

An Empty Wheelhouse

by Sean McMullen

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Notes on the deaths of John Jenkins and James Stuart (Hanged by the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance, 1851)

This part of the project was to determine if the Australian criminals Stuart and Jenkins had any connection with Rob McIver, who was shot dead on May 25, 1851. Both men were members of a gang known as the Sydney Coves, who were all ex-convict Forty Niners. The Sydney Coves were described in the Annals of San Francisco as "stray vagabonds from Australia, where had been collected the choice of the convicted felons of Great Britain."

By mid-1851 local vigilantes had broken the power of the outlaw gangs, such as the American Hounds and the Sydney Coves, but law and order was still almost impossible to maintain. McIver was shot in the back as he left the Jolly Waterman on Telegraph Hill. His killer emptied his pockets before escaping. McIver had been an explorer in Australia before he sailed to California and struck it rich in the 1849 gold rush. In Oldfield's Diary of a Vigilante he is mentioned as having what he called a "lucky beastie" that found gold for him. Oldfield describes this as a tame possum with webbed feet that he led about on a chain. It died after being attacked by a bull terrier in April 1851, and McIver shot both the dog and its owner. His luck really did run out then, and he was murdered within a month.

John Jenkins was caught several weeks later, after breaking into a store, stealing a safe, then trying to row away with it in a boat. The Committee of Vigilance waded out after him, arrested him, and took him to their rooms in Battery Street for a trial. A ship's master, Captain William Howard, presided. He summed up the case with the words "Gentlemen, as I understand it we came here to hang somebody." A motion to hang Jenkins from the flagstaff was shouted down as unpatriotic, then a lynch mob took over and hanged him from the loading beam of a nearby warehouse.

The contents of the water-damaged safe were impounded in the strongroom of another store. Three weeks later a second Australian ex-convict, James Stuart, was arrested while preparing to rob it. After his arrest Stuart was recognised as the notorious English Jim, wanted for gold robbery, horse-stealing, escaping from legal custody, arson and murder. He was tried on Independence Day, 1851, and the Vigilantes marched him to the pier at the foot of Market Street for execution. When the city attorney, Frank Pixley, tried to rescue the prisoner the mob threatened to string him up on the derrick as well. Pixley later took possession of some papers from the safe that both lynched men had apparently been after, and Oldfield mentions that some of the documents had belonged to McIver.

The surviving city archives from that period have been searched repeatedly, but no trace of the documents has been found.

* * *

Helen always sent the results of her research out as electronic mail to an Internet address that was somewhere in the UCLA campus. Her cryptic instructions came on the same Internet system, and the money for her services always appeared in her bank account from some untraceable source.

Who would pay a history graduate so much to do research into obscure nineteenth-century documents? Not that \$500 per week was so very much, but she had been working for months now

without knowing what the point of the exercise was. It might have been an inheritance dispute, in fact that was her favourite theory so far. There was always plenty of money to do whatever was required to complete her instructions.

Today Oakland, tomorrow... would depend upon the message that she received in reply to her latest researches. She had been flown to New York, and found nothing meaningful. She had expected to be fired: instead she was flown to London to read old colonial office reports. Again she found nothing of interest, yet she was booked onto a flight to San Francisco to read records in the city's archives. The next trip was shorter, just a journey on the BART to read some rare documents in a library on the Berkeley Campus. By lunchtime the work was done. She packed her Toshiba laptop and modem into a shoulderbag and dodged across Bancroft Way to the little group of shops and cafes just south of the campus. Neil was waiting at a sidewalk table, as they had arranged over the phone.

"So, still on that contract for those folk in LA?" he asked as she sat down.

"That's right. Whatever they want, I seem to be finding it."

"I'm leaving for Hawaii right now. I'm only in town because my connect flight goes through Oakland airport."

"Hawaii, great. I have no idea where they'll send me next."

For some minutes their conversation remained exuberant and facile, even a little hysterical. There were more important things to discuss, unpleasant things, yet the preliminaries could be made to last. Slowly, carefully, she assembled her meticulously rehearsed string of words, then took aim at a space in the conversation like an Indian stalking salmon in a stream.

"What are the job prospects like for historians in Hawaii?"

"Ah, not good, not good. You'd be cleaning motels, and serving in bars."

Missed.

"You checked already?"

"Yeah, I did. Hey, do you know who you're working for yet?"

In other words, drop the subject. "No clues. It could be the KGB for all I know."

"I doubt it, they're all doing contract work for the Arabs these days. It's probably someone trying to prove a bloodline with a millionaire who died without leaving a will."

"Then why the secrecy?"

"To have an advantage in court, maybe."

