

ABANDONMENT

You're forgiven.



ALWICK HOUSE
ITEMS REMOVED
child's doll
tricycle
china plate
silver spoon
lace glove

You're
forgiven.

3A F7 9C 1D
6B 04 7E 2A
8F 21 C9 00
4D 6A 90 3F
1E 7B 5C 11
2C 09 AE 67
7F 3E 2D 4B

// CHANNEL: ECHO_47
Solve. Recreate.
Erase.
Leave it unsolved.
That's the game.
>_

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The jogger found him before the sun did. Lena Harrow would think later that it was, more or less, exactly how the first one had been found. Seventy-six years and a hundred metres between them.

Somerton Beach in Adelaide kept its habits.

And its secrets.

He lay above the tide line in a good suit, one leg crossed neatly over the other, an unlit cigarette resting against his lips as though he'd fallen asleep in the middle of a rest. Uninjured. No wallet. No phone. No labels in the jacket—history repeating itself. A sharp implement, probably a razor by the neatness of the work, had parted every seam that might have held one, the way a seamstress would. Yet, in the breast pocket, folded into a square so small it had almost gone unnoticed, a scrap of paper. Two words. Using an old-style typewriter, as if to recall a past way of communicating. Half the letters had smudged into the page suggesting the ribbon had gone thin on ink.

You're forgiven.

That's all it said.

By nine that morning it was on every screen in the country. Despite Adelaide's sometimes prudish image, it nevertheless held close to its dark side. And 1948 was one of them. Talkback hosts on the morning shifts, whose parents might have been children when the first body was discovered on that fateful day, became instant experts. As is the wont with those raised in the digital eon, a thousand fake images miraculously appeared across forums and pages.

A pathologist who'd retired too many years ago found himself back on the six o'clock news, standing on the same sand in a windbreaker, saying the same careful, unsatisfying words his predecessor had said in black and white: cause of death undetermined, pending further investigation.

Lena had been an investigative journalist once, the kind who got quoted at industry dinners when her *zeitgeist* was ablaze, a winner of a Walkley Award one year, quietly unfollowed the next, mired in controversy over questionable procurement of sources. Now, as a private investigator, she was passed the work that no-one wanted. But it paid the bills, though also crushed her sensibility and stripped her soul bare—infidelity scandals, insurance fraud, the occasional missing teenager who turned up at a boyfriend's within the week.

The daughter who hired her, a tight, exhausted woman named Priya Voss, sat across the desk with her father's photograph turned face down, as if she couldn't do the job and look at him at the same time.

Des Brady

‘The police have a case number, no idea of the person’s identity and a spate of fire bombings by bikie gangs of rival tobacconist outlets. So, not a lot of incentive,’ Priya said. ‘I need someone who still cares whether this is my father. I need an answer.’

Lena took the retainer, and didn’t tell Priya the other she’d taken the case. The one that had made her hands unsteady since the story broke: that her grandfather, Detective Sergeant Freddy Harrow, had stood over the first body on that same stretch of sand in 1948, and that somewhere between his death and his estate sale, three decades of his casebooks had simply vanished.

She’d asked her mother about it once, years ago, half pissed at a wake, in the way private things in a family crept out from behind the stern face of sobriety. Her mother had quietly dismissed it, as she had always done, and only said that Freddy had grown strange in his last years. He’d become quieter, more careful about locking doors, she’d said. Not just a copper’s habits, but the kind that looks like paranoia from the outside. On closer inspection it seemed like a man who couldn’t let go. Of what, Lena could never ascertain.

She’d filed the conversation away with the rest of the family’s buried secrets and hadn’t thought about it again until that jogger discovered a second well-dressed dead man on the same beach, three streets from the house Freddy had lived and died in.

The echoes were unmistakable.

Adelaide at night ran on two kinds of light now—the incandescent glow of the old pubs, churches and shops, unchanged since her grandfather’s day, and the cold blue wash of a hundred thousand phones, texting theories into being before the body was even named. Analog grief, digital appetite. Lena moved between both, the way she’d learned to.

