

FRAGMENTS

A SHORT STORY

MICHAEL BRYANT

FRAGMENTS

This is a fiction work. All characters, names, organisations, locations, and addresses are the product of the author's imagination. Should they exist, it is purely by coincidence and or has been used fictitiously, void of any intent to depict reality.

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Please contact the publisher at:

michael.bryant@scu.edu.au

For the Viking

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RITUALS

The day should have started off like any other day. Dogs barking. First Hugo, the Alpha, would send out the call. Billie would respond with a higher pitched howl. Charlie Brown, being the youngest, would follow her sibling's routine. Within minutes, the quiet street would be awakened by an acapella of kelpies at 6.30 am in the morning. Every morning.

Except today.

I got out of bed and performed the morning rituals. Peering out of the sunroom window across the street to the house where the dogs lived, I waited and listened. No visuals. No sounds. Recalling the disquieting morning silence in the final scene from le Carrés *Little Drummer Girl*, I mused, *where are the dogs, Charlie?*

Being old school/new school, I still use a battery powered transistor radio, curiously similar in size to a smartphone. Carrying on with the rituals, I made coffee, or more accurately the machine made the coffee. Half sugar and not too much froth, thank you Nespresso. Like an AI this thing. Talking to it and all. I turned on the Sony to the local station. A bit of news, classics, jazz, and daily book readings. Breakfast is a banana and pills. One for the Blood Pressure. One for the cheesecake I simply refuse to relinquish.

Static on the frequency. The fun of old school. Fine tuning, manually.

The sunroom panorama takes in the street, across the lagoon and rests on a stretch of the Pacific. Breaking through the wintery Nimbus clouds, first light splintered into the room. 7:05 am on the microwave clock. Although that precise measure cannot be trusted. All three clocks in the house are set fifteen minutes ahead with the exception of the smartphone. GPS accurate.

My own dog ignores the howl of the wolf pack across the way, much like a cat regards the efforts of a dog playing fetch. She ambled in from outside, stretched a little, yawned and settled into the rug on the sunroom floor. "Good girl Gracie." I reassured her softly rubbing her

back with some toes. She turned 30 degrees, smiled with her teeth, and made a few canine noises that would have translated to “I know, but thanks for reminding me.” Catdog. And part human too.

Static still. I rotated the dial back and forth incrementally until the Pacific National Radio frequency was located. I thought, not again. The Sony is tuned to PNR 24/7. The only thing touched is the on/off switch. Vibrations will do it. Passing heavy vehicles. And earthquake. Not today hopefully. Five tremors, all considered minor, have occurred in the last two months. Distant, yet felt.

Vivaldi's Opus 3 No.6, Violin concerto in A minor. Balance seemingly restored.

TRANSMISSION

Hanoi is gone.

Everyone is sending SMS's. It's going crazy.

"Is there anyone you want to contact?"

"Yeah."

"But I think it'll be okay. It hasn't hit the South Pacific yet. Hold on. Manila is gone!"

That means..."

"Yeah"

"How long?"

"Less than an hour."

"Love you. Keep the faith."

Transmission ends.

WINTER

Only occasionally does the Sony get dialled into another station. After Vivaldi. After the news and weather came the weekly mid-morning segment *Turn Another Page*. Innocuous enough in itself, the program presented selected readings of recently published fiction from the South Pacific region. I was in the business of preparing another coffee when the reader delivered a chapter from the new book for the week. I must confess often tuning in despite myself.

Last week there was this piece about a mysterious guy, Sebastian, who frequented local markets around Cornwall, arousing speculation from the men and stolen glances from some of the women in the village. Nothing spectacular. Okay, the plot seemed superficially bland. A quasi period/romantic/drama piece. Yet according to one of the characters, Reg Hollingsworth the local publican, Sebastian “seemed to stroll around the edges, looking out for something, but not looking out for anything.” So yes, it had a hook. Secretly I had waited for the next instalment. Like a soapy gets you talking to the television. And he had my name after all.

