

***THE POACHED CAFÉ***

***C.J.Naylor***

*naylorstwo@yahoo.com.au*

***CHARACTERS***

ETTIE                      Café owner, fifties

BILL                        Local, friend of Sharon, forties

SHARON                  Local, friend of Bill, forties

***SETTING***                      A small café in a regional town

***TIME***                              The present

## **SCENE 1**

*A café. BILL and SHARON drinking coffee. BILL reading a newspaper. ETTIE, cleaning a table nearby.*

BILL: *(showing newspaper; shaking head)* I don't know why you have these things.

ETTIE: So you can read them.

BILL: They're full of tripe.

ETTIE: Well, you don't have to. You can just drink your coffee.

BILL: If there's not any sport there's nothing.

SHARON: The coffee's good, Ettie.

ETTIE: Thanks.

BILL: *(turning pages)* Nothing... *(sees story of interest)* Oh. Ah. Look at that!...

SHARON: *(looks)* Churns your stomach, doesn't it.

ETTIE: What?

BILL: Oh that thing with the girl getting attacked in park.

*They both look at the article and picture.*

ETTIE: Yeah. That was bad.

BILL: It's not safe anywhere these days.

SHARON: Right near some houses too. You think someone would have seen it.

BILL: Hanging's too good for them. Too good. That's what I say.

SHARON: We don't have it anymore Bill.

BILL: We should. I'd put the rope around his neck myself.

SHARON: Then you'll get all the do-gooders coming out of the woodwork saying what a bad upbringing he had. Beaten when he was a kid-

BILL: All the bleeding hearts.

SHARON: Broken family. All the rest of it.

BILL: Doesn't help the poor girl.

SHARON: What about her family?

BILL: *(sympathetic sigh)* Yeah.

SHARON: They've got to deal with it.

ETTIE: If you ask me, they're nutcases - guys that do these things. They always seem to have something wrong with them...

SHARON: Like what?

ETTIE: You know. Schizophrenics. That sort of thing. Something wrong with them from the start.

SHARON: There's got to be a way of identifying them. When they're young. Manage them. Keep them off the streets.

ETTIE: How are you going to do that?

SHARON: I don't know. There was talk of chemical castration back a few years. Remember.

ETTIE: That's a bit rich if they haven't offended in the first place.

SHARON: If they're likely to.

ETTIE: How would you know?

SHARON: There'd be signs.

ETTIE: Signs?

SHARON: They'd have done something before.

ETTIE: Hoh. Why don't you put them in leg irons, be done with it. Bring out the cat-o-nine tails into the bargain.

BILL: There you go. Bleeding-heart Ettie. Next thing you'll be having them around here for coffee trying to mother them.

ETTIE: You can't reform someone who's got a chemical imbalance. Or whatever it might be.

BILL: You know what? I don't want to read newspapers any more. It makes me sick. Sick to the teeth.

SHARON: Well, put it down then.

BILL: Maybe I will. (*puts paper down*)

ETTIE: Another cuppa?

BILL: That'd be good Ettie.

SHARON: Not for me.

*Pours BILL a cuppa.*

BILL: Ah. You hear something every week now. I can't remember all this when we were younger.

ETTIE: We see a lot more things on the tele now. We hear about it more on the radio.

BILL: But it's different now. Different.

ETTIE: How?

BILL: It just is!

ETTIE: You're just getting caught up in the media talk.

SHARON: No. They've got to do something about it.

BILL: They never do anything.

SHARON: They never do.

*A little bell. ERIC enters sits.*

BILL: The word's spread Ettie.

ETTIE: What?

BILL: Your coffee. You've got a customer. Haha.

SHARON: A younger one too.

BILL: Must be the new sign you've got out front.

ETTIE: *(turns to ERIC)* Won't be a moment.

SHARON: *(indicates a sign)* 'Ettie's Coffee House'. Very stylish.

BILL: The old one was so faded. Never knew what it said anyway.

SHARON: *(looking at ERIC)* That one. He looks familiar.

BILL: Can't say that I've seen him.

SHARON: His face.

ETTIE: *(to ERIC)* Can I help you?

