

CONSOLATION

GARRY DISHER



First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
VIPER, part of Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

First published in Australia in 2020 by
The Text Publishing Company

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Freight Text by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 817 5
eISBN 978 1 78283 858 6



1

Did Hirsch own the town?

At times he felt he did—was making it his, at least, as he prowled the streets at dawn. When he'd begun doing this eighteen months ago, he was mapping the place. Fixing the police station in relation to the little school on the Barrier Highway, the general store, the side-street lucerne seed business, the tennis courts, the painted silos at the defunct railway station—and the houses, mostly built of the stone found hereabouts. Wheat and wool country, halfway between Adelaide and the Flinders Ranges.

That achieved—context established—the cop in him began to emerge. Protector and enforcer. He watched over the teen siblings who cared for their manic-depressive mother, the old woman whose husband wandered off if her back was turned, the Indigenous kid who'd come halfway to thinking Hirsch wasn't the bashing kind. And he watched for stupidity, cunning and plain malice. Recasting old crimes and cockeyed fate until a veranda post here and a driveway

there were imprinted with blood, regret and if-only—so that next time he might anticipate it. The glint of craziness in a man who was, at first glance, a solid citizen. Or where on First Street he'd be able to head off an escape attempt. Or how, on Canowie Place, he'd eventually nab the snowdropper. Every place was porous. Badness—goodness—seeped through and linked them all.

The snowdropper. Hirsch turned off Mawson Street and headed down Canowie Place, this frosty Wednesday morning in late August, frost dusting the grass, blades of ice reaching down from dripping garden taps, frost and ice splitting into prisms and diamonds as the sun struck. A bright, still, freezing day ahead. Snow reported on the Razorback yesterday, and Hirsch was prepared to believe it, his eyes watering right now, his cheeks and toes frozen.

Strange to think that 2019 had started with bushfires all over the country. Nothing could top that. He hunched his shoulders, stamped his feet, pulled his head in, a swaddled figure under an Icelandic beanie, rolling down Canowie. Past the Uniting Church, now home to a retired geologist, past a transportable kit home, smoke rising straight up from the chimney, past more stone houses, their roofs made of faded red or green corrugated iron, their shrubs and Holland blinds keeping the world at bay. Like any country town: a mishmash of the old, the new, the restored and the forsaken, and he could feel the chill in each of their bones.

He paused at Mrs Lidstrom's, 9 Canowie, giving himself a sightline along her side wall to a quadrant of backyard clothesline. A tea towel and a pair of the navy polyester pants she liked

to wear. They'll be ice-stiff in this air, he thought. He imagined flicking them with a fingernail: the little snap, like cardboard.

He lifted his gaze to the eaves. After the snowdropper had struck numerous times in the district—here in Tiverton, down in Penhale, over in Spalding—targeting some victims more than once, the district police budget had covered the installation of a discreet CCTV camera at one house in each town. No incidents reported in Redruth, leading Hirsch and his boss, Sergeant Brandl, to theorise that the guy lived there. That was ten weeks ago. Since then, grainy video footage had been obtained from Mrs Lidstrom's camera and the one in Penhale. A male figure in motorcycle leathers and a helmet. 'Come to think of it,' neighbours had said, 'I did hear a bike last night.' No face, only an impression of a stocky build—stocky in leathers, anyway.

Hirsch's electrician friend, Bob Muir, had installed the cameras at each location. Mrs Lidstrom, standing with Hirsch in the side yard, watching Bob up a ladder, had used a word Hirsch had only ever seen in print.

'Who would want to steal my old lady's bloomers?'

'It's your cutting-edge taste, Betty,' said Bob, looking down from the ladder, a pair of brass screws bobbing between his lips.

She snorted. She was round, comfortable and white-haired; sharp and mostly amused by the world. 'Not to mention my bathers and best bra.'

'Bathers?' said Hirsch.

A little twist of annoyance: keep up, Paul. 'Water aerobics. Redruth pool.'

As she'd once said to Hirsch, she wasn't one to let the grass grow under her feet. Probus Club lectures, walking holidays in New Zealand, volunteering, fitness. 'Right,' he said.

'Keeps me young. Not that young, though. I repeat, who'd want to steal an old lady's underwear?'

