

# Cannibals of the Fine Light

Simon Brown

The city broke the skyline into ragged edges, an horizon of concrete spears. Harry Beatle heard Angie whisper something about sunsets, but her soft voice drifted on without really being read.

*Where's Paul?* he wondered, and outside the night was eating away at the sky with teeth of stars. "Paul should have died an old man," Angie said, her voice closer now, and irritatingly arrogant. It occurred to Harry that she was really repeating her point about sunsets.

*All of us are like moths, fluttering around the lamp of our grief, he thinks. We're cannibals of the fine light shining from the death of a friend, the fine light that comes from the sudden knowledge of mortality, a fine light that casts shadows from feelings, leaving everything else in revealing darkness.*

Marilyn said there are no such things as old men. "Only children and corpses," she insisted. She was Paul's last lover, the last to touch his flesh, so perhaps she would know. *After all, such intimacy should have some secrets denied the rest of us.* Harry remembered Paul once telling him that only lovers scored solid points in the affections of the deceased.

The conversation tumbled acrobatically among the mourners, most of them surprised by their own loquacity. It was a relief for them; no one could have stood one of those awful gaps of unwanted silence that often crop up at wakes, as uninvited and unappealing as the dead.

Harry kept on thinking it was such a poor joke that Paul should have died the way he did. A single vein, narrower than a straw, bursting in his head, turning his brain red and his mind into nothing. Just like switching off an electric light. *A thousand monkeys, typing away, trying for Shakespeare but writing Paul's obituary instead. Ridiculous, his thoughts continued, forty five and dead. But there was no other way.*

Harry looked around the room, silently counting those who'd come to the wake. *Here we are, gathered like wilting hothouse flowers picked too early. All your friends pretending to remember you but really desperately trying to forget you ever existed.*

*Nothing personal, Paul, but in death you've gained weight and grandeur.*

Harry Beatle had always been the most unassuming in appearance of all of City Security's operatives. Tall, a little stooped, his hair prematurely thin, his face wide and blunt, he looked more like an accountant than a policeman, though someone once unkindly pointed out that he looked like the archetypical English Chief Inspector, the one who patiently plods his way through a case and inevitably nabs his man on the last page or in the last scene. But England had died in the last war, and Harry was as likely to kill the villain as arrest him.

Six months before Paul McAllister's death, a few of the City Security's finest had gathered around a long metal table for a last look at Theresa Gould, killed with two bullets through the forehead.

"Neat job, Harry," Ian Brewster, Harry's partner, said, professionally checking the entry wound.

"What did you get out of her?" Kath Hutton asked, standing apart from everyone else, as was her wont. Rank hath its privileges.

"Some fine invective," Harry answered quietly.

"I hope she pulled a shooter on you, Harry, before you squeezed the trigger," Kath said, staring at him. "Of course, Kath. You know how I work."

"It's only that our body count's been very high of late," she continued, "and the City Council's feeling a little bruised from all the pressure being applied by the Church and the Civil Rights Union."

Harry didn't answer a second time, which pissed off Kath somewhat, but he was damned if he was going to get into an argument with her in front of a corpse.

Paul and his partner Marilyn Kremmer, the other two present, said nothing. Having themselves been responsible for two killings in as many weeks, they weren't about to buy into the discussion. Kath was their chief, and had to cop all the flak coming from the Mayor's office over any of City Security's perceived wrongs, but they knew Harry Beatle wouldn't have killed Gould unless his own life had been threatened directly. The victim had had information City Security wanted badly, and that was more important than settling old scores.

Kath pulled a hat from a coat pocket and slapped it against her leg. "Well, nothing can be done about it now," she announced gruffly. "I'll need a report on line by 0800 tomorrow, Harry."

Harry nodded once, didn't turn to say goodbye as she left. He found it difficult to take his eyes off Gould's face. It struck him as curious, and partly obscene, that someone who had died so violently could now appear so peaceful, as though she'd been felled by nothing more vicious than sleep.

Ian put a hand on his shoulder. "It's time to go."

Harry let himself be led out of the morgue. The four friends stood silently for awhile on the steps of the building, watching the sun slowly sink behind the city. Sunsets were still something of a novelty, the clouds of destruction from the last war only dispersing in the last five years or so. The air remained cold though, and western Sydney still suffered from frosts as late as December.

"What now, Harry?" Ian asked him. "With Gould dead, our last hopes of nailing Tarbuck have gone with her."