The tailor’s marks were the first real thread. A city cutter, retired, agreed to look at photographs of the jacket and suggested a workshop it might have originated from. It had been closed since 2019, but he’d told police he recognised some old cutting patterns. Yet, the suit had been made for a man who did not, as far as any documentation could tell her, exist. Lena visited him later and sat with the old cutter in his front room, a man in his eighties with a tape measure still looped around his neck out of habit, and he told her, unprompted, that he’d cut for a man matching the dead man’s build twice before, years apart. Both times paid in cash. Both for a man’s name that belonged to nobody.

‘Ghosts don’t usually dress this well,’ he said. ‘Whoever’s doing the dressing, though... well, that’s someone with taste. And money. In my experience those two things tend to travel together.’

Sewn into the lining, behind a seam so fine the police had nearly missed it, was a second scrap of paper: a run of letters and numbers, printed in the same fading ribbon.

WRGOABABD—4—19—E.

Her grandfather’s notebooks might have been gone, but she had one surviving page, water-stained, kept in a small cabinet since she was a girl because it was the only thing her

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mother had left. Retained, oddly like an inheritance. On it were the five lines of the code from 1948—those hidden in the copy of the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám found in an Adelaide Railway Station locker, contained in a scuffed brown suitcase, the type school children used in the day. That case was never solved, not properly, not by him or anyone after him. Just a mysterious message, in small writing, a single unfinished sentence.

Not a cipher. A ledger. That's what grandad had written.

She had never understood what he meant. Looking at the new sequence in her lap, she began, for the first time, to think he might have had something.

She'd finally found a woman who claimed she could read this new code. That contact came through one of the only people in Adelaide's main Detective Squad who would still talk to her: Jack Summers. The woman called herself Dr Gypsy Saratoga and taught semiotics part-time at a college that barely used her, and who lived in a darkened unit with the blinds perpetually drawn. She also held seances and gave palm readings as a part-time bit of fun Lena had been told. It didn't give her a lot of confidence in the woman's skills, let alone her bona fides, but she had little else to cling to. It took Lena two weeks and another favour from Summers to find this woman's real name, and when she knocked on the door with that name, the woman's face went the colour of the hallway light.

She let her in anyway. That told Lena more than the woman likely intended. Or nothing at all.

The book she told Lena about, that would reveal all the secrets, lay in an old floor safe beneath timber floorboards hidden by a Moroccan rug that had seen better days. It was, allegedly, a 1940s copy of the *Rubáiyát*, the same edition tied to the 1948 case. The book was clearly ancient, its spine cracked in the same place from overuse yet the margins had new ink in them. Recent, urgent writing it seemed, that of someone who was motivated by worry. Or paranoia.

Saratoga turned to the page the crease in the spine revealed.

'You see... here,' she said, pointing with a long fingernail at the two words that were in bold type, those that were hauntingly familiar to Lena: *Taman Shud*. 'Do you know their meaning?'

This woman leered at Lena as if the knowledge was some incantation in a séance in those dark rooms. She shook her head.

'It is done.'

Leave it unsolved, that's the only protection, was the feeling Lena got from this woman.

'He came to me six weeks ago,' Saratoga said, once the silence had gone on long enough to feel oppressive. 'Wanting to know what the old code meant. The one from 1948. I told him what I'm telling you. Some mysteries aren't puzzles. They're fences. You don't

climb a fence to see what's on the other side. You leave it standing, and you thank it, quietly, for standing there.'

'He didn't leave it standing.' It wasn't a question.

'No.' Saratoga looked, for a moment. 'It appears not.'

Jack Summers prised the dead man's last six months of internet activity from a server in Reykjavik and gave them to Lena with a warning: be careful of what you seek. That trail led her into a forum with no name, only a rotating string of numbers for a URL, where several hundred members traded disturbing historical unsolved cases the way other people traded stamps. Somerton Man. The Taman Shud cipher's cousins in Canada and the US. A missing schoolteacher from Ballarat in 1971 nobody outside the forum had ever heard of. A man and a dog mysteriously vanishing in Oregon after visiting a woman thought to be a mass murderer.

They called themselves curators, and for a long time Lena read it as exactly that. An obsession with the macabre and unsettling cases, the internet doing what the internet always did with conspiracies and things that appeared to be impossible. Make them their own.