There was something tired and unworkable going on here, yet neither of them had the will to admit it. His face betrayed nothing; his smile was controlled to perfection. There was one more hurdle for her exhausted emotions to clear. Oddly enough, sex held no special terrors for Helen, but talking about it was the worst possible nightmare. Any sort of verbal exchange worried her, she wanted to rehearse her words, to type them into a computer, then rearrange and polish them, then hand the printout to Neil who would give her a score out of ten.

"I've got a room across the bay," she said while staring intently at her coffee cup. "It's not long on the BART."

"Look, that would be great, but, well I really don't have much time between flights. It was hard enough just seeing you here and... I'd better rush. My flight leaves soon."

When he had gone Helen slumped with relief, then ordered a large slice of coffee cake with plenty of cream. Free again, free from talk. She had studied history because most of the subjects were safely dead, with their words on paper. Her special project was a dream come true: the communications were terse, and arrived by electronic mail. Perhaps it would last for a very long time.

The next phase of the project took her back to London, and lasted a month. Each night she would open a line to her enigmatic employer in Los Angeles and type in a few likely records from the nineteenth-century registers. Only occasionally did she get a reply, and the replies were short.

At last she had a breakthrough. A clerk at the city attorney's office in the San Francisco of the early 1850's shared a feature with one convict: a pair of parallel scars on his chin. It was a small thing, but enough. Patrick O'Hallorin, an Irish immigrant, had been given a job in the city attorney's office in 1852, and had worked there for eleven months. He was five feet nine inches tall, and had brown hair and blue

eyes. Those details fitted dozens of British convicts, but only Brendan Terrence Hooligan shared the scars too.

She expected a trip to Australia next, but however much her employers might avoid libraries, they had no trouble with electronic data. Some sort of scan of databases was done in the time that it took her to stroll along the Thames Embankment and have a cup of coffee, and by the time she returned to her rooming house and made an Internet connection they had found a copy of a Ph.D thesis for her to examine.

It was held in a small collection in the University of London. An Australian student had done his urban demography thesis on the passenger lists of ships entering Australian ports between 1830 and 1860. The thesis was a thin book and ten computer diskettes. It took a morning to learn the student's customised access program, but after that the search was over in seconds.

Among the hundreds of thousands of entries there were three for Brendan Hooligan. He had arrived in Australia as a convict in 1840, left Sydney in 1849 for San Francisco as a discharged convict, then arrived in Melbourne aboard the Queen of Tahiti in 1855. He had tried to pass himself off as O'Hallorin again, but had been caught out. A free text footnote in the database mentioned that he had been sentenced to nine years hard labour for uttering a false declaration, abusive language, and shooting a member of Her Majesty's Port Authority in the foot.

She typed in the few lines of research, and the reply appeared within an hour.

RECD: LONDON WORK COMPLETE. FLIGHT TO BOSTON BOOKED. TOMORROW MORNING. CONTINENTAL. INSTRUCTIONS FOR NEXT STAGE TO FOLLOW...

If Helen loved the work she hated the travel. The flight west had disrupted her sleep patterns, more because she stayed awake willing the wings and engines not to fall off, than because of the change in time zones. Perhaps there will be a lot to keep her in Boston, she thought hopefully as she propped herself against the customs counter.

She had to read through a list of books in various historical society libraries, keeping a watch for references to Hooligan. After eighteen obscure and indifferently written volumes she came to Sibil J. Henderson's *Impressions of Australis: Travels of a Boston Girl in Australia, 1896 to 1901*, published by herself in 1922. The style of writing annoyed Helen intensely. The author had recorded the details of her trip in fussy, exact prose, right down to spelling out people's accents. It was excessive, even by nineteenth-century standards. Unlike Helen, she appeared to have been a born traveller, always happiest when on the move, never worried about ships sinking or what to say to strangers. On page 122 she mentioned Hooligan.

Today, April 5, 1897, is a most glorious autumn day, and there could be no finer place on earth to enjoy it than here, steaming up this broad, magnificent Murray River on a paddle-wheeler. I have just had tea with Captain McGinty under the bow awning. I am getting quite a strong taste for tea during my travels in Australia.

Captain McGinty is very formal, and comes from a strict Presbyterian family in Scotland. The other passengers have been finding him hard to talk to, but I discovered that asking him about his paddleboat is the way to his heart. He told me that the "Wee Robbie" weighs 200 tons, is 130 feet long, and has a horizontal high pressure steam engine of 40 horsepower. He gave me a tour of the engine room, and it was all polished brass and copper, cleaner than the dishes that meals are served on. I saw from a plaque that it was built right here in Australia.