Tarbuck was the main target of Harry and Ian's current assignment. He was a smuggler and warlord, someone whose wealth and power, and alleged links with the Kiwi Merchant Guild across the Tasman, posed a real threat to the City Council's hold over Sydney. Gould was the person they'd hoped would give them the information and evidence needed to bring Tarbuck to trial in one of the Council's rigged courts. But now . . .

Harry shrugged. "Something will turn up."

"Ever the optimist," Paul said, laughing, slapping his friend on the back. "*Maybe* Willson or Collary will raise their ugly heads now that Gould's dead. *Maybe* one of them can help you put Tarbuck away." His voice wasn't quite serious, but Harry looked at him sharply.

"Maybe," he said, nodding slowly.

"We'll leave you to it, then," Marilyn said, glancing at Paul from the corner of her eye.

Both Harry and Ian caught the meaning in that look, but ignored it. What she and Paul did with their lives was their business.

"I'll give you a lift home," Paul said to his partner. He turned briefly to the other two men. "Harry. Ian."

Five minutes later Harry was still watching the sunset. Ian waited patiently for him on the street, calmly watching passers-by.

"Marie will be waiting for you," Harry said eventually.

"I expect so."

"You'd better go, then. Thanks for waiting."

"Can I take you somewhere?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I'll take the tube home."

"Do you think Paul's right? Do you think something will come up?"

Harry looked down at his feet. "Something already has," he said sadly.

There was a moment when Angie found herself alone, and the feeling was almost unbearable. She turned her face away from the crowd and stared out the window, watching the wake in the reflection. Suddenly,

something large and heavy fluttered against the window, and then was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Angie jerked back, her breath catching in her throat.

*An eagle! her mind shouted. Talons and beak, and tail like a wedge . . . But in the city?*

And why not, she reasoned to herself. Skyscrapers are nothing more than mountains, and streets the valleys in between. *And above us all, the eagle.*

*Or maybe it was hunger, detached and given form. If I watch I will see it again. I will stay by this window to make sure.*

*The sun is setting. Welcome back darkness. Hide my face from my friends. I have seen myself in too many mirrors the last few days, searching to see if Paul had left me anything of myself. He'd taken so much, and with so little grace. My husband died before I could claim my inheritance from his memories. He died before retribution, before justice could be done.*

Angie bowed her head, exhaustion bending her frame. *There's no point complaining. Paul has the ear of God, now. Knowing him, he'll be an archangel in six months. God will put him in charge of adulterers - Paul understands them so well. The Archangel Paul.* The thought made her smile.

Someone tried to hand her a drink, but she brushed it away. She realised she wanted to be alone, now. Her thoughts went back to Paul again.

*Perhaps that's no eagle out there, but Paul! He's returned, and is drawn to us - to the souls he knows - like an insect's drawn to a kitchen window. He'll batter his wings around the edges of our lives until we all die . . .*

*. . . and then we'll join him in heaven, become deputy angels in his anti-adultery squad. We'll swoop down from heaven, attacking the poor victims of physical desire. They'll cry out like frightened gunners in Lancasters: "Bandits! Bandits!" And there'll be blood in the bedroom and sin on the sheets . . . and oh, God! have mercy on our souls!*

*It doesn't bear thinking about; not from a merciful God anyway, not from a merciful God.*

They met in the Royal Botanical Gardens. Side by side they walked, past ancient banyan trees, strange fists and fingers of wood that had somehow survived the worst of the nuclear winter, and past new plots of temperate plants, it still being too cool to replant the subtropical species that once had adorned the garden's paths and enclosures.

"Do you remember summer, Harry?" Kath asked.

"I was twenty four when Sydney had its last summer. That was the same year India launched its SRNMs against Pakistan and China."

"I can't remember summer at all," Kath said wistfully. "I was five years old when the war started. All my memories are set in winter. I'm hoping to see a summer next year, or the year after. But so much is going to change, not just the weather." Harry didn't say anything. He wondered where Kath was leading the conversation. "I mean, the City Council controls things easily now because there's so damn little outside of Sydney. We have contact with other cities and one or two rural enclaves, but no one wants to leave here. Everyone's willing to stay and obey the rules."

The pair stopped near a low stone wall that separated the gardens from a thin strip of orange beach. Oil shimmered on the sand. Small, dead fish moved in and out with the lapping waves like strips of metallic paint. Beyond was the harbour, filled with steamers and tramp ships, tankers and trawlers.

"In time, when the weather warms up," Kath continued, "people are going to want to leave, or, knowing that exile is no longer such a horrifying prospect, try to change the order of things here. Sydney will lose hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of its people. That's dangerous, Harry, dangerous for us all. In this underpopulated world, population equals power."

