

Searching for Siobhan

Foreword

There are none so blind as those who will not see.

Proverb. John Heywood, 1546

The Queensland Police Service has a section known as Task Force Argos, which investigates crimes against children. The Operation Argus in this story is a fictional representation.

Apart from the events and people of a publicly-documented historical nature, all the characters and happenings in this story are products of imagination and bear no implied resemblance to any particular persons, living or dead; or to their locations.

And yet ... there are very definite factual meanings underpinning this tale.

When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.

Thoughts on the cause of the present discontents, p106, 1770.

Edmund Burke 1729 - 1797

Warning.

Some readers might find certain themes and scenes in this story to be confronting.

Chapter 1

Brisbane. Thursday 10 September 2009

‘Mr Boyd, why would she send you text messages? Are you in a relationship?’

Detective Constable Clare Milne looked very efficient to me, with her hair pulled back in a bunch and that detached business-like expression of officialdom. She asked the seemingly innocent questions. But she was giving me a wary unease; it was in her tone.

‘No. It’s strictly landlord-tenant. We enjoy each other’s company and like to talk about world issues. Siobhan has travelled. So have I. We find lots to chat about. And she has a sense of humour. She’s a tease.’

‘A tease?’

I looked – waiting – but her frowning query didn’t change. Reluctantly, I had to assume she had meant the lowest common denominator implication. ‘No. Not that way.’ Such a base suggestion annoyed me. ‘She might send me puzzles, with numbers – as a talking point. I like maths – and challenges. I’m a teacher.’

The policewoman watched me closely for a few seconds before she spoke.

‘Alright.’ Her eyes dropped to concentrate on the texts and she copied them into her notes. ‘We can check the car rego. No problem. Compton? There’s a Compton Road down in the Calamvale-Woodridge area. Sus car? Maybe that’s the one attached to the rego? Argus? We have an Operation Argus – one of our sections.’

‘What do they do?’

‘Chase paedophiles. Abuse of children. Internet soliciting. That sort of thing.’

‘Jeez.’ Fluttering fear passed through me in uncomfortable waves. ‘That’s just the kind of thing that would get Siobhan stirred up.’ In a flash of dread, I added without really thinking at all, ‘What has she got involved in?’

The detective was back to observing my reaction. I could feel her assessing what I had just said; wondering if she should ask another question. The insinuation was there in her doubting gaze. And, I was annoyed – increasingly so. I should be

able to have an intelligent conversation with another public servant without this suspicious response.

In the end, she closed her file notes. 'I'll pass the message on to the Argus team. It's amazing how important little snippets can be. Take heart. Most missing people actually turn up.'

I nodded slowly, wanting to be convinced – consciously working hard at calming my irritation. The world of policing was so far from my normal life and, really, I *needed* the support of this detective.

'What can I do? I feel so helpless.'

'We'll go through all the processes but we don't have the personnel to chase up matters where there is no evident crime committed.'

Her eyes scanned mine in a semi-puzzled pause, before she added, 'Siobhan is an adult. She could be missing by choice.'

The dismissiveness in her last couple of comments was way beyond my rational comprehension. Bewildered, I couldn't find any words to say.

'She could have *chosen* to leave.' There was insistence in the policewoman's almost world-weary explanation. The routine glance at my face was but a brief pause – perhaps she was starting to appreciate my urgent need for enlightenment. 'That is not a crime,' she added with a shrug.

'You are not going to follow this up.'

The awful realisation had dawned on me at last. How slow was I? It must have been the shock of this whole business, affecting my usual methodical reasoning. I had contacted the police, looking for help. And now, this casual flick-off had been the totally unanticipated outcome.

My continued astonished stare seemed to elicit her repeat of, 'We will go through all our processes.' Then, her suggestion, 'You could try a private investigator. I can't recommend anyone officially.'

I gulped. An ironical combination – of my current confusion and the discipline of my upbringing – was just managing to keep a welling anger in check. By reflex, I squeezed my brow with my right hand and wiped my fingers across in an attempt to remove the imagined wrinkles of tension.

'Please. Please just point me in the direction of someone. This is not my field. I teach maths.'