She spent four nights of insanity inside one forum called *The Deadpool* before she let herself see it clearly, scrolling threads with titles like *Provenance Mothers* and *The Long Reach of the Claw*, watching members annotate old case files with a devotion that looked, on the surface, indistinguishable from scholarship. They cited coronial reports. They argued footnotes. One member, screen name Actaeon, had spent three years building a timeline of the original Somerton Man's last movements down to the hour, and Lena had almost admired it before she noticed it all came to nothing.

Then she found the recruitment thread, locked behind three more layers than anything else on the board. It was then that she understood that this wasn't about collecting or analysing mysteries.

They were making them. Becoming the curators.

The dead man, Voss, Priya's father, had been a member for eleven years. Six weeks before he died, he'd posted a single line in the locked thread and then never posted again.

I know what we actually are. I'm not staying quiet about it. Those were his last words.

The replies underneath, before the thread scrubbed itself down to a single visible line, had been brief. Understood. Noted. We'll be in touch. Ordinary words, corporate almost, the kind of language a man might use to close out a meeting rather than a life.

After two more visits to Gypsy, Lena finally discovered the insight that opened the mysterious message. It was a list. Deeper within the ecosystem of these curators were names, dates, four-figure identifiers that seemed to be case numbers. Somerton Man was the first on the list. The oldest. All closed.

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Closed didn't mean solved, it meant handled, she'd said.

After more research, Lena found six of the names belonged to people who'd died in the last decade under circumstances the police reports and newspapers had called accidental, or suicide, or simply undetermined. Voss's name was the newest addition. And, unlike the others, there was no *closed* designation.

Only a date. When he had been found.

And now she knew what that code meant: WRGOABABD—4—19—E.

It was his death warrant. He'd known, Lena understood, sitting in her car outside Saratoga's building with the list glowing on her screen. He hadn't been murdered for finding the code. He'd been murdered on schedule.

Lena discovered that this group, this shadowy group, had been assembled after the Second World War, and was run by an old codebreaking cell made up of an eclectic mix from the intelligence community and a loose confederation of academics who worked in and around semiotics. After the war, some were convinced of the threat of communism raking through the world and overtaking all, so kept meeting.

She also found they kept building puzzles, first for pleasure, then, as the decades progressed and minds turned a little bent, the appetite for pleasure seemed to curdle into a taste for control, for use. An unsolved mystery, it turned out, was an excellent place to lose a body, a defector, an inconvenient man. The 1948 Somerton case hadn't been their first attempt. It had simply been their first success. Clean, permanent, still unsolved three quarters of a century later, a proof of concept nobody had ever thought to read as one.

'They evolved,' Saratoga said. 'Don't meet in dark rooms any more. And they recruit. Assiduously. Relentlessly. Those who share their tastes. Meeting in threads that dissolve after reading. But the appetite hasn't changed. Neither has the method. Find someone who's already a little bit gone from the world, someone who is suspect, has no family and no institution watching, make their disappearance into a puzzle people want to keep unsolved. People like to protect a good mystery, Ms Harrow. Better than they ever protect a person. That's the game of the *Task Masters*.'

'And you've known this for how long?'

'Forever.' Saratoga's hands, in her lap, had not stopped moving the entire conversation. 'I was one of the ones who believed in solving them. I lost that argument. Long ago.'

'The new breed.'

'Yes,' Saratoga nodded. 'And it's just taken a social revolution to get there.'

They came for Lena the way she'd always assumed they would. Because this knowledge would not be held close as before. It would spread. Virally. But they did not come with intent

of violence, but an offer, delivered by a man in a good coat outside her office who knew her name, her grandfather's name, and the exact page number of the notebook fragment at home. He didn't sit. Didn't raise his voice. He talked of her grandfather as if still alive, the way you'd remember a colleague who'd made a sensible decision once.

'Freddy understood the arrangement,' he said. 'You should leave well enough alone. Freddy kept that bargain for thirty years. We'd like the same courtesy from his granddaughter. The ledger leaves your family alone... unless something new emerges...'

'He didn't keep it because he agreed with it.'

'No,' the man said, almost kindly. 'He kept it because he knew that some things were never meant to be discovered or solved. That this was the purpose of the mystery. That is why Voss had to be the warning.'

