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NOWHERE MAN

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For Jenny, Alison & Martin

"Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like bananas."

– Groucho Marx (1890-1977)

"The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient."

– John Stuart Mill (1862)

The end is in the beginning and yet you go on."

– Hamm, in Samuel Beckett's one-act play, *Endgame* (1958)

1

THIS CITY DOESN'T grow on you, it grows in you. It snatches your breath. It scratches its scarlet nails down your back so you squirm for more. Sydney is heaven without dying. But in eight minutes, for Sonya, it would become hell.

The bush track clung alongside the foreshore, a seductive stretch of dirt and rocks and water views. The professor pounded it daily so, even without checking her watch, she knew she'd been running fifty minutes. But after last night, who cared about time?

Dribbles of sweat kept filling her smile lines. It had been their first sex in three weeks, true, but what did she expect after nine, no, ten years. As Sonya was convincing herself once again that Michael wasn't a lousy lover, the lace frond of a fern camouflaged a sandstone outcrop and she almost tripped. Regathering her balance and her pace, she reminded herself that in the long spaces between the sex Michael was still, well, a gentleman; most at ease sniffing a vintage claret or cradling a tumbler of good scotch—no ice, no water—and drawing back on one of his antique smoking pipes. And

considerate. The word “companion” didn’t endear itself to her, so she pushed it away.

She leapt, almost flew, over a tree root that caught her eye just in time but her shoulder swiped against a split branch of a eucalypt.

To her, Michael was a Mr Cool in a gallant, nineteenth-century kind of way yet “cold fish” was the epithet more often whispered round their circle of friends; these days more a semi-circle, and mostly hers. To them, Michael soaked himself in solitude. “Reserve” was a word conceived for him, or so a friend had said once in Sonya’s earshot. It was true he rarely sought friendships and when on odd occasions they were offered, he seldom accepted them.

For him, familiarity bred contentment, albeit one focused on few people and fewer things. Mostly, Michael was a self-contained, tight-lipped man who brushed off the prevailing fondness for approval or intimacy. Cool... yes. Detached at times... oh, yes. But for Sonya, also thoughtful... decent. Integrity and a quiet generosity gently shimmered from him, in soft beats.

He stuck to his guns in most things, even in his business affairs. His work since she’d known him was as a stocks and bonds trader operating from home, a perfect cocoon for his temperament. He’d chosen it well, she decided. Intellectual stimulation, the adrenaline of the markets, and no people. Plus, keeping yourself away from the daily hub-bub helped you filter out the noise and maintain perspective, a lesson he said he had gleaned from his earlier days freelancing as a journalist.

He claimed it was a useful tool in trading on the markets

as well as in everyday life but Sonya was never as convinced about the virtues of isolation. It did have its moments, like when she powered her motor bike down after a day's lecturing and she'd find him at their grey sliver of fence that overlooked the beach, ready for their ritual chat over a freshly-poured wine or whisky. She never knew if it was his first drink since alcohol didn't affect him as much her. Sonya was tall and slim so her vulnerability was a metabolism and fitness thing, nothing to do with her being a blonde as a friend once joked. As she'd head through the house to join Michael at the back fence, she'd try to guess from the wafting aroma what he had cooking. As well as a journalist, he'd also worked as a chef. What jobs hadn't he done? She'd pass by the dining table, usually set for two, often with a spray of fresh tulips. Like last night.

For Sonya tulips went with everything, even her job lecturing in business studies. It wasn't just their cheeky cup shape or their splashes of vivid colour. It was also the history of the manic speculation they'd fired up four centuries ago. Every year, she got a kick out of telling her students how Rembrandt earned less for his 1640s masterpiece, *The Nightwatch*, than the hammer price a single Viceroy tulip bulb got knocked down for at auction.

There were other kindnesses: gifts, and especially conversations. But Michael kept that side of him to their private world; the modern fetish for public displays of affection, even warmth, repelled him.

Where would she have been without him? Living comfortably on a university salary, for sure, but not in their beach house... well, hers actually... but that was another

story. One she had certainly rationalised but never quite worked out.

A barbed sapling brushed against her but she palmed it off, just as she'd done for years to the gibes and gossip. Like Michael she didn't care for the sneering but, truth be told, she yearned that he would occasionally display his emotions so others could see him as she did. Her late mother had always stereotyped him. That he was so reticent, so uptight, because he was British. It wasn't that, Sonya was sure, but there was something. An itch she couldn't scratch.

Sonya knew she should speak to him about it, and she would.

Today.

Six minutes...

Heck, did she really care if he was reserved? Live for the moment! And with him, there were great moments. She brushed back some loose strands of hair, for a change blasé that the whole world could see she had one ear with a lobe and one without. It was an oddity she normally covered up with longer hair, even though Michael claimed he found it endearing.