'It's called snowdropping,' Hirsch said.

Betty Lidstrom looked at him. He saw the snap and crackle of her mind. 'A fetish?' she said. 'Psycho-sexual?'

Hirsch raised his eyebrows at her. She punched his upper arm lightly—don't go making assumptions about old women—and he smiled and nodded. 'Probably.'

They both stood there, and Bob Muir in his overalls stood there on his ladder, the three of them thinking their way into the head of a man who stole underwear from backyard clotheslines. Why he did it. What he did with his trove of old lady's bloomers. And whether he was building up to something else.

He'd be hard to catch. And if he was caught, he could talk his way out of it, say he'd bought the underwear in an op shop. Embarrassing, but not theft. Then something about the authorities having no business in the bedrooms of the nation, et cetera. So each victim had been supplied with marked underwear: a hole punched in the top left corner of the waistband label in case he did it again.

Just then a light went on in Mrs Lidstrom's rear side window: kitchen. Hirsch walked on, securing the town, burning away his overnight aches and stiffness, feeling good

to be alive despite the cold, the tedium. He'd probably spend the morning witnessing a stat dec or two; writing up last weekend's pub brawl between windfarm workers; chipping away at the clods of mud inside the wheel arches of his SA Police 4WD—the nasty, clogging, adhering red-soil mud of the mid-north plains.

Up the side path of a little brick-veneer house on the highway. A habitual good-luck knuckle-rap on the wind-screen as he edged past his old Nissan. In through the back door. Then, showered, second breakfast inside him, he opened the connecting door and stepped from his suite of three cramped rooms into the room facing the highway.

This was the police station. A ceiling fan for summer, a useless bar heater for winter. Community notices on the walls, an out-of-date calendar of spring wildflowers east of the town, a counter separating his desk, computer, swivel chair and filing cabinet from the waiting room. People rarely waited. Crimes occurred now and then, perpetrators were about, but mostly a local or a stranger could be sure of immediate service—if Hirsch was there, at any rate; if he wasn't out on patrol or answering a call. A sleepy country town. Mostly.

Seated at his desk, scorched-dust odours rising from the bar heater, his shins barely warm, he tackled his in-tray, read emails and checked the Tiverton WTF Facebook page. The snowdropping was an ongoing What the Fuck item, the commentary sometimes amusing, sometimes faintly off-colour; occasionally nasty. Hirsch supposed Betty Lidstrom knew about it. He couldn't protect her from it. Police everywhere were fighting losing battles with social media.

Three items of interest this morning: photos of the Razorback with its spine of snow; reports of a pair of Irish roof repairers floating around the district—*A con?*—and an anonymous query regarding Quinlan Stock and Station, a Redruth agency that specialised in the buying and selling of land, livestock, wool, agri chemicals and equipment: *Anyone find this mob to be slow payers?*

The desk phone rang. ‘Paul?’

Hirsch didn’t recognise the voice. ‘Speaking.’

‘It’s Clara.’

Hirsch assumed he should recognise the name and voice; knew it wasn’t his strong suit. Not a good look in a country policeman: the job description included friend and counselor, as well as law enforcer, to everyone. The name Clara was a wisp of smoke in his mind, sent up by something remote in time and place.

‘Hi.’

She read him. ‘Clara Ogilvie.’

Nothing. ‘How are you?’ he asked, concentrating madly.

‘Caledonian Dreaming?’

Ah. A loose group of fiddlers, guitarists, pipers, tin-whistlers and singers—border ballads, edgy folk, Appalachian mountain music, anything vaguely Celtic. Once a month in an upstairs room of the Woolpack, in Redruth, half an hour down the highway. Hirsch had gone twice, dragged along by Wendy Street and her daughter. His second time there, back in June, he’d closed his eyes against every penetrating eye in the room and given a short, deeply self-conscious vocal performance of ‘Dirty Old Town’, from an old Pogues LP his

parents had owned when he was a kid. He had the words in his head; what he didn't have was a rasp in his voice from whisky and cigarettes.