ERIC: Is the breakfast menu still on?

ETTIE: What's the time? Eleven. Go on. What would you like?

ERIC: Um. Maybe the eggs and sausages.

ETTIE: You can have mushrooms and beans as a side.

ERIC: Oh. Mushrooms.

ETTIE: How do you have the eggs?

ERIC: Poached.

ETTIE: Sorry. We can't do 'poached' today.

ERIC: Oh. Maybe just a flat white then.

ETTIE: No eggs and sausages?

ERIC: No.

ETTIE: (*jots it on pad*) You're new around here?

ERIC: Just moved in. On the north side.

ETTIE: Oh.

ERIC: Thought I might get some work in the mines.

ETTIE: It pays good money.

ERIC: I was told by a friend there could be some work.

ETTIE: Most of the mines have closed down here over the years. A lot of people have left. There's not a lot going on these days.

ERIC: Can I have it fairly milky?

ETTIE: Right. One fairly milky coffee coming up (*exits to make it*)

SHARON: (*to BILL*) He doesn't look as though he's been near a mine.

BILL: I was thinking that. He looks a bit like Marion's boy.

SHARON: No. It's not him.

BILL: He went down to the big smoke, didn't he?

SHARON: A few years back, yes.

BILL: I wouldn't know what he looked like these days.

SHARON: They grow up so quickly.

*They look at ERIC, trying to work him out. ERIC notices this, and feels compelled to say something.*

ERIC: Morning.

BILL: Hello.

ERIC: It's a nice little spot you've got here.

SHARON: Ettie's been doing it up in the last year.

ERIC: I meant the town. It's a nice little town.

BILL: Yes. It is.

SHARON: I grew up here. So did Bill. Everyone knows you. It's that sort of place.

BILL: I really don't know why anyone would want to leave it.

SHARON: Where are you from?

ERIC: Brisbane.

SHARON: Oh. You've got family nearby?

ERIC: No. I just wanted to live a quiet place. Where no one knows me. This looked as good as any.

BILL: People are pretty friendly here. Once you get to know them.

ERIC: I'm not really interested in meeting a lot of people.

SHARON: Oh. *(thinks this is weird, quick look to BILL)*

ERIC: I just want a quiet life.

BILL: Sick of the hurly burly of the city?

ERIC: You could say that.

SHARON: A lot of people are. But we don't get many like you here.

BILL: They go to the coastal areas, more than often.

SHARON: It's unusual coming here.

ERIC: I just want to get away from prying eyes. Where people won't hassle me.

BILL: I can understand what you're saying, but we're good here. We're good people. Aren't we Sharon?

SHARON: We sure are.

ERIC: I stayed in a place before and people upset me. I had to leave.

BILL: Did you?

ERIC: I don't like a lot of people about.

SHARON: You don't?

ERIC: I couldn't take it any more...

BILL: Oh.

ERIC: Having to watch my back.

ETTIE: *(enters)* Your coffee.

ERIC: *(the coffee arrives, turns)* Ah yes.

ETTIE: *(puts coffee down)* Enjoy.

ERIC: Thanks. *(takes a sip)*

*ETTIE retreats to clean more tables.*

BILL: So, mining?

ERIC: Well...

BILL: Have you had much experience?

ERIC: A friend told me about it.

BILL: I see.

ERIC: I-I need to sort a few things out. Get my life together.

BILL: Well, of course. I guess we all do.

ERIC: Buy a lawnmower and a fridge. Things.

BILL: A fridge?

ERIC: *(drinks coffee, slurping, and using fingers throughout)*  
It's very nice coffee.

SHARON: *(to BILL, quiet)* Don't say anything.

BILL: What?

SHARON: *(circling finger to mean nutty)* Tell you later.

ERIC: The grass is overgrown. I don't think it's been cut in a long time.

BILL: Yeah, I think I've got to take a look at mine. The weeds sneak up on you.

ERIC: I think there's snakes.

BILL: Snakes? *(looks at SHARON, puzzled by ERIC)*

ERIC: I saw something wriggling there yesterday.

