

Chad Taylor / CLOSE TO YOU (2000)

The lounge had been blackened to the ceiling. It stank of melted plastic, wood, fabric, everything. Stank like a tip. Josie scraped the floorboard with little movements of her toe, whispering as she left marks in the charcoal.

‘Why are they using flash?’ she said.

They have to capture all the details.

‘But it’s sunny.’

They’re thorough. That’s their job. They have to get everything down.

‘It’s thirty-two degrees.’

We’re talking tens of thousands of dollars, I said.

‘I guess.’

I panicked when I got the call.

‘Yeah? No way.’

I came straight over.

You promised, Josie. You made a promise.

She said nothing. She chewed her plait.

*

Josie wore her hair the same way since she was nine. We played hide and seek, sardines, murder. She read my palm. Babies have fingerprints the second they’re born.

‘He saved me from drowning, once,’ she said. ‘I was swimming. We were swimming. He pulled me out of the water – I don’t think I would have made it.’

That must have been frightening, I said.

‘Later. But while it was actually happening I felt very calm. I was really tired at the time and I felt myself falling and I just let it happen. I let myself fall. And then he caught hold of me and pulled me out.’

He was good to you.

‘You look good in the uniform,’ she said. ‘It makes you look taller.’

She kissed me on the cheek and I felt her cool lips and I realised how long I’d been walking around in the heat.

*

I always called to check where she was. I told her answering service: don't go anywhere without telling me. Look after yourself. There's always a room for you here. Call me any time. Her answering service hung up.

I never discussed this with anyone else.

*

I took a cold shower back at the motel. I cut myself on a blunt razor. I knotted my tie. My shirt smelled like smoke.

The duty doctor introduced himself as Manson. The name could have been his first or second, as if he hadn't sorted it out in his own mind. His shirt was untucked. He had curly hair and repaired spectacles. Without the coat, he looked about nineteen. His tennis shoes squeaked as he walked me to the ward, talking about something.

'So your sister's okay?' he said.

Yes.

'Guess she knew what to do, right?'

Yes.

'There was another guy from the fire department up here before.'

Sometimes we double-check.

'Is it true the tender got stuck in traffic?' He shook his head. 'What an inditement.'

Auckland's a big city now. These are signs it's growing up.

'You reckon?'

Sure. Traffic, parking – these are big city problems.

'I'll pass that on. It'll cheer people up.'

I was thirsty but I didn't ask for water. That made me feel better about myself.

*

Manson stood at the end of the bed with his hands in his pockets. I had to keep

clearing my throat.

‘Is there anyone else coming?’ he said.

This is it.

‘Would you like a coffee?’

I don’t know.

‘There are people available if you want to talk to someone,’ he said.

I’m fine.

‘I’m going to get myself a coffee – I’ll bring you one back.’

What’s your advice? I said.

‘You should really talk to the intensivist.’

You work here. You’ve got the coat. Give it a shot.

‘We can only give out details to next of kin.’

Fair enough.

‘There’s not much else you can do,’ he said.

I thought seeing him would tell me more.

‘Because that’s how life is. Feel his wrist.’

He didn’t move. He didn’t even know I was there.

‘Feel the pulse?’ Manson said. ‘That’s why you’re here. Because you care.’

*

It’s not the gun, it’s the person who pulls the trigger.

Why do people sent to foreign jails suddenly appear one day – unshaven smiles on CNN: what makes that happen? Do their captors have a sudden change of heart? An epiphany of western liberalism?

Accidents happen.

*

The intensivist was in her office. She spoke very calmly.

‘Bad burns,’ she said.

How bad, I said.

‘Most of his right side,’ she said. ‘It’s not good. How’s your sister?’

Holding up.

'It must be hard for her.'

Yes.

The breeze rustled the papers on the desk and she glanced at it like the noise was out of place. I made a point of closing it properly on my way out.

At an atomic level, the world doesn't behave like it should. Atoms, dark matter: things don't pan out. Nobody knows why it works. But it does work.

I went back to one of the dive bars I knew. Everyone was at home in the dark.

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Chad Taylor's new novel is THE CHURCH OF JOHN COLTRANE.