And suddenly he was able to place Clara Ogilvie. Mid-forties, slender, vivid, the kind with a permanent current buzzing inside her. She'd touched his forearm afterwards—Wendy looking on with a sleepy half-smile—and told him he had a lovely tenor voice. In a small community that was code for passably pleasant.

'Clara, right. What can I do for you?'

'I'm ringing because...' She trailed away. 'Have you got a minute?'

'I have.'

'It's not one of your patrol days?'

Hirsch would have been on the road by 7.30 a.m. if it was.

'You're good,' he said, and a corner of his soul tensed. She wanted him to sing again, maybe in the concert mooted for the Redruth Show in September.

'I'm calling because...Look, it's complicated.'

'Take your time.'

'I'm concerned for someone's welfare.'

The last time Hirsch made a welfare check, he'd stumbled on a mother and son shot dead in a home invasion. The blood, the bodies: instantly there in his head again. 'Uh-huh. Who?'

'Background,' Clara Ogilvie said. 'I teach English at Redruth High—that's how I know Wendy. She said I should talk to you rather than bring in Child Protection just yet.'

A kid in her class? Didn't schools have welfare officers?

This was becoming a round-the-block-and-up-over-the-hill kind of conversation. ‘Someone you teach? You think it’s a police matter?’

‘I hope not, but I am worried.’

A child sexually abused, he thought. Coming to school with bruises. Acting out. Neglected. On drugs. Dealing drugs...

And why call him? The Redruth police station was two minutes from the high school, Hirsch thirty minutes. ‘Perhaps ask Sergeant Brandl to look into it.’

‘You’re closer.’

‘How about you tell me the circumstances.’

A pause, as if he’d been short with her. Then a sense of a deep breath taken. ‘In addition to teaching at the high school I do a bit of online work with home-schooled primary age kids, monitoring their progress.’

‘Okay.’

‘For the Education Department.’

‘Okay.’

‘It’s a requirement.’

‘Mm.’

‘This week I’ve been online with a girl in her final year of primary school. Lydia Jarmyn, eleven years old, home-schooled by her mother, Grace.’

‘Okay.’

‘Well, I touch base with these home-school kids a few times a year, monitor their progress in various different subjects, curriculum check, and all week Lydia’s been distracted. Yawning a lot. Zones out all the time.’

‘We’re talking about Skype? Zoom? You can see her?’

‘She looks thin and pale. Drifts off, gives a little shake as if she’s trying to wake herself up, then just drifts off again.’

‘Have you spoken to the mother? Maybe she spends all night on the computer. TikTok, whatever it is now.’

‘There’s something else going on, I think. I asked her if anything was wrong and she said she’s hungry all the time. Said she’s only allowed a small bowl of rice a day. And she can’t get warm.’

Hirsch ran through the likely scenarios if he called Child Protection: thirtieth caller in line, or someone promises to get back to him but doesn’t, or it’s allocated a case number for attention next month, or they need more evidence, or they promise to act and don’t...And the child dies.

Or we’re looking at a kid having a whinge.

‘Do you know where the Jarmyns live?’

He heard paper rustling and then Clara Ogilvie recited an address: Hawker Road. Hirsch pictured it: a gravel track up in the Tiverton Hills. ‘Any reason why she’s being home-schooled?’

As against Tiverton Primary School, across the road from his police station.

‘If the parents can satisfy certain requirements, they’re allowed to home-school their children.’

Which was an answer, but not to the question he’d asked.

‘Okay, thank you, I’ll check it out.’ He paused. ‘You did the right thing.’

Diplomacy: it was half his job.

Ogilvie’s voice changed: light and chatty. She was looking

forward to the Caledonian Dreaming get-together on Sunday afternoon; she named a couple of songs she thought would suit his voice. Hirsch swallowed. From their titles alone they were epic ballads of feuds, raiding parties and supernatural come-uppance. He dodged and weaved and got off the line without committing.

Hirsch pinned his mobile number to the front door and backed the police 4WD onto the highway. Cars were streaming into the side-street entrance to the school, and he wondered again why Lydia Jarmyn was being educated at home. He waited for the Broken Hill bus to trundle through, then trailed it north through farmland.

