

La Profonde

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'La Profonde' is the result of Terry's fascination with the landscapes around Perth's suburban railway stations under that unique western light, and his chance discovery of the name for those special pockets in a magician's coat.

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here was no mistaking how surprised Derwent was when he saw Jay walking along the railway tracks towards him. Jay's one-time business partner was wearing sunglasses, so his eyes were hidden, but his mouth actually fell open. Then, in true Derwent fashion, his surprise and fear turned immediately to anger.

"Fuck, Jay, what is all this?" he shouted. "This 'meet me at the station' stuff?"

Jay just smiled and waved, then waited till he'd reached the end of the otherwise deserted platform, and Derwent was glowering down at him over

the safety rail.

“Tell me, Dee” - Jay deliberately used the unwelcome nick-name - “Do you know what a *profonde* is?”

But Derwent wasn't up for any of Jay's smart-ass questions. He was hot and sweating, clearly upset. Though only thirty-seven, two years younger than Jay, red-faced and agitated like this he looked ten years older. One well-timed email had turned Derwent's world upside-down.

Dee, we need to talk. I have documented proof of what you and Cally did to Edilo Ltd. Take the 12:55 to Morley Station on Sunday for a 1:30 pm meeting. You won't tell the others and you will come alone. This is your one chance.

Jay couldn't see Derwent's eyes, but he could easily picture the determination he'd find in them amid the rage and desperation. Dee had been threatened with having his scam exposed, the dangerous emails he'd thought he'd purged from the office systems while he and Cally were plundering Edilo in true insider fashion. Three years of enjoying the spoils; now this summons to a deserted suburban railway station on a hot Sunday afternoon. He'd had enough.

Jay hauled himself up onto the platform. Morley Station was almost as new as the housing estates going up all about them beyond the cutting, just a stretch of hot concrete between two sets of tracks, with nothing more than a modest double-sided passenger shelter, two lamp-posts with signs attached saying *Morley*, and a set of iron steps at one end leading up to a deserted bus-stop and a car-park, both as deserted as the station at this time of day. “A *profonde*, Derwent? Ever hear of one?”

But for Derwent there was only one issue. His sunglasses might be hiding his eyes but his other features showed the full extent of his emotion. “Three fucking years, Jay. What do you want?” Not, Jay noticed, how the hell did you find out?

Jay grinned and gestured down the platform to where the rails stretched off in the afternoon glare. “I want you to take a walk with me, Dee, that's all.”

“Christine and the kids know where I am, Jay.”

Jay doubted that, and ultimately it didn't matter. “So what's the harm in taking a walk so we can talk about this?”

“Talk about it here. What do you want?” It was the old Derwent, the pre-scam Derwent showing through, but it truly was a mere shadowplay of how Dee had been three years before, a bravura display from a broken puppet.

Jay squinted in the glare. He glanced up and down the quiet platform in its lonely cutting. No sunglasses for him. Never. He listened to the hot breeze pushing through the grass on the embankments, then glanced at this watch. “Derwent, I’m going to start walking north along the tracks now. If you’ve got any sense, any interest in saving your fat ass, you’ll take that walk with me. It’s up to you, buddy.”

And, true to his word, Jay turned and began heading along the platform.

Derwent swore, called after him, shouted abuse, even the beginnings of threats - just the beginnings - but Jay kept walking. When he reached the end of the concrete deck he crouched and jumped down onto the rail-bed, then began moving north along the tracks.

There were more angry shouts from the platform behind him, but Jay didn’t stop. He kept walking, smiling into the day, relishing the warm breeze on his face and the realization that this could indeed be done exactly as he had planned it.

Back at that hot quiet station Derwent would be running through his options, railing at the universe, at the insufferable turn of events. Sooner rather than later, he would accept that there was nothing else he could do but follow. He’d been caught out. He could only try to survive this. Maybe he’d blame Cally, say that *she* had persuaded *him*. That was likely.

Finally Jay heard, “Well hold on then!” But, of course, Jay didn’t slow his pace. Couldn’t. He’d checked his watch and it truly could remain a matter of timing. Let Derwent shed some of those happy fat-cat pounds he’d been putting on during the past three years.

