

ATW090



<https://atwonline.com.au/image/atw090>

1 minute.

Feeble rays of moonlight straggled through the leaves, casting patterns of light and dark on the brick wall.

A voice resounded from inside the house. Confident. Polished.

He was inside.

Not for too long though.

Time inexorably ticked onwards. 3. 2. 1.

I cast my eyes up and made out a raised hand, seemingly engulfed by the black night.

The eight of us readied ourselves.

“Now.”

An ear-splitting crack sliced through the still night as the wooden door buckled under the force of the wrench.

My heart palpitating wildly against my chest, I streamed through the doorway, footsteps thudding on polished timber, left, right, left.

A shout to the left.

I turned.

My eyes burned under the intense light of the kitchen. But there was no mistaking him. There stood a man in a two-piece grey suit, wispy-grey hair combed back from his ruddy forehead, eyes widening by the second.

Jock Garden. Labour politician. Part of bloody Lang’s inner circle.

Apoplectic with rage, I swung my rod, making contact with the back of his head. He doubled over, howling in pain, bloodshot eyes turning to face me. They were the howls of a communist, a man opposing ideals of a sane and honourable representative government, a man we must remove. The others were with me now, kicking, scraping, a flurry of limbs blurred before my very eyes.

Footsteps. They thundered from behind me.

We had company.

As I turned, convulsions of pain ricocheted up my body as calloused hands violently twisted my arms. I locked eyes with my attacker, one of two young men dressed in a heavy rancher’s coat that had seen its share of labour.

In a frenzy of panic I strained my arms against his grip of iron, feeling the front of my black cloak tear asunder. Eight of us from the New Guard. One bloody communist with his equally corrupted sons. Limbs numb with pain I continued to struggle, the cacophony of men’s shouts drowning out any sense of rational thought.

Stars danced before my eyes. A trickle of blood. I don’t know whose.

Then a bark. Two barks.

We knew what the barks meant. We had to leave.

Mustering the little strength I had left, my foot collided with the man's stomach.

He staggered back.

And I ran.

The others followed.

Never had the darkness seemed so welcoming, and tonight I gladly raced into the depth of its embrace. I slowed, my lungs burning with excruciating pain as I took each breath.

If we had achieved anything at all tonight, it was that we had given Jock a warning.

"Go home. Don't be seen. The police will come. We'll discuss tomorrow."

And so I made my way further into the darkness.

Sleep. It would not come. Bloody Jock Garden would not let this pass. They would come looking tomorrow. But most painful of all was the hunger. It gnawed at my stomach as I lay in bed, dreaming only of another bowl of soup, another slice of bread. Any other time I would've grabbed a bite to eat, help calm my unsettled mind. But I had to be careful. Money was scarce these days.

I took off my cloak. Felt the smooth cotton unravel into furls of thread as my fingers traced the jagged edges of the rip. I had to hide it under the floorboards. After all, I did have a spare. A rip would be a tell-tale sign I had been in a fight.

Then people would start asking questions.

I awoke to a bird's strident call. Clambering out of bed, my face contorted in pain with every movement.

A knock sounded at the door.

I froze.

The cloak had hidden my face. He couldn't have known.

"Mr Smith. I know you are inside. Please open the door. Else I will enter by force."

I warily shuffled towards the door. They couldn't have known it was me. I locked eyes with the doorknob. Placed my trembling hand on the wooden handle.

Turned.

“Good morning sir. NSW police here. You are a member of the New Guard I believe?”

I felt my heart slow a little. Maybe they didn't know. At least not yet.

“Yes officer.” I said as politely as I could muster. I recognised his face. One of the undercover officers they always send to our meetings, shadowing our movements. Even when we claimed one of our key objectives was to assist the NSW Police in case of mass civil disobedience, they made it clear they didn't want our help. A suspect organisation, they called us.

“Well there was an incident last night. Jock Garden was assaulted.”

I stared blankly at him. “Sorry to hear that officer.”

“He was assaulted by 8 members of the New Guard. Dressed in black cloaks.” His eyes glinted dangerously. “And so I'll be investigating your house.”

My heart stopped. To object would be a huge mistake.

“Yes officer.”

Time slowed to a stop as I stood at the door, eyes darting about as I waited for the officer's return. As long as he didn't check under the floorboards. As long as he didn't check under the floorboards. As long as...

“Mr Smith.”

I turned. In his hand he clutched a cloak. Black in colour.

“Thank you for your time. I will be confiscating this cloak.”

“Yes officer.” A wry smile crept onto my face as I watched the officer leave the house, stride across the cobbled pathway, finally disappearing around the corner. He had been looking for a ripped black cloak, a cloak that had been in a scuffle - and he hadn't found one.

And so my secret remains with me.

Under the floorboards.