How often had she engaged in these same arguments with herself? She would definitely raise it all with him today. For sure. What better time, now that he'd agreed, finally, to a baby? Thirty-five on her last birthday, she had certainly been hearing her body. Tick... tick...

The early morning sun slanted through the treetops, leaping from branch to branch like flames. She stopped at the viewing platform, drawing in the crisp sea-spray of the

sou'-easterly and watching the wind-shadow skip across the water. An augury perhaps.

Her thoughts lingered, imagining that the rhythmic swell of the water was Michael, his chest rising and falling just as it had been when she'd slipped out of their bed that morning.

Their relationship had always had its edges. Until last night, Michael's stand-off against children, though always gracious, had been as hard as flint. Despite that, compared to the ditch her first marriage had careened into, her decade with Michael was a yellow brick road. There were the unexpected things. Like last night: "Let's go barging on a French canal," he'd said, "before our baby." Before our baby, a phrase lightly tossed in like a vinaigrette, and without any fanfare despite her years of badgering.

Surprisingly, she'd almost not registered it; the mere mention of an overseas trip had thrown her completely off-guard. After they'd quit New York for Sydney nearly nine years ago and despite their, or rather, his money, they'd only ever flown together within Australia. Never internationally. He, on the other hand. God! she thought, as she turned back onto the track, Michael was such a frequent flyer the airport security people probably knew his shoe size. He must have a trillion international frequent flyer miles but, she reminded herself, she had never enjoyed a single one.

His many, too many, business trips were fleeting, always rushed. Inevitably he returned dishevelled, as if he'd just been trekking for thirty days in Nepal rather than on a three-day flit to Los Angeles or some other business capital. In the beginning, she'd stressed herself about these trips—

what wife wouldn't?—but time wore her down and tolerating them simplified her life, despite her mother's finger-wagging: one failed marriage was enough, she'd repeatedly warned.

Four minutes...

A child. Sonya hurtled off the end of the track and her shoes dug into the white sand, so fine and clean it squeaked as it stopped her short. She slipped off her sweatshirt and wrapped it round her waist for her cool-down. Her red leotard top was crimson with sweat and her heartbeat was even outpacing her mind.

She'd come round the headland and this end of the beach was tapped in behind, sheltered from the south. Here the palms and eucalypts stood motionless. The barnacled boats moored in close were rocking imperceptibly from the rising tide and there was scarcely a jangle from their glinting halyards. The sun continued to chin itself above the horizon and paint colour onto the eastern cliffs, giving the final crescent of moon a razzle of gold.

She watched the water nudge against the beach, up and back. It hissed up the sand leaving a froth of lace for the seagulls to trample. As her breath slowed she watched the grey scavengers fluffing up their wings and poking their beaks underneath, picking out lice for their breakfast appetisers. A fledgling with a pink-grey beak and legs and spotted wings scabbled to the water's edge and dipped its head in and out several times, shaking it in between.

Apart from a drifting foam of cloud, it was a still winter's morning. Sonya strode over the sand for her final stretch, certain this would be a good day... a good year.

But in three minutes, she'd discover how wrong she was.

At the far end of the beach, the familiarity, the odd ordinariness of their grey slatted fence sandwiched between much grander walls caused her to question Michael's sudden new leaf and by the time she reached the boardwalk, she was stamping the sand out of her soles as well as her scepticism.

Once again she questioned how she'd lasted so long with a man so guarded, so private. Obscurity and vagueness about his past hovered around Michael like a cloud of summer sand flies but though it was irritating, years of practice had taught Sonya to swat it off as yet another tolerable eccentricity. No longer. Not from today. Today the itch would be scratched.

She recalled how weeks after she'd moved into his New York apartment on Central Park West, she'd knocked his passport from his desk and two strange dried flowers fluttered out of it to the floor. They were shrivelled, brittle and brown though she guessed they'd once been white. Daisies perhaps. As she slid a page of the passport underneath the wilted blooms, carefully so they wouldn't disintegrate, she'd wondered if they were a memento. But of what? Or whom? She'd never asked. Flipping through the tattered passport that day, she saw some pages were ripped. The corner with his birth-date was gone. Cut or torn, she couldn't tell. But for the first time she saw his full name: Michael Will Hunt. His name was a sentence.

One minute...

She unlatched her gate smack on what she assumed was 7 AM. Courtesy of Ralph their pitch-black Labrador, the time seemed obvious. Ralph was not normally a barker but

what usually got him yapping at this time was the racket from the builders a few doors up. Six days a week it was always the same. On the dot of seven the noise dam from the construction site legally sluiced open.

But wait. Apart from Ralph and the squawk of a seagull, and the hiss of the tide, there was no sound. No builders. Not yet. Sonya checked her watch: five before seven.

Something caught her eye and she jerked her head up at the house to see that the glass double-doors of their attic bedroom were ajar, swinging out onto their balcony.

