

ALASTAIR

SARRRE

A THRILLER IN THE DESERT

PROHI

BITED

ZONE

Wakefield Press

PROHIBITED ZONE

Alastair Sarre was born in Leigh Creek, a coal-mining town in the outback of South Australia. He studied forestry at Australian National University and worked for a mining company for a couple of years before returning to Canberra to complete a writing diploma. He has worked as a science editor and freelance writer specialising in forestry and spent time in Japan before moving with his family to the Adelaide Hills. *Prohibited Zone*, his first novel, was shortlisted for the Adelaide Festival Award for Best Unpublished Manuscript.

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Wakefield Press
1 The Parade West
Kent Town
South Australia 5067
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2011

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Cover designed by Marc Martin, Small & Quiet
Designed and typeset by Clinton Ellicott, Wakefield Press
Printed in Australia by Griffin Press, Adelaide

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Sarre, Alastair, 1963– .
Title: Prohibited zone / Alastair Sarre.
ISBN: 978 1 86254 943 2 (pbk.).
Dewey Number: A823.4



Publication of this book was assisted by
the Commonwealth Government through the
Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

TO ALL THOSE WHO ENCOURAGED ME AND ALL THOSE WHO INSPIRED ME,
AND ESPECIALLY TO IAN AND NANCY, WHO HAVE ALWAYS DONE BOTH.

1

DUSK WAS FALLING SOFT ON A LAND as hard as old bones and I had the road and the world and the whole damned universe to myself. The way it had always been, and always would be. The sun had slipped below the knife-edge of the horizon, leaving behind faded pink and dirty orange. The plain couldn't have been more plain. It stretched in all directions, treeless and childless and motherless and loveless, like it had been yesterday and the day before and for a million years before that. It was strewn with iron-red pebbles called gibbers, hard and misshapen like spent bullets or burnt-out dreams.

A spattering of streetlights showed against the darkening horizon as I approached Woomera. A military line of eucalypts was silhouetted against the dying pink of the west. Just outside town two police Land Cruisers were parked on either side of the road, far enough apart for a car to pass between them. Their red and blue lights were flashing with self-importance. Three cops in reflective vests and short-sleeved shirts were standing on the road armed with torches. They watched me approach.

Two of them were wearing caps and one wasn't. The capless one was leaning against one of the Land Cruisers but he

stepped forward as I neared and signalled for me to stop by waving his illuminated torch up and down. He hitched his trousers and went to touch his cap, standard police procedure to remind everyone that he was wearing a gun and that he was a cop. Then he realised he wasn't wearing a cap . . . but at least he still had his trousers. I recognised his beer gut in the headlights, the only permanent cop in Woomera, Ian Dickson. I drew up alongside him and lowered my window.

'G'day, Dicko.'

He shone his torch in my eyes. 'I know this guy,' he called out. 'Dangerous bastard. Think we orta work him over?' He turned to look at his fellow officers, grinning; they glanced at each other and didn't laugh.

'Just follow the procedure, officer,' one of them said.

Dicko returned his gaze and his torchlight to me. He lowered his voice. 'I'd like to give *him* a procedure one of these days.' There was alcohol and tobacco on his breath. He had been stationed in Woomera for nearly ten years but he still dreamt of the day he'd get back to Adelaide. His wife was already living the dream, having left him three years ago to shack up with another cop down in the big smoke.

'Jeez, you're looking rough, Westie,' he said. 'Hard day in the mine shaft?'

'Yeah, I've been thoroughly shafted,' I said. 'Can you get that thing out of my eyes?'

'Oh, yeah. Sure.' He switched off the torch and his drooping face started to materialise as my eyes adjusted. It had probably been a handsome face once, but not anymore; it had lived through too many brawls and too many hangovers and too much disappointment. He had a bald spot at the back of his

head that he either didn't know about or didn't care about because he didn't try to cover it up. Come to think of it, he must have known about it; his lovely wife would have told him – often.

'So what's up? A breath test?'

'Eh? Ah, nah, we're not breathalysing. Just as well, I'd probably be over o-five myself, just quietly.'

He laughed. It sounded a bit like a wood rasp on a sheet of corrugated iron.

'You shouldn't say things like that, Dicko, even to a mate. Not even quietly. So what's going on? Why the big show of force?'

Dicko looked again at his fellow officers, but they'd wandered away and were waving down a car heading towards them out of Woomera.

'There's been a bit of a blue on at the centre,' he said. 'A few of the residents have climbed over the fence and bugged off.'

He was talking about Woomera Detention Centre, located a few kilometres north of town. In recent years, thousands of illegal immigrants, mostly from Afghanistan and Iraq, had been arriving on decrepit boats claiming asylum, and the government was obliged by international law to consider their cases. If the immigrants could prove they would be shot, tortured or otherwise given a hard time if they went back to their own countries, we'd let them stay. Maybe. In the meantime we didn't want them running around loose, so the government had set up detention centres in remote and unpleasant parts of the country.

