

What happens when children disappear?



Time's Long Ruin

A Novel

**'A compelling
page-turner'**
RICHARD WALSH

STEPHEN ORR

Wakefield Press

Time's Long Ruin

Stephen Orr's first novel, *Attempts to Draw Jesus*, described the disappearance of two jackaroos in the Great Sandy Desert in 1987. His second published work, *Hill of Grace*, was a study of delusion and disappointment in a 1950s religious cult. His short fiction has been widely published in journals and magazines. He works as a high school teacher in Adelaide.

By the same author

Attempts to Draw Jesus

Hill of Grace

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Press

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All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

That all should change to ghost and glance and gleam,
And so transmuted stand beyond all change,
And we be poised between the unmoving dream
And the sole moving moment – this is strange.

Past all contrivance, word, or image, or sound,
Or silence, to express, that we who fall
Through time's long ruin should weave this phantom ground
And in its ghostly borders gather all.

There incorruptible the child plays still
The lover waits beside the trysting tree
The good hour spans its heaven, and the ill,
Rapt in their silent immortality.

As in commemoration of a day
That having been can never pass away.

For never was I not, nor thou, nor these kings;
Nor will any of us cease to be hereafter.

– Bhagavad-Gita

PART ONE

Chapter One

The streets of Croydon are long, washed with light on long Saturday afternoons, smelling of freshly cut grass and jasmine, the air dry, venting over-ripe compost and the third race from Cheltenham. Smelling of candied almonds and Mr Hessian's chicken shit, piled in heaps in his backyard. Looking like the world had ended, or at least descended into a hibernation of half-sleep, of tea cosies to be crocheted and *Advertiser* obituaries to be re-read. Sounding of children dragging sticks along a corrugated-iron fence and someone laughing so hard they start coughing, and then someone else calling for Jack to come in for a haircut.

The streets of Croydon are wide. Hot and cracking. Starting at Thomas Street (my street) and narrowing as they head west towards the factories of Kilkeny. Streets like spines, sprung with ribs named Ellen Street and Croydon Avenue. Kept long and straighter still by power lines hanging heavily from Stobie poles like lights on an overloaded Christmas tree.

When I was five I used to think it would take an hour to walk the length of Harriet Street (although it actually takes ten minutes). I liked to think that when you got to the end you'd just drop off the edge of the world. I imagined maps, drawn in gold and red ochre inks on vellum, decorated with sailors falling into the mouths of dragons, and Mrs Brooks, the infant teacher. I knew this wasn't actually true. For one, Dad had a world globe and he'd spend hours showing me where the pyramids and the Greek islands were – and anyway, how had God crammed a whole world of beaches, car factories and New Zealand holidays into Croydon?

I've lived my whole life at number seven Thomas Street – across the road from Con and Rosa Pedavoli and their healing tree, next door to Kazz and Ron Houseman on one side and the Rileys on the other, at 7A. All of them now dead or gone, leaving me alone in the house I've lived in for fifty-four years. Walking up and down a hallway my parents carpeted with a rich red Berber, over floorboards that haven't smelt air since 1956, which creak in exactly the same spot every time I go to make a cup of tea or take a pee.

I remember our home being something special. I remember the day Dad removed the old wooden windows. Ron Wells the butcher came over to help him put in a set of brand-new aluminium ones that didn't quite fit and had to be packed with timber wedges. People stood on the footpath staring through our rampant iceberg roses.

'Jesus, he'll never have to paint again,' they said, and pretty soon aluminium windows were appearing all over Croydon.

Our house was built in 1910. Twelve and a half foot ceilings and a fireplace in every room. After buying the house in 1950 the first thing my father did was to block the chimneys and put a gas heater in every fireplace. Proper job. Mr Wells helped him with the flues and gas lines, and the laying of bricks in rows that never looked straight. That's how it was done back then. No point paying someone when you could do it yourself.

We had a garden full of foxgloves and clivia, dissected with paths that were variously sawdust, gravel and weak concrete that eventually broke up. A few years ago I dug it all up and piled it in a corner of the backyard. Eventually I'll find a use for it. In time the path went muddy and weedy and then the weeds gave up and died off anyway. By then the asparagus fern and pittosporums were dead. But the aggies and clivias are still going, just. Hard bastards. That's why everyone used to plant them. Now people have got silver birches and box hedge they trim every three days with a little plug-in number from Kmart.

Like most homes in Croydon ours has four rooms and a hallway, and attached to the back wall, a kitchen and a laundry under a sloping roof. My father refused to call this a lean-to. A lean-to was something the pioneers had.

