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Amnesia

Written by Peter Carey

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Peter Carey

AMNESIA

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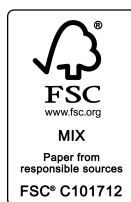
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FOR FRANCES COADY

PART ONE

1

It was a spring evening in Washington DC; a chilly autumn morning in Melbourne; it was exactly 22.00 Greenwich Mean Time when a worm entered the computerised control systems of countless Australian prisons and released the locks in many other places of incarceration, some of which the hacker could not have known existed. Because Australian prison security was, in the year 2010, mostly designed and sold by American corporations the worm immediately infected 117 US federal correctional facilities, 1700 prisons, and over 3000 county jails. Wherever it went, it travelled underground, in darkness, like a bushfire burning in the roots of trees. Reaching its destinations it announced itself: THE CORPORATION IS UNDER OUR CONTROL. THE ANGEL DECLARES YOU FREE.

This message and others more elaborate were read, in English, by warders in Texas, contractors in Afghanistan, Kurdistan, in immigrant detention camps in Australia, in Woomera, black sites in the Kimberley, secret centres of rendition at the American ‘signals facility’ near Alice Springs. Sometimes prisoners escaped. Sometimes they were shot and killed. Bewildered Afghans and Filipinos, an Indonesian teenager wounded by gunfire, a British Muslim dying of dehydration, all these previously unknown individuals were seen on public television, wandering on outback roads.

The security monitors in Sydney's Villawood facility read: THE ANGEL OF THE LORD BY NIGHT OPENED THE PRISON DOORS, AND BROUGHT THEM FORTH. My former colleagues asked, what does this language tell us about the perpetrator?

I didn't give a toss. I was grateful for a story big enough to push me off the front pages where I had already suffered PANTS ON FIRE. I was spending my days in the Supreme Court of New South Wales paying Nigel Willis QC \$500 an hour so I could be sued for defamation. Nigel's 'billable hours' continued to accrue well past the stage when it became clear that he was a fuckwit and I didn't have a chance in hell, but cheer up mate: he was betting 3:2 on a successful appeal. That my barrister also owned a racehorse was not the point.

Meanwhile there was not much for me to do but read the papers. FEDS NOW SAY ANGEL IS AN AUSSIE WORM.

'Would the defendant like to tell the court why he is reading a newspaper.'

'I am a journalist, m'lud. It is my trade.'

Attention was then brought to the state of my tweed jacket. Ha-ha, m'lud. When the court had had its joke, we adjourned for lunch and I, being unaccompanied on that particular day, took my famously shambolic self across to the botanic gardens where I read the *Daily Telegraph*. Down by the rose gardens amongst the horseshit fertiliser, I learned that the terrorist who had been 'obviously' a male Christian fundamentalist had now become the daughter of a Melbourne actress. The traitor appeared very pale and much younger than her thirty years. Dick Connolly got the photo credit but his editor had photoshopped her for in real life she would turn out to be a solid little thing whose legs were strong and sturdy, not at all like the waif in the *Telegraph*. She was from

Coburg, in the north of Melbourne, a flat, forgotten industrial suburb coincidentally once the site of Pentridge Prison. She came to her own arraignment in a black hoodie, slouching, presumably to hide the fact that our first homegrown terrorist had a beautiful face.

Angel was her handle. Gaby was her name in what I have learned is 'meat world'. She was charged as Gabrielle Baillieux and I had known her parents long ago – her mother was the actress Celine Baillieux, her father Sando Quinn, a Labor member of parliament.

I returned to my own court depressed, not by the outcome of my case, which was preordained, but by the realisation that my life in journalism was being destroyed at the time I might have expected my moment in the sun.