Kath put an arm around Harry and began walking again, leading him away from the view of the harbour and up towards the art gallery. "The law is the key to everything. People must respect the law, and for them to do that they have to see we're prepared to deal harshly with those who flout it. People like Tarbuck."

"Where are you going with this, Kath?" There was a hint of exasperation in Harry's voice. He disliked

being treated like a raw recruit.

"You know something new - or you think you know something new - about the Tarbuck case, Harry, but you haven't come and talked to me about it. I have to admit, that worries me."

"When I have something definite I'll let you know, Kath."

She pursed her lips. "This Tarbuck thing is different from other cases you've handled, Harry. He isn't your regular, run-of-the-mill kind of villain. He's a major player, a real threat to Sydney's future."

"Sydney's future or the City Council's?"

Kath's eyes narrowed and she glanced quickly at Harry. "What's the difference?" She waited for an answer, but none was forthcoming. She sighed deeply. "I wish I knew where I stood with you. When I look in the other direction, should I cover my back?"

"I don't want your job, Kath."

"I know that. But that isn't what I meant. Whose side are you on, Harry?"

He thought about it for a moment before answering. "I'm with the angels."

"No such things. Not in Sydney, anyway. Can I trust you?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you trust me?"

They reached the art gallery, its old stained sandstone making it look more like a natural formation than a building. Harry started climbing the steps to the entrance, leaving Kath behind.

"Who is it, Harry?" she called after him. "Whose ghost is haunting you?"

He stopped when he got to the top, turned around and looked out over Kath, over the gardens and out to the harbour. It looked no better from here.

"Paul McAllister," he said.

"Paul?"

"We both know Tarbuck has someone in the government feeding him intelligence. We always assumed it was someone in the Council. Well Kath, it's worse than that. It's someone in City Security. It's Paul McAllister."

Kath ran up the steps, her speed belying her size. For a moment Harry wondered if she was going to attack him. Instead, she stopped a metre away from him, her eyes wide, her nose flaring with anger.

"You'd better know what you're talking about, Harry. For your sake, I hope it's a fucking good story."

"Collary," Harry said. "Brian Collary. Only seven people in the whole wide world knew that Collary works for Tarbuck. Collary himself. Tarbuck. You. Me. Ian Brewster. Gould. Tarbuck's mole. The other day, at the morgue, Paul let slip Collary's name in connection with Tarbuck."

"Jesus." Kath breathed out heavily. "Maybe he found out from someone else . . ."

Harry was shaking his head. "That's what I've been chasing up. No way. It has to be Paul."

"Pull him in."

"He's a friend. You pull him in."

"It's your bloody case, Harry. Finish the job. Pull him in."

"Will you be there when we interrogate him?"

She turned her head away, closed her eyes. "Of course I'll be there."

"What about Marilyn?"

"One at a time, Harry."

"She could be involved."

"Fuck you Harry. I said one at a time."

"When?"

"Now. This afternoon."

Harry moved to leave, then stopped and turned on his heel to face Kath again. "And after? What happens to Paul after we've questioned him?"

"We do him a favour, Harry. No one wants to know a mole."

Marilyn wasn't sure which way to turn. She felt out of place among all the people, even among her

workmates. The situation wasn't helped by the looks she received from Paul's widow. Marilyn spoke some words to Angie at the funeral, but her eyes sort of glazed over and her face became rigid. Marilyn had left her alone after that. She found herself a seat at the end of a lounge, the other end occupied by two women involved in their own conversation, happy to let the stranger sit by herself with her hands in her lap nestling an empty glass.

*What am I doing here?* she thought. *These people aren't my friends. Most of them see me as an enemy of the state - Paul's lover, and what do lovers know? The length of a penis, but not of a temper, the shape of an intellect but not an imagination, the feel of skin but not affection . . .*

Marilyn could smell something burning in the kitchen, but she refused to rouse herself from her niche.

"This isn't my home," she accidentally said aloud, and smiled nervously at her companions on the lounge as they looked up questioningly. She shrugged and they returned to their own privacy.

*Lovers are a part of the cold. We are the Antarctic, the frozen shore of everyone's world. At night our dreams are about ice and glaciers, crevasses and avalanches, deep blue seas that drop to infinity. Oh, Christ, here come the tea and cakes. Leave me alone, Angie. There's no need to be polite.*

Marilyn needn't have worried. Angie passed by her as though she was invisible. She wondered about Angie. Was there now a dark gap between her and her life, as there was for Marilyn?

She felt it was time to go. She got up, a little unsteady on her feet, and looked for somewhere to put the glass. In the end, she left it on the carpet near the front door.

