

[Excerpt]

Doing Life in Paradise

A Novel

Tommy had to come home early from work. He was sick again. He managed to pick up some tin beer at the Tonsley Park Hotel drive-thru near his flat in Clovelly Park without passing out. He had to rest outside the cafe where Ruby often had her favourite pineapple crush drink and where he bought biscuits. But that was when he was eating. He made it back to his flat and struggled up the stairs, holding on to the rail and trying to keep hold of his tin beer with his shaking hands. About halfway up, Lemon Guy who lives on the top floor was coming down. Tommy didn't look at Lemon Guy, no one looked at Lemon Guy, he wasn't the kind of guy you wanted to make eye contact with, he took it as an invitation to beat the crap out of you. And Tommy was too sick to take in Lemon Guy's stink. 'Well, if it isn't Franz.' Tommy was never sure why Lemon Guy insisted on calling him Franz, but he wasn't the kind of guy you challenged; Tommy wouldn't have thought him capable of reading anything more substantial than a comic, so literary allusions were well out of his reach. Tommy stopped, held his breath swallowing his nausea and bowed his head to let Lemon Guy pass. But it was no good. As Lemon Guy reached Tommy, he clocked Tommy right in the face. Tommy's legs buckled, and he crashed to the floor. When Tommy opened his eyes, his nose was full of lemon smell and blood and Lemon Guy's face was only centimetres from Tommy's face. Lemon Guy spat at Tommy. 'You killed my cat, you cockroach.' Lemon Guy shouted this into Tommy's nostrils. Tommy didn't ordinarily use his nostrils for hearing, but in Lemon Guy's case, he felt compelled

to make an exception. Then Lemon Guy smashed Tommy again with his head and that was when Tommy felt his nose buckle, making a sound like plastic snapping. It seemed unlikely that a discussion about neighbourly harmony would be fruitful right at this moment. Tommy felt his nose fill with blood, which surely would put to an end any ambitions Tommy's nostrils might have entertained as listening devices. As it stood at the moment, they were flat out fulfilling their basic design function of air in, air out. Tommy didn't know it was Lemon Guy's goddamn cat. It was true then, Tommy thought, he had killed Lemon Guy's cat, and this confirmed his worse fears about himself. Tommy was a killer.

The first thing Tommy hoped was that no one in any of the flats had heard his nose snap. Especially Ruby. His regular noisy breathing as he walked up the stairs every day was bad enough. He would be embarrassed even more now, if she came out to see what that snapping noise was and found him lying on his back with blood bubbling from his nose, tin beer all over the steps and Lemon Guy standing over him. Tommy really didn't need that. And he didn't need Lemon Guy head-butting him and converting his nose into a lumpy fleshy bloody mess either. He was already not feeling good. But it would be worse if Ruby came out and saw him being beaten up by Lemon Guy. Tommy would feel defeated if that happened. He would feel he had let her down. He must never do that. Tommy believed it was his job to look after Ruby. Ruby had no idea Tommy was her self-appointed guardian angel. Billboards with the self-promoting smiling Minister's face in Paradise said, 'everyone has a guardian angel'. Not that Tommy was capable of saving anyone, himself included. Truth be known, Tommy could have used a guardian angel himself. Tommy had to hope that Ruby also had a real guardian angel, so that her safety wasn't totally reliant on him. Even so, as pathetic as Tommy knew he was, if he saw Ruby was in danger, he would do what was necessary to save Ruby. Sacrifice himself, if that

was what was required (it wasn't as though this existence of his was much to write home about). Some things you know about yourself, and Tommy knew he could sacrifice himself to save Ruby. And let's face it, Tommy was a killer, that was a proven fact and if he had to, he ought to be able to rely on that trait if necessary. He would kill anyone who put Ruby in danger.

Lemon Guy kicked the beer from Tommy's hand and all the tins broke from their plastic sleeve and crashed down the stairs with an unholy clatter. Tommy would have to wait for the beer to settle before he could open a tin, and he was really thirsty. Nothing was easy for Tommy. Whatever could go wrong, did. He was plagued with bad luck. The beer was critical. It was all he could take in these days. Blood dripped from his nose onto the concrete steps. He felt embarrassed causing a mess on the steps which everyone had to use, even though the building had been scheduled for refurbishment under the PERP programme. He felt he had let himself down again.