*BILL and SHARON turn away from him, and continue to drink their coffee. Things go quiet. But ERIC drinks his coffee noisily and quickly, then gets up, a little agitated in manner and goes up to pay.*

ETTIE: Finished already?

ERIC: *(impulsive)* I've got to go back.

ETTIE: Oh. That's four dollars.

ERIC: It was very nice. *(wants to get out of there)*

BILL: See you again sometime.

ERIC: *(feebly)* Yes.

*ERIC leaves swiftly.*

ETTIE: You didn't say anything?

BILL: No we were sweet.

SHARON: I think he's the one.

ETTIE: I don't want to lose a customer.

SHARON: I think he's the one they've been talking about.

BILL: What one?

SHARON: You know. The one they said was going into Cliff Avenue.

BILL: Hell no! *(stands, watches ERIC through the window, concerned)*

## **SCENE 2**

*A few days later. ETTIE is wiping tables clean, when the little bell tinkles. SHARON enters.*

SHARON: They're all up there. Going crazy.

ETTIE: They're not.

SHARON: The stuff they're calling out. It'd make your ears fall off.

ETTIE: No.

SHARON: It's pretty vile.

ETTIE: Can't they just leave him alone?

SHARON: We don't want him here. They have to know that.

ETTIE: What's going to happen?

SHARON: I came to get you.

ETTIE: I can't really leave the shop.

SHARON: We need a show of strength. Let them know what we think.

ETTIE: They've been outside the place now, placards and all, for two days, and nothing's come of it.

SHARON: It will. We've got to keep the pressure up. That's why you should go up there.

ETTIE: Sharon...

SHARON: I can look after the shop for a bit, if you like.

ETTIE: (*maybe*) Well...

SHARON: It'll mean a lot. Show we're all in this. You're a respected citizen of this town!

ETTIE: They should have told people he was here. Not have this going on.

SHARON: They've hidden him at the far end of the house now. You can't get through.

ETTIE: I don't know about this. It's going a bit far.

SHARON: We want to get our message across. There's talk a TV channel might cover it.

ETTIE: Television? Ah.

SHARON: We don't want people like him coming here, Ettie.

ETTIE: I knew there was something different about him that first day he came in here.

SHARON: He was creepy. I could smell it a mile away.

ETTIE: They'll find him another place won't they?...

SHARON: It's a disgrace.

ETTIE: Surely.

SHARON: They're not telling us, not giving us any information at all.

ETTIE: I suppose they can't.

SHARON: It's laughable. The coppers outside, trying to look inconspicuous. But every knows.

ETTIE: I wonder why they chose here. It doesn't really look like a place where you'd re-settle a convict.

SHARON: Goodness knows why.

ETTIE: So he's this beach murderer, someone was saying.

SHARON: Remember. Up on the Gold Coast a few years back now.

ETTIE: I don't know that I do.

SHARON: He drove her along the beach in that four-wheel drive. She went missing.

ETTIE: Oh, that one.

SHARON: The lawyers cooked up a deal. You know how it is. Marion Schwarz, she was telling me.

ETTIE: Well, she'd know.

SHARON: She saw the story in the newspaper. He got a lighter sentence. Some technicality.

ETTIE: Oh.

SHARON: He shouldn't have. And now he's out.

ETTIE: And here.

SHARON: There's a car parked outside the house with Queensland number plates.

ETTIE: Queensland?

SHARON: He said he was from Brisbane.

ETTIE: He did.

SHARON: They move them interstate...

ETTIE: How can they do that?....

SHARON: So no one knows.

ETTIE: Not tell us.

SHARON: We'll never be safe...

ETTIE: I don't understand it.

SHARON: Never.

BILL: (*enters, agitated*) It's getting out of hand!

ETTIE: What?

BILL: You should see it. You wouldn't believe it.

ETTIE: What?

BILL: They've gone and broken down the back fence. A few got in and tossed bricks through the window.

ETTIE: Hell no!

BILL: He took off.

SHARON: What?

BILL: He's gone. Up the street and over the hill.

SHARON: No!

BILL: I don't know where.

ETTIE: This is too much. It's got out of hand!

SHARON: What are we going to do now?

BILL: I don't know.

SHARON: They'll have people out after him. Surely.