After that we went back to the bow and sat under the awning while he told me all about the rivers and riverboats of Australia. Riverboats were very important in opening up the frontier here, just as they were in America, but I'm afraid that I just let my mind wander when he was talking about bales of wool and barrels of rum. The water ahead was almost smooth, and the brilliant blue sky and brown river were separated by a line of olive green eucalyptus trees on the bank. Black swans were bobbing on the water, and once we passed a strange, tatty little riverboat that was towing a barge half filled with earth with vegetables growing in it! The captain said that those people were river gypsies known as Murray Whalers. I asked him if the river had been more dangerous in pioneering times.

"Nae dangerous, just a wee bit unsafe. I suppose it was like America in many ways, and there were actually a lot of American boats shipped oot here before the locals learned to build reliable boilers. There were a few American captains oot here as well. Gus Pierce from Massachusetts was the most famous. He came tae Melbourne as a sailor during the gold rush. He was just a teenager, and he jumped ship and swam ashore in his underwear when the captain locked up the crews' clothing tae stop them deserting. He found nae much gold, but he worked his way up tae riverboat captain after a few years. He was a real character! When he retired he said that he came tae Australia without a penny, but left owing hundreds of pounds."

"Gus Pierce, you say?" I replied. "Was he interesting? Are there any tall tales about him?"

The captain laughed. "The only tales about Gus are tall tales, lassie. He's supposed tae have rammed and sunk a steam barge from under an Irishman named Bren Hooligan. Said that Hooligan stole some special beasties that could dive underwater tae find gold."

"Now that is a tall story."

"Aye, and let's see now, that would have been 1867, when he was Captain of the sternwheeler Lady Daly. Funny, because Gus dinna like tae talk about that ramming. Other things, well ye'd nae shut him up. I asked him about it when we met back in 1875, but he told me tae mind my own business. Nothing in the records, either."

"So there's no record of the ramming? Is it just a tall story?"

"Well... it's hard tae say. Records get lost if a bushfire destroys a town hall-- along with the rest of the town. Happened a lot in the pioneering days."

"Uh, bushfires?"

"Forest fires, ye'd call them. Now fires were also a problem with the old paddle-steamers. Sparks frae the funnels burned holes in passengers' clothes, even set fire tae the cargos. Why later in 1867 the Lady Daly's sister ship, the Lady Darling, was lost when her cargo of brandy caught fire near Wahgunyah. Burned tae the waterline, she did, and there were grown men watching frae the riverbank in tears. Getting back tae that ramming, though, my chief fireman was on the Lady Daly when it happened. He was only fourteen at the time, mind. Pirate Bollinger, that's him. Rough as auld bags but a good lad. Would ye like tae meet him?"

I declined his offer. I had not come halfway around the world to meet some coarse and vulgar stoker. Captain McGinty then told me about another American, Peleg Jackson, who had been the previous Captain of the Lady Daly, and who flew the Stars and Stripes when-- "

Helen booted up her Toshiba and typed in the passage before reading on. There was no more about Hooligan, so she returned to her hotel early and sent off the passage as Internet mail. One attempt to drive a hire car through some apparently suicidal Boston traffic was enough to confine her to her hotel room while the eyes on the other end of the Internet link made what they would of Sibil J. Henderson's adventures in nineteenth-century Australia. This time the wait was a single hour.

RECD: SATISFACTORY. FLIGHT TO MELBOURNE BOOKED. CHECK AIRPORT.

Satisfactory? That was an expression of ecstasy when compared to earlier replies. She wondered if they had meant Melbourne Florida or Melbourne Australia, but was not really surprised when her call to the airport was directed to international departures.

The flight was to San Francisco, then Honolulu, Auckland and Melbourne. That meant a chance to see Neil, and to spend precious hours on the ground. He was working on the eastern coast of Hawaii, on a field trip near a recent lava flow. Using her own money she booked an Aloha flight and a rental car after rescheduling the rest of the journey.

It was clear that her status with Neil had been reduced to that of interloper. A bronzed microbiologist wearing a white bikini of open-weave string regarded her suspiciously from the field station as they walked along the black volcanic sand. They had a lot to talk about, but somehow nothing important could be said.

"If an animal could find gold, how would it go about it?" she asked, on the brink of talking about the weather.

"An animal? Do you mean like a trained searcher dog?" Neil responded eagerly, also anxious to grasp

at any neutral subject.

"No, no, I mean... well, it's this inheritance business. There was a prospector in the California gold rush who was supposed to have had an animal that could find gold. It was a possum with webbed feet, according to the writer."

"Probably just another tall tale. For a start, possums are marsupials, and that means they keep their young in a pouch. How would the young breathe when they went swimming? The other thing is that gold is almost inert chemically, that's why you find nuggets on some goldfields. It would be very hard to smell, so an animal would have no better chance of finding gold than a human-- except that we use metal detectors now. Who was this guy, anyhow?"

"Just some Australian ex-convict who came over for the '49 rush, struck it rich, then got himself shot."

