

Victoria, 1966

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They had only been missing two weeks, but two weeks is a long time when there's a hot sun burning over the Northern Plains.

It was summer, the height of the fruit-picking season, and the town of Mitchell, sunbeaten, weary, and short-tempered, sweltered under a mantle of heat. Shoppers gathered in the shade of store verandas talking hopefully of rain as an old Labrador dozed at their feet. The animal's slumber was briefly disturbed by a window blind being drawn, and then by the greengrocer hosing down the footpath outside his shop, but little else stirred and the dog went back to sleep.

Across the road outside the Union Hotel, two men in stained shorts and blue singlets sat on a bench telling tales and flicking cigarette ash at the still air. Inside the hotel more of their like perched at the bar red-eyed and taciturn while downing glasses of beer as though a shortage was imminent. It was Saturday, and too hot to work, even as heavily laden pear trees wilted in dry orchards beyond the town.

For all their disorderly habits, these footloose itinerants were indispensable to the town in summer, men who camped in the back of vans or in fruit pickers' huts or in dingy hotel rooms in between sporadic bouts of work in the cannery or on orchards.

Their possessions scant, their disturbances frequent, they also became the first port of call when police wanted to inquire about a lawn mower that might have disappeared from a backyard, or when cigarettes were shoplifted from Potters general store, or as women's underwear went missing from clotheslines.

So it came as no surprise that when the local boy and girl vanished attention naturally turned toward this drifting, raucous scrap of humanity. At the Lions Club's district meeting its governor was adamant that feral fruit pickers were holding the teenagers prisoner in an orchard somewhere for various nefarious purposes. And if it wasn't that, he continued, the idea growing in his head even as he said it, the Mafia had planted them six feet under for stumbling onto an illegal drug crop.

But the truth was elusive. A common tale – to smiles all round – had the pair eloping in the first flush of love. They would turn up in their own good time, people said, married and full of remorse when they realised the fuss they had caused. According to the proprietor of the town's tyre store, however – and he had heard this from someone *in the know* – the boy had made the girl pregnant before they'd both been bundled out of the state by her parents. Yet others still had them taking off with the pop group in town that night, in a modern day equivalent of running off to join the circus.

To many others, however, the couple's disappearance represented nothing more than the usual summertime comings and goings. And if the suspects didn't happen to be itinerant workers, some

believed the police had to look no further than to the missing teenagers' parents, who had all the while remained obstinately camped in their houses with their curtains drawn, as if they had something to hide.

Except that near the end of that long fortnight a high school boy out shooting rabbits near the Waranga Basin dumped his bicycle by a dirt track. Shielding his eyes from the sun, and with a good-sized buck limp in the old school bag slung over his shoulder, he squinted over a bleached paddock to where a warren hid among a clump of acacia trees. As he soldiered his way toward the burrows dead grass tangled high about his legs. He felt the sun's sting on his back. And then on passing a great, solitary eucalypt he walked straight into a crippling stench. He checked his step and scanned the ground around him but saw nothing and dismissed the smell as rotting carrion, probably a dead sheep, he supposed. He was in a hurry anyway because of the rabbits, especially when he saw a young one slip through a fence ahead of him. He chased the rabbit beyond the fence to the acacias, the smell following him most of the way there.

The boy's shirt clung damply to him by the time he entered the acacias meagre shade. Eager to start shooting, he took up a position with a clear view of a burrow entrance. If I had nets, he thought, and ferrets, this would already be over.

But as he lay in the dirt with twigs pressing against his belly, and after an hour or more had passed and he'd fired two shots at nothing in particular, he knew the napping rabbits would have to keep for another day.

As he retraced his steps through the fence and across the paddock the earlier stench assailed him again. He searched for where it might be coming from but the grass here was thicker than anywhere else he'd walked today – dried out and snakey, yellow, ripe to be set fire to if he had a box of matches handy – and at first glance he couldn't spy anything other than a flock of thirsty grass parrots wheeling by overhead.

Thinking he would cut a course directly back to the track, and again conscious of the buck's soft weight in his bag, he quickened his step until the smell blew his way again, too powerfully to ignore this time. Like a hunting dog he raised his nose trying to sniff a trail across the paddock, and after turning full circle he thought he'd worked out where it was coming from. He watched his feet push a path through the yellow grass, the odour rising stronger and fiercer until he knew he was close.

And then it came upon him like thunder; a crumpled mess sprawled at his feet, the smell overpowering and horrific. Having expected a decaying animal he couldn't make sense of it at first. He gagged on the stench as he took in what he was looking at: a matted clump of brown hair, a filthy white top and then, as he peered closer with forearm pressed against his nose, what had to be someone's bare backside and legs. Someone face down. A girl.

He didn't want to look, but couldn't stop staring either. Until he took a step backward, dumbfounded by what he was seeing. It wasn't true, he began panicking. What would someone be doing out here? A real body, dead, just laying there like that?

And then he hurried away, thinking he might be blamed for it somehow. He stumbled and blundered his way across the paddock, suddenly disoriented as his mind turned in all directions as he raced through the tall grass so he couldn't remember where the track was, or where he'd left his bloody bike.

It was only when he neared the great eucalypt again that he almost ran over the second body, leaping in fright to avoid it.