My room is at the front, looking out on Thomas Street. It's the same room and the same bed I've slept in since my mother and father brought me home from hospital in January 1951. There was never a cot – just a wall on one side and a guardrail made from salvaged window wood on the other. A single globe hangs from the high ceiling and there is a wardrobe with a door missing (which I never found or had explained). This is the room in which my mother, Ellen Judith Page, laid me, Henry, the great disappointment of her life, on a stinking hot day. As she looked at my twisted foot and sighed (perhaps), she whispered to Dad, 'You can get up to him.'

My mother had a club foot. When she married Dad she told him, as long as you never want children . . . I'd never put anyone through this. That is, her left foot, twisted inwards at an angle of thirty degrees.

Fine, my father replied, thinking he'd talk her around later.

So Dad got talking to Doctor Gunn, and our proper doctor, Doctor John, and the doctor who did the physicals for the police, and any other doctor, physio or coroner he came across in his work as a copper. And they all told him (he told me years later) that club foot couldn't be passed on. It just happened: one in a million. He explained this to Mum and the next thing you know she's pregnant. Obviously I don't know the exact details, and maybe it doesn't matter, but for years after she would always blame him for having 'no idea about anything', and he'd tell her to grow up, and off they'd go with their shouting.

I have a mental picture of the delivery suite at Calvary hospital. It's hot. I can hear fan blades turning slowly and see nurses in starched aprons wiping sweat from their foreheads.

I can smell bleach, hair oil and a distant roast leg blowing in through rusted flywire speckled with blowies. I can see the child, Henry Page, lying on a towel, and the doctor's expression, and then Mum looking at him. 'What is it?'

As the chatter of a few nurses falls silent. As Dad comes around to look at me more closely.

As Mum repeats, 'What, what is it?'

It's not like I was born without an arm, or Mongoloid, or covered in a strawberry birthmark. It was just my foot, curving inward. What was she worried about? That the rest of my body might follow, contort, scrunch into a ball? That my mind might turn inward, losing its ability to communicate? That I might become some sort of spastic that she'd have to hide away for the rest of eternity, feeding me custard and wiping my arse as the sounds of normal children playing chasey or cricket drifted in the window?

I still don't know.

So there's me. Wrapped in a blanket despite the heat. In the arms of a nun. Being presented to my mother, who turns her head away. Who looks at my father and then stares down at the lino floor, worn thin in the same places by doctors and nurses bringing children into the world.

Back to Thomas Street, a few days later. I'm imagining it's night, three or four in the morning, and I'm in nothing but a singlet and nappy. Dad holds me and sits in a rocking chair. There's a light breeze coming in the window and I can hear it rustling the leaves of Con and Rosa's healing tree. I can also hear a cart unloading in Elizabeth Street. Maybe spuds for Ted Bilston's Half-Case Fruit Shop. Then the sound of a horse moving about, but being steadied. A hush: the last of yesterday's heat rising into a Sputnik sky. A magpie squawking. The smell of coal smoke. Yes, you think I can't remember, but I can. I can remember everything. I can remember my dad whispering, 'How was I to know?' and then singing:

*Bring back, bring back, bring back my love o'er the sea,
Bring back, bring back, bring back my bonnie to me.*

And then he lays me on my bed and goes in to Mum. She is lying awake. I can hear them talk. Again he tells her the name of the doctors, and where they've worked, and what universities they went to. And then he says, 'He's got the bluest eyes,' and she replies, 'And mousy hair . . . did you have mousy hair?'

'Oh yes, but it didn't last long.'

And then I go back to sleep, still hungry.

My story – the story of the Pages and the Rileys, of Con and Rosa Pedavoli and Mr Hessian the widower, of Adolf Eichmann and the rag and bone man – begins on New Year's day, 1960. This is the first fragment of the story I remember. A fragment like a hundred others from the summer of 1960. A fragment I intend to recall faithfully – although if I do add and subtract a bit here and there, change the painted side of a deli from Weet-Bix to cough drops, make a sunny day overcast or give a neighbour a limp he never had, have someone die of cancer instead of a stroke – please forgive me.

We're in the Rileys' backyard. There's no fence between our yard and theirs, just a long flower bed filled with pansies and lisianthus, bisected by a paved path shaded by an arbour overgrown with bougainvillea and wisteria, woven together in a curtain of colour and smell. It's nearly lunchtime and I am chasing the Riley kids around the old trees in their yard. Someone catches me and I hide my face and count to a hundred. The Riley kids scatter, run around, squeal and eventually hide in the same spots they did last time.

Gavin, the youngest, hides behind his dad's shed.