Outside of the apartment she felt a great weight lift from her shoulders. *Hello, Paul, goodbye. Your passing was a major event. Not as spectacular as summer, perhaps, or as important as the latest tax hikes, but you've left a hole in the universe and it will never be filled. I loved you, and I miss you, but soon the pain will be gone and my life will be mine again . . .*

It was easier than Harry had any right to expect. Paul wasn't reluctant to talk, being well aware of the alternatives. Just the same, at the end of the interrogation he was injected with happy juice and some of the questions were put to him again.

Harry phoned Angie to let her know not to worry.

"He's getting too old for these all night jobs, Harry," she complained.

"I know, Angie. Paul told me tell you he's sorry, but it was unavoidable."

"It's *always* unavoidable, Harry. I'm tired of unavoidable. It's time he found another job. He's not cut out for this. Jesus, Harry, *I'm* not cut out for this."

"I'll talk to you later, Angie."

"Give my love to Paul."

"Good night, Angie."

Marilyn was more difficult to put off. In the end Ian Brewster took her with him on a routine job, telling her that Paul and Harry were going over old files together for Kath Hutton.

Early next morning, well before the sun came up, Paul recovered from the effects of the happy juice. He saw the doctor preparing another injection.

"Hey, Harry, what's this?"

"It'll knock you out for a few hours, that's all."

Paul caught Harry's gaze for a few seconds. His face went white. "I understand," he said. "I knew this was going to happen as soon as you started asking me questions about Collary, but somehow I never really believed it." The doctor held Paul's right arm, flicked a finger on a spot over his triceps and inserted the needle. "What about the body washing, Harry? How are you going to get rid of me?"

Harry glanced at Kath. She remained motionless, her gaze never shifting from Paul's face. "We haven't figured that out yet," he said.

Paul was already beginning to sway a little in his chair. "Nothing too brutal. That'd be hard on Angie and Ma . . . on Angie, you know?"

"It'll be something ordinary, Paul," Harry assured him, fighting a sudden urge to retch.

"Haemorrhage is always good," Paul said. "I've used that one myself."

"That's a good idea . . ."

But Paul never heard Harry's words. He slumped into the doctor's arms.

"He won't feel a thing," the doctor promised Harry. "I can arrange a haemorrhage, if that's what you want."

Harry nodded.

When the doctor had gone, and the technicians had removed Paul, Harry made Kath some coffee. They sat together for several minutes without saying a word. Eventually, Kath said: "At least we have enough now to nail Tarbuck."

"Was it worth it, Kath?"

She shrugged, the most animated she'd been for several hours. "It's not cost a thing, Harry. We're not accountants-"

Harry slammed his hand down on the table, making Kath jump in her seat. "*Was it worth it, Kath?*"

"Sure." Kath swallowed uneasily. "Sure, it was worth it. We have a job to do, and now we've done it."

She cleared her throat. "Someone's going to have to tell Angie."

"I'd like to be there when you make the call," Harry told her.

After all of Paul's friends and acquaintances had left, Harry was the last one left at the wake with Angie. They busied themselves cleaning up, swapping small talk. Afterwards, he waited until Angie had fallen asleep before leaving the apartment.

An hour later he found himself in the Royal Botanical Gardens, near the little stone wall that guarded against the stained beach, the harbour, the new city. He felt like a cork bobbing along in the stream of time, a stream that ran by the same landmarks, fell down the same waterfalls, kept on moving without really changing. Paul's death had become a station outside of time, a truly *knowable* fact, and Harry had to fight the temptation to anchor himself to it like a leech attaching itself to evolution's first warm-blooded limb. Like it or not, he belonged in the stream.

He looked up into the night sky, and imagined Paul's spirit, his memory of Paul, dispersing into the void, components scattering like biblical chaff throughout space and time. He could see bits of Paul being vaporised by burning, blue suns and colliding with meteors, and falling as grey rain on some remote planet, and other bits being sucked into the maws of black holes like dust into the mouths of vacuum cleaners. Paul becoming so dispersed throughout the universe that he might as well never have existed. *We are all made up of memories, and when all the people who know us forget who we are we simply disappear from sight, without even the dignity of first becoming dust.*

Harry heard in the distance the lonely sound of a ship's horn. It floated across the water, a warning to Harry and to anyone else who'd listen. *These are not good times*, he told himself. *I don't think Kath will ever see her summer. The world is winter and the word is winter, and so it will be for ever and ever. Amen.*

Originally appeared pp. 31-42, *Eidolon* 6, October 1991.

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