It was easy to tell when Dee was gaining by the laboured breathing getting nearer, the growing thud of footsteps out of time with Jay’s own. It was like someone imitating an old-style steam locomotive, exactly that.

Then Derwent was there, staggering, straining, hauling in big ragged breaths. When he could get words out, they were the expected things.

“Wasn’t personal - Jay. Never - personal. Un’erstan’?” It seemed like all he could manage.

“Glad to hear it, Dee.” Jay didn’t look at him, just kept watching the way ahead, reading every detail of the route between the two sets of tracks. “But how exactly do you mean that? Never personal?”

Derwent stumbled along, still trying to catch his breath but probably exaggerating that, giving himself time to gather his thoughts and, hardest of all, hold back his anger. Would he blame Cally, take the easy out and blame it all on her? Difficulties for him later, certainly, but a solution now.

Jay savoured the breeze on his brow and wondered what line the other man would take. However it went, Derwent would be sensing there was hope, would believe he knew exactly how he had to play this. Maybe he’d be thinking he really could reach some private settlement here, buy himself out of trouble.

Derwent finally answered. “You were just someone, okay?” More ragged breathing. “Could’ve been anyone.” Another pause, laboured. He truly did seem to be judging every word. “You un’erstand? It was just - the situation. An opportunity. It’s not like we ever - signed on to get *you*.” Derwent emphasized the last word.

Finally Jay did look across at the man trudging with him between the two sets of tracks. “Who’s we?”

“Aw, hell, Jay. What does it matter? It was just something that came along, you know? Never thought about it too much.”

“Enough to get away with it for a while. Ruin the company. I trusted you.”

“Yeah, well, some of us aren’t as trusting as you, okay? We don’t light up as bright. We try, but it doesn’t always happen. You made it easy.”

“There was Cally. Who else?”

“Hell, Jay. It’s been three years! Why this now?”

“Brian had to be in on it. Those emails make that pretty clear. And Mark, doing the accounts. You needed him. Barbara, Ashley and Hiro were mentioned.”

“Christine knows where I am, Jay.”

“I grew up on a railway line, did you know that, Dee?”

“How the hell would I know that?” Derwent said, thrown by the change of subject and forgetting for a moment how this had to be played.

“That was out in Leederville. As kids, friends and I would walk the tracks between Leederville and Quinton, just exploring, you know. Always loved what you found along railway lines.”

“Is that right?”

“Nothing forces patterns on a landscape more than a railway. All those lines and curves. No barriers. Hills cut away, fields divided. Rivers hardly stand a chance. It’s all so precise, so artificial. Then it changes. It doesn’t stay like that. It’s almost as if the intrusion is resented, worn away.”

“Resented? That’s a bit much.”

“Not at all. It’s the elevator effect. People get in an elevator. It’s really just a little room that moves up and down over a tremendous drop and takes them to where they’re going. Most people don’t think of using an elevator in terms of shafts and counterweights and terrible drops. It’s just a room that moves and does a job. Same with railways. People notice the trains, sure, maybe the tracks while a train is on them, but what about when a train isn’t passing? The tracks are overlooked, forgotten. All that precision, that regimentation gets blurred, roughed up. Pretty soon those railside corridors become wilderness, bits of a rogue landscape. People looking out train windows always look *beyond* the corridor, have you noticed?”

“No, I haven’t. Listen, Jay, this is interesting but I don’t see what it has to do with our situation.”

“Love that word, Dee. Situation. Tidies it up so nicely, don’t you think? That’s why names are so important. Finding the right handles.”

“What can we do about this, Jay?”

“One thing at a time. You never answered my question.”

“What question?”

“When we first met back at the station. First thing I said.”

“A question? What question? Hey, look, Jay, I’ve had a lot on my mind. You really can’t expect -”

“I would’ve been in your thoughts though. You would have been very much aware of me. You wouldn’t have given me a thought in years, but when my email arrived the other day, ever since Thursday, I would’ve been in your thoughts surely.”

“Well, yeah, but - I mean, I was pretty mad. Worried and all. You have to allow that -”

“You were right, what you said before about destroying Edilo. It really wasn’t personal, was it?”

