

The Detective

Out here in the desert, there's nothing deadlier than water. It's an uninvited guest out here, a cut-and-run invader. Or, at the very least, a lost traveler like the rest of us: out of sorts, rudderless, jostled in the mad rush of traffic, hassled by the caprices of the local landscape. Every year people get swept away by rainfall they never saw, buried in river beds they thought prehistoric, swamped in arroyos of slurry that strike like lightning.

Less than a week after I took the pledge, I went on an MP call. Two out of Geraldton. Father and son, native Sandgropers but coastal townsfolk out of their element in the Outback. A week later we identified them by their roof antenna poking out of the earth. The bodies didn't bother me. But I remember puking my guts out the moment I saw that grim, metal sprig sprouting from the ground like some mechanical sapling.

It took twelve hours to dig those bodies out and another three to put them back. Every year there's another story like that, if not in WA than somewhere else in the Outback. Most people wouldn't believe it, but more people drown in the desert than die of thirst.

I kept thinking about that antennae after I got the call, two eggs and a half cup of short black into my morning chinwag with Alice Cotton. Alice ran a hash house on the south end of Cervantes off the Sixty. She had twinkling blue eyes, short, chestnut hair with tight curls, and the best bedside manner from Perth to Jurien Bay.

“I’m not getting you in trouble, am I?” she said after I took the call.

“Not any more than you always do.”

“I’m serious. And from the sound of it so was that call.”

Sergeant Linehan said emergency dispatch had gotten a call from Coolgardie. Priority Two. Heavy business that wasn’t a car crash.

“Probably some buffer confused a garden hose for a snake.”

“Be careful.”

“Don’t worry. I get paid to.”

The morning sun helped beat half the exhaustion out of me - curiosity took care of the other half. My beat rarely brought me over to the One. Most nights I patrolled the Sixty from Cervantes to Arrowsmith. Occasionally trouble dragged me westward to play lifeguard for drunken tourists and drunker fishermen.

Another update halfway there: dispatch reported two DOA in Coolgardie, fifty miles inland. There wasn’t much beyond that. Special crimes unit was coming up from Perth. But I was the only walloper close enough to poke the bodies before they went sour.

I knew the mine by reputation only. Two years back, some protests made the papers alleging the operation had illegally expanded into the Wongonderrah Nature Reserve. Fines were paid, a few officials got the boot, but their only crimes were trying to backdoor the public. The expansion went on, the rich got richer. Business as usual.

It was a quiet place, notable only for its neighbors: The Free Nation of Leaf River. Though “free” and “nation” were pushing it - “quirky tourist trap for anyone bored enough to play make believe with a disgruntled, delusional farmer who’d crowned himself a king” hewed closer to the truth.

The sky had turned a sharper shade of blue once I reached the mine. A security guard came over, scanning the car for continuity errors. He looked forty, forty-five, with thinning hair that matched his skin and a face that could cut a steak. He was burning a durry, though the smoke seemed more for my sake than his.

“Can I see some ID?” he asked me.

“Don’t have any. I nabbed this outside the cop shop this morning. Thought I’d go for a joy ride.”

“Want me to call your chief, funny guy?”

I flashed my badge and a dirty look, and then followed a rust-colored ute along an access road. The truck kicked up enough sand at me to

rebuild the pyramids, though from the looks of this place they already had. We passed a row of sand piles, some five stories if they were a foot.

At a clearing the ute flashed red, pulling over into the brush. The driver, a young man who didn't look a day over twelve, got out and stood with his hands in his pockets. The color had run from his face down to his toes. Experience taught me us Jacks can put the spook into kids his age, especially hopheads with hot pockets; this seemed different.

"You gonna start talking, kid? I left my two-brim hat and magnifying glass at home."

The kid didn't say anything - he looked to his right, at the reservoir. Aside from where we were standing, the reservoir was surrounded by dunes. And in the middle it looked like someone had sank the *Arizona*.

"What the hell is that thing?"

"Coolgardie 1," a voice said from behind me. "Second largest dredge in the Southern hemisphere."

A middle-aged man in loose red flannel and khaki overalls emerged from a wooden dock snaking from the east.

"Chief Engineer Bruce Patton," he said with a glint in his eye, singing a few notes too high given the circumstances. "Please follow me."

The kid stayed behind as I followed Patton onto the dock. I couldn't take my eyes off the dredge. It had to be well over fifty meters long, not counting the giant metal arm extending from the front of it, hanging over one of the sand hills at the south end of the reservoir. At the head of the dredge, half submerged, was a giant, jagged metal wheel with teeth that had to be the size of bathtubs.

There were two men barely visible on the deck of the dredge, concerned with something that wasn't us. Patton led me into a small motor boat.

"We found them a little over an hour ago," Patton said.

Two bodies were face down in the reservoir about twenty meters ahead of us.

"Who found them first?" I asked.

"Dredge operator," Patton said, lifting his head to the men above us. "We fire it up at daybreak."

