

## Suckered into a perfect line

Listen, this is how it is. I don't want to be Mr Popular. Doesn't worry me what people think. But nor do I fancy being the bloke standing in a flat-bottom skiff firing both barrels at his mate. Over he goes and so do I, recoil shoving me into the drink. Underwater I watch a ribbon bleed from Andy's chest, limbs twisting slow motion as he tumbles. Once I'm certain the body is debris, I climb back in our boat, tossing his gear over, glancing around and checking for witnesses. Then my eyes open.

The river licks its banks. Crouched in reeds, I shudder, a gun cold in my hands. Breathing steam, Andy fiddles with reloads. Idiot.

He keeps on tinkering. The dead Andy was better company. Am I a bad person to get sucked into daydream? You have to understand. I'm tired. Been tired a long time.

Jesus it's cold. Can't think about that. Can't.

Between my teeth I find apple bits, like rubbish floating in the current. Empty stubbies and cans catch first light as it spills above trees to prod the birds awake. I try not to think about Andy and Nicole either. Instead I'm running an oil rag over my weapon, resting it on the bank. Got to keep working. From the bore I pass through the breech, like I did two nights ago, crouched on a crate in my garage, smoothing the barrel with solvent, over and over until dawn, massaging metal with oil, over and over in smearing motions. I could have been hypnotized – only I was shit-faced.

You don't need to tell me that drinking isn't recommended before a shoot. But I couldn't help myself, getting angrier with each glass, gripping tight enough to shatter it, watching Andy and Nicole kissy-kissy in the bar. She must know how long I've wanted her, even back in the days when Lyn was around, when the four of us used to go camping together. I know Lyn sussed it. She reckoned she had me figured out, doing her psychology at uni.

'I don't really know you,' she said one night, after another bedroom fizzer.

'Not surprising, lady. You're never here.'

'And you're always wanting what you can't have.'

'Spare me the Freud. I got actual work in the morning.'

Okay, maybe I was jealous. Left school at fifteen. Not an educated man, I'd be off to do a twelve-hour workshop stint while my wife went to lectures, spending her day with friends. For talk, I just had the men I hire. We don't say much. Meanwhile I was paying Lyn's bills. I ran the motel of her life. Lying in darkness, I would listen to her snore, thinking of words I should've said.

Nothing comes to me at the right time. If I crack a joke at work, the men might smile but they don't ask me to join them for a beer later. I work right through most weekends – except during autumn, when I head for the wet. For company I usually take Andy. My old mate.

He and I did our apprenticeship together. He finished. I've known the bloke twenty years, so you'd think I could discuss stuff with him. But how can I? Fact is, lately I've been imagining how to bump Andy off. I'll be thumping my wheel in traffic or stuck behind some retard at the lights, or at home fingering the neck of a drink. I can feel heat in my fingers. I can hear myself doing it, plugging him with both barrels. And then I'm racing back to snatch Nicole. I would be doing her a favour. Andy's a moron.

Proof positive. The moron makes a Velcro rip, alerting waterfowl and mudlark for miles around. Swearing under his breath does not count as an apology.

Jesus, it's cold out here. My back hurts. I've got a headache the size of Bendigo. Sliding and cramping inside the waders, my legs chill. Eucalypt-coloured water seems to seep in, icing up my skin. The river slurps against tree roots. Gives me the creeps sometimes. Earlier it sounded like girls laughing. That's dumb, I know. But my balls aren't all that shrinks. The brain goes numb. You might think it's pathetic

for a grown man to go on about a Grade Four accident so many years ago. Get over it, you could say. Trouble is, I don't. I get pulled in. Another time our little girl walked in during my shower and laughed at my privates. Embarrassment maybe. I couldn't ask. Trouble is, I don't forget stuff, like that time I had to sack an apprentice for mimicking my limp. He was a trouble maker anyway. I had no choice. Only way to regain respect from the men.

So maybe I'm full of it but out here there's nobody laughing. It's just birds and water. No one around. I find it weird what being in the wetlands can do to you. By half-light, the Murray oozes like sump oil. Scraps of scum ride the rim, quiet as my bedroom. Thing is, it's more complicated than that. There's the sky. Hanging low, it feels close enough to stroke. Like a woman's hair. And there's a drop of dew bending back a grass blade right in front of my eyes on the bank. An ant crawls up my nose. I don't move. That's a skill Andy needs to learn. Horizon clouds might be swollen, and your gut twisting from the strain of keeping still, but this is what you've got to do. Watching the leaves fall, tracing a line of treetops crooked as a punk haircut, seeing eucalypt branches form an arch. It's hard to explain. And I'm sure my shooting mate wouldn't understand. Isn't it what women complain about, how we're so thick about all that?

Two nights ago, I sat next to Andy's girl at the movies. Her leg rubbed mine by semi-accident. She plays with fire.

'Popcorn?' she said, touching my arm.