BILL: Well, I don't know.

SHARON: What?

BILL: He hasn't done anything they can hold him for.

SHARON: Except kill a girl on a beach.

BILL: It's crazy, isn't it?

SHARON: A loony on the loose and all they do is protect him.

BILL: Not any more...An absolute farce.

SHARON: Where would he go?

BILL: There's nowhere *to* go.

SHARON: They can't keep him here.

BILL: The trouble is, he's a free man. Free to wander about the community.

SHARON: They'll take him somewhere else. Won't they?

BILL: If he wants to stay there's nothing stopping him...

SHARON: We'll never be safe.

BILL: But I don't think we should let that happen. We've got to do something.

SHARON: I won't be able to go to sleep at night. I keep thinking of that girl on the beach with her throat cut.



ETTIE: You can't stay here.

ERIC: I won't stay. I just want a coffee. You couldn't make me one, missus.

ETTIE: Make you a coffee?

ERIC: So I can get warm.

ETTIE: I shouldn't even be talking to you.

ERIC: Just a small coffee.

ETTIE: Small?

ERIC: Yes. On milk. I find it soothing.

ETTIE: What if the others come here?

ERIC: I'll take my chances.

ETTIE: They're in an ugly mood.

ERIC: They don't understand.

ETTIE: I can't blame them.

ERIC: They don't understand my situation.

ETTIE: I think they do.

ERIC: I've got nowhere else to go. (*step forward*)

ETTIE: Don't come near me! (*steps away*)

ERIC: I just want a coffee missus.

ETTIE: You haven't got a knife?

ERIC: A knife. No. What would I be doing with a knife?

ETTIE: It's really not safe for you here.

ERIC: I came to get warm. You were kind to me the other day.

ETTIE: People will come here soon.

ERIC: I only want a coffee.

ETTIE: You're sure you don't have a knife?

ERIC: No. I'll have my coffee and be gone.

ETTIE: Oh.

ERIC: Then I won't trouble you any more.

ETTIE: I pictured you as different.

ERIC: Different?

ETTIE: You seem just like any another person.

ERIC: Would it be too much to trouble you? Just a small coffee.

ETTIE: Well. I'll see what I can do.

ERIC: It'd be much appreciated.

ETTIE: You won't hurt me?

ERIC: I promise.

ETTIE: A coffee.

ERIC: Yes.

ETTIE: (*turns to make him one, stops*) I have to say I don't like what you've done.

ERIC: No one's letting me forget it. But now I want to make amends.

ETTIE: I suppose you have to live somehow.

ERIC: You don't know what it's been like missus. Always wondering who's around the next corner. What's going to happen to you...

ETTIE: A coffee.

ERIC: Yes.

*Pause: she considers things. There's the noise of people outside, yelling.*

ETTIE: Oh. They're here!

ERIC: Ahh. *(moves to go)*

ETTIE: They can't see you!

ERIC: No. *(retreats)*

ETTIE: You'll have to go. *(looks where they are)* They're coming this way.

ERIC: No.

ETTIE: Quick. Hide out the back.

ERIC: The back.

ETTIE: Through into the kitchen. *(she ushers him out)*

ERIC: Thank you.

BILL: *(enters looking for ETTIE)* Ettie?...Ettie?...

ETTIE: *(enters after a moment)* Bill.

BILL: Oh, there you are.

ETTIE: *(wiping hands on apron)* Cleaning the stove. It's an endless task.

BILL: He's disappeared.

ETTIE: What do you mean?

BILL: Clean disappeared. Gone.

ETTIE: Where would he go?

BILL: They think he may have taken off into the bush. No one knows.

ETTIE: The bush?

BILL: It's pretty dense. It'd take a long time to find him out there.

ETTIE: It would.

BILL: The deep gullies and so on. There's quite a few caves he could hide in.

ETTIE: Caves?

BILL: Oh yes. He could be down there for weeks and no one would know. It'd make it near impossible.

**SCENE 4**

*The three of them. ETTIE brings more coffee.*

SHARON: It was for the best.

BILL: Maybe you're right.

SHARON: Sometimes things happen. Events have a way of finding the right course.

