THE WAY IT IS NOW

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GARRY DISHER

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For Selma and Jonathan

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January 2000

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On a Monday in January, three weeks into the new century, Charlie Deravin drove down to retrieve his surfboards. He was intending a quick in-and-out, but stopped when he saw the For Sale sign in the parched front lawn where Bass Street intersected with Tidepool. He found himself idling in the middle of the road with a strange ache in his chest. It was true. No longer an abstract notion. The sign was hand-painted, as if his old man hoped no one would take it seriously, but the offer was there for all to see.

Everything tilted for Charlie. Lost or changed definition. He had never noticed the rusted gutters; the rotting window frames and florets of roof lichen. Not a house, no longer a home, barely a beach shack. His mother's potted geraniums absent from the veranda. And his father, watching motionless in a deckchair, also altered.

Charlie pulled his Subaru into the driveway. Got out, stretched the kinks in his spine. He could hear the sea down there where Tidepool dead-ended at the path that wound

through the tea-trees and onto the sand. Smell the sea. Gulls calling. Complicated emotions calling.

He edged along the flank of his father's Holden, his T-shirt catching on the untamed driveway bushes, and stumbled into plain view.

'Dad.'

'Son.'

'Thought you'd be at work,' Charlie said.

Detective Sergeant Rhys Deravin, looking at Charlie, was shadowed by the veranda roof, by impending divorce, and by a deeply ingrained disappointment that he was being expected to swallow another lie, this time uttered by his son.

Okay, thought Charlie. He crossed the lawn, briefly blinded by a patch of sunlight, and settled into a deckchair across from his father. A mug of tea steamed on the lid of the dented army footlocker that stood between them, the repository of the family's sandshoes, flippers, thongs.

'Good drive down?'

Charlie heard the other questions: you chose a Monday morning, hoping I'd be at work? You're dropping in on your mother, too? Did Liam come with you? And so on.

'Not bad.'

His father, alerted by a car rattling along Bass Street, raising a tiny swirl of dust, reached absently for his tea. Sipped, resettled the mug on the footlocker again and crossed his legs—thin, tanned, sinewy, beachcomber's legs; cyclist's legs in ragged shorts. Energy was always coiled in Rhys Deravin, until it uncoiled. Physical energy; mental.

Renowned as a thief catcher; not so much a husband and father. Good-looking still, in his late forties.

He stood, flipping tea onto the lawn. 'I'll leave you to it.'

'Dad—'

'Didn't bring a trailer?'

'It's just the boards. I'll be fine with the roof racks.'

His father said, a little helplessly, 'Your bed? Your wardrobe?'

Charlie tensed. 'Salvos, I thought.'

It was almost a tipping point. His father flexed and gathered himself and said, 'Well, you sort that out, I'm not doing it.'

He banged through the screen door, and immediately out again. 'I need you to move your car.'

'Will do.'

In the time it took Charlie to reverse and park where he wouldn't obstruct traffic—what there was of it in Menlo Beach—his father, now wearing trousers, polished shoes, a short-sleeved shirt and a tie, was stowing a briefcase and nodding goodbye from behind the wheel of his car. Charlie nodded back. Felt the tension ease a little.

He wondered if a life—or lives—could be boiled down to a house.

His surfboards were stored on a rack in the garden shed but he opened the front door and stepped inside the house, needing to shake the sense of coming untethered from his childhood. Straight into the sitting room, a broad space with a kitchen at one end leading to a dogleg corridor and the

rooms beyond: his bedroom, Liam's, his parents'; a bathroom and laundry near the back door. All pokey.

He felt rattled to see the sitting room so underpopulated, just two mismatched op-shop armchairs on either side of the coffee table, which his mother clearly hadn't wanted. Books leaning sparsely on the shelves against the back wall: encyclopaedias, Tom Clancy, sailing manuals, cricket and surfing biographies. Charlie's mother hadn't wanted those, either. A card table where the dining room table once sat, with a straight-back chair pulled up to a bowl of mostly consumed cornflakes and the dregs of orange juice in a glass.

Charlie rinsed bowl and glass at the kitchen sink as if to cling to a solid present. The way it is now, he thought. Gaps had opened in all their lives and the repairs were makeshift. No wonder his father rarely stayed down here these days, preferring to fill his time with work and his Prahran floozy. That was Liam's word, floozy: going for alliteration. Charlie quite liked Fay. She hadn't tried to impress him—she simply regarded him as her bloke's son.