She studied me, searching my pleading eyes. Having pondered some thought, she looked quickly over her shoulder.

Her words were quiet. ‘Given that the car was found in Salisbury, you might try an investigator who knows that part of town. Most just chase up insurance claims and prepare reports but Mike Grant is your old-style operator. His office is in Moorooka but he lives in Salisbury. He could sniff around where it is harder for us to move without causing suspicion. His costs are reasonable.’

As I walked out through the front door of the Holland Park police station that lunchtime and stood on the top step, sucking soothing oxygen from the spring blossoms in the air, I could sense the words of the silver-haired retired corruption commission judge, Tony Fitzgerald QC, ringing in my mind: *the conditions are ripe for a return to the bad old ways of the past.*

His message had been clear and challenging during the previous week as I’d first listened to him over the car radio giving his authoritative commentary – and then again when, with my lodger, I’d watched him on the TV news only a couple of nights back. Even Siobhan had picked up the vibes and wanted to know what had happened in the late 80s.

I’d been just a kid at the time but I’d absorbed some of the lessons from listening to my folks and from curiosity over the years. It had been about serious corruption in the government and the police. As a result, the independent Criminal Justice Commission had been set up in Queensland, now morphed into the Crime and Misconduct Commission, to ensure that any unwary level of criminal and government collusion couldn’t happen again.

So why did I have a bad feeling? Something wasn’t right. The warning was there.

And my mind cast over the events of the past two frustrating days ...

Chapter 2

Brisbane. Tuesday 8 September, 2009

It had seemed like a normal day in a maths teacher's life – exciting my students with the magic of numbers. But, how little I knew.

I grinned at Alice, the girl in the front row, as she sat dutifully on the yellow Post-it Note. She was proud to have the honour of being the trusted one. It was in her eyes. The rest of the class realised she would not reveal the secret of the note, despite the subtlety of their scheming pleas.

Michael was at the whiteboard. He had selected a three-digit number in which no two digits could be the same. 123 – how unimaginative. The class were giving it to him.

'Reverse it, Michael,' I said, 'and take the smaller from the larger.'

We were all absorbed. 321 minus 123. He wrote 198.

'Reverse that number and add the two together.'

'Yes, Mr Boyd.' He obeyed my instruction with a tolerant grin that said, *What is this? How easy.*

891 plus 198. He wrote 1089.

'The paper you are sitting on, Alice? What is the number on it?' I asked.

With theatrical flair, she produced the yellow sticky and held it for all the class to see. *1089!* Wide eyes. Scratching pencils, while some checked their own calculations with different three-digit numbers – which all came to 1089.

'Am I a magician or a mind reader?' I asked them. Puzzled smiles. They wanted to know more. 'It will always come to 1089. The question is *why?*'

Year 8s. So many new ideas to explore but too cool to admit any naïvety as they tweet and text in and out of all the joys and uncertainties of their teenage years.

'Could it be to do with place value, sir?' They weren't going to be beaten.

A babble of whispered theories fluttered round the room. There was the feel of an intellectual joust coming on – like the debates I had been having with my lodger of the last few months, Siobhan Doyle, the flame-haired Irish copywriter cum local-area reporter. She would cheekily challenge any expressed view just for the fun of traversing the logic. 'Shi ...vawn,' I heard myself mutter, trying to copy

her lilting pronunciation. None of my apprentice thinkers noticed, as I drew my attention back to their struggle.

‘Work it through with several examples. I need you to be able to explain it to me. I am but a *simple* man.’ My extended arms complemented my astonished tongue-in-cheek expression.

‘Oh, *Sir*,’ reproached Alice, grinning in appreciation of my performance.

I bowed in acknowledgement. The others smiled back fleetingly before their questioning eyes returned to their scribbling.

Thirteen-year-olds. The complexity of human thought was a whole new universe to so many of these young people whose diet was too often just mindless TV or on-line crap. For some of them, sadly, school was one of the few places in their worlds where they could actually meet freely with other *real* people, outside their family circle – where they could speak, watch, touch, smell and interact with the flesh and blood personalities; rather than the virtual.