BILL: You wonder what his life would have been like here anyway.

SHARON: Intolerable.

BILL: He's at peace now.

SHARON: Some sort of peace, I guess.

BILL: We've got our lives back. Which is the important thing.

ETTIE: They're saying it mightn't have been suicide.

BILL: What else could it be?

ETTIE: The way he was found...

BILL: Of course it was.

ETTIE: Dangling from the swing with the chain wrapped around his neck.

BILL: It's pretty obvious to me.

ETTIE: I'm not so sure.

SHARON: Oh come on Ettie...

ETTIE: He didn't seem the type.

SHARON: It's as obvious as the nose on your face.

ETTIE: The police have got suspicions. They've taped off the area.

BILL: They always do that...

SHARON: A kid's playground, a crime scene. That's a bit rich.

BILL: It's procedure.

SHARON: The last thing we want now is the police running around pestering people over this. We've had enough.

BILL: Yes. They should just call it a suicide and be done with it.

ETTIE: They have to do their jobs.

BILL: (*sighs*) Ah. I don't know why they just can't let us be.

SHARON: What was he doing there at the swings anyway?

BILL: Anyone's guess. The guy was a nutter. Who knows.

ETTIE: There's been no mention of him touching children.

SHARON: You know, I think he was overwhelmed feelings of guilt. He saw the swing and that was his opportunity.

ETTIE: It would have been difficult for one person to do that to themselves. With the swing. I've been thinking about it.

BILL: You mean another person?

ETTIE: Maybe more than one.

BILL: If there is, they're not going to be telling, that's for sure.

SHARON: It's bizarre. The chain and swing twisted around his neck like that. Who'd do that?

BILL: I can name any number of people in this town that have had their emotions running high the last days.

SHARON: You can't say that Bill!

BILL: I'm not saying who, I'm just saying there'd be any number.

SHARON: Well, as far as I'm concerned it's over. We don't want an investigation on top of everything else.

BILL: That's right. The town's had enough.

SHARON: *(hand up to neck)* We've had it up to here.

BILL: We want our town back.

SHARON: Some tranquility. That's all we're asking.

***SCENE 5***

*ETTIE has been interviewed by the police and returns.*

ETTIE: *(enters)* Hi.

BILL: What happened?

ETTIE: They wanted to know if he'd been here.

BILL: Oh.

SHARON: You didn't say anything?

ETTIE: I had to. Someone saw him leave out the back.

SHARON: Why did you let him stay?

ETTIE: He was cold, freezing. He wanted coffee.

BILL: You should have told him to go.

ETTIE: I couldn't do that. Even for a dog. You should have seen him. He was miserable.

SHARON: Now you're bringing the police into it. I don't like that Ettie.

ETTIE: I couldn't really say he hadn't been here. I would have been lying to them. You know what that means.

SHARON: Who saw him?

ETTIE: They didn't say. Someone.

SHARON: What else did they say?

ETTIE: A car stopped to pick him up.

SHARON: A car.

ETTIE: They think it was a red Toyota. Down the street a bit.

SHARON: Oh.

ETTIE: But they weren't sure.

BILL: Could have been anyone.

ETTIE: It could have. But there aren't too many red Toyotas in town.

SHARON: Why don't you leave it alone Ettie!

ETTIE: You want me to? You want me to say nothing.

SHARON: It's only going to cause more trouble.

BILL: I know you think it was me, Ettie. Well, your right.

SHARON: Shut up Bill!

BILL: I'm going to have to tell her now.

SHARON: You should have shut up while the going was good.

BILL: We saw him running up the street.

ETTIE: We?

SHARON: Yeah... I was there too.

BILL: Coming from the café here. A group of them saw him, and chased after him.

ETTIE: I didn't know that.

BILL: He ran straight up past us. He was frightened. He came over to the car, recognized us. He wanted a lift.

SHARON: Oh gees Bill. You should have said nothing.

BILL: He was desperate to get away from the mob. I let him in. He wanted to go down to the park where the shed and toilet are. He thought he'd be safe there... I thought it was a great chance. I was going to just drive and drive. Take him a couple of hundred kilometres away. Completely away from our town. Let him out there. Solve everything.