Lemon Guy scrunched one of Tommy's hands into the concrete step with his heavy army boots as he passed. Tommy felt the bones crack. Lucky it wasn't his right hand, the one he used to write his stories. Tommy crawled up the two flights of stairs to his flat, fell into his bathroom and started throwing up. He didn't need to be throwing up. He knew he had to try and keep things inside himself. He had stopped eating biscuits. He was losing fat fast now. He already looked like a stick insect, but now a stick insect that sweats and cries, and has a nose the shape of a mushroom slice and a hand that looked like it had been stuck in a giant's mouth and chewed. He hoped that Ruby in flat three hadn't heard all the noises. He worried that Ruby's quiet life might be disturbed by his small, unnerving sounds. He didn't want to scare her.

Tommy was scared himself, so he knew what that was like, although he wasn't scared in any particular way, like of Lemon Guy. He was pretty scared of Lemon Guy, but anyone would be. Tommy was just scared in a universal way, scared of life, scared of synchronicity, mostly synchronicity. What scared him about synchronicity was that it was impartial, disinterested and unpredictable and, as such, more wretched than something that intends harm, like Lemon Guy. Synchronicity. It wasn't as though it singled you out for specific retribution in a way that suggested you might deserve it for your sins, or crimes against the Universe. No, it didn't do that. It came along and shat on you for no good reason because you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, like some kind of coincidence monster. Because, let's face it, someone is always in the wrong place at the wrong time, otherwise there wouldn't be such a thing as a wrong place or a wrong time, but there was, and Tommy was always there. Synchronicity wrecks your life and then moves on as though you were not important, just a freckle on someone's leg in the Universe; like you just happen to be in the way. And it leaves you with an enormous debt. Tommy felt the everyday business of life was about dealing with the consequence caused by your own presence. Tommy felt half his problems were as a result of just being. Tommy figured everyone had this 'universal scaredness', in varying amounts. Although Tommy felt he had more of it than most and with good reason. He felt it in Ruby too when he stood across the Great Southern Road to watch her at work at the supermarket, before she started selling cars for a living, or when he saw her sitting on the steps of the flats eating grapes and sunning her beautiful legs. He wished she wouldn't do that; he didn't want Lemon Guy getting any ideas or looking into her eyes. You couldn't look into Ruby's eyes without crying. Looking into her eyes could rip your heart out. With a guy like Lemon Guy, well, it could tip him over the edge. Tommy had shadowed Ruby for a long time, for years now. That was his job, his life's work. But he was sure she wasn't aware

of his presence; he didn't want that. She didn't know him. He didn't dare tell her who he was. Tommy had loved Ruby for all this time and would love her forever. He would look after her. He owed her that. He would kill her himself, if that was the only way to save her, but she would be the last to go.

Tommy tried not to think too much about killing things and he thought he was getting better but when he realised how much of a phoney Doctor Robert Reynolds was, it was like something inside him clicked, and he all of a sudden started sweating and waning. It was like his cerebral waters broke and emptied in a sucking spiral out of his head and down through his body. He couldn't explain it any other way. In fact, that was how he explained it to Doctor Reynolds. Or did he get that from Doctor Reynolds? He couldn't be sure. He had relied very heavily on Doctor Reynolds and his counsel. Tommy was losing about a kilo of fat per week – similar to a bag of wet sponge cake. The sweat ran off him in rivulets. He hoped like hell the sweat would equal the weight loss, and that it was fluid he was losing not his actual self. He hoped it would all stop soon. He tried to read articles about weight loss, to see if any of them say, 'don't goddamn worry if you sweat a lot or if you suddenly start losing weight', but none of them did. He tried not to worry but it would have helped if he had someone. It would have helped if he wasn't always alone in his flat or in his bastard building, or his car; being in his car was the worst. But there was some- thing wrong with the building too; it sweated, and didn't like its tenants. Inanimate objects could be killers. Tommy suspected everything. But then Tommy had good reason to suspect things had malevolent intent, because everything did. He had firsthand experience of this – things could kill, cars for instance, especially cars. All he wanted was a normal life, a normal life in Paradise. Unfortunately, Paradise provided him with no clue as to what a normal life was, or how you went about having one. This is where he had expected Doctor Reynolds to help him, but after years seeing

the doctor, including reading every line of the doctor's first book, that was just a goddamn blow-out.

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