Wheat, oats and barley shoots in thick, vividly green rectangles on either side of the road and reaching in broad brushstrokes up the hill slopes, stopping where the soil gave way to stone reefs. Distant rooftops on these hillsides: farmhouses and implement sheds. He thought about the march of the seasons. He'd not much noticed it when he lived in Adelaide. The weather was hot, cold or in-between, that's all. He didn't register plants and birdsong, pollen and blossom, life and death. Only what to wear, did he need a jacket and was it hot enough to swim. But up here, three hours from the city, and quite high above sea level, there were two extremes: cold green winter and droughty summer.

A speck in the sky resolved itself: a crop-duster, short, stubby, the cabin a prominent bubble above the wings, side-slipping and straightening for a run across a wheat crop. Hirsch slowed, signalled, pulled onto the verge, and watched

it drop, leapfrog the powerline, drop again and howl from fence line to fence line, releasing a thick stripe of chemical spray, climbing before it ploughed into the hill, tilting onto one wing and coming around again. Drop, hedge-hop, spray-bomb, climb, turn.

Timing it so he wouldn't get a lungful of chemicals or a roof-rack full of landing gear, Hirsch pulled the police HiLux back onto the highway. Fifteen minutes later he turned left, a gravel road taking him up and then across the flank of a hill. Finally a driveway, sealed by twin galvanised iron gates padlocked together.

He parked and got out; stared balefully at the lock. The driveway wound between silvery gum trees to a 1970s tan brick house set among pine trees. Tremendous view, he thought, turning around to confirm it, seeing the world through the eyes of anyone who lived here, high above the valley.

Should he, or shouldn't he? Between first and second thoughts Hirsch was climbing the fence and trudging up to the house. The wind was fierce. It reached deeply into his bones and the eucalypts bent to it, moving above his head in a ceaseless rushing sound. A shut-up look about the house, curtains drawn on every window. No vehicles that he could see. He knocked: no answer. He didn't like this. He didn't want to do this.

Not a place abandoned, though. The veranda was clean, pot plants healthy, garden beds weeded, window glass spotless. No mould on the downpipes. And a sheepdog in a kennel watched him, unconcerned. Chooks pecked and

scratched in the backyard. A little pink tricycle stood neatly in the carport. The householders are out, Hirsch thought. They'll need to come back and feed the dog.

Leave a note? And then, alerted by a hint of a whisper of a sound or a movement, Hirsch took a second look at a caravan parked inside an open implement shed at the far end of the farmyard.

He crossed the yard. It was an older style of caravan on rotting tyres. Subject to the weather blowing in, because here at last was the grime and mould. A slip bolt had been mounted on the door, wire grilles over each window. As nice a prison as you could hope for.

Hirsch knocked and said hello and didn't wait but slid open the bolt, opened the door and stepped inside.

2

And jerked back reflexively. He turned, took a bite of the chilly fresh air blowing in from the wider world, stepped down to hook the door flush against the metal flank and tried boarding the caravan again, swimming against a rank tide—piss and shit odours drilling into his sinuses.

Shallow-breathing, he slid open a couple of windows for the cross breeze and took stock. Down at the bottom end was a mattress and a tangle of blankets. Closer to, on a grubby fold-out table between bench seats, was an atlas, a dictionary, foolscap booklets and pens and a wooden ruler in a glass jar. On a nearby sink, a plastic bowl ready to be washed, one pale maggot of cooked rice glued to the rim.

Hirsch scanned the rest of the interior. The walls—a thin metal skin that would be no defence against mid-winter temperatures—were finger-marked and mostly bare apart from a scrawled-upon whiteboard mounted between overhead cabinets halfway down the room. He saw that it was

a list of rules in black and red, the words butting furiously against each other:

Bad behaviour is not rewarded in this family

Remember who is boss (hint: its not you)

You fit in with us, we do not fit in with you

You break it you fix it

Learn to take no for an answer

*It might surprise you to know your not the centre of the
universe*

You get respect when you earn respect

Hirsch moved on and stood looking down at the bedding. A thin foam mattress, stinkingly yellow, askew on the bedframe. Two threadbare grey blankets with blue piping bundled at the foot of the mattress, stained and worn through here and there; probably poor comfort in the night.

A faint shift in the equilibrium of the caravan. As if it lived.

