

Closure

Prologue

Eastern Europe – 2010

A low-lying morning fog had settled across the town square. The early morning April sun was trying valiantly to burn away the remains. Come June, at this time of day, the cobblestones would already be soaking in the heat from another day of exquisite sunshine. But for now, they lay cool and wet from the evening dew.

I crossed from the west side of the square, scattering dozens of pigeons hunting and pecking in search of their morning meal, past the centuries-old Dominican church with its onion-domed spires and sat down at one of the many tables facing the park. The large umbrellas overhead extolled Lavazza coffee. From speakers within the café drifted the sound of a mournful guitar solo, I recognised the tune as a Dire Straits hit from the 1980s. Townsfolk crisscrossed on the meandering trails that wound through the black birch trees, possibly heading to work, some perhaps heading home. A few early morning joggers, still a rare sight in this part of the world, shuffled past. Presumably tourists. The path they followed snaked through the park and skirted the ancient walls of the old city before looping to the south around the fourteenth-century

castle, a sentinel for all these centuries, standing guard, high above the river bend. Swallows flitted from branch to branch amongst the trees and the occasional wino slept off the effects of the night's medication on one of the park's many wooden benches.

The young waitress, smartly dressed in a black skirt and white blouse, took my order and disappeared inside the cafe. The owner shot me a quick glance, and offered a nod in welcome, as he hosed down the cobblestones, washing away the debris from, and memories of, last night's clientele. I watched the pigeons scuttle towards, then retreat from, the spray's wake, reminding me of young children playing at the water's edge of some faraway beach.

With a smile, the waitress delivered my coffee and then melted away from the table. From the south, a tram approached, its exterior was a faded red that had seen better days. It pulled to a stop with a screech of brakes opposite the park. The swallows took flight searching for quieter surroundings. The pigeons remained, unperturbed. Doors slid open, passengers disembarked, getting on with their lives. I sat back, sipped my coffee and thought back to another time and how it had led me here.

Part 1

Melbourne - 1980

I stared out of the grimy window as the number-eleven tram rattled its way down Gilbert Road. My legs swung beneath the cracked leather of the bench. It was a typical grey Melbourne morning in the middle of winter. Cold, windy, perhaps around five degrees. From my seat, you could spy the occasional column of smoke rising from backyard fires, the smell of burning leaves heavy in the air. The clouds threatened rain, as they had for days, but the strong southerly wind kept them moving along at a fair clip. It was as if these potholed streets, and tiny dank homes weren't worthy of their load. Perhaps the clouds were already spent after washing clean the streets and buildings over the city and were now headed off to the northeast to reload, their mission complete. Either way, the northern Melbourne suburb of Thornbury wasn't in their plans today, as it hadn't been in many people's plans for quite some time.

To realise that, all one had to do was to gaze out of the window at the shop fronts as we flashed by. The real estate agent's office displayed photos of "drastically reduced" asking prices, taped to the inside of a front window in desperate need of washing. The store itself looked for all the world as if it were waiting for its own "best offer" so it could head north, or west, in fact anywhere but here. On either side of the road, discarded newspapers and fast-food wrappers swirled past boarded-up windows that now substituted as billboards for graffiti artists and posters touting upcoming shows at the Croxton Park Hotel or the Cricketer's Arms. The owners of the butcher shop, dry cleaners, milk bar, and

bread shop, all bravely tried to hold on to the dream that they could make a go of it, that their business would someday be the springboard to propel their lives on to something grander. In reality, that ship had long since sailed. The smart money had already sold out and headed to the newer suburbs and a better life. Those that remained were the rear guard left to man the ramparts, too late to sell and too stubborn to admit defeat. Would the last to leave please turn off the street lights.

It was to one of these stubborn old fools that we travelled. Mr. Kowalczyk had lived in the small flat over his shoe repair shop, Hall's Shoe Repair, for over twenty-five years. He began working for old Mr. Hall as a young lad. His apprenticeship started with sweeping floors, stocking shelves and in time, helping the occasional customer. Slowly but surely, he learnt the trade from the master. Mr. Hall had died many years ago. Mr. Kowalczyk, had been, more or less, the son whom Mr. Hall had never had. He inherited the shop and kept Hall's Shoe Repair, a fixture in this part of town, open for business.