My role was to get students wondering, thinking; to have an opinion. And to test their ideas – as scientists and mathematicians do.

Sometimes when the discussions got animated, we could feel the heat in the room. Vibrant classes. I loved their energy.

And I liked Siobhan’s irreverent enthusiasm, her subtle Celtic accent and occasional lapses into heavy brogue. She had breathed fresh life into my thinking.

Because the Boyd façade of confidence had taken a serious dent in the past few years.

Not that my students should have noticed; I was always very careful about my teaching image. But, it was true – I had wallowed since my not-too-distant high life. An unwillingness to take risks with emotions had overtaken me. I knew that; but I couldn’t seem to let it go. It was my retreat into the formal safety of professional probity.

My mother had always said to me, as a young teenager, ‘Harry, you are from a different mould.’

I knew she meant I was mathematical, more serious than some others. Sure, I’d always had a very logical sense of a proper way to do things – very helpful in processing maths – but slightly unusual amongst my peers, at the time. Hey, I’d probably got most of that from my upbringing anyway – a simple homespun honesty – Mum saw most things as *just common sense*.

Mind you, I could still cut it, even back then; play the life of the party when it suited. And – on the right occasions and with the right people – I still did; but always well away from family and collegial scrutiny; never adding conflict to my own nest.

My home life had the feel of peace; the calm and routine that I needed. But I could handle a more rebellious sense of adventure with people who didn't know me too personally – or, at least, I told myself that to soothe that nagging doubt.

I liked the conversations with Siobhan. She was smart, with no apparent agendas beyond an intelligent, sometimes quite intellectual, discussion. And I definitely didn't want any more involvement than that. It was a business relationship.

She would have been eight or nine years younger than me and was a paying house guest, after all. But she brought that free-spirit sense of itinerant people in their mid-twenties. Over the past few years, globe-trotting and adventure had no longer been such a pressing need for me.

In recent times, I haven't minded just living other people's excitement through *their* travel experiences. My imagination, combined with my own my past jaunts, let me live their joy with them.

I was looking forward to preparing a meal for Siobhan and me, when I got home. We'd follow it up with some debate about whatever world, national or local issue would take her fancy. We shared the culinary load – her practical suggestion – and a good one. My dish would be a simple yet tasty version of Scandinavian chicken salad; curry-powder-lifted mayonnaise with the tang of squeezed lime over soy-browned chicken strips and sliced apple, laid delicately on a salad bed of spinach, radish, iceberg lettuce, chilli and diced spring onion.

The class was busy, absorbed in the puzzle of 1089. I heard their giggling as they struggled with new theories. It was nearly lunchtime. Siobhan would be driving close by the school about then on her way to Garden City shopping centre. I couldn't see the road from my classroom window. I just imagined her beetling along in her little blue Mazda, arguing away with the presenter on the car radio.

Siobhan Doyle had pulled up at the intersection of Mains and Kessels Roads on the southside of Brisbane. She was in the left lane at QSAC, the sports and athletics centre, waiting to head down to the Garden City retail complex to cover a

low-key fashion show. She had promised Jane at Quest newspapers she would get the story through to her by email that night. Local reporting wouldn't set her world on fire but it paid the rent.

She was intrigued by a young Asian face in the back of a green car in the next lane. Chinese? The girl was watching a fluffy kookaburra fly low over the cars and land laughing on top of the grand-piano store sign. So cute.

But the girl didn't laugh with the kookaburra. She seemed to sense Siobhan watching her. Instead of the expected smile as their eyes met, a tear rolled down her left cheek. How strange.

Looking past the girl, Siobhan could just pick out a man in the driver's seat. High cheeks, short-cropped black hair, a lean look.

Could he be the father and she's been playing up? That might explain the tear. Siobhan remembered being challenge enough for her parents when growing up in Dublin and on the receiving end of tight maternal control. Yet, some might agree, she had turned out alright.

Couldn't be more than twelve or thirteen. The girl was wearing what looked like the old-style gym tunics of European schools – but in grey with a white blouse. Which Brisbane school would have a grey tunic? She searched her mind.