"Australia... now that's just the place to find possums. There are dozens and dozens of species there. Some are as small as your thumb, while brush tail possums are big and strong, and have been known to kill even small dogs that were dumb enough to corner them. Humans don't faze them, either: all the parks in Australia's main cities have wild possums, just like the squirrels in Central Park in New York. They're quite a tourist attraction, except that they have to be fed by torchlight because they're nocturnal."

He hastily scoured his mind for more facts about possums as the pause began to lengthen ominously.

"There are some types that can glide through the air, using membranes of skin between their front and hind legs. One of the large glider possums chews through the bark of trees and sucks the sap."

"A vegetarian vampire?"

"Kind of like that."

"But none of them can find gold."

"No, I guess not. To do that they would need an electric sixth sense, and the only mammals that have that are the monotremes. They're the only ones that I know about, anyhow."

"Now wait a minute. You mean some animals really can detect electricity?"

"That's right, the platypus and the echidna, and they're also Australian. Both have organs to detect the muscular electricity of their prey. Any animal that could also generate an electromagnetic field could act like a biological metal detector, but-- "

"How about the electric eels of South America?"

"Well, perhaps, but eels are not bright enough to be trained. Now that you mention South America, though... I've just remembered something from my first year at college. There is one aquatic marsupial in the world, a type of possum called a yapok. It has a fatty layer of skin at the edge of the pouch, which makes a waterproof seal when it dives-- and its hind feet are webbed. The trouble is that it hunts by touch, not electric field."

"Could that prospector have had a platypus, then?"

"Nope. First thing is that a platypus looks more like a beaver with a duck's bill than a possum. Second is that it can only detect electric fields, and metal detectors work by generating their own electromagnetic field. Still, the idea of an animal that could find gold is not really impossible. Maybe that ex-convict guy really did find an Australian yapok that also had electro-sensitive fingertips and a field generation capacity. Something like that would be able to find gold in muddy riverbeds."

A pause became lengthy silence. He's worse than me, he's a worm, he needs a spine transplant, she shouted within herself, then spent the uneasy minutes rearranging the words into a scathing put-down. It came out as:

"Well, I must go. I've got a connect flight to Australia."

"Oh great-- er, place for a holiday."

Helen took a deep breath to relieve the spasm of grief. "I'll be in Melbourne, doing research in the state library."

"Any idea who you're working for yet?"

"No. Do you think they might want to know if McIver's animals are still around-- if they ever existed?"

"Why bother? A commercial metal detector works a hundred times better these days... on the other hand, I suppose that if you bred up and trained a herd of a thousand or so, then they cover a lot more

ground than a human, and for no more pay than a barrel of worms. It just might be possible, but then of course their scientific value would be just astronomical as well. If you do find anything I'd, ah, drop me a line."

"I'll do that. I really must go now. Bye Neil."

He glanced back to the field station. "Bye Helen." No kiss.

It was only on the flight back to Oahu that she realised the glorious truth: the affair was over! No scene, no tears, no long, excruciating discussions. They had broken up by default. She celebrated by getting slightly drunk at a bar near the international airport, then slept soundly for much of the long flight south.

Melbourne turned out to be the hardest phase of the project. She had to search through the local histories for references to Hooligan, especially the ramming of his riverboat. Weeks passed, with no result. There were no references to Hooligan, except for his death notice-- he had drowned in the Murray River at Albury. After the local histories Helen searched the card indexes of the special collections, the collection of early photographs, and even the sound recording archives. She reported daily over her Internet link, telling her nameless employer of the lack of progress.

After the first week she had moved out of the hotel and into a student house near Melbourne University. She was growing to like Melbourne, which was similar to Oakland and San Francisco, yet on a bigger scale. By now she had amassed a fair amount of background knowledge on nineteenth-century Australia's riverboat systems, especially on the role of Americans in running them. Might there be a Ph.D topic here, after the project was over? Of course there would be an interview, yet this was on a subject that she understood well, and she would not be lost for sensible words. She took a tramcar to the University of Melbourne.

The interview with Dr. Merrin of the History Department went well. There was a shortage of students because of recent cuts in government funding, and being a candidate with a good academic record and comfortable savings made Helen a good prospect. The talk moved to her recent work.

"Riverboats?" exclaimed the lecturer. "There's a coincidence. Just last month the History Department's library was given the manuscript of an old riverboat pioneer. He was in his eighties when he died. It's a sort of rambling autobiography, transcribed by one of his sisters from his own words. The writing is a bit overblown-- it was done in the 1940's, after all-- but it's full of good material. I was thinking of editing it for publication. Would you like to have a look through it?"

She certainly did. The straggly writing was on musty paper, with the blue ruling running slightly. On the fifteenth page she found the holy grail that had drawn her around the world.