Hirsch went at once to a floor-to-ceiling wardrobe and opened it and the stink rolled out at him and, shrinking into the floor, was a girl, caging her head in her hands and forearms. Matted brown hair, a grimy woollen pullover and oversized explorer socks for warmth. But her legs were bare, and a disposable nappy was straining to protect her midsection.

Hirsch reached out a hand to her shoulder and rested it there. She jerked violently and ground herself deeper into the floor. He couldn't see her face.

‘My name is Paul. I’m a policeman. You’re safe now. Is your name Lydia?’

A stillness came over her. Not acquiescence: a willingness to listen? Give him the benefit of the doubt? He stroked her forearm and relayed some low, soft, calming nonsense for a couple of minutes: Isn’t it a cold day! Want to go somewhere warm? You must be feeling a bit uncomfortable there. Ms Ogilvie’s worried about you. Shall we find you some warm clothes?

It didn’t work. At each statement she flinched, curling herself more tightly into a ball.

Hirsch realised how tiny she was, skin and bone. Eleven? She looked about six or seven.

‘Now I’m just going to make you more snug and comfortable,’ he said, lifting her out in one motion. She stiffened but didn’t struggle. He spread one blanket over the stained mattress, sat her on it, wrapped the other around her shoulders.

She no longer hid her face in her arms but looked at the floor rather than meet his gaze. A smudged jawline, sharp cheekbones, mouth ajar. She sniffed wetly. A rattly cough. She’s not well, Hirsch thought.

She dragged a forefinger across her nostrils. It glistened, a new mucous trace upon old, and a ring glinted, fake ruby, fake silver, and that made Hirsch sadder than ever.

‘Is anyone home, Lydia?’

Nothing.

‘I knocked at the house but there was no answer.’

This time she shrugged.

‘Have they gone to the shops?’

She seemed to consider the question and whispered, 'In Clare.'

'Okay. For shopping?'

A pause and a shrug.

'Would you like to go over to the house and have a nice warm bath and change your clothes?'

She shrank against the enormity of that. 'Stay here,' she said.

'Is this your bedroom?'

She was very still; then a tiny nod.

'Shall we see if we can find you a change of clothes?'

Nothing.

'I could warm up some water so you can wash and change in here. I'll wait outside.'

She hunched herself, wanting to disappear again.

'Perhaps it would be best if I phoned your mum. Do you know her mobile number?'

It was as if she hadn't heard him. Then her hand shot to her scalp and her fingernails dug in. Nits? She coughed, and it left her weak.

Hirsch said, 'I don't think you're very well. Let's get you to Doctor Pillai in Redruth. Do you know her? She's nice.'

Lydia Jarmyn shook her head. 'Stay here.'

'I'll leave a note at the house to explain.'

'Stay here,' she croaked, and coughed again, sad and feeble and helpless against it. Worn out, she fell against Hirsch.

He wrapped her deep within his arms and the grimy blanket and carried her out into the air and some kind of future. Her struggles were those of an old dog insisting she

be allowed to walk. The air was a rejuvenating force around them, with only a faint underlay of the child's wastes. Then just as Hirsch passed from the shed gloom to the wintry sun a pinprick of red caught his eye. A CCTV camera was trained on the caravan.

Oh well, he thought. I'm the cops, so you can fuck off. And he hoped that if there was film of him snatching Lydia, there was also film of those who'd harmed her.

Note to self: obtain CCTV footage.

He belted Lydia Jarmyn into the passenger seat, cracked open the window a couple of centimetres and rolled down the hill and out onto the highway. The sky was vast above the shallow valley and an eagle hung there and sunlight glinted on a distant windscreen. The world was washed clean.

He glanced often at the child as he made his calls, steering with one hand. Dr Pillai, at the Redruth Medical Centre, suggested he take the girl to the town's little hospital. 'Text me as soon as you arrive.'

'Will do.'

Then his boss at Redruth, Hilary Brandl, who wanted a lot more detail.

With a glance at Lydia, Hirsch said, 'In due course, sergeant.'

A pause. 'She's there? She's listening?'

'That's correct.'

Another pause. 'I'd like to check the place with my own eyes before I get Child Protection or CIB involved.'

'Understood.'