Michael must be up but, at anything before 7:30, that was almost unheard of.

A lorikeet flashed past her, so close the green wingtip brushed her cheek. The bird perched on top of the left-hand balcony door and cocked its head, a scatter of sunlight fluorescing its blues and mauves.

As Sonya unconsciously wiped her cheek, the bird gave a raucous squawk and shot a repulsive stream of grey shit down the glass door panel. Sonya was not religious, yet the smear roused in her an ancient echo of parents daubing blood on their doors to ward away the angel of death.



A scatter of sand flew off her shoe as she kicked open the back gate but Sonya's eyes, puzzled, stayed fixed on the swinging doors upstairs. She almost tumbled over Ralph, needing to stabilise herself against the gate post. She started to reward the big lump of a dog with a scratch under his black muzzle but strangely he didn't roll over and offer his

belly as he usually did. He simply pulled away from her and loped back toward the house.

Why was Michael up so early? She bent over, still huffing a little, her hands on her hips, and noticed her toe had jabbed into a small brown mound on the grass. Damn Ralph! She snapped her foot back from it, but on eyeing it closely she saw it was a knock of Michael's pipe tobacco. She squatted to test if he'd already been out here this morning but it was soggy, the same as the grass, and she also noticed how the lone track of her footprints leaving the house an hour earlier still lingered on the dew. No, Michael had not been outside. It was the same with Ralph's paw prints though she could see they were mostly in a crazy circle directly below the bedroom balcony, as if he had been chasing his tail. She tugged her ear, the one with no lobe. Something wasn't right.

Ralph came back to her and snatched at her sleeve, tugging her toward the house. A little jittery, Sonya shook him off, her eyes focused back up at the swaying doors. Even if Michael had opened them and come outside, why would such a stickler for neatness leave them unlatched like this? Maybe the phone had rung or he'd suddenly remembered something inside? She wiped the sudden clamminess of her palms on her sweatshirt.

Every morning when Sonya returned from her run, Ralph would feign sneaking inside under her guard, knowing that inside the house was off-limits—one of Michael's many exasperating rules. But today Ralph showed no sign of playfulness and simply plonked himself at the stoop, covering his head with his paws.

As Sonya headed upstairs, a low growl rumbled from deep in Ralph's throat. Halfway up, her nostrils flared into question as a faint, almost odourless smell insinuated the air. Old socks? Sweat? She ran her fingers through her hair and also over her tights to check if the parrot had deposited anything when it flashed past, but no. She pulled the shoulder of her sweatshirt to her nose, but it wasn't that either. Ralph? She sniffed again and turned her head back to see if he'd snuck in behind her but he was still at the door, watching her through his paws.

She padded up the stairs. At the turn-back, she started to make out murmurings from the bedroom TV. But with the breeze outside picking up, the balcony doors started to bang and the hallway door slammed shut.

"Hey!" she called. "Are you trying to bust the glass?"

There was no response. It must be that the TV was too loud, she decided.

Something held back her hand from turning the door knob. Eventually she turned it and slowly pushed open the door.

But Michael wasn't there. Guessing he'd be in the bathroom, she switched off the TV. But instead of silence or his radio blaring from the bathroom, all she heard were Ralph's growls drifting up from the garden.

Sonya slid open the bathroom door expecting to find Michael semi-dozed and with his undershorts splayed around his ankles. There was no Michael. "This isn't funny," she called out, her cry ricocheting uselessly off the tiles.

The lingering airlessness she'd felt on the stairs was now invading the bedroom as if it was stalking her. Her heartbeats hammered into her ears and her legs felt weak.

She twisted round to Michael's dressing room and yanked its door open so hard it banged against the wall, gouging out a chunk of white plaster which crumbled onto the floor.

Her stomach compressed into a fist that squeezed the air up and out of her lungs. Had Ralph seen something... had he been warning her?

She spun round like a drunk and ran downstairs. The door to Michael's office was wide open. He never left it like that. And that odour... it was stronger, mustier, like the mouldy crust of an overripe brie cheese that's been left out in the air too long. Or truffles... Michael loved black truffles, she remembered. He said he'd spent a season in France once sniffing them out with his own pig. Or maybe it was a dog. Either way, she didn't care. Not now.

Confused and panicked, Sonya stood framed in the doorway. It was more like an office furniture catalogue than Michael's office. His beechwood desk was almost bare, scattered only with a few loose papers. His leather chair was swivelled to face toward the window, as if he had turned his back on her. Even his beloved ashtray was empty. She walked over and lifted it to her nose for a whiff of him but it was cold antiseptic metal.

All that was left was an unplugged computer screen and his music player. She pulled open a desk drawer. Empty. She leant under the desk. A depression in the carpet marked where his computer console had been and a grey power cable snaked itself uselessly from nowhere to nowhere else, neither rearing nor ready to go.