Then there was the time dad worked for Bren Hooligan, a really mean cove. He came out of the eastern highlands driving a bullock cart with a hardwood cage on the back. There were ten possums in it. One of his men told dad that they were called wateroos.

Now Hooligan hired a sternwheeler steam barge and had the cage put on board while he and his two men went off to buy supplies and fuel. Dad was always hanging about on the docks looking for odd jobs, so they paid him a shilling to feed the possums and clean the cage.

Dad liked animals, and these were so tame that he started to let them out of the cage on a leash, one at a time. He noticed that their back feet were webbed for swimming, and their forepaws were just like hands. Their fingertips were big, soft pads, and gave dad a tingling feeling when they touched him.

Around noon he was sitting on the edge of the barge, flipping his shilling in the air and feeling pretty pleased about having such easy work. Well, he missed a catch, and the coin hit the water. Without thinking he let go of the leash and started to take off his shirt to dive after it. Suddenly the wateroo that was out of the cage jumped straight over the side and disappeared.

Dad said that he was really frightened, and was about ready to pack it in and go bush because Hooligan would have shot him. Then the wateroo surfaced with the coin and handed it to dad. He dived again, and again, going on for about half an hour until dad had over one pound in lost coins, and a gold watch on a chain.

Well dad wasn't stupid, he pocketed the lot. When Hooligan's two men returned, though, he

couldn't resist showing them how the wateroo could fetch a coin out of ten feet of water. They patted him on the head and gave him another shilling, then stood talking for a while. Then, without getting clearance or anything they fired up the boiler, cast off and went steaming away down the river. Dad thought nothing of it, he just sat on a barrel, flipping that shilling in the air. An hour later, along came Hooligan.

"Where's me barge?" he shouted.

"Your men steamed off with it an hour ago," dad said.

"You're the kid we paid to feed the wateroos," he said, grabbing dad by the hair and shaking him. "Where are they? Are they all right? Any sick or dead? Tell me, ye hear?"

"They're all right, they're on the barge," dad shouted. He thought Hooligan would drown him or something. "They're not sick, Mr. Hooligan, why I had one diving for coins around noon. I looked after them real good, that I did Mister Hooligan."

Now Hooligan looked really worried. "Coins? Diving?" he said. "Did ye show Bill and Zeke that trick of diving for coins?"

"That I did."

"Hell and damnation, boy, how d'ye think they find the coins?"

"They see them-- "

"See them be damned, nothing can see in ten feet of muddy water and six inches of silt. They've got special fingers, they can find metal under water and-- and why am I wastin' time here? Come on!"

He dragged dad along the dock until they came to a riverboat that was just stoking up. It was the Lady Daly, and her captain was the Yankee, Gus Pierce. He made dad tell Gus everything about the wateroos, and yelled at Gus to chase after them.

"Sir, it seems like a lot of fuss over a few possums that can find coins under water," said Gus.

"Fool, fool, don't ye see?" shouted Hooligan, almost crazy. "They can find anything metal underwater. They can find gold!"

"Gold! Is that true, boy?" he asked dad. Dad showed him the gold watch, still covered in river silt. He turned back to Hooligan. "Mr. Hooligan, instead of chasing off after your partners, why don't we just go catch some more wateroos then go prospecting?"

Hooligan threw his arms in the air and jumped up and down on the deck.

"The local natives said that there were only fifty left, and that they all lived in one particular mountain pond. They were too hard to catch, so I blasted the pond with barrels of gunpowder. Ten were stunned, the rest were killed. Those ten on the barge are the only ones left in the world! I'll pay ye one hundred pounds, see, I've got the money here. Just get my wateroos back."

That was enough for Gus. He had the Lady Daly cast off and steered down the river, steaming all out. Hooligan's men didn't know much about steam engines, so they were pottering along slowly, trying to get the hang of things. The Lady Daly caught them up by mid-afternoon, and after a few shots from Hooligan's Henry Repeater the pair dropped anchor and raised their hands.

After Bill and Zeke were locked up Gus asked to see a wateroo in action. Hooligan let the biggest one out and made dad drop that gold watch overboard. The wateroo dived and recovered it.

"Now that's mighty impressive, Mister Hooligan," said Gus, looking thoughtful. Hooligan just grunted and started to count the hundred pounds out of his bankroll.

"Now hold on there, Mister Hooligan," Gus went on. "Seems to me that I just did you a valuable service, and that those wateroos are worth more than a hundred pounds. Tell you what, why not keep your money and leave one wateroo with me."

"No!" snapped Hooligan, holding out the money. "We agreed on one hundred pounds. The wateroos are all mine."

Gus just stood there, twirling his handlebar moustache.

"How are we to know that?" he said, smiling. "What say we go back to the Albury magistrate

and let him figure it out."

"They're mine!" shouted Hooligan, suddenly raising his repeater.