What did she think of 5 Tidepool Street? Had she ever been here? Charlie walked through to the master bedroom, then to the bathroom, looking for evidence that she stayed sometimes. He didn't find anything. Maybe she'd never been here. Maybe she didn't want to sleep with Rhys Deravin on a mattress full of history.

Charlie poked his head into Liam's room: nothing remained but four Blu Tack smudges on one wall. Finally, his own room—the smallest, as the younger son. He'd call the Salvation Army to collect his bed frame, mattress,

wardrobe and bedside table, but he'd forgotten all about his tennis trophies and his Class of 1999 graduation photo, the police commissioner shaking his hand in the grounds of the academy. He took them down from the shelf, stacked them in the car and returned to check the wardrobe, the drawers, expecting maybe an old concert ticket or a five-cent coin.

Zilch.

The landline rang before he could lock up and collect the surfboards. He thought: Jess, Dad, a colleague of Dad's, Liam or Mum. The phone, a pale green relic of the seventies, was on the kitchen bench next to a basket of bills, receipts, envelopes, keys and a tube of sunblock.

'Rhys Deravin's phone, Charlie speaking.'

'It's me.'

'Hi, sweetheart.'

'Sad?'

'A bit.' Charlie paused: she deserved more. 'A bit unreal.'

'Memories?'

'Memories and absences,' Charlie said, and stopped.

His wife waited a moment. Laughed and said lightly, 'That Charlie; can't shut him up sometimes.'

Two years in, it was sometimes like that between them. Often like that. The rebukes fond rather than harsh, though. So far.

'The place looks a bit forlorn,' Charlie said.

'My lovely, I wish I could be there. Em says hello. Say hello to Daddy.'

Charlie saw his daughter in his wife's arms and heard some of her soft, gassy pops and murmurs, and, when he

said, 'Hello, bubba,' silence. Maybe she'd recognised his voice and was wondering what he was doing in the handpiece. It tickled him to think that.

Then Jess was saying something about a stinky nappy, and they said goodbye and Charlie, pulled against himself by the then and now of his life, wanted some fresh air.

On the way out an opened envelope caught his eye, 'Asbestos Audit' scrawled across it in his father's impatient hand.

The report was five pages of headings and crammed type, confirming that the fibro-cement wall sheets of 5 Tidepool Street contained asbestos. Well, they knew that. Menlo Beach was a Peninsula beach town of unassuming shacks dating from the 1930s, side by side on a crosshatch of narrow, potholed dirt streets. Half the houses down here on the flat were fibro. Cheap housing, back when Dad and his mates started buying holiday houses and weekend getaways in the late 1970s, places that became family homes. Six cops on ten little streets. Rowdy, rampaging men who thrilled the kids and made them laugh; one or two wives, cut desperately from the same hardwood, who didn't. Booze-soaked barbecues and beach cricket, wrestling on the lawn. Sailing, catching waves, cycling up and down Arthurs Seat. Exhilarating guys who called you chicken and wore you out. Guys with big natures and a black intensity if you caught them unguarded. A fellowship pretty much disbanded now. The wives had left first, when the kids were young. Charlie's mother had been the last and she'd waited until her sons were grown—or until her husband had taken up with a floozy.

Charlie slid the report back into the envelope. It would have been his mother's idea: do the right thing, alert potential buyers. Avoid a lawsuit down the track, some home handyman drilling into the fibro and sucking in a lungful of asbestos. The well-heeled professionals were moving in on the flatland houses, now that all the adjacent clifftop blocks had fallen to suburban castles that strained for a glimpse of sea between the pines. People like that would snap up this shack, Charlie's childhood home. Tear it down, erect some cubic glass-and-timber wet dream.

Feeling distracted and out of sorts, sensing that some showy disaster was coming, Charlie locked up the house and fetched his surfboards from the garden shed. Strapped them to the roof rack while the benign sun worked powerfully on him; the brine and the tidal wash sounding upon the sand. He'd intended to drive to his mother's house in Swanage, five minutes by car. But hell, the day wasn't hot, wasn't windy: why not walk there across the familiar geography of past summers? Take him less than an hour.