Such as Woomera.

Woomera Detention Centre had been built in a hurry in 1999 and now, more than three years later, it was still going strong. It was run by Corrections Australia, a private company that had happily discovered that a profit could be turned by depriving people of their liberty. It worked for the politicians, too, because they found that it won votes.

But not everyone was happy. Protesters from the cities had started camping outside the centre, holding hands and demanding that it be shut down. A couple of weeks ago I had been curious enough to drive out there. The facility covered about fifteen hectares of saltbush plain, enclosed behind a five-metre-high perimeter fence made of steel palisades topped with razor wire. There was another palisade fence a few metres inside, and interior chain-mesh fences that divided the compound into sections. Rows and rows of shabby dorms were watched over by dozens of light towers. It had been a stinking hot day but a few people were prowling about, listless and restless. A small group of men was playing soccer in the dirt, watched by a couple of guards. Several women were congregating in a covered area containing kids' play equipment. One kid was hanging upside down on the monkey bar. There were no trees or greenery, only the dull blue of the saltbush, the dull pink of the dirt and the dull shimmer of the steel fence. And the dull anger of the people.

'You know that peaceful protest outside the centre?' Dicko was asking. 'Well, it kind of turned non-peaceful. The Rent-a-Wanker protesters started pushin' at the fence from the outside and prisin' pickets apart and throwin' blankets over the razor wire, and a bunch of the residents started riotin' and every bugger tried to leg it. We're tryin' to round 'em all up

before they get lost and die of fucken thirst. You're not harbourin' any fugitives from justice in the back, are you, Westie?'

'Not that I know of.'

He thumped his torch a couple of times on the roof of my Ford utility.

'I'd better take a look-see, anyway, eh? Me brethren in the Australian Protective Service over there seem to expect it.' He nodded in the direction of the other cops, one of whom glanced towards us. The approaching car had dimmed its lights and was slowing down.

'Sure, Dicko, you're the law, do whatever you want. But go easy on my roof, will you?'

He laughed, then turned his torch back on and started flashing it around. He took a quick look through the window at the interior cargo area and wandered to the back of the ute where he undid the tray cover. He shone his torch inside, did the cover back up and returned to my window.

'Takin' a break?' He must've noticed the overnight bag and swag; I was mildly surprised that he had.

'Yeah, I feel the need for a bit of rest and recreation down in Adelaide.'

'Well, give her my love.'

'I'd rather give her mine.'

Dicko sniggered.

'So, did you see any action today?' I asked.

'Not really. Mostly it was the APS boys and the private goons – you know, Corrections Austraya – with their water cannon. Inflicted a bit of damage. Knockin' the rezzies over like they were fucken tenpin bowlin'. Then they used it on the dorms 'cos a few of 'em got torched. I'm tellin' ya, it was mayhem.'

‘But you didn’t get to hit anyone, eh?’

‘Nah, worst luck. I feel like whackin’ those fucken feds, though, just quietly.’ He nodded again in the direction of his colleagues. ‘Got their badges firmly wedged up their arses.’ He laughed. We both laughed. The two feds had finished inspecting the second car, a Pajero, and were waving it on with their torches. It couldn’t move because I was blocking its path. Dicko thumped the roof again.

‘Alright, Westie, bugger off to Adelaide. We won’t miss ya. Got yerself a roadie?’

‘Thought I might stop off at Spuds.’

‘Yeah, maybe I’ll join you later. Could be a bit lively there tonight. Anyway, if you see any stray Afghans in search of a camel, give me a call. Here’s me number.’

He handed me a piece of paper and shone his torch on it so I could read it. ‘Sergeant Ian Dickson, SA Police, Woomera.’ It gave a mobile phone number.

‘How many got out?’ I asked.

‘More ’n twenny.’

I put the card in my wallet. ‘If I see anyone wearing a turban I’ll give you a call.’

‘Those bastards don’t wear turbans, you silly bugger. Only the women.’

‘The women wear turbans, you reckon?’

‘Yeah, ’course they do. Don’t they?’

‘See you, Dicko.’

He gave me a mock salute and waved me on with his torch as if he were ushering through Prince Charles. I bet he’d printed dozens of those cards on his home computer and was busy handing them out to everyone he pulled over. Maybe it

was his copper's zeal, or maybe he thought that tracking down an escapee or two would earn him enough brownie points to get him the hell out of Woomera. I raised my hand to the other two cops and the Pajero as I drove away and into town.