"They yours?" I said as we edged to about a meter from the bodies. I snapped a photo with my phone.

"Nobody forgot to punch in this morning, if that's what you mean."

“Anybody chuck a sickie?”

“Not that I know of.”

“There a night shift?”

“Operations close at seven. Just a security detail here between then and five.”

“Yeah, I met him. Doesn’t seem like the type to let a metal spoon through. Or is it just cops he doesn’t like?”

“That’s Ollie Prescott. Don’t pay him no mind. Bloke takes just about everything too seriously.”

“I’ll bet at least your company rugby team’s got something to show for it at least.”

“MAWA league champions four year’s running.”

I snapped a few more photos of the bodies. Both appeared to be men, or at least dressed that way. One was in a black, seersucker suit, the other a powder blue dress shirt and khaki trousers. I told Patton to keep his distance. We’d have to wait for SCU from Perth to move the bodies.

“How deep does it get?”

“Ten meters.”

“How easy is it to drain this thing?”

“Not very.”

I told Patton to take us back to the dock. Linehan called to tell Perth was twenty minutes out. The kid in the ute was gone, leaving behind only his breakfast and the tire marks of a student driver. I kept Patton close, put off by his warm humor and the rosy glow in his cheeks. Death had ways of drying those around it like crackers; this guy was wetter than an Irish Christmas.

“Where’s the best view of the reservoir?”

“That would be the foreman’s box at the top of the number one processing plant. It’s between dunes three and four back that way. We can hoof it you don’t mind leaving your squaddie here.”

I followed Patton. I looked left and saw that a hundred meters, a light layer of underbrush and neck-high chain link fence was all that separated us from the main highway.

“Seems like it’d be pretty easy to sneak in here from the east.”

“Not much worth sneaking in for.”

“Oh?”

Patton laughed like he’d never heard a funnier joke in his life.

“You don’t know what we do here, do you, mate?”

I said nothing.

“This is a sand mine, officer.”

I turned east toward a desert so flat you could almost see Sydney.

“I didn’t realize we were running out.”

“Most people don’t.”

We reached the elevator to the plant. It was a boxy building, with thin metal siding a paler shade of tan than the dunes around it. The foreman’s box comfortably seated no more than two, but the panoramic windows probably kept the loneliness at bay – and the dog-eared magazines and books on the floor took care of the rest. From here, I could see the pump line from the dredge snaking along the surface of the reservoir into the processing plant below us.

“Security use this as a watch tower?”

“No. Like I said, not much damage you can do in here without a vehicle. Not much point in watching anywhere beside the access road.”

“Nothing worth stealing?”

“Not much you wouldn’t need a convoy to haul out of here. Drink?”

Patton poured two glasses of stiff bourbon and threw one at me. I took it and scanned the perimeter of the reservoir, trying to get an idea of how the bodies could’ve gotten there.

“How do your men get onto the dredge?”

“Right along that pump line. You can see it leads right to the docking platform.”

“I’ll need to question them. Seems the only way those bodies could’ve got there was from the deck of the dredge.”

“It’d be a lot of trouble to haul the bodies all the way out there just to throw them back in the water.”

“Whoever did this wanted trouble. Probably isn’t a worse hiding place in a hundred square miles. They wanted those bodies found.”

“Who?”

“A serial killer who’s getting cocky, for starters. But a better guess would be somebody out to damage the reputation of the mine.”

“It’s a big company. That could be a lot of people. Nowadays people scream bloody murder on Wednesday about something they didn’t know Tuesday morning.”

“You’re talking about environmental groups?”

“We’re one of the few that does things the right way. Go to China, India, Africa, Russia where they’ve got unregulated seaside and riverbed dredging. Erodes beaches, undermines coral integrity, increases the chances of flooding, just to name a few.”

“What about Wongonderrah?”

“Ancient history. Plus, that’s a once-in-a-decade expansion. Cattle farmers clear out that amount of forest every month in Australia alone.”

I lit a cigarette and opened the left hand viewing window. I hadn’t noticed until now, but below us, just to the left of the plant, the waters of the reservoir were shallower. Several ridges of mineral deposits had formed along the bank.

“What about down there?”

Patton finished his drink and stood up. “That’s where we release the slurry from plant back into the reservoir. Everything the dredge takes that doesn’t go into the concentrate is released there.”

“The bodies could’ve been brought through there. Is it accessible from the frontage road?”

“Yes, but wading through that sludge isn’t exactly easy.”

“But the only other spots to access the reservoir are the dock where we got on the boat, and the pump line here at the plant. Right?”

“Yeah, pretty much everywhere else is blocked by dunes.”

“Would the processing plant below us have people in it at night?”

“No.”

“Doesn’t matter. The killer or killers might’ve not known that. They’d want to stay hidden.”

“I thought you said they weren’t trying to hide anything.”

“I said they wanted the bodies found, not that they were hoping to get caught. The boat would’ve made too much noise. The plant might’ve had security. That area’s pretty well hidden. Let’s go take a look.”