Gus must have thought it was a joke, because he just kept smiling and stepped forward. Hooligan fired a shot between his feet. Gus jumped back. Dad dropped the wateroo's lead and raised his hands, and that wateroo jumped right over the side. Hooligan cursed dad like a demon in drink, but it was too late so he jumped onto his barge and cast off. Now the steam barge was fast and light, and the Lady Daly could never have caught it with an experienced man in charge, but the big riverboat was downstream of the barge, and as Hooligan came around Gus called the engine room for full steam and steered to cut him off.

Gus leaned out of the wheelhouse and called "Stand to, Hooligan, and turn those critters over."

Hooligan shouted back "Stand off, Yankee Doodle, or I'll have the redcoats after ye." Then he raised his Henry Repeater and fired two shots through the wheelhouse window. Gus jumped out of the wheelhouse and took cover behind some bales of wool with dad. He returned Hooligan's fire with his two horse pistols. Suddenly dad noticed that the Lady Daly was changing course and heading straight for the steam barge. Hooligan tried to steer out of the way, but even though the wheelhouse was empty the big sternwheeler changed course again and rammed that steam barge.

Being twelve times the weight of the barge, the Lady Daly rode up over it and forced it down until it filled with water and sank. The wateroos were locked in their cage and never had a chance. There was floating wreckage everywhere, and then they saw Hooligan thrashing about in the water. When they pulled him aboard he had a couple of dozen cuts, some of them quite deep.

He was raving mad, saying that the free wateroo had stabbed him with a knife and taken his keys to unlock the cage. Well nobody was going to check on that in a hurry, as the barge sank in forty feet of water. He was locked up and taken back to Albury with Bill and Zeke. Dad said that Hooligan took to rum and drowned five years later when he fell off the pier. The funny thing was that dad's fishing knife did go missing during the excitement.

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After so much time any effort the end came as an anti-climax. She transcribed the text onto her Toshiba's disk and plugged it into the modem. This time it took forty minutes for the Internet message to arrive, but there was no denying that this was the end.

RECD: CONTRACT CONCLUDED

Helen stared in disbelief at the words on the screen, her mouth hanging open. Disbelief turned to admiration. The words were clear, sharp and absolute, there was no agonised lingering, no searching for words to cushion the blow.

In spite of the hot, humid summer evening she sat in the kitchen of the student house for two hours. For a change she needed someone to talk to. The shadowy people on the other end of the Internet link had been secure, reliable companions, people who spoke her language, but now she had been betrayed. No, not betrayed, not at all, they might feel guilty-- but she *had* been betrayed, and they *should* feel guilty! There was such a thing as common courtesy, telling people where they stood: which she had not done with Neil.

"Neil, let's split." She said the words aloud, then cringed at they way they reverberated in the silent kitchen. "This isn't working!" The words were easier this time. They could have saved her the cost of a flight and a hire car.

There was a loud thump on the veranda roof, followed by the patter of heavy feet. Helen glanced at the chewed stump of a marijuana plant in a pot by the window, then smiled. Possums, and city-wise possums at that. "I suppose it's nature's way of telling me to give it up," the plant's owner had said ruefully.

The halting mutter of a badly tuned motorcycle in the street outside announced that someone else was home. Roger was a tutor at University's computer centre.

"G'day Helen," he said, putting his helmet on the hallstand. "How's your day? Mine was shocking. Want a coffee? White with a sugar, isn't it? Caught a hacker, smart bastard, too."

"Hi Roger. I got fired." The words were spoken before she could stop herself.

"One of our second year students. Think they know it all when they're in second year-- fired?"

"That's right."

"Jeez, that's a bit poor."

He sat down and stared across the table at her, unsure of how to be helpful. Back in the States he might be called a computer nerd-- a cybernetics expert with limited social skills.

"Did you get that grant?" she asked. That's right, change the subject, she fumed to herself. You want sympathy, but don't ask.

"Oh yeah, forgot all about that, what with the hacker and all-- I'll be working with a physiologist. He has a volunteer who lost an arm in a car crash, and we're going to wire the nerve stumps into a computer interface. We'll see if we can give him enough control to simulate typing commands by nerve impulses alone."

"So he could just be sitting there typing by thinking about it?"

"That's close. We're also going to feed impulses back to see if he can communicate with the machine without using a screen. Rather like giving him an electrical voice and ears."

An electrical voice! Abruptly a vast number of stray facts in Helen's mind locked into one fantastic pattern. Possums, tingling fingers, a riverboat steered from an empty wheelhouse, awkward and cryptic instructions on Internet.

"Could you tell me about Internet?" she asked, suddenly eager.

Roger blinked. "Well, it's just a network of research computers. It started off in the USA, but it's world-wide now."

"But how does it work?"