2

Dodging potholes, his runners crunching over gravel in the windless mid-morning, Charlie set off along Tidepool Street: six houses huddled behind gum trees and shrubs. He crossed the bisecting clifftop path and ducked through the tea-trees and finally down the railway-sleeper steps. At the bottom was a little wire fence, with a child's scuffed pink sandal on one of the pine posts. No one would ever claim it.

He stepped out onto the sand and paused a while. The tide was in, calm, barely lapping, and kids were splashing or tottering with buckets as if there was no first day of school in their near futures.

'Charlie?' Mark Valente erupted from the shallows, beads of the sea clinging to his chest hair, his huge belly gleaming and his bathers pasted to his groin and massive thighs. He waded out like a man fording a torrent, jerking his head to rid his shaggy ears of water.

Valente—Rhys Deravin's partner in the old days: Major Crimes. Now a senior sergeant and head of Rosebud CIB.

He stepped over the tidewrack and advanced on Charlie like an unstoppable bear, blocking the sun, one frying-pan hand outstretched.

Charlie shook. A damp hand but it gripped like a manacle briefly, affectionate challenge in it, and Charlie felt that he was a kid with a cricket bat again, Valente shouting at him from the sidelines, 'Keep your eye on the fucking ball, Charlie-boy!'

'Day off?'

Valente shook his head and water flew about them. 'No, no. Four to midnight shift. Been to see your dad?'

Charlie nodded. 'Caught him before he left for work.'

'He's on that Securicor ambush,' Valente said.

'Right.' It had been on the news, a guard shot in an armoured-car holdup, but Charlie hadn't known his father was working it. He'd never known about anything his father investigated; the old man had brought the job home with him in other ways.

Valente winked. 'And so shall the wicked wail and weep.' Mark doing the firebrand-prophet routine they'd all found so mystifying yet amusing as kids. As far as Charlie knew, the guy had never been to church.

Valente was looking him up and down. 'Bring your togs?'

'No. Just thought I'd walk around to Mum's.'

Mark Valente had something to say about that—and thought better of it. 'Say hello for me.'

'Will do.'

They shook again, and Charlie watched Valente power upslope to the steps, parting the air and the molecules and

the kids playing. Water-matted pelt, tiny backside, shrewd mind.

Charlie returned his attention to the blameless sea and let it settle him—the soft reaching of the tide and the air full of life and promise—then headed to a rocky point where the cliff line began, grasses and little trees clinging to the walls. Signs warned of rock falls. A woman on a towel spread between fallen rocks and banksias waved and called his name and he had no idea who she was. He returned the gesture and followed the sand as it curved around a tiny stretch of water bracketed by reefs and safe for swimming, his progress a series of fancy sidesteps into the kelp, avoiding sly inrushes of the tide.

Fuck it: he took off his socks and runners and waded along happily where the sea broke on the shore, his splashing a counterpoint to the susurrations of the water. He felt, curiously, both contained and expansive just then: there was a high cliff wall and pines at his left shoulder, a limitless horizon on his right. He passed a pair of sandals and a body-dented beach towel; no sign of anyone in the water. Seaweed. Dead jellyfish. Tiny plain timid shells. Driftwood. The base of a beer bottle, frosted by the abrasive motions of the sand. He pocketed it, then saw immediately a tangle of line, sinker and fishhook, which he wrapped in his handkerchief. There was a bin up ahead, at the beach path in Tulum Court. It was something you did if you grew up here, if this was home.

Around the next bend, the ridgeline and its million-dollar

clifftop fortresses of tinted glass and weathered wood gave way to another huddle of holiday shacks on flat ground, set back from the beach by the foredune, a broad stretch of grasses and succulents a metre above the sand, and here a small working party was driving stakes linked by nylon rope into the sand. A sign on one of the stakes read: *Hooded Plover Nesting Area Please Keep Out*.

Mrs Ehrlich waved. Charlie nodded and carried on. Halfway along the little bay was a creek inlet and then the path up to Tulum Court and the camping reserve. He left the beach, the sand soft and heavy-going, and dumped his trove of jetsam in the rubbish bin.

Then back to the sand. Around another point, to another quarter-moon family beach. Past the Balinoe Beach yacht club and the bones of the old jetty, to the long stretch of mostly unpopulated sand where they exercised the race-horses at dawn. This was taking longer than Charlie had expected.