Even in the cold water, the memory of it stirs me. Got to slam on the reality brakes. Supposing I did put myself forward – she'd freeze me out in an instant. As her boyfriend's mate, I'm a safe tease. Jesus, that rips me up. I can't keep away from her but when I sit beside Nicole I burn from the effort. She radiates heat like she's got a furnace inside. And her perfume odours. Combustible. Have to force myself not to touch her. Lyn knew it. She could read me that easy.

I haven't forgotten Lyn's skin, how she started to turn clammy as she got older. Thin in our wedding photos, she fattened up on chocolate. Then she went vegan. Losing kilos, she deflated. Her neck and arms sagged. Her mouth shrivelled. Uphill battle, as she tried to look young again, bleaching her hair, squeezing into jeans: diet pills and sleep pills. Despite all that mineral water she sucked down, Lyn dried.

Where did the years get to? We shared a bedroom and a daughter. Then she went back to uni, to finish what she left behind for marriage. Lyn found other people to talk to. At home, she had nothing to say. After sex I'd try to make a comment but none came. I blanked, just rolling back on the wet spot to stare at light fittings, like a storm had crashed through the house and chucked around our furniture, then disappeared, leaving things where they fell. I couldn't explain it. One time I nearly managed but she did her cross-examination thing. I hated her for that. No way could I get words out.

I started hunting again. I took Andy. These last few years I get hungry for next season, never skipping, even if the forecast is for sheeting rain. You might think it's only a blood sport. But you'd be wrong. Out here, there's no bullshit: just bag limits and Hardhead and Pacific black. I can get legless. Nobody cares. I can make mess. Nobody cares. No customers or suppliers, and no bullshit. Home tomorrow night, I'll buy groceries and sweep up – though my daughter won't. I will find pizza boxes, cereal bowls and a spill near the toilet where some kid has missed – and Bethany in bed with the current boyfriend. But I can't comment. If I open my mouth she'll only slam doors, threatening to leave, like her mother.

On our front lawn I was staring after Lyn, feet soaked but not feeling anything. I hosed the grass long after her cab went. When Bethany got home from school she didn't say anything, just slammed her door. Six months later, at the funeral, she refused to hold my hand. A stupid P-plate driver had put Lyn out of her misery. My

eyes stayed dry. Nothing left. I looked at her coffin and chucked in a scoop of soil. Apology stuck in my throat.

‘What’re you doing...?’

Andy is fiddling again, mucking with the load. Amateur. For black duck, he should use one-and-a-quarter ounce of number four.

‘Try smaller shot.’

‘Matter of opinion, mate.’

There’s nothing he can do about being thick. I might try coming up to the Murray alone but it wouldn’t be the same. Even Andy’s better than no company.

Not a sign of other hunters yet. Early in the season, I often hear young clowns bragging about ‘woodies’ and ‘spoonbill’, showing off with their shithouse long-range shooting. They use the wrong loads and skyblasters. They cripple birds. Rather than wear camouflage gear they slosh around in jeans and Nikes, holding their guns like cricket bats. A kid drowned, season before last. He didn’t respect the river.

I need at least one barrel with full choke at maximum range. Depending on forecasts, Andy and I sometimes bring the skiff, or climb into mud for improved control – still the best way to get forward clearance – but it’s always me that does the thinking. Andy’s a passenger, and no oil painting. Why do the women go for him?

‘No one else up yet.’

And a master of the bleeding obvious. There’s not even a do-gooder trying to rescue wounded birds. That lot ought to be trying to save the whale or hug a spotted gum. They mean well but there’s more going on up here than they know. I’m caught on a nail. I’m walking a tightrope over a gorge. Duck rescuers don’t get it. The Murray swells, grey as a bruise, but I’m pumped just to be wading through it, loaded and ready. Blood beats in my ears, like it did for ancestors. Flannelette smells of dried sweat. It’s just me – us – in the water, waiting.

‘Could move closer.’

I've told Andy it's a good spot, better than a blind. He mocks.

'Hey, not using your old pumpgun, mate? Crap recoil.'

Imbecile.

'Next time we'll bring the boat,' says Andy.

Moisture drips from our waterproof caps. I spot the floating rubber shapes we staked yesterday.

'You get better swing-through here,' I explain. 'Plus a view of the decoys. With more gear it'd be just a nuisance.'

At daybreak's edge I can feel the juice going through me, not only to smear teal from the sky but... how can a man find words? Away from fumes and powder coating, the wetlands call. It's like the floodwater and swamp need us. You should see the night sky, sprinkled with salt. Frogs make a song noise that rinses the town away. If I could write songs, they'd be the sound of this water. First light twitches down each hair on my arms, heating the muscles of my back, swelling the chest. That could be us, all the way up there, instead of birds, skimming clouds before we get caught. It's how we're supposed to feel, how it used to feel before the duck became more important than the gun.