Bill Riley, a linen salesman, always said that us kids should never go anywhere near his shed. But one day we found the door swinging open. Strange. It was usually secured with four padlocks and there were steel bars on the window. We

went inside and found the walls lined with shelves. Each shelf was packed full of new linen, still wrapped: sheets, pillow-cases, tea towels, you name it. Later that night, when I told Dad what we'd found, he said that was where Mr Riley kept his samples.

'Don't they have a warehouse?' I asked.

'No. What were you doing in there anyway?'

'The door was open.'

'He told you to stay out,' Dad shouted, leaning forward and threatening me with his beer.

'But . . .'

'It doesn't matter.' He sat back in his chair and opened his paper. 'And don't say anything to anyone at school.'

'Why?'

'Things get around.'

That was adult logic. Why would it matter if other people knew what was in Mr Riley's shed? Anyway, I wasn't stupid, I knew. Still, I always found it curious why my dad, a copper since he left school and a detective since 1955, was never too concerned.

That's how neighbourhoods were back then. Now I don't know most of the folks in Thomas Street. Now I've got a ballet dancer next door. He knocked down the Rileys' trees and put in a pool. Hardly says a word. Wears his hair in a perm and lives with his younger brother.

Anyway, there's Gavin, hiding behind his dad's shed. He's peeling flakes of paint off the old iron: grey, and under that green, and brown, and more grey – decades of cheap (or souvenired) paint applied in a thick icing to stop rust. A skin that burns and peels in the sun as the shed's wooden frame sags and the whole thing sways in the breeze. The roofing letting in rain. Mr Riley covering his blankets and lace tablecloths with a tarp.

Gavin is tall for his age, nearly up to my shoulders. He sits smiling and grinning as I start to search. 'Coming, ready or not.' I see him, but pretend not to. He's squeezed himself into

a ball of pyjama pants, rubber boots and a fresh white linen shirt with the pins still in it, blowing around him like the torn sails of the *Marie Celeste*.

I stop to take a wedge of watermelon from the table and my mother pretends to smack my fingers. She's smiling, laughing, adjusting her bra strap under a cotton frock my father thinks shows too much skin.

'You're not wearing that,' he'd said, standing in our hallway.

'Why not?' Mum asked.

'You'll burn.'

'I will not.' She stopped. 'This cost me a lot of money, Bob, I need to wear it before I'm too fat.'

'Fat?'

She was struggling to pull the frock down over her bum. 'It happens at my age.'

I dropped the watermelon and licked my fingers.

'Let him have it,' Bill Riley said, picking up his ukulele.

'You're a long time dead.'

'He can wait,' Mum said.

'Let him go,' Dad replied.

Mum looked at him. I looked at all the adults in turn. Mr Riley just shrugged and started to strum his ukulele.

*Lonely days are gone
Twilight sings his song
All the happiness that used to be . . .*

Next thing I knew he was kneeling on the ground at his wife's feet. Liz Riley laughed and pushed him away. He toppled over, rolled onto his back, but just kept playing and singing:

*Soon my eyes will close
Soon I'll find repose
And in dreams you're always near to me . . .*

'Where am I?' Gavin called out from behind the shed.

'Coming,' I replied, grabbing the watermelon and shuffling off in the wrong direction.

Janice Riley jumped out from behind the water tank. 'Hi, Henry.'

She screamed and ran off down the driveway. I went after her but she knew the deal. Go easy on Henry. She pretended to trip over and sprain her ankle; then she sat on the concrete, holding it, moaning, 'Oh no, what are you going to do to me, Henry?'

Nine-year-old Janice was the eldest of the Riley kids. She had short, cropped brown hair that stuck out at every angle, catching the sun. She had a flat, stumpy nose and teeth as white as her mum's piano keys. During the holidays she turned feral, getting around in a singlet and a pair of old cotton boxers. Janice always had bare feet and her skin was the colour of Jersey caramels.

Anna Riley appeared from behind a lantana hedge. She grabbed her older sister by the arm and tried to pull her up.

'It's no use,' I cried. 'I love the taste of little girls.'

They both screamed. Liz Riley stood up and looked over to see what was happening. 'Keep it down, girls.'

But they just ignored her.

Gavin ran past me. He flew to Janice's side and grabbed her other arm. As Gavin and Anna tried to pull their sister to safety she screamed even louder: 'No, Henry, eat the young ones first.'

I growled and raised my hands in the air.

'Children,' Liz called out again. 'Please.'

'C'mon, Henry,' my dad echoed, half-heartedly, as Bill Riley, still on the ground, kept strumming:

I'll see you in my dreams,

Hold you in my dreams . . .