I had published several books, fifty features, a thousand columns, mainly concerned with the traumatic injury done to my country by our American allies in 1975. While my colleagues leapt to the conclusion that the hacker was concerned simply with freeing boat people from Australian custody, I took the same view as our American allies, that this was an attack on the United States. It was clear to me, straight away, that the events of 1975 had been a first act in this tragedy and that the Angel Worm was a retaliation. If Washington was right, this was the story I had spent my life preparing for. If the 'events of 1975' seem confusing or enigmatic to you, then that is exactly my point. They are all part of 'The Great Amnesia'. More TC.

In court, I listened as my publisher got a belting from the judge and I saw his face when he finally understood he could not even sell my book as remaindered.

'Pulp?' he said.

'Including that copy in your hand.'

Damages were awarded against me for \$120,000. Was I insured or not insured? I did not know.

The crowd outside the court was as happy as a hanging day.

'Feels, Feels,' the News International guy shouted. 'Look this way. Felix.'

That was Kev Dawson, a cautious little prick who made his living rewriting press releases.

'Look this way Feels.'

'What do you think about the verdict, Feels?'

What I thought was: our sole remaining left-wing journalist had been pissed on from a mighty height. And what was my crime? Repeating press releases? No, I had reported a rumour. In the world of grown-ups a rumour is as much a 'fact' as smoke. To omit the smoke is to fail to communicate the threat in the landscape.

In the Supreme Court of New South Wales this was defamation.

'What next, Felix?'

Rob a bank? Shoot myself? Certainly, no-one would give me the Angel story although I was better equipped (*Wired* magazine take note) to write it than any of the clever children who would be hired to do the job. But I was, as the judge had been pleased to point out, no longer employable in 'your former trade'. I had been a leader writer, a columnist, a so-called investigative reporter. I had inhabited the Canberra Press Gallery where my 'rumours' had a little power. I think Alan Ramsey may have even liked me. For a short period in the mid-seventies, I was host of *Drivetime Radio* on the ABC.

I was an aging breadwinner with a ridiculous mortgage. I had therefore been a screenwriter and a weekend novelist. I had written both history and political satire, thrillers, investigative crime. The screen adaptation of my novel *Barbie and the Deadheads*

was workshopped at Robert Redford's Sundance Institute.

But through this, even while bowing and scraping to get 'seed money' from the Australian Film Commission, I remained a socialist and a servant of the truth. I had been sued ninety-eight times before they brought me down with this one, and along the way I had exposed the deeds of Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch (both Old Geelong Grammarians, btw) always a very dangerous occupation for a family man, and apparently terrifying for those who rely on him for succour. As the doors of the mainstream media closed to anyone unworldly enough to write the truth, I still published 'Lo-tech Blog', a newsletter printed on acid paper which was read by the entire Canberra Press Gallery and all of parliament besides. Don't ask how we paid our electricity bill.

I worked as a journalist in a country where the flow of information was controlled by three corporations. Their ability to manipulate the 'truth' made the right to vote largely meaningless, but I was a journalist. I did my best. In 'Lo-tech Blog', I revealed the Australian press's cowardly reporting of the government lies about the refugees aboard the ill-fated *Oolong*.

'I can't comprehend how genuine refugees would throw their children overboard,' said our Prime Minister.

Once again, like 1975, here was a lie of Goebbelsesque immensity. The fourth estate made a whole country believe the refugees were animals and swine. Many think so still.

Yet the refugees belonged here. They would have been at home with the best of us. We have a history of courage and endurance, of inventiveness in the face of isolation and mortal threat. At the same time, alas, we have displayed this awful level of cowardice, brown-nosing, criminality, mediocrity and nest-feathering.

I was overweight and out of breath but I was proud to be sued, reviled, scorned, to be called a loser by the rewriters of press

releases. I took comfort from it, which was just as well because there was comfort nowhere else. As would be confirmed in the weeks ahead, none of my old mates were going to rescue me from the slow soul-destroying grind of unemployment.

