My grandfather asked my father what would happen to the house if he and my mother separated. My father insisted the house would be for me. He even bought it in my mother's name to prove his point. The house was rented out and my father studiously paid my grandfather back the money. He figured once I was an adult I could either live in it or sell it and use the money for whatever I wanted out of life. Either way, the foundations for my entire life would be built. My mother would be the guardian of the property. My father, paranoid as ever, even had a legal contract drawn up saying she would rent the property out and put the profits into a trust fund for me, and then transfer both the funds and the property over to me when I was eighteen. Neither of those things ever happened. If I could change only one thing about my life, just to see how things would have been different, I would definitely stop my father from ever buying that goddamn house. His best intentions often proved disastrous.

In order to take some of the financial burden off my father, Mum found a job working for the Royal Blind Society, taking audiobooks to visually impaired people. Sometimes she'd take me with her, other times she'd put me in childcare for a half-day. Mum became close friends with a woman named Margaret at the childcare centre. When Margaret learnt about Mum's relationship with my father, she gave out her address as a pre-emptive move in case he ever hurt her again. Mum noticed my father

would make a habit of going out whenever she was at work. She wondered if he was cheating on her.

A few months later, my father came home with a very content look on his face and nonchalantly told my mother he had just been 'serviced'. For some time my mother had been feeling as if she was his social worker rather than his partner. She calmly told him she wanted to leave. In an instant, he wrapped his hands around her throat and screamed in her face. The moment he released the pressure, Mum ran out the door and headed straight to Margaret's house. She was worried about leaving me, but Margaret didn't think my father would physically hurt me. Margaret did say if my mother didn't leave the relationship, she would lose all respect for her.

Mum called my father the next morning, September 30th 1989, and asked if he wanted her to look after me when he went to work. They had an awkward greeting, and as soon as he left, Mum rushed to pack our belongings into her car. She was in such a hurry, she left her week's pay in the kitchen drawer. We went to her parents' house, several hours drive away. My father called around trying to find us. Before long he called her parents and sounded genuinely concerned about my welfare, even asking if I was fretting for him. My mother said he didn't understand I was still traumatised from witnessing his violence the night before.

Mum stayed with her parents for a few months, enough time to save money to find our own place. She initially wanted to move into the house in Armidale. However, the solicitor who drew up the contract advised her against that. My father was obsessed with paying off the mortgage, and having us move in there would have eliminated the income he was getting from the tenants, significantly delaying his efforts. The solicitor was worried about how my father would react if that happened.

With the help of the local women's refuge, Mum found a small rental flat in Armidale, and life was relatively normal for a year. I don't remember too much about living with my mother in Armidale, but I remember being happy. I remember her taking me to the university's appropriately named Deer Park, where I could feed deer through the chain-link fence, and I remember chasing ducks around the pond in Civic Park.

Armidale is a small town. The population has been hovering around the 30,000 mark from the early 1990s until today, but it seemed boundless as a child. I have fond memories from preschool, but I spent plenty of time at home too, often with babysitters, while my mother completed a post-graduate course to become a librarian. I remember getting up at night after my mother put me to bed and playing with my toys because I wasn't tired. I remember going to Video Ezy with my mother, trying to rent *He-Man* tapes and being told to get *Care Bears* instead. My mother didn't like the violence in *He-Man*.

We were not well off by any means and moved house three times during the eighteen months we lived in Armidale between various temporary accommodations the women's refuge could find. At the second place we lived, Mum made friends with the woman next door, Lily, and I made friends with her children including her daughter, Annie.

Our relatively pleasant life, however, was interrupted when my father found us via a private investigator. He drove up with his new girlfriend, Maree, an overweight blonde who was a few years younger than him. She physically forced her way into our flat and bullied my mother into giving my father custody of me for a few days. My father drove me back to Sydney, promising my mother he would call to let her know we'd arrived back safely. He didn't. He also didn't bring me back until about a week later,

twice the amount of time he'd agreed to take me. As soon as he left, I begged my mother to lock the door, telling her my father hit people and constantly screamed at Maree.

I remember being petrified for a time at my preschool, even wetting my pants in the playground because I was too afraid to go into the bathroom. When my mother picked me up from preschool shortly after returning from visiting my father, one of the teachers took her aside.

'Something has happened to Damien,' she said. 'He's scared of everything. He won't even go to the bathroom on his own. He won't play with the other children. This is not the same child I looked after last week.'

My mother said she'd noticed the change in my behaviour as well. My preschool teacher was a mandatory reporter for DOCS, the Department of Community Services, and told my mother she was supposed to report anything suspicious like this. My mother decided she'd go to DOCS and report it herself.

When my mother contacted DOCS, she told them my father had assaulted me. She also reported concerns I'd been molested. I'd been watching the news with her when a report came on about a man being arrested for molesting children. I asked my mother what that meant, and when she explained he was being punished for touching children in their private areas, I told her my father had done that to me. In retrospect, my mother believes I jumped on an opportunity for someone to punish my father, and that I just wanted him to get in trouble like the man on TV. That seems the likeliest explanation to me now. My father was a lot of terrible things, but a paedophile wasn't one of them.

At the time, however, my mother thought the allegation was genuine. She reported the incident to the police. An officer played a video that dealt with child abuse and observed my mother and me watching it. Her report stated I interacted with my

mother in a normal way and did not react to the portion of the video dealing with abuse in the manner typical of children who have been sexually assaulted. I was also interviewed by a DOCS worker, though I wouldn't repeat any of my allegations, saying I couldn't remember anymore. DOCS referred me to a sexual abuse counsellor. Her report from late 1990 describes me as 'a quiet, resistive little boy who was clearly on his guard. His play-work showed consistent themes of anger and feelings of powerlessness'. When she asked me to draw a picture of my family, I only drew my mother. I told her my father was a 'bad daddy' because he hurt my mother, and how scared that made me feel. She performed standard tests for evidence of sexual abuse, with anatomically correct dolls among other things. Her report stated there was no evidence of sexual abuse.

The DOCS worker concluded he could not take any further action regarding my mother's allegations. His report did note I was 'reticent to talk,' 'difficult to engage [with]' and that I had 'poor eye contact [and] muffled speech'. If society had known more about autism at the time, perhaps mine would have been diagnosed shortly thereafter, rather than in my mid-twenties.

I didn't see my father again for about a year. During that time I was enrolled in kindergarten at a local public school. One day my mother told me to catch the bus home. It was a lot to expect from a four-year-old. I couldn't recognise where to get off, so I just stayed on the bus until the end of the line. The perplexed driver called the police about the young boy who seemed completely unfazed by his predicament. I'm guessing on the scale of trauma I'd already experienced at this age, being lost didn't rank very highly. I'm told I spent a very pleasant afternoon watching TV at Armidale police

station, waiting for my mother. I don't remember this at all. In any case, it must have been more enjoyable than my next stay at that police station twenty-four years later.

My father arranged on three occasions to come and see me, though he never showed. He then applied formally for temporary custody of me, and the Family Court in Sydney awarded him two weeks with me at the end of my schooling year. My mother was afraid of me spending that much time with him. I didn't want to leave home for that long myself. I distinctly remember begging my mother to ask if I could only go for a week instead. My mother didn't hesitate, but naturally my father refused. A consolation offer was made. My mother could come to Sydney halfway through my visit and check in with me for a couple of hours at Sydney Central Police Station.

My father was thirty-eight years old when he drove up to Armidale in his faded yellow Mazda on December 28, 1991. When he collected me, he told my mother he had a surprise for her. When she asked what it was, he gave her his trademark malevolent smile and said 'You'll find out'.