

The Night of the Coup

I was crouching in a concrete storm-water drain next to a pylon under the south side of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. There were explosions and gunshots everywhere, tracer bullets were spitting across the harbour, police and navy boats were pushing through the water, firing at the shore and at each other, and there was the occasional thump of what my war-movie-educated ears took to be mortars.

I could see across to the Opera House where the main demonstration had been earlier and where there was now chaos, crowds of people, tanks, armoured cars – it was hard to tell exactly what was happening but there was lots of shooting and screaming and people running everywhere and some jumping into the water.

Where I was seemed like a safe place but I wanted to get home. My wife and kids wouldn't know what was going on or what had happened to me.

'You're an idiot,' my wife had said. 'You can't go out walking. All shit's about to break loose.'

'What am I supposed to do? Stop walking? This could go on for months.'

'You're a bloody idiot.'

And she was right. But I had to walk. I mean I'm not asking a lot. I get home from work, my wife gets home from work, we cook dinner, we eat, the kids do whatever they've got to do, my wife starts to read – and I get edgy. But if I can get out for a good walk then everything makes sense.

I usually go from our house in Surry Hills, through the city, through The Rocks, under the Bridge, back through the city, past Darling Harbour and out towards Glebe and Newtown before returning home. It takes up to three hours.

Summer nights are best, and this particular night was the best of summer nights. Hot, cloudless, no wind, a full moon. Normally I'd stand under the Bridge for a long time and soak in the peacefulness – the ferries moving in and out of the Quay, the strolling people, the city lights. But now everything was crazy.

There'd been daily demonstrations in the city for ages, and every day there'd been more demonstrators and more police and more and more violence. And then supposedly there'd been a split in the military and some of them had joined the rebels – the so-called People's Liberation Force, the PLF – and now there was a real chance of a revolution because everyone had plenty of guns and bombs and so on.

I can understand why people demonstrate. The government has been useless and corrupt and all that stuff for years. But whoever overthrows them will probably end up being exactly the same. I don't know. I just want to live my own life. If there have been three hundred thousand people (the government estimate, so it's probably a bit more) on the streets demonstrating then that still leaves more than three million at home minding their own business. And yes, I've heard all the arguments against non-involvement, and I understand them, I really do, so I have no answer except to say I've got my own bloody problems – which I know isn't good enough but that's the way it is.

And so now here I was with a war going on and I was stuck on the wrong side of the city. But I was fairly safe and probably could've lasted

the night easily, crawled right into the storm-water drain and had no problems – but what if in the morning things were worse than ever? What if people were being shot on sight? What if during the night it got more and more dangerous?

I climbed out of the drain and started running up Fort Street. I'd get through The Rocks and then the city and then I'd be almost home. Up one back street and then another, I know them all, and running I could do it in no time.

Then the shooting got very close. I was jogging up Cambridge Street, still in The Rocks, when a large group of people came running around the corner towards me. They were in a panic and right behind them was a group of soldiers who stopped after they turned the corner and started firing into the fleeing crowd. I jumped behind a parked car. There was shouting and blood and people were falling all around me. Then a tank came around the corner. It quickly fired down the street and a car that several people had hidden behind was blown apart.

All this had happened in just a few seconds. There was now a pause as the tank and soldiers stood silently at the end of the street. There were many dead and wounded, some of the wounded moaning and crying terribly. Other people were behind cars and in doorways. Then the tank and the soldiers started moving down the street. The panic and the running and the shooting started again.

I couldn't stay where I was so like everyone else I started to run. I ran about twenty metres and then took cover in a recessed doorway. I banged on the heavy wooden door without expecting anything to happen. But then the door opened slightly and a woman's face appeared.

She was scared and looked like she was about to change her mind so I squeezed myself inside and slammed the door behind me.

The woman stood fearfully away from me. There was a man sitting apprehensively on a lounge. We listened to the tank rumbling past outside. I stood with my back to the door and looked around the room. The house was a very old terrace, thick sandstone walls, narrow windows covered by heavy curtains. The only light was a lamp in a corner. In another corner a television was playing a black-and-white movie with the sound turned down.

'What's happening out there?' the woman said.

'It's awful,' I said.

'Why did you bloody let him in?' the man said. 'He could be anybody.'