How to explain it, other than the obvious? Maybe her mother had been right all along.

She stared blankly past his chair and out the window, frantic for a flash of inspiration. The edge of a cloud blocked the sun just for a moment and when the gloom passed, a brassy glint sparked up from the floor just between the wall and the desk. In a daze, she stooped for the gold-coloured disk and without thinking slid it into the slot in Michael's sound system as if tidiness were a substitute for action.

Suddenly she tore out to the garage. But both the car and the bike were still there. Unsure if she was pleased or disappointed she circled round the ancient SAAB, its grey enamel absorbing her despair. She unlocked the trunk but it weighed on her fingers. She'd read stories... seen movies... Eventually she lifted it. Apart from an umbrella, an old theatre program and a credit card slip from the supermarket, the space was empty.

She exhaled with a force as if she hadn't taken a new breath since she'd been upstairs in the bedroom. She slapped her side. Of course the vehicles would be here. Michael didn't drive. She drove the SAAB when the two of them were out together or if it was raining. The bike was her work horse, to weave her through peak hour traffic to and from campus. Actually, it was more than that. A twin-cylinder Ducati MH900 *evoluzione*, it was a tomato-red speed machine. But the three hundred kilograms of grunt she loved so much were as cold as she now felt.

As she lumbered back upstairs to their bedroom, she checked her watch. Again. An hour. She'd only been gone an hour.

She stood at the door rocking on the balls of her feet, indecisive, and finally crossed the room to stop the doors

banging. Was she imagining it or were they waving farewell? She pushed them open to engage the latches, maybe to let fresh air in to flush the room. She was tempted to clean off the lorikeet shit with a tissue from the box beside the bed but left it there. As a marker.

She turned back into the room and spotted something on the bed, half-tucked under her pillow. It was a note.

Her eyes closed for a moment to calm her raging, thumping pulse but it was futile.

She dragged in her breaths. Her legs had barely the strength to carry her to the edge of the bed. She sat and, pointlessly, one hand tried steadying the other as she read it.

My darling Sonya,

Sorry our bliss had to end like this—with a scratched note—but I could hardly face you.

We were a great couple. You know that.

And though you'll always have the memory of our last May Day together and our walk to Calvary, without you I'll be nowhere.

Your love,

◆ □ ◆

Mike

Blinking back sudden tears, denial scratched at her eyes and her heart. Last night, finally, he'd relented about a child.

And a trip. Hardly actions if he was planning an exit, she argued with herself. He had to be in trouble. Kidnapped, perhaps. But by whom? And why? And why this note but no ransom demand?

Last night. Had it been just a decoy? A cruel lure. To lull her? “The bastard!” she spat out aloud.

Her mother had been right. She had seen through him just like she’d sussed out Charles, Sonya’s first husband. Yet now it seemed, she had wasted all those years by staunchly defending shit number two.

“*We were a great couple,*” said the note.

Were... The word slapped her hard.

Her life had already shifted into the past tense.

What would she tell their friends? Her friends, she corrected herself.

She edged herself off the bed. This, she thought, clenching the note in front of her face... this was not Michael. She gripped it harder to prevent her hands trembling but that made it worse.

Her bank loan. What about that? Surely Michael wouldn’t just walk out and leave her in the...

She inched to the window and looked out across the water but tears blurred her vision and her mind struggled to focus.

There was something... She stepped back and again lowered herself onto the rim of the bed. She pulled up a corner of the blue bed sheet to wipe her eyes but it was still laced with last night... instead, she crumpled it in her hand and drew it up to her nose.

“*My darling Sonya...*” Her breath caught but knew she had to read on. “*My...*” Her eyes welled up but she pushed

herself through the blur. It wasn't his usual old-style copperplate but it was still Michael's handwriting. Yet the words... they weren't his. Michael did not write this.

The maelstrom roiled around her and she fell back on the bed, clawing at the sheet.

He didn't write this...

A baby... The house... He wouldn't leave her.

But he had.



ABOUT JOHN M. GREEN

When it dawned on John that what got him up in the morning was writing not his day job, he quit the job. Until then he was an executive director in a leading investment bank. Much earlier he'd been a lawyer, a partner in two major law firms.

He is a well-known business writer and commentator and his writing has appeared in a variety of publications in Australia and overseas including: *The Australian*, *The Australian Financial Review*, *Company Director*, *Business Spectator*, *The Age*, *The Bulletin*, the UK's *Financial Times* and Canada's *Director Journal*.

Nowhere Man is John's first novel.

Today, as well as writing, he is a board member of two stock-exchange-listed corporations and some not-for-profits, as well as a co-founder of *Pantera Press*.

He lives with his wife, a sculptor, in Sydney. They have two adult children who share their passions for the arts, books, business and philanthropy, as well as for the shimmering waters of an extraordinary city.