Harry would know. She thought immediately of texting her oh-so-proper landlord Harry Boyd, the maths teacher who let a room in his house – the man who liked puzzles and a chat; happy enough to explain all the quirky Queensland attitudes to a new arrival.

She had been texting him questions, preferably numerical, every few days just to crack his complex veneer. And it had. It got a laugh.

He'd been such a surprise.

She'd thought he was going to be so serious but he had a dry sense of humour and liked to discuss – well more to debate – issues of the time or of a deeper philosophical nature. He had a patient way of stirring conversation at evening meal times; provoking, challenging – and then grinning his way into a laugh, often even at his own expense. That was when he seemed to relax most – when he was teasing her, or vice versa, into bumping heads over some insoluble world issue.

Siobhan glanced again at the passenger in the back of the green car. She thought she had seen that look before – an expression that transcended national

and cultural boundaries. It was in the girl's eyes – a generic loss of hope? A resignation, beyond pleading?

An old emotion tingled through her mind. Much as she had learned to control it, her blood was rising in a familiar sensation.

What if?

The car radio news was quietly prattling away about the former Supreme Court Justice, Tony Fitzgerald, expounding for at least the second time in a few days about how the old corrupt ways might have returned to Queensland. She turned the volume up. She and Harry had watched the retired judge on the TV news and that had led to an interesting discussion on this very topic at dinner the previous evening. Fitzgerald seemed to have some sort of legend status in Queensland.

Apparently, according to Harry, it was the Fitzgerald Inquiry at the end of the 1980s that had brought down the long-serving conservative government of the time, ending up with the police commissioner and government ministers in jail. Harry had been speculating about the evidence the retired Queen's Counsel might have in mind for his current statements.

It had struck a chord with Siobhan because she was researching – had been for a while, actually, as a potential hard-hitting journalist rather than a local reporter – into the perceived rise in crimes against children. And not just on the Internet. She was well aware of abuse much closer to the safety of the extended family and the protecting community. For that to be still happening, she'd argued that there would have to be corruption on so many levels in society. People had to be covering up, lying, or at least looking away – officials and ordinary people seeing but choosing not to understand or even to acknowledge.

The lights changed.

The girl in the backseat of the olive-green Holden Berlina had turned her face forward, a stiff dazed movement, and the tear was still there on her cheek.

What if?

What if Siobhan had seen the look, recognised it and had done nothing?

Then again, would she be proved wrong ... again?

'Off wit' t' fairies,' her Ma would say as the unconventional daughter would come home with fantastic plots for simple Dublin street scenarios.

'Bugger it.'

Decision made – three-quarters of an hour before the fashion show. The journalist in her sensed something – nothing to be lost by following this up for a few minutes at least. Better than standing around waiting for a fashion parade to start.

The cars were moving.

Siobhan, her interest more than piqued, cancelled her left indicator and continued south down Mains Road, slipping over to the middle lane only two cars back from the girl.

She could feel the free surge of the chase, imagining some journalistic scoop – or at least making a note of the registration number, just in case.

If she had understood the painful Pandora's box that her actions might open, perhaps she would have settled down and headed straight back to the fashion parade. But her mind was filled with cascading images of the injustices of society, of a potential intrigue to be solved and a yearning for her mother's acclamation. So she didn't settle down. She continued to follow the green Berlina.

They passed the shopping centres of Sunny Park and Sunnybank Plaza, thronging with Asian people and with bright Chinese characters on every sign.

Over a long hump-back bridge at a railway station, past an old wooden building on the right saying Live Theatre and a church with a sign which read, *Being in church no more makes you a Christian than being in a garage makes you a car.*

'That'll be a good one to try out on Harry tonight,' she muttered, smiling up at the vast clear sky, as if some higher power might be listening.

The green Berlina headed straight south in the surging bustle of three lanes of lunchtime traffic. Some grander houses towered over sprawling yards, dwarfing the tired low-sets closer to the road. She looked at her watch – another few minutes and then it would have to be put down to experience. Another empty fizzer?

Siobhan slotted in behind and noted the rego on a yellow Post-it pad, lying on the passenger seat.

Into Gowan Road. Over Compton. Bigger brick houses. They turned left.