'I'm nobody. I'm just trying to get home.'

The woman said, 'I had to find out what was happening.'

The man said to me, 'So how bad is it?'

'Pretty bad.'

'Our daughter's out there,' the woman said. 'She was protesting. I told her not to go. I begged her not to go.'

The woman sat on the lounge next to the man and they held each other.

'Can I use your phone?' I said.

'It's not working,' the man said.

I went to the phone and picked it up. There was no dial tone.

'Don't you believe me?'

The woman looked at the TV. 'There's only one station and there's been no news at all.'

'What about the radio?' I said.

'Nothing but music.'

I sat on a lounge chair.

'My family don't know what's happened to me,' I said.

They asked me about my family. I asked them about their daughter.
Then we sat in silence and fear. Time passed.

'You can spend the night here,' the man said.

'No...thanks. I've got to get home. It seems to be calming down a bit outside. The shooting's getting further away.'

The woman and man held each other tighter and the man started to cry. I stood up and walked around the room. I looked in another room. There was a bicycle leaning against a wall. I grabbed it and wheeled it towards the front door.

'I'm sorry but can I please borrow your bike?'

The woman jumped up and ran over and held the bike.

'No, no, you can't, you can't.'

She tried to wrestle the bike from me. Then the man stood up and came over and grabbed my shirt.

'Let go of the bloody bike,' he said.

He pushed me against the wall.

'Get out of my house. Get out of my bloody house.'

'Please, please, I've got to get home, please.'

The woman was hugging the bicycle and sobbing. 'It's Sally's bike.'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

There was a long silence, then the man said, 'All right, take the damned bike.'

'Yes,' the woman said, pushing the bike towards me. 'Take it. Please.'

'I'll get it back to you as soon as possible. I'll remember where you live. I'll give you my name and address.'

'No, no, you don't have to do that.'

'Please, I insist, please.'

I made them get a pen and paper. But then I wrote a false surname and address. I suddenly had an image of them telling whoever might later be in charge, *Yes, he's the one, he's one of them, yes, he stole our daughter's bicycle.*

Out on the street most of the parked cars had been flattened by the tank. There were people helping the wounded and covering up the dead. I got on the bike and started riding fast. As I rode up Pitt Street the noise of the fighting was now far away – it seemed to be concentrated to the west near Balmain and to the east past the Botanic Gardens and around towards Kings Cross. Here in the centre of the city was the aftermath of battle – dazed people everywhere, burning cars and trucks and buses, shops being looted, bodies and bits of bodies, bombed out buildings.

Then I was on Elizabeth Street and riding past Central Station, where suddenly everything was almost normal. The streets were clean and deserted and the only indication of what was happening was the distant gunfire and the smoke. I was nearly home now, glad that the fighting hadn't come in this direction. I pushed harder on the pedals.

But then I turned into Belvoir Street and there were half a dozen soldiers right in front of me. I didn't have a chance to slow down, and one of them swung an arm around and hit me across the face. I flew

backwards off the bike onto the road. For a moment I didn't know where I was. I tried to stand up but fell down again.

One of the soldiers laughed and said, 'Best stiff arm tackle I've ever seen.'

The soldier who hit me said, 'Sorry mate, you came out of nowhere.'

They pulled me to my feet. I was dizzy and mumbling that I just wanted to get home, that I was nobody. They told me to shut up and that I had some questions to answer and that I'd have to come with them. They half-dragged me up one street and then another. We got to Cleveland Street where there was a road block and a lot more soldiers. I was taken into a pizza shop that was their headquarters. They made me sit in a chair.

One of them shouted, 'We've got another one here, corporal.'

The corporal came in from a back room. He walked over to me and pulled my head back. We looked at each other. He started to laugh. I smiled. We knew each other. We'd known each other at school, his name was Steve, we'd played football together. But we hadn't seen each other for years.

He said, 'You're not one of those bastards we've been fighting, I hope.'

I told him everything that had happened to me that night.

'Well, you'll be right now,' he said.

He got us both coffee and he sat down.

'First break I've had all night,' he said. He told me what had been happening with the fighting, as far as he knew. Apparently there was a lot of confusion and no one really knew who was on whose side. 'We

were told to set up this road block, patrol the area, and shoot anything that moved...You're lucky you're not dead.'