But this *Hanoi is gone* business. Please. What, are there not enough minutes to midnight as it is? I am all for a healthy bit of dystopianism. Keeps us honest. Classic books and films like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Brave New World*, *The Matrix*, *Pleasantville*, *R.U.R.*, *Red Pill*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *We*. Yet on this cold winter’s morning with the sun barely visible as the Nimbus began gathering the troops, I just was not in the mood for any *Transmission ends*, nihilistic end of world scenarios. And my coffee had gone cold, distracted by *Hanoi is gone*. So old school to new school. We all have our playlist platforms. Somewhere into Israel Kamakawiwo‘ole singing about rainbows, no internet. No power. Blackout. Except for the Sony.

Like the unscheduled earthquakes we’d been experiencing, Pacific National interrupted *Hanoi is gone* to advise of an unscheduled power outage affecting the Island’s 1253 resident’s homes and all 297 businesses. Having a hybrid infrastructure of solar and diesel generators to power the Island it usually takes a cyclone to cause an entire system outage. However, PRN reported there had been a magnitude 5.3 quake, 20 km depth, 300 km northwest from us on Tea

Tree Island. No damage to report, no immediate threat of tsunami. Gracie sat up and listened to the radio voice, looking at me as if to say, *no more coffee for you, old man, unless you're prepared to get out that metal pot and put it on the fire.* "I'm way ahead of you, old girl" I responded, reaching for the Moka pot hanging above the stove.

The weather had ramped up since daybreak. The news reported the 20 knot southerly gusts were forecast to increase as strong wind strength by mid-afternoon. It was cold and raining. Yet not locally severe. Not tropical cyclone significant. And it was winter.

INTERRUPTION

Like with a lot of things, you can figure out what has happened before someone tells you what has happened. I was making an omelette, and coffee in the Nespresso watching the swell building, the ocean waves bending with the wind along the rocky platform, when the radio let me know, power had been restored. *Thank you, Sony*, as I stirred the half sugar, easy on the froth. Gracie usually slept a good part of the day. She was 11, so she was getting on in human years. While she didn't mind the Sony and sighed contentedly to most of my playlists, Gracie became reborn when the television set came on. "Tele time?" I suggested. She leapt up, grabbed a nearby chewed piece of bone, and literally ran to the loungeroom and curled up on one of her many rugs. Waiting. I followed her, sat down with lunch and pressed the remote.

Charles Druyer was an eyewitness of the Kennedy assassination in 1963. He was there on that Autumn Day with his parents on Elm Street, near what was later neologised as the *Grassy Knoll*. No plexiglass. Clear target. Druyer was just 13 years old. Now he had his own TV show aired on Wednesdays at 12.30 pm, local time.

Dr Charles Druyer presents: What If? This week's program conjectured, *What If, Rising Sea, the current conflict in the Southeast Asian theatre, was a strategic distraction by the West?* And an often speculated favourite, *What If we are alone in this universe but not alone in the multiverse?* Druyer was branded by the media as a conspiracy theorist and far left of centre. I wasn't watching for the politics. It was a half hour of midday entertainment. He was getting into a tangential balance of power viewpoint involving China, the US and NATO when the knocking at the front door got Gracie to her feet.

THE BEACH

As the Nimbus cleared, the sun came out. The wind was still strong but here at Little Beach less so, as we were on the lee side of the Island. My neighbours, Brigitte and Jonas had come around to see if I wanted to take a walk now that the rain had eased. We were standing on the beach looking out at the wild ocean. Waves came in and were flushed out swiftly. The run-out tide was intensified by the stormy conditions.

Suddenly, the Island Police van arrived. The megaphone message rang out like a siren: “Get off the beach! Tsunami warning. Repeat. Get off the beach! Tsunami warning. Proceed to the evacuation centre now!” Someone cried out from the top of the hill overlooking the beach. “Tsunami wave! Tsunami wave!” Pointing out past the buoy others there joined in. The collective voice of siren sounds, and people shouting sounded like the howl of the kelpies. People began running up from the beach and park, some falling, some stopping to help others up. The scene could go chaotic in the blink of an eye.