A short time later he encountered his third original Menlo Beach cop of the day. Noel Saltash, thin and whippet-like where Rhys Deravin was a sinuous cat and Mark Valente a bear, jogged past Charlie, running shoes flashing, breath grunting, singlet criss-crossing against his spine with each swing of his arms. Shooting a glance, a crooked grin, he said, 'Charlie', and was gone. A hundred metres ahead he swung left, up into the dunes, where a track led to a return path alongside Balinoe Creek.

Reaching the outskirts of Swanage at last, Charlie ducked through at the youth camp, onto the long front street of

the strung-out town, wishing his mother's rental house wasn't at the far end. A couple of cars passed him; kids on skateboards; women friends with towels, baskets and broad hats on their way to the beach. He passed the shop and the primary school and eventually descended into a hollow, following the through road as it ascended again, then turned left near the water tower at the far end of town, into Longstaff, the last street before farmland. His mother's house, a faded weatherboard cottage, was halfway along. A white Mazda in the street: Liam was visiting. Charlie drew near, thirsty, needing the bathroom, and felt a strange jolt to see his mother's geraniums dotted along *this* veranda.

Then a sense of unease, of disarrangement, as he noticed the motorbike that claimed her carport.

3

It was a glossy black Ducati, hip-cocked on its side-stand, lording it over that shady space while her lustreless old Corolla baked in the street. A feeling of irritation: his mother's house; her name on the lease. She was letting the lodger take over now?

He closed the listing gate behind him, pushing at parched, untended grass. He wondered why his mother didn't borrow the Tidepool Street mower. But the answer came immediately: because it would mean negotiating with Dad.

He knocked on the screen door. It rattled in its frame, warped from the sea air. There was no answer, so he stepped into the dim hallway, into air slack with the heat of the last few days and laced with dope and aftershave. The irritation deepened. Shane Lambert's bike in the carport, his stink in the house.

The kitchen was a mess of chipboard and scorch marks, and Charlie felt the pain of it. The shack in Menlo Beach was

no mansion but it was better than this. The sooner they sold it and his mother had the money to rent a nicer place—by herself—the better.

'Anyone home?'

The dingy walls took his voice and gave nothing back. He crossed to the sink, downed a glass of water and peered through the greasy window at his mother and his brother, shoulder to shoulder at one of the garden tables from Tidepool Street. Charlie watched for a moment, noting his mother's bowed head and Liam's jaw jutting as he laid things out for her, her hands clasped in his.

Alerting them with a slam of the back door, Charlie took the concrete steps onto the dying grass and crossed to the table. His mother slipped her hands out of Liam's and into her lap as if she'd not been engaged in secret business. Otherwise, her face lit up. 'Charlie!'

He dodged behind Liam, who was getting to his feet, and planted a kiss. 'Mum.'

Then the brothers faced each other, their affection landlocked. An agonising instant passed. Finally, a quick clasp and release, and Liam returned tensely to his chair. 'You've been home?'

Charlie avoided his gaze. 'Yep.'

'See Dad?'

'He was there.'

They could have entire conversations like this, fragments laden with history, tension mounting. Their mother knew that. She rested her fingers on Liam's forearm until he deflated.

Charlie said brightly, 'I walked here, like an idiot. Took forever.'

'Still,' his mother said, 'a lovely day for it. See anyone?'

Another pitfall for Charlie. He said, 'Mark. Noel,' offhandedly, feeling rather than seeing renewed tightness in Liam.

'That would have been a thrill for you,' Liam said.

The brothers shared their father's physical grace, but where Charlie had thrown himself into games as a kid—thrown himself into winning and losing—Liam, the better athlete, simply didn't care. He'd grow distracted and wander off or just not turn up. He was genuinely puzzled by the remonstrations of Mark Valente or their father, or whoever happened to be organising the beach cricket or footy that day. Vicious old homophobes, he called them now.

Charlie sighed loudly. They all looked at the table, the grass and the back wall.

He broke the impasse with a safe topic. 'Looking forward to school going back?'

His brother taught at a private school, his mother at a state school, and they groaned in unison. The summer break had passed too quickly. Soon it would be all feral kids, lesson plans, principals, parents from hell.

There was another silence, but Liam was building up to something, shifting around in his seat. Finally he blurted, 'Charlie, Mum's been having problems with her lodger.'

She touched his wrist quickly. 'Oh, Liam, it doesn't matter. It's nothing.'