“That’s right. That’s right, Jay! It just happened.”

“No, I mean in the sense that I never got to *be* a person to you with a life and interests, plans and hopes. Never got on your radar.”

“Well, you were the boss. Always so earnest, you know? So remote. It just never -”

“Right. But if I’d been a *person* enough, mattered more, you wouldn’t have pulled something like that. You’d have picked somebody else. If you’d liked me at all, thought I was *worth* liking, worth respecting at least, you wouldn’t have used me like a mark and taken advantage.”

Derwent’s eyes were hidden by his sunglasses, but the way he suddenly went quiet, suddenly became fixed in his gaze while walking, let Jay know that there would be a very different look in them now.

Jay smiled and glanced at his watch again. It was 1:42 and here it was at last: the *You’re a wacko!* look tucked away behind black Raybans.

“Where are we going, Jay?”

“Just to the next station. You ever take this line?”

“You kidding? I’m a city boy. I never get out this far.”

“Right. Well, Greenwood’s just another little station like Morley back

there. Brand new. They all are once you get past Belmont. Just a platform, a shelter, some steps up to a bus-stop for a feeder bus line that doesn't seem to be operating yet, not much else. Not much of a train service on a Sunday out here, not yet anyway. What's that term they use a lot nowadays: abandoned in place?"

Derwent nodded and uh-huh'd. He'd adjusted again, had worked out a new strategy, all predictable really. "You did this as a kid?" His tone was pitched to invite sharing.

"It's where we played a lot. I still love walking the tracks."

Derwent knew his cue. "We never knew stuff like that, Jay. That you had a thing for trains -"

"Not so much the trains, Dee. More the landscape you find around railway lines, the narrow strip of land they run through. Even out here where it's not too built up yet you get the same no-man's-land corridor you find in cities and the inner suburbs. The moment a line is opened up, there they are: the same lines of fences and plantings, the same cuttings, power poles, the chain-link barriers and supply sheds. Look at all this! Grass, bushes, mounds of soil. Rails and sleepers for repair work, future track development. Today I've seen an old tanker bogey left on a spur not even joined to the main track. Not even joined! Then half a dozen cattle trucks, just left out here. Go figure. That's all part of it."

Derwent didn't miss a beat. "So how far have you walked today, Jay?"

Jay knew exactly how far to the precise mile and yard, the exact metre, but he pretended to think. "Let's see. I drove out early and parked at Silverton, then caught the 9:40 back to Belmont. Now I'm walking back to the car. That's five stations so far. One more to go: Greenwood, then it's Silverton again."

"I caught the train out like you said. I'll need to get back."

Jay nodded. "I can give you a lift. I can drop you off once we settle this."

That clearly made Derwent feel better. "And just how do we settle this? Like I said. Jay. It wasn't personal. I can pay you back something if -"

"It can't be about money now, Dee," Jay said, and looked at his watch again. There was a double coming up, he was sure of it.

“Hey, you’re counting!” Derwent said. He’d only just noticed.

“I am,” Jay answered. “Ten more paces and I’ll show you something really interesting. Here we go: six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Look over there now! Where that stanchion meets the embankment. Near that pile of earth.”

“What? What am I looking at?”

“You don’t see it?”

“See what?”

“To the left of the stanchion. That shimmer of light on the soil. See the light near the top? It’s a hot-spot. Unfinished, but what’s called a double.”

“Jay, it’s a hot day. Of course there’s going to be heat shimmer.”

“Not this. This is different. It’s a double.”

Derwent would have that look in his eyes again. “Okay. Then it must be something *you* can see.”

“Guess so.”

“Walking those tracks back then, you probably learned to notice lots of things other people don’t.”

“Quite likely.” Jay almost made it sound sad the way he said it.

Derwent reacted to the tone. He had to be figuring that every step took them closer to Greenwood. “What about the other kids you played with back then? Did any of them see these - these doubles?”

“Sometimes. Not often. Jenny Attard did for a while. Jeff Callan did a few times, but we disagreed over details. We both wanted to name them, but we always disagreed over the names.”

“Are there that many?” Derwent seemed genuinely interested, though doubtless he figured this was the best way to play it. Either way, they were on the same page of the script.