A five-star hotel might seem an unwise venue for a bedraggled outcast to lick his wounds but the Wentworth was favoured by my old mate Woody 'Wodonga' Townes. My dearest friends all exhibit a passionate love of talk and drink, but of this often distinguished crowd it was Woody Townes who had the grit and guts. He had attended court every day although he had had to fly seven hundred kilometres from Melbourne. Any fight I had, he was always by my side. And when I had endured the whacking from the press I found him where I knew he would be, where he had waited on almost every gruesome afternoon, with his meaty body jammed into a small velvet chair in the so-called Garden Court. The moment he spotted me he began pouring champagne with his left hand. It was a distinctive pose: the heavy animal leg crossed against his shiny thigh, the right elbow held high to ward off the attentions of an eager waiter.

I considered my loyal friend's exposed white calves, his remarkable belt, his thick neck, the high colour in his cheeks and I thought, not for the first time, that it is Melbourne's talent to produce these extraordinary eighteenth-century figures. In a more contested space, life would compress them, but down south, at the Paris end of Collins Street, there was nothing to stop him expanding to occupy the frame. He was a Gillray

engraving – indulgence, opinion, power.

By profession my mate was a ‘property developer’ and I presumed he must be sometimes involved in the questionable dealings of his caste. My wife thought him a repulsive creature, but she never gave herself a chance to know him. He was both a rich man and a courageous soldier of the left. He was a reliable patron of unpopular causes and (although he was possibly tone deaf) Chairman of the South Bank Opera Company. He financially supported at least two atonal composers who would otherwise have had to teach high school. He had also bankrolled my own ill-fated play. Woody’s language could be abusive. He did occasionally spoil his philanthropy by demanding repayment via small services, but he could be relied upon to physically and legally confront injustice. In a time when the Australian Labor Party was becoming filled with white-collar careerists straight from university, Woody was old-school – he did not fear the consequences of belief.

‘Fuck them all,’ he said, and ground the champagne bottle down into the ice. That would be pretty much the content of our conversation, and three bottles later, after several rounds of fancy nibbles, he called for the bill, paid from a roll of fifties, got me into a taxi and gave me a Cabcharge voucher to sign at the other end.

‘No surrender,’ he said, or words to that effect.

It was only a short drive across the Anzac Bridge to our house at Rozelle. Here the best part of my life awaited me, my wife, two daughters, but – in the narrow passageway of our slightly damp terrace house, there stood, by poisonous chance, five cardboard cartons of my book, maliciously delivered that very afternoon.

Were these for me to pulp myself?

Was this not hilarious, that my puce-faced publisher, with his big house in Pymble, had gone to the trouble and expense of having boxes sent to my humble door? I was laughing so much I barely

managed to carry this burden through the house. Apparently my daughters saw me and cared so little for my distress that they went straight up to watch the Kardashians. Claire must have been there somewhere, but I didn't see her yet. I was much more occupied with enacting the court order.

I could never light a barbecue. I had no manual skills at all. It was my athletic Claire who handled the electric drill, not me.

Naturally I overcompensated with the firefighters. Did I really enclose a free firefighter in every book? Was that a joke? How would I know? It was not necessarily self-pitying and pathetic that I set my own books on fire, but it was certainly stupid or at least ill-informed to add a litre of petrol to those feeble flames. I was unprepared for the violent force, the great whoosh that lifted off my eyebrows and caught the lower limbs of our beloved jacaranda.

As the flames crawled from the branches to the second-floor extension, I should – people never cease insisting – have picked up the garden hose and put it out. Fine, but these dear friends did not see what I saw. I made my judgement. I chose human life before real estate. I rushed up the stairs and snatched the audience from the Kardashians. Yes, my babies were teenagers. Yes, they resisted, but here was no time for explanation and I had no choice but treat them roughly. Apparently I smelled 'like a cross between a pub and a lawnmower'. I rushed them out into the street and left them screaming.

I don't know what happened then, but somehow the next-door copywriter stole my girls and the Balmain fire brigade were soon pushing me aside, dragging their filthy hoses down our hall and Claire, my wife, my comfort, my lover, my friend was waiting for me.

The next bit should remain private from our kids. But I will never forget exactly what was said.