The streetlights were on but Woomera was dead, even by the standards of a government town. In the 1950s the British government had needed a large, uninhabited area, preferably in a country other than its own, where it could peaceably go about testing nuclear weapons and assorted missiles. The Australian government, never wanting to miss a chance to lick arse, had offered them a huge slab of desert country, which it named the Woomera Prohibited Area, from which it henceforth banned ordinary people. The Brits had tested their weapons there for decades, and the Americans had built a secret base nearby. Woomera had sprung up, a neat little town made of neat little streets lined with neat little houses. It had been an army town, filled with neat little citizens wearing neat little haircuts. But the Brits and the Americans were long gone now. The town was still owned and managed by the Department of Defence but the heyday was over, and most of the neat little houses were empty.

I drove past the Eldo Hotel, the only pub in town. More cars than usual, including five cop cars, were parked outside. I wondered why the cops weren't out hunting for detainees, but maybe first they had to work out whether it was a state or federal operation and who would get to sleep on the top bunk. I didn't stop, and soon Woomera was just a mirage in my rear-view mirror.

2

FIVE KILOMETRES SOUTH OF WOOMERA the road joins the Stuart Highway, which dissects Australia from north to south, connecting Darwin at the top with Adelaide at the bottom. At the junction is Pimba, a tiny town stricken with terminal indifference. It seemed that nobody in Pimba had ever had the energy to do the things that make a town a town – like build proper houses or roads or put up a few shops. There was no church because not even God could be bothered to exist there. The town's sorry huddle of houses was complemented by an equally apologetic row of tin sheds lining the dirt road at the back of the houses; they seemed to lean on each other for moral support, which was not much support at all. Pimba's only noteworthy feature was Spuds, a ramshackle roadhouse and pub. It sat in the triangular corner of the highway junction and attracted drinkers like flies to a sheep's crotch. Just before I reached the junction I turned right onto an access track and drove along it for a hundred metres or so. I bypassed the two rows of petrol bowsers and parked in the dirt outside the bar.

As Dicko had predicted, the place was livelier tonight; at least twenty cars were parked there. I recognised some of

them – belonging to locals, mostly. I guessed that the protesters had dispersed as quickly as they could after the riot and were heading back to Adelaide.

I sat where I was for a moment to let the dust settle. Stars were coming out. There was no breeze and almost no movement apart from the dust. I got out of the car, not bothering to lock it, and walked up the one step to the beer garden, a gravel wasteland adorned by four large tables made of old railway sleepers and overhung by a trellis, upon which grew a shabby vine in chronic need of more water and less urine. No one was sitting outside but there was plenty of noise coming from within. I pushed the door open and entered.

Besides being a pub and a petrol station, Spuds was also a motel, a restaurant and a shop – the only shop, in fact, in Pimba and the only form of group entertainment for at least a hundred kilometres in any direction. It had a low roof and a high bar and a population of drunks, ratbags and the occasional and highly valued old tart. It also had a décor with only one guiding principle: minimal investment. Five surfboards hung from the ceiling, probably installed after they had blown off their car roofs (there could be no other reason; the nearest surf was three hundred kilometres away). Old car registration plates, no doubt salvaged from car wrecks, were nailed to the wall. A couple of barrels served as poseurs for the resting of beers. There was also a huddle of more conventional tables in another corner, which was known as the restaurant. I could see many familiar faces, as I expected I would, and no one who looked like a protester, an escaped Afghan or a camel.

Rabbit sat on the far side of the pool table with his wife, Doreen. He grinned at me and nodded and I grinned and

nodded back. An elderly couple sat in the plastic restaurant chairs, shovelling down what looked like fish and chips and glasses of the house white. They were probably grey nomads – retirees doing a slow-paced lap of the country to prove to themselves they were still alive.

A pool table lined with red felt occupied a prominent position close to the bar. Chook was leaning over it, cigarette in hand, preparing to pot the blue. I'd seen him in the same pose a week before. He looked up from his cue as I came in, his eyes almost as red as the table. He grinned quickly, showing an array of teeth that were as crooked, as dirty and as sparse as the headstones in the Pimba cemetery. Lank hair fell across his eyes, and he blew it out of the way with smoky breath as he returned his gaze to the blue.

'G'day, Chook,' I said. 'How're they hanging?'

'Like huge fucken lumps of lead, Westie,' he said as he took his shot. The blue went in, but so did the white. 'Fuck it, you put me off me shot.'

Somewhere, someone laughed. I took up position at the bar next to Simon Rice, one of the guards at the detention centre. He was mostly called Baz, as in basmati. He was a mate of mine and we had arranged to meet for a beer on my way through. We greeted each other with a grip of the hand, thumb around thumb.

'Fellow legend, how are ya?'

'Somewhat legendary, mate.'

Spud had already rolled a stubby of Coopers Pale Ale to mix the sediment and was twisting off the top. I tossed a five-dollar note onto the counter, which was wet with beer. Like all its notes, Australia's five-dollar bills are beer-proof. In fact,