Okay, I'm no hero. Memory shoves me into corners I'd rather not see, like when Andy introduces me to his girlfriend in a see-through singlet, hair bouncing on her bare shoulders, with that husky laugh like she's coming up for air, and a black coffee voice that makes me wild. But I can't tell Andy she's the kind that men kill for. He wouldn't understand. Lyn used to pretend that she and Nicole would become great pals. We were living in a High Street flat, five minutes from the market. During that hate phase, Lyn hated her skin and her hair, plus having to share a bed with me. I no longer felt hitched to her like a water tank on the back verandah. I hadn't even noticed her getting older. One day I noticed wrinkles on her cleavage, like a tide was going out.

The swampland gurgles then goes quiet. Moments later, a squeak of mynas. On with the gloves, earmuffs and safety glasses. I check my ammo.

From the pack I pull a flask, and knock one back. Bourbon floods me, heating the cold corners. Breakfast was apricots and cold sausage with Andy. Watching him chew I noticed that his sideburns aren't cut the same, like he does his shaving in a bathroom that needs reblocking. Tiny veins crack his cheeks. He's got eyes the colour of beer. What do women see in it? Even my wife found him interesting. But then nothing I did was good enough for Lyn. I should've finished school. I should be running a real business, not a glorified tool shed. I shouldn't eat eggs or meat. I should make an effort to understand wine. I shouldn't make love like I'm changing a tyre.

'You don't enjoy it,' she told me. 'You'd rather I lie still so you can get it over with. Do you kill birds because they don't hit back...?'

Sometimes she would scream, not caring who heard. I took to sleeping in the spare room.

Slipping off my gloves, I stand. Spread my feet. Loosen my hips. I mount the stock against one cheek, fitting its self-pump action to my shoulder.

A noise.

'Greenhead.'

No point in hushing Andy. I concentrate my aim down a line of decoys: ready for trigger slap, hand supporting the fore-end.

Up they soar, heading somewhere better, suckered into a perfect line that wags only at the end. I'm ready to wipe sky, bead on the muzzle, tracing a line of flight to take my shot.

*Wuh-bang...*

Then the recoil, ripping through ear-muffs. My nose throbs from flake powder.

But something's wrong.

A lapse in concentration maybe, or thinking about Nicole.

*Shit.*

My mouth hangs open. I see spiralling teal. Worse than a miss – I've tail-feathered one.

With swing through, I've got time to hit another dead centre. Hurrying the third, I go wide. I am buggered.

Sloshing through reeds, my legs squish inside the waders. Got to make sure nobody's about. I don't want witnesses.

Swinging my stock, I hit hard. The bird thrashes. I whack again. Would you believe tears? I'm actually blubbing. In a stink of scorched feathers I feel sick, tasting a spasm of vomit. The bird's beak hangs open, as if to criticize.

From my pockets I fumble, pulling gloves over wet hands to begin the plucking. My thing might still be edible. Flies nag and buzz. I yank out its feathers, washing as I go, removing the crop and pulling entrails from its body cavity – not skinning or cutting off wings, like Andy would. As I return, he's about to say something. But I shut him.

'Not a bloody word.'

He has bagged four, each a work of art.

Rinsing and drying, I fold up the carcasses. My nose swells with shot, guts and singed feathers. Flies cluster. I flop on the bank, waders bloody, pumpgun beside me mud-caked: the weapon that missed. I point the barrel at Andy.

'What do they see in you anyway?'

But I'm full of crap. The gun in my hands is a crock. Andy has heard nothing. I swipe at the air – a mosquito or wasp. What is the thing I'm trying to grab? I can't seem to get hold...

On my feet, I gather up gear. Tomorrow night, I will stack carcasses on the kitchen bench. I might kick out Bethany's latest boyfriend but how can I lay down the



law when I've pissed off for a weekend? Beth will shuffle in, belly button hanging out, and the top of her knickers peeping. I can't comment.

Something snags my thinking. I'm trying to figure it. Up ahead looms an old bluegum, thick as a pylon but twisted at the trunk like it's got stress fracture. Then I see a colour, parrot green. Tied to one branch there's a rope hanging, hacked off just beyond a man's reach. Somebody has slung it there. Question is – did that someone have to be cut down?

I really am full of it. The rope must be left over from a camping trip, some kid's tyre swing maybe. No reason why it should scare the shit out of me, a frayed end swinging in the breeze. Except. A moment before seeing it, I was rubbing my old gun, thinking how easy it would be to open up and slide the muzzle in. Twitch of finger. Couldn't miss. About time someone else did the cleaning up.

'Let's give it another crack later,' Andy says, 'at sunset.'

Brushing away feathers and blood, I join him for the trek back. Tomorrow night Bethany will sneer at me, like her mother used to, but she won't leave. I'm what she comes home to, when school is over and she breaks up with her latest. We'll reheat pizza, or something. I'll wash. I'll mop the kitchen.

'You bring any coffee?' Andy is asking.