“Come on! We’ve got to get to high ground.” I urged them. Jonas was staring out to sea at the growing first wave out past the buoy. In shock like the rest of us but his feet were immovable, like he was stuck in quicksand. Brigitte tugged at his arm, “Jonas, we need to go now!”

I helped him up the steps to the park area. “My phone” he said. I must have dropped it.” I looked back and saw the case on the sand. “Keep going. I’ll get it.” Little Beach is always littered with nets and small fishing boats. A safe launch cove to the open sea. The first wave, although small, caught me by surprise. It knocked me over and I got tangled up in one of the nets. Brigitte glanced from the top of the hill. She could see the predicament. The nets had my feet and legs, so it was taking precious time to free myself. “Go Jonas, I’ll help Seb. It’ll be okay. Go now, please!”

She raced down the hill onto the beach. Cautiously she stood on the edge of the nets “Give me your hand Seb.” I managed to free a hand and reached out and grabbed hers. I tried to

remain calm knowing it would be the second wave that would do the damage. There was still time, but it was finite. She tried wrenching me free but one of my legs wouldn't budge. She looked back up the hill for help, but everyone had left the area heading for the evacuation centre. We could see the second wave passing the buoy. About 400 metres out. It would only be a few minutes away. "Run Brigitte, I'll get out of this in a minute." She looked scared but determined. "Hang on." She went and rustled about in one of the bins and came back with a piece of a broken glass beer bottle. "Try this" she handed me the bottle, and I went to work on the net.

Mentally, the cutting became synchronised with the incrementally adjusted speed of the second wave, slowing as it started breaking off the shallow reefs around the headland. "Run, now! I'm almost free." She had done all she could, so she ran. The last strand gave way, and I leapt clear of the net onto the sand. It was soft from the first wave, and I couldn't get a proper foothold. I was trying to run but my legs felt weighed down, devoid of muscle energy.

I managed to clear the steps and reach the park's mid elevation, when the second wave caught me. It knocked me to the ground. Rolling around and sliding I was grasping for air.

RESURFACE

I felt someone gently touching my arm. “Seb, Seb.” It was Brigitte’s voice. I was thrashing about trying to get the sheets off me. I sat up and looked out the window rubbing some of the fog from my eyes. I looked around the room. Reorienting. The thoughts in my mind were but fragments. It was a clear blue sky. The sun’s rays visible. Instinctively, I flipped open the phone case wallet on the bedside table and tapped the screen. It displayed 6:30 Sun, 13 Aug. I got up and went to the bathroom to wash my face.

“Seb? Ça va?” Drying myself with a paper towel I threw it into the waste bin and noticed in there an opened envelope, addressed to Monsieur Sebastian J. Druyer 1153, Rue Victor Hugo 13210 Saint-Rémy-de-Provence FRANCE.

I could hear some dogs barking in the distance.

“Oui, Brigitte, je suis maintenant.”

THE DAY SHOULD HAVE STARTED OFF LIKE ANY
OTHER DAY. DOGS BARKING. FIRST HUGO, THE
ALPHA WOULD SEND OUT THE CALL.
EVERY MORNING. EXCEPT TODAY.

A startling transmission reveals catastrophic events
unfolding in Southeast Asia, causing anxiety about
the potential impact throughout the South Pacific.
Hanoi is gone.

“Is there anyone you want to contact?”

“Yeah.”

“How long?”

“Less than an hour.”

“Love you. Keep the faith.”

Transmission ends.

On the protagonists idyllic Island, he and friends are
caught unawares on Little Beach, by the warning siren.
Sebastian and Brigitte attempt to help Jonas to safety
who is paralysed by fear, as the first wave approaches.
Brigitte manages to get Jonas to flee the cove, but
Sebastian becomes entangled in fishing nets.

“Run” he cries out to them both, as the second wave
wraps toward the headland. Brigitte sees the
predicament and races down the hill onto the beach.
“Give me your hand Seb.”

She looked back up the hill for help, but everyone had
left the area heading for the evacuation centre. The
second wave was now passing the shark buoy, 500
metres out. It would only be minutes away.

“Run Brigitte, there’s no time! Rolling around and
sliding I was grasping for air.”