I ashed my cigarette on the floor, pocketed the butt and we rode the elevator back down to the ground. Patton took a call and told the other end to keep the workers at the front gate. I kept waiting for the shake in his voice, but it never came.

“You been around a lot of floaters?” I asked after he hung up.

“Should I make chunder of my toast?”

I said nothing.

“I was an engineer in the Navy for ten years. I’ve seen a few things. I don’t like this, officer. Not one bit. But if I’m under suspicion...”

“Now, settle down...”

“Then I think maybe my cooperation is...”

“I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m a man who likes talking to a man who likes being talked to. That’s all.”

We walked fifty meters south of the processing plant. A narrow path split by two, five-story piles of mineral concentrate separated the access road and the reservoir. It didn’t look like it was made for walking. Ten meters in the path fanned out. Everywhere past here would require tall boots or a cobbler with a debt to repay.

“I don’t know what you expect to find out here,” Patton said.

“If you do, don’t keep it to yourself.”

“Maybe we should start with the perimeter fence,” I said, regretting I’d already soaked my socks like an easy mark in a difficult joint.

As I spun around, a shiny object on top of the sand caught my eye. I put out my other cigarette in the sand and picked up the object.

It was a coin. Silver and heavy enough to buy something. I stepped back onto dryer ground and held it out to Patton. “Look familiar?”

“It’s not our money. Looks like that might be Chinese writing around the edges. Here...” Patton poured the rest of his bourbon on my palm to wash away the excess sand. “From one of the bodies you think?”

“Or the people in a hurry to get out of here.”

I spitshined the coin, pocketed it, and we continued looking. Nothing we could eyeball so we rolled up our sleeves and went to work. The only other evidence ten minutes got us was strictly geological. I walked back to the access road, sweating too much for eight o’clock on a September morning.

“Mind if we take a look inside the processing plant?” I said to Patton, healthier than a man his age had any right to be, wiping his hands on his workpants, barely out of breath. But before he could answer, Perth arrived. Only the driver got out.

He didn’t look in a hurry to speak so I started for him.

“Two floaters. John Doe’s so far as we know. Been in the reservoir since at least six this morning. Chief Engineer Patton will help you reel ‘em in. You got anyone in there with a hot eye, send ‘em my way. Gonna

do a pass of the processing plant. We might get lucky, but I hope for your sake you're already fixed for red points."

"Uh... who are you?"

I introduced myself to the captain, a portly bloke named O'Gara, about six foot and all of it rounded where there should've been edges.

A female officer got out of the passenger seat and switched places with Patton. She was tall, sorrel-haired and talked like she and her mother kept things on a last name basis.

Silence and darkness descended upon us inside the processing plant. Patton had told the workers to empty the place, though a switch of the lights showed it didn't have much use for flesh, blood and bone. The intake from the dredge ran went through a filtration tank that took up most of the ground floor and which pumped most of back out into the shallows we'd just been digging through. The rest ran through an assembly of filters, funnels and piping.

My idea was to check the windows and exits first, for signs of forced entry. Officer Bannon followed close behind, taking photos of the doors, her mind obviously elsewhere.

"Can I ask you something?" she finally said.

"I feel like saying 'no' won't stop you."

"Why... are you wearing a fedora?"

"Right." I had forgotten I was indoors. The hat rack for employees must've been tucked away in one of the locker rooms. I grabbed my hat and dangled it from the blackjack at my side.

"Well, if they came through here, they didn't need to break their way in or out. Are all employees accounted for?"

"That's what Patton said. Seems like he runs a clean outfit. But there's always another guy trying to run the end around. Places like this never try to stay too clean. Wouldn't want to scare away a dirty dollar."

I led Bannon out the way we came. We walked around the east end of the plant toward the main pump line connecting the dredge to the plant. Bannon jotted something on her notepad as I brought another cigarette to my lips to ease the shakes from the early morning exercise.

Perth and Patton had reached the bodies - Patton manned the handheld rudder while the deputies packaged the first floater. I wanted to do one last run of the pump line before going to interrogate the employees at the security gate. Bannon didn't seem keen to join me. Her weightless

voice and soft footsteps told me she was new to the job, but I didn't get the impression the corpses bothered her. She struck me as one of those people who had a Judas window permanently fixed between them and the world.

“What was your name again, deputy?”

I explained to her who I was.

“Cervantes, you said? You don't happen to know Deputy Mizuno?”

“Sure. We used to drink out of the same bottle.”

“You're... twins?”

The wind died and everything with it. The sun was higher now and had taken some of the blue out of the sky. My patrol almost never washed me this far from shore, but even a hundred miles farther inland the desert sun wasn't half as mean. Maybe I was letting the floaters get to me, but there was a stillness in the air beyond them, beyond the silence of the assembly, beyond the unspun motors, the undisturbed water and the blank squares filling up the balance sheets.