- *That's our stop coming up next, Oakover Road. Let's go, love.*

Mum rose from her seat with a sigh, reached up, pulled the cord to signal the driver, grabbed my hand and waited for the tram to come to its sputtering stop. Every Saturday for the past two years we had made the trip to Mr. Kowalczyk's to clean his flat. Well, Mum would clean and I would try to stay out of mischief.

If Mum had a choice, I'm sure cleaning other people's homes would not have been her chosen profession. Perhaps she would have become a hairdresser, or just as she had been up until three years ago, a happy and contented housewife. Mum was petite, her

permed brown hair short, with just a hint of grey. Only the few additional lines around her eyes and mouth told of her struggles these past few years.

The axis of Mum's world tilted when her husband of fifteen years, my dad, passed away after a short illness. A very rare disease the doctors called it, as if being one of the few to contract it was something to claim with pride, that this made it somehow easier to deal with. Perhaps my dad's case provided an opportunity for the doctors to write about one day in one of their journals and attain some form of notoriety for their diagnosis and treatment. Perhaps they would find themselves credited, immortalized in a footnote in medical history, when a cure was eventually found. Nothing mundane like a car accident or heart attack would fit *that* bill. Though for me and Mum, it changed everything. The happy and content couple with a small child and a home in the suburbs, seemingly overnight, became a broken family with bills to pay and too little remaining from a widow's pension to go around. Hence the cleaning jobs.

It was our first of three stops that day and my favourite. Being just ten years old, I loved exploring the nooks and crannies of the cramped two-story flat above Mr. Kowalczyk's shop, especially looking through the small library he had set up in his spare room, losing myself in the pages and lives lived by others. Barely three-square metres, the room was crammed on three sides from floor to ceiling with books. The cheap shelves bowed in the middle under the weight of the volumes. Many of the books were about a place and time that he had left behind years before. Against the one wall without books sat an old leather armchair which, to me, looked 100 years old. Next to it, under the window ledge, rested a small, wooden end table on which sat a battered record player. I was

careful not to disturb anything in his sanctuary. He would show me books and photos of the town and country of his birth, if he had time.

The place of his birth was in the southeast of Poland by a river. The name for the longest time escaped me. To try to hear Mr. Kowalczyk pronounce it, was to lean into a sound more a whisper than a word. He muttered it much like a mother whispers to a small baby as she lays it down to sleep. And when I saw the faraway look in his clear blue eyes as he fondly remembered his hometown, I knew it is with the same feeling of love.

We pulled our overcoats' collars up tight against the wind and headed around the corner to the lane behind the shops. The back gate to Mr. Kowalczyk's shop, and the flat above, was about fifty metres along the lane. To reach the gate we first had to navigate past overflowing rubbish bins stinking of the past week's accumulated refuse from the businesses that fronted Gilbert Road. Many had lids askew or had been overturned completely by the neighbourhood possums during their nocturnal scavenger hunts, or, just as likely, by the offending possums scurrying in retreat from the ravenous jaws of the Mitak's dog on one of the rare occurrences when he wasn't tied up.

The Mitak family own the pizza shop two doors down from our destination. They kept a particularly nasty Alsatian named Dinamo chained out back. Secured or not, Dinamo always made passing by him a moment fraught with danger. I was convinced he ate young children for dinner. Luckily today, he appeared otherwise distracted.

My mother was the first to realise why. She quickly grabbed my hand and pulled me backwards, but not before I noticed a pair

of feet sticking out from behind the row of rubbish bins. The leather soles of the black dress shoes faced towards me, the toes pointed skyward, feet splayed in a “V” shape. A thin trail of congealed blood snaked from beneath the body, the flow stopping short of the storm drain in the middle of the lane.

It appeared I wouldn't be visiting Mr. Kowalczyk's library today.