Liam swung around on her. 'It doesn't sound like nothing. It sounds like the guy's a creep.'

Charlie had never met Lambert but, watching his mother's face, saw the truth of it. 'Mum?'

'It's nothing to worry about.'

'Okay, but how come he keeps his bike in the carport and you have to park in the street?'

She tried to wave it off. 'It's nothing. The place is a rental—it's not as if I own it. Not as if I have more rights than he does.'

'You do, actually,' Liam said. 'The lease is in your name. He just rents a room from you.'

'I don't want to rock the boat.'

Charlie turned towards her. 'Why? You think he'd turn nasty?'

'It's just...' She fell silent, looking for the next word.

Charlie said, 'Where is he now?'

'He works at a timber supply in Hastings.'

'But his bike's here.'

'He gets a lift from a workmate.'

Liam cut in, shooting Charlie a look: *Can we get back on track, here?* 'Mum, he's a creep and you've got your head in the sand about it.'

'That's not fair, Liam,' she said, with some grit, and Charlie saw her spirit and her pain and her shame. Curiously, she shapeshifted then: she was not his mother but Rose Deravin, a woman separate from him, a woman slim and tired, who taught PE at Westernport Secondary College. Tan cargo pants, a white T-shirt and red toenails. Fine pale hair in an untidy knot. A strong, searching nose. Capable, attractive, and she saw him looking and there was defiance in her. It unsettled him.

With a warning look for Liam, he said gently, 'Tell us what bothers you about him, Mum.'

'He's just, I don't know, a bit off.'

'Has he, ah...' Charlie felt himself blush. 'Has he tried it on sexually?'

She shook her head. 'Not really.'

'Mum!' Liam cut in. 'What do you mean, not really?'

'He usually watches junk TV all evening but one night there was an SBS documentary on the female orgasm'—she shifted in her chair—'and he said he thought I might like to watch it with him. I said I was too busy. When I went out of the room, he turned the volume up.'

'Mum!'

Charlie kicked his brother under the table. 'What else?'

She shifted again, as if sorting through a list, and it came pouring out:

'He's inconsiderate. Leaves the toilet seat up—well, you boys always did that—but he's not very careful, if you know what I mean. Dumps his dishes in the sink as if I'm supposed to do them. One day I found him cleaning some engine part at the kitchen table. We agreed to buy our own food, but he never has any—he keeps taking my eggs and bread and whatnot without asking. I always shut my door at night, but I hear him in the hallway sometimes, as if he's just standing there, and one day I found him in my room, looking in my sewing box. He said he needed scissors but, you know...And he owes a month's rent. I asked him about it, and he said, "You're a teacher," as if I'm supposed to carry him whenever he's short of money.'

‘Mum,’ said Charlie.

‘But what can I do? It was hard enough finding someone to rent the room in the first place. Now I have to start all over again, and it could take weeks.’ She shook her head. ‘I can’t afford it.’

Blackbirds had been hopping around under the gnarled old pear tree, pecking at the fallen fruit. Now they began to squabble, a squall of bluster that bowled them all over the yard as the sun sat mildly in the sky.

Charlie said, ‘Would it help if we talked to him?’

‘And say what?’ demanded Liam. ‘We get rid of the guy—that’s what would help.’

‘I don’t know,’ their mother said miserably.

Yes, you do, Charlie thought. ‘I think you feel scared.’

She wouldn’t look at him.

‘Not a healthy way to live, Mum. We’ll help you get rid of him,’ Charlie said. He checked with Liam: ‘And help you with the rent until we find someone more suitable.’

Liam nodded.

Their mother worried the top joint of one thumb with the ball of the other. ‘I can’t ask you to do that.’

‘You didn’t ask: we’re offering. When does he get home from work?’

Her watch was loose on her thin wrist. She shook it into place, glanced and said, ‘Mid-afternoon.’

It pained Charlie to see some kind of hope build in her as she looked at each of them. ‘Can you both be with me when I tell him? In case it gets awkward?’

‘We’ll do you one better,’ Liam said. ‘You drive over to

see Grandma or Karen Wagoner for the afternoon. Charlie and I'll pack up his things and when he gets home we'll tell him he has to find somewhere else to live. You don't have to face him at all.'

She agonised. 'What if he comes back when you're not here?'

Liam gave Charlie a look. 'You keep a spare uniform in your car, right?'