Walk away, and the list stays a list. Publish it, and you become the next name, seemed to be the subtext.

She thought about her grandfather's unfinished sentence for a long time that night. Not a cipher. A ledger. He'd known, or half known, and he'd left it as a note in the margin instead of a headline. This twilight zone, this estate of uncertainty, had infected three generations of Harrows without any of them understanding why. She thought about Priya Voss's photograph, turned face down on her own desk because she couldn't bear to look at her father and think about the fence he'd jumped.

She published the list at six the next morning, cipher, names, dates, Saratoga's confession recorded and time-stamped, everything, before anyone in her chain of custody could talk her into an edit.

Adelaide's composure cracked. A city like this could not tolerate a suggestion that a story like this, one that ate at the soul of the city of churches, could be suppressed. It burned bright for eleven days. Many were arrested. Yet none of them, as it turned out, knew more than the layer directly above and below their own. The forum went dark inside forty minutes of the story breaking and never resurfaced under any name Lena's contacts could find.

Saratoga disappeared the same week, and Lena told herself, because the alternative was unbearable, that she'd simply run, the way people who've spent a lifetime being frightened eventually learn to.

Priya Voss called her once, a week after the arrests, to say thank you in a voice that didn't sound thankful so much as tired. 'I thought knowing would feel like relief,' she said. 'It just feels like a different kind of not knowing. Bigger, maybe. But not better.' Lena didn't have an answer for that, because she'd started to suspect, somewhere around the fourth night in the forum, that there wasn't one.

She hadn't solved anything, not really. She'd only pulled one thread far enough to expose the seam.

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Six weeks later, a package arrived at her door with no return address and a postmark she didn't recognise. Inside, wrapped in tissue gone soft with age, a single page torn from a 1940s printing of the Rubáiyát, the paper the exact stock, the exact foxing, as the copy in Saratoga's floor safe.

Typed at the bottom, in ink that hadn't had time to fade:

You weren't abandoned. You were chosen.

Lena stood at her window a long time after that, looking out past the rooftops toward a beach she could not see from here but knew held dark secrets. And she knew that, somewhere out there, that tide of men who'd built this would never recede. They'd hidden once, in good suits, in respectable institutions, in the simple, durable fact that nobody looks twice at a puzzle everyone has already agreed is unsolvable.

But they now hid in the dark web. The past wasn't gone, she thought. It had only ever been waiting for a better host.

She did not report the package. She put it in the cabinet, beside her grandfather's page, and went back to work.



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AUTHORS NOTE

This idea first came to me years ago when I heard about the Somerton Man, the unidentified man found dead on Somerton Beach in Adelaide in 1948. DNA analysis may finally have given him a name. While that potentially provides welcome closure for his family, part of me couldn't help mourning the loss of one of Australia's great mysteries. The unanswered questions had always been an irresistible hook.

Abandonment grew from that fascination. The story is fiction, although the discovery of a copy of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and its connection to the real Somerton Man case provided part of the inspiration.

Now I'm wondering whether *Abandonment* should remain a short story—or whether there's a novella or even a novel hiding inside it.

There are four questions I keep coming back to:

1. **Freddy Harrow kept the arrangement for thirty years**, and by the story's logic his silence protected his family. Was he complicit, or was he trapped? Does Lena's decision to publish vindicate him—or retroactively make his whole life a failure of nerve?
2. Saratoga says **'people protect a mystery better than they protect a person.'** Is that merely true of the Task Masters, or is the story saying something about our own appetite for mystery? The forums. True-crime culture. Even readers of this story, drawn to the Somerton Man precisely because his story remained unresolved for so long.
3. Voss announced **'I know what we actually are. I'm not staying quiet about it'** and was killed on schedule six weeks later. Lena effectively does the same thing—yet survives. Why? Luck? Timing? Or is there something fundamentally different about how the Task Masters see Lena?

Are they trying to recruit her?

4. At the end, Lena keeps the second package. She doesn't destroy it, take it to the police or publish it. **Why?** And what does that decision tell us about Lena? Is she already further down the path offered to her than she'd ever admit?

I'd genuinely like to know what you think. Should *Abandonment* end here?

Or should I find out what happens next?

You can email me at des9999@live.com.au. I'd love to hear where you think the story should go.