"Oh, TCP/IP protocols, and you can have best effort packet switching, dedicated links, or electronic mail. The famous Internet Worm of 1988 spread through the electronic mail."

"I don't understand any of that."

Roger scratched his head. "I'm not sure I can make it any simpler," he said after a moment.

"Look, my former employers supplied this Toshiba laptop PC and a telephone modem. I turn it on, plug it in, then type CONNECT."

"And?"

"I get connected, from wherever I am."

"There's probably some sort of communications program in the PC. It broadcasts your ID packet through the Internet. Rather like calling someone's name in a crowded party."

"Hey, that's great! Why can't you explain things so well all the time?" That was a bold thing to say. She felt proud of herself.

Roger smiled, frowned, opened his mouth to reply, then decided against it. "Can I use the Toshiba?" he finally asked.

It was beside her chair, and she handed it across the table. Within moments he had it running.

"Strange filenames," he reported. "One's called CONNECT, the rest are A, B, C, D and E. No imagination at all. I mean TEST and FRED are bad enough, but A and B?"

It made sense to Helen.

"So you can wire a computer directly into someone's nerves."

"Yeah, of course. It's been done for years, but we're trying to do it a lot better." He inserted a diskette into the Toshiba.

"Suppose we had evolved electric speech? Could we work better with computers?"

"I don't follow," he said, tapping at the keyboard.

"Suppose we could speak using electric impulses when we held hands. Could we 'speak' to computers with those impulses?"

"I... suppose so, in fact it could be a real advantage over keyboards. The only trouble is that electrical speech would be no help while climbing up the evolutionary tree. Imagine trying to run a hunting party if

you had to touch hands before talking."

Helen was aching to talk about an intelligent, electro-sensitive animal surviving long enough to exploit an evolutionary niche in the world-wide communications and computing network, but her terrors came back. She would sound crazy, she wanted Roger to think well of her. Did he matter? Yes, dammit, he was-- she blushed.

Roger stood up. "Think I'll go upstairs and turn off," he said, removing the diskette from the Toshiba and handing it to her. "There, I've copied the Internet link programs onto this floppy."

"What for?"

"Suppose your bosses take your portable back, but you discover that they still owe you money. All you have to do is put this into a PC with a modem, then type A:CONNECT to raise them and say pay up."

She sat turning the diskette over in her fingers as he walked to the stairs. The telephone rang as he passed the hallstand.

"It did what? Just like that? Okay, okay, I'll come over and try to unscramble the mess. Ten minutes, okay?"

He took his helmet from the hallstand and called back to Helen.

"Problem at the computer centre. Sounds like one of our genius undergrads hacked into the Cyber and made a few creative changes to the operating system. I may be out a couple of hours."

With Roger gone she was alone in the house again-- all the others had gone on a hiking trip. She went up to her room, locked the door and switched off the light. Alone in the blackness, she had confidence. The night was still hot and oppressive, so she took off her clothes and lay naked on her bed. She tried to imagine possums that climbed unseen into communications towers, that fingered cables, and manipulated the electronic arteries that controlled the world. Music from her clock-radio pleasantly overlaid the background from traffic outside.

They had been in decline when Europeans had come to those remote mountains in south-east Australia. Then McIver had come past in the 1840's. Perhaps he had dropped a coin or ring into their pool, and one had retrieved it. If aquatic possums could find a gold ring, they could find nuggets also. He took one to California and struck it rich, then talked to Jenkins, Stuart and Hooligan. The rest was history, a history that Helen, alone of all humans, knew.

Hooligan had blasted their pond, stunning a few and killing the rest. Caged and terrified, the last members of the dying species had been carted away and put on Hooligan's steam barge. What nobody had realised was that they might be intelligent, more so than a dog, or even a monkey. One leader, their own Napoleon, Washington or Cromwell, had watched and learned about tools. It had been a standing broad-jump over millions of years to go from mountain pools to steering a riverboat, using keys, and fighting with a knife, yet...

Yet they were aquatic, the use of fire was inimical to them. Their intelligence kept developing without technology, along with an electronic language without wires. Intelligence and speech, but no technology. All at arm's length. After escaping Hooligan they found the early electric telegraph wires strung out across the countryside, and suddenly a huge, empty ecological niche beckoned to them. They could talk in large groups, and over great distances. Were they cybernetic mice or something more? In communications they had a head start, using their natural language while humans used Morse code. More than a century had passed, yet they remained unknown and made no bid for power. Perhaps they had no need to dominate, they merely wanted to preserve the electronic environment that served them so well. So why did they need her? If they understood human computer systems but not human culture, they would need help to trace their own history.

There was a brief fanfare from the radio, and a news bulletin began. Helen listened without hearing. Reports of some local bribery scandal were followed by the cricket scores.