She followed the car at a discreet distance as it drove into a huge house behind a gated, white security wall.

She slowed down.

Something smelled sus. A Berlina didn't fit with the house – perhaps a late-model BMW or an Aston Martin but not the Holden, although Harry would want to argue that one, as a proud driver of the local product.

'Yuk.' She expressed her distaste as she drove her Mazda 2 down the street of oversized, over-decorated homes, all behind bland walls and forbidding gates.

She turned at the dead-end to look at the white mansion again. Too late she noticed the CCTV cameras under the eaves, so she kept driving back past a little roundabout and parked out of sight.

She grinned away the recollection of her mother's pained expression, thinking instead about how she could stir Harry up. It was probably all harmless anyway. At worst, he'd get a laugh; at best, a problem shared would be a problem halved.

She texted the registration number to Harry's phone by way of an appetiser. He'd be in class, teaching maths; phone on silent. He wouldn't look at any messages until after three. He'd mentioned a staff meeting too – then he'd have to pick up the necessary for the meal. She imagined his puzzled expression when he eventually looked at the registration number. He'd scrutinise it back and forward, searching for some deeper meaning.

She grinned in anticipation of the laughter at meal time that night. He'd call her scatter-brained for going off like this after the car. But, hey, what the heck? It would be a boring old world if everyone just conformed to the planned routine.

She sat thinking and keyed in another text message to Harry.

He really was more of a pal than a landlord. These last four months had been good fun. *Byond Compton. Sus car. MayB Argus* and, with an impish pout at his expected confusion, she pushed send

If he mocked her that evening she would jut her chin and assert, 'Well, there might have been a story in it. Maybe there still is.'

She hadn't caught the street name or the house number.

'Ah, you only live once!' She locked the car door and walked back up to the roundabout to take a quick video on her mobile, but was wary of being seen by any monitoring cameras. In ten minutes, she'd need to head back to Garden City. It wouldn't matter if she was a few minutes late – a couple of photos, a few names and some PR for the designer and the centre. The free local paper survived by advertising. Everyone would be happy.

‘Must be some rich folks living here,’ she whispered into her phone video while shooting a few seconds of the street, making it look as if she was just reading a quick text message.

Suddenly, a silver Mercedes entered the roundabout, the driver’s window down. Instinct made her press the video-record again.

The driver had blond curly hair and he looked familiar. There was a darkened figure behind a closed rear window.

She stopped the recording hurriedly as a wash of guilt flowed through her – stalking blameless people again. She could see her mother’s disappointed expression rear up from her memory.

The car swung through the open gate in the white wall. Siobhan stared in brief surprise. The same house.

Then she chattered into the mobile recording, ‘How lucky was that to get some footage? Maybe it’s all normal, innocent. At least that vehicle fits the street. Ah, well. Back to the car and the fashion show. Nothing lost and a whole new part of Brisbane seen for the first time.’

Strolling to her car, she savoured the flush of excitement; that long-remembered high and it still felt so good.

Bouncing back into the driver’s seat of her blue Mazda, she nodded acknowledgement to herself. It was fun playing at detectives again. Then, with a long regretful sigh, she braced herself for returning to the boring world of routine reporting. A deep breath calmed her thoughts for heading back towards Garden City.

Her distracted eyes focused on an Asian woman walking towards her down the empty street from the roundabout and she mused at the cuteness of carrying an open umbrella on a sunny day.

‘Must get footage of that.’ She chortled.

Pointing her phone camera discreetly, she thought that Harry would see the humour in that.

Siobhan’s videoing was interrupted when she noticed that parasol-woman was glancing at a map and looking confused by her surroundings. The Asian lady was going to ask her for directions.

Siobhan jolted into discreet but urgent action as the lady approached the passenger-side window.

Had she been observed?

She tucked the mobile up under the front of her driver's seat, catching it quickly in the upholstery cover, vaguely aware of her over-reaction to the pangs from her past.

The woman tapped at the car window, holding up a map.

Siobhan smiled and leaned over the passenger seat to hear what was being asked.

At that moment, the driver's door clicked open behind her ...