We drank our coffee slowly and talked a bit about the past.

Steve said, 'You ended up marrying Carol, didn't you?'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah, I used to like her. How long you been married?'

'Nearly twelve years.'

'Shit, that long...Any kids?'

'Four.'

'Yeah?...That must be good.'

'Yeah...Yeah, it is,' I said. 'So what've you been doing since school?'

'Mostly travelling. Before I joined the army. I was overseas for more than ten years.'

'Whereabouts?'

'All over.'

'God, that's what I'd like to do.'

'Yeah, it's great to travel...but I don't know, I reckon you got the best deal.'

'You reckon?'

'Yeah, mate, definitely...Come on, time to go.'

Steve handed me a motorcycle helmet.

'I was hoping you'd have an armoured car or something,' I said.

He gave me a bullet-proof vest.

'The best I can manage.'

We went outside to where the motorcycle was. Steve called out to one of the soldiers, 'You got that gun?' A soldier came over carrying a

gun that looked halfway between a pistol and a machine gun. Steve took it and strapped it over his shoulder.

'Shouldn't I have one of those?' I said.

'I'll look after you, mate.'

Steve got on the bike and the gun sat on his lap. I got on the back of the bike. We had to go up Cleveland Street, down several back streets, and out onto Montague Road, where I lived. It was only a couple of minutes away. Steve rode fast, pushing each gear to its limit and leaning hard into the corners. But as we were going down the second back street, a long narrow street full of factories, there was a sudden burst of gunfire and the bike went from under us. I skidded across the road and onto the footpath before crashing into a row of bushes. A moment later the bike hit a factory wall and exploded.

I lay still for a few seconds. I checked to see if all my limbs were working. Steve was a couple of metres away, lying on his back and not moving. I dragged myself over to him. The visor on his helmet was shattered. A bullet had gone through it, and his head inside the helmet was red pulp.

Then I looked up over Steve's body and past the furiously burning bike and I saw four figures in silhouette moving cautiously along the footpath towards me. They were all carrying guns. Steve's gun was strapped around his body and lying on his chest. I put a hand on it. I'd never fired a gun before. I pointed it in the direction of the figures and squeezed slowly on the trigger. It kicked wildly and there was an eruption of bullets and noise and smoke. I did the same again, and then again. When the smoke had cleared I saw that the four figures were lying on

the ground. I stood up, took off my helmet, unstrapped the gun from Steve's body, and slowly walked over to them.

They were kids, maybe seventeen years old, two boys and two girls, dressed in black and wearing the red armbands of the PLF. Three of them were motionless, the other one was lying on his stomach and moaning. I rolled him over. I recognised him. I didn't know his name but I knew he lived just down the road and that sometimes he cut the lawn for the people next door. I'd often said hello to him. He was in a lot of pain and was saying, 'Help me, help me.'

I looked at him for a long time. My thoughts were all jumbled and half-formed. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, and in that one moment I saw the whole night. I saw the buildings burning, I saw the tanks and the soldiers and the shooting and the terror, I saw the bodies in Pitt Street, I saw the people being blown to pieces in The Rocks, I saw Steve's mashed head. And entwined with all this horror, in some sort of unavoidable and inexorable and never-ending confusion, I saw myself and my wife and our children. And then I opened my eyes and pointed the gun at the head of the young boy lying on the ground pleading for help, and I squeezed the trigger. And I kept squeezing the trigger as I swept the gun backwards and forwards over the bodies of the others. And then I dropped the gun, and in the next moment I knew I could never be forgiven. Then I walked home.

When I got home my wife hugged me and we cried and the kids were all over me and crying. We spent the night in the lounge room. The kids slept on mattresses, my wife and I were on the lounge trying to get some news from the radio and television. The fighting continued throughout the night, sometimes very near and then further and further

away. I couldn't stop shaking for more than three hours. My wife made me cups of tea. She fell asleep about four o'clock.

And then I remembered the bicycle I'd borrowed. I thought about the couple who had lent it to me. I wondered if their daughter had made it home safely. And then I decided I would buy them another bicycle. Yes, of course, that was something I had to do, I had to buy them another bike, no matter what.