“You’d be surprised. You see them more easily as kids. If you work at it, you keep the skill.”

“Does this other kid - Jeff? - does he still have the skill?”

“Can’t say. Haven’t seen Jeff since we were kids. Guess you lose it if you don’t keep at it. I put in a lot of time. Only stands to reason that I’ve kept the knack.”

Derwent didn’t overdo it, didn’t say something like: “There’s more to you than we ever knew, Jay”, or “If only we’d known...” He kept it simple, kept the focus on more immediate things.

“That was a double back there, you said. Okay, tell me some other names.”

“I’ll point them out as we come to them. There’s a clearback up on the embankment, but it’s very faint and the grass is hiding it.”

Derwent looked to where Jay was pointing, even removed his sunglasses to squint through the heat. “A clearback. Okay. Can’t see anything.” He replaced his Raybans.

“You won’t. I barely can. Clearbacks are common, but they come and go. There should be another one soon.”

“Is there a particular one I’ll be able to see, do you think?”

“That’s what I’m hoping to show you before we reach Greenwood. *If* it’s there. Sometimes they come and go. That’s why I’m counting. This one’s called a *profonde* and it’s a bit of a test really. If you can see it and describe it to me, I’ll forget the whole Edilo business.”

“But, Jay, you said it yourself. Most people don’t have the skill.”

“Turn back any time you like, Dee. No-one’s forcing you. I tell you when we’re near a *profonde*. You try to see it and describe it to me. That’s the deal.”

Derwent stopped walking, put his hands on his hips. “I have to describe something that no-one else can see but you! That I only have your word exists in the first place! You’re crazy!”

Jay didn’t stop. “You should be able to manage it. It’s one of the more noticeable ones.”

Derwent started walking again. "Oh, fine, Jay! Just one of the more noticeable among invisible things! Great!"

"Greenwood is about ten minutes around that next bend. You'll just have to master the skill. If it's any help, there's a rather special *servante* over there to the left of that bush. Nowhere near as common. There's a prime *antesammis* near that fence there."

"You know, I was just going to say that, Jay. Yessir. That's a prime antipasto over there, whatever!"

Jay ignored the barb, just breathed in the smells of hot steel tracks, the dry grass and the heated eucalypts beyond the embankments. "There's usually at least one *profonde* before we reach Greenwood."

"And you reckon I'll see it."

"If you take off those sunglasses you might."

Derwent did so, putting them in his shirt pocket. He squinted in the glare again. "Fine. Just say when."

They walked without speaking for a while, following the lines as they began to curve through another cutting. The breeze followed them. Dry grass rustled on the embankments.

The quiet was too much for Derwent. "So we're just walking through these things right now?" he said.

"Not right here," Jay told him. "But the one we want is very close. It's usually - No, there it is! Get ready, Dee. It's not even fifteen yards away, exactly in front of us. Describe what you see!"

"What I see! I can't see anything!"

"We're heading right for it. Ten yards now, right in front. Try looking from the side. Turn your head a little."

Derwent did so. "Is it still there?"

"Right there. Two yards now. Opening and closing along its seeking edge. It's got quite a rhythm going." Jay steadied himself on the stones underfoot.

“I can’t see anything, Jay. What’s it like exactly? How big is it?”

“Both big *and* small. That’s why it’s called that. A *profonde* is a word that conjurers use.”

“Conjurers? Do they?” Derwent was peering into the emptiness ahead.

“It’s what magicians call the long pockets in the tails of their coats. The ones they use for making things disappear.”

“Okay, so how -”

It was all he managed because Jay had pushed him hard from behind. There was a single yell, more like a squawk that ended almost as it began, and it was done. There was just the heat shimmer above the tracks, the sound of the breeze rushing in the dry grass.

Jay glanced at his watch, then stepped around the hot-spot in case it was still active, and continued walking. Another hundred yards and he rounded the final curve of the tracks and saw the small Greenwood platform in the bright afternoon light. And there was Cally, exactly on time.

Jay quickened his pace and was soon looking up at the last person on his list.

“Hey, Cally,” he called, pleasantly enough. “Do you know what an *oubliette* is?”