"And here is the State news. A forty-seven-year-old lecturer from Melbourne University was killed tonight when his car failed to take a bend on the Yarra Boulevard. He was Dr. James Merrin of the Department of History. The car was completely burned out..."

Helen sat up on the bed, shaking the little radio as if to get more news out of it. Merrin, dead! She had

phoned him only that afternoon. He said that someone in the U.S. had made a very large bid for the Bollinger manuscript, but he had refused it. He was taking it home with him to begin editing it for publication.

Tiny hands could tamper with the brakes of a car. With a gasp she jumped up, flung the bedroom door open and ran down the stairs to the kitchen. The Toshiba was gone. Naked, shaking with fright, she sank to the floor. They were here! They were desperate to have all records of their existence sponged from human libraries. Even working in secret, after hours, the watercoos could not easily use libraries, so they had hired Helen to trace their history.

And they kept her on the move. What happened in her wake? Did pages disappear from files, books vanish from shelves, data get corrupted in historical computer databases? Had others died? Her work was over now, and she was the only human expert on them. Her work was done. Merrin was dead. She would be next.

She shivered continually in spite of the hot night. How would they come? This was no way to die, sitting naked on a grubby kitchen floor ten thousand miles from home! They were small, they would masquerade as common possums, they would not carry weapons. They would set traps, that was it. She was safe as long as she did not move, but she had to. She was naked, her hair tangled, her face streaked with tears, if Roger came in she would die... her sobs became laughter for a moment.

Yet they were probably frightened too. Once they had been rare, powerless, yet immensely valuable. They had been very nearly wiped out by humans because of that. Now they were powerful, yet perhaps still vulnerable. Humans would fear them. This time their extinction might be from systematic slaughter, not bungling incompetence.

Helen noticed her jacket draped over the back of a chair, and she reached out for it. Her fingers closed on something hard in a pocket. A diskette. The diskette that Roger had prepared from the missing Toshiba. With a sudden surge of hope she took the diskette out and flung the jacket aside. Roger had a PC in his room, and with a modem wired illegally into the house telephone. She could get in contact with them! Then what?

Plead for mercy? Threaten to expose them? Swear that she would never mention them to anyone? They were aliens, true aliens. They had minds and values unimaginably different to those of humans. She could not reason with them, they would not feel pity, or guilt, or greed. She the worst of communicators, yet she had to be the first human to consciously contact an alien society. Or die. What to say? "Give me a line to your leader?" Too silly. "Please, I know you want to kill me but I promise not to expose you." No, too dramatic, she would rather die than... she laughed again.

When do I speak most easily, she wondered. When telling people what they wanted to hear. "Mom, I got honours," had been easy. "Sure Neil, I don't mind if you take Lindy to Aspen." Well, that had hurt, but it had been easy. Yet these were aliens. Webbed feet, electric fingers, furry bodies, so who could know what their values were. Yet they did value things, they had paid tens of thousands of dollars to erase themselves from human history. She could make them listen.

Slowly, carefully, ever watchful for tripwires and traps, she climbed the stairs and walked down the passageway. Roger's door was unlocked. She looked in. It was chaotic, rather than dirty, and a PC stood ready on his desk. She booted it up, inserted the diskette and typed A:CONNECT.

BAD COMMAND OR FILE NAME flashed at her. She gasped, her heart sank, tears trickled down her cheeks as she teetered on the brink of hysteria. She held on, forced herself to think. There were two slots for diskettes in this PC: perhaps the top one was not drive A. She removed one of Roger's diskettes from the lower drive and replaced it with her own. She typed A:CONNECT again. Now there was a familiar series of connection messages, but no master acknowledgement: they did not want to talk, but were they listening? Helen typed.

Extract from the newly discovered diary of Rob McIver:

December 10, 1848: Now the funny thing is that whenever I touched the beastie's fingers I got a tingling feeling, like when you sleep on your arm and wake up with it feeling full of pins and needles. I am not a well educated man, but I think this is something to do with the way it can find coins that I throw into the pool. If I was to take the beastie to a gold rush, it could find enough

gold for me to buy Buckingham Palace."

NOW THAT I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, ASK YOURSELVES IF YOU CAN VERIFY THAT QUOTE. IF YOU CANNOT, YOU NEED A GOOD HISTORIAN. YOU NEED ME.

Forty minutes passed, forty minutes of staring at a screen and scarcely breathing while her life hung by an electronic thread.

RECD: ACKNOWLEDGED. PAYMENT ON COMMISSION

She flopped across the desk in relief, utterly drained. It was like lying in a stupor after good sex, all exhaustion and contented bliss. Sleep washed around her like a warm incoming tide. Roger would be home soon, would find her here. What would he think? She smiled. What would she say? She would find words. After tonight communication with mere humans would never again be a problem.

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