ETTIE: But you didn't?

BILL: No. He just wanted to sleep. He looked terrible. So I let him off at the park. He'd sleep the night and leave, he said. I told him about the caves further down in the bushland. How he could hide out there. But he had to leave the town. He nodded his head.

SHARON: We left him there in good faith. Honestly.

BILL: I think he suicided.

ETTIE: The police don't think so.

BILL: We didn't have anything to do with it. I told you. We just let him off.

ETTIE: Someone has got to him in the meantime.

BILL: Ah hell. The police are going to be all over this. There'll be question after question.

SHARON: Can't they just mind their own business and leave it at that.

BILL: It had to be suicide. He wasn't in a good frame of mind.

ETTIE: Perhaps it was.

SHARON: We need to stick together on this. We're a nice little community Ettie.

ETTIE: Of course we are.

SHARON: Do we need to mention things we don't need to?

ETTIE: If I'm not asked then I can't say anything.

BILL: You're a good friend Ettie.

ETTIE: I'm just telling you what the police said.

SHARON: We're all a part of this. We didn't want him here.

ETTIE: We didn't.

SHARON: It would have killed us. Killed the community. Kids walking down the street with a murderer living close by. You've got to understand that Ettie.

ETTIE: I understand it alright.

BILL: It's for the best Ettie.

ETTIE: Perhaps it is. But it doesn't make it right.

***SCENE 6***

*BILL and SHARON enter. They wait for ETTIE.*

SHARON:                   Ettie...Ettie...

BILL:                        She wouldn't be out somewhere?

SHARON:                   I don't think so.

BILL:                        She would have put the sign on the door.

ETTIE:                      *(enters, with apron on, teary) Sorry. (wiping hands on apron)*

SHARON:                   How are you?

ETTIE:                      Oh. As well as one can be.

SHARON:                   Oh?

ETTIE:                      Busy.

SHARON:                   You need someone else to help out.

ETTIE:                      Maybe.

BILL:                        Another girl.

ETTIE:                      It does get busy at times. But it's quiet too.

BILL:                        You can't do all the cooking and serving.

ETTIE:                      I manage.

SHARON:                   You're running yourself into the ground.

ETTIE:                      I don't think I'd really be able to afford it.

SHARON:                   *(looks at ETTIE)* Is there anything wrong?

ETTIE:                      Wrong?

SHARON:                   You don't look your usual self.

ETTIE:                      I don't. *(she wipes a tear)*

SHARON: No.

ETTIE: Oh, it's the police.

BILL: I thought that was all finished. You talked to them.

ETTIE: It was more they wanted to tell me something.

BILL: Oh?

ETTIE: About the case.

SHARON: That's unusual, the police giving out information.

ETTIE: They thought people should know.

BILL: They're still not investigating it?

ETTIE: No. They didn't have enough evidence to take it further.

BILL: Is that so?

ETTIE: But they said there was a peculiarity. They'd never seen it before.

BILL: Oh?

ETTIE: They wanted me to tell people this.

SHARON: What was it Ettie? What did they say?

ETTIE: There were a whole lot of adult hand prints on the swing, clustered together. Not very clear and damaged by the weather.

BILL: There's a lot of people visit that park.

ETTIE: They do.

BILL: Could be any number of people in the town.

SHARON: You wouldn't know who'd been there.

ETTIE: That's what they said. (*suggesting the mob*) 'Any number of people'.

BILL: That's right.

ETTIE: But there was something else they said.

SHARON: Something else?

ETTIE: Yes.

SHARON: What was that Ettie?

ETTIE: I wasn't sure...

SHARON: You weren't sure of what?

ETTIE: Whether I should say anything.

BILL: Oh come on. If the police have told you something, we should know.

ETTIE: I didn't know what to do.

BILL: Come on, don't keep us in the dark.

SHARON: Yes, Ettie. No secrets.

ETTIE: They told me...

BILL: What?

ETTIE: This fellow. He wasn't the Gold Coast murderer.

SHARON: How can they say that? Everyone knows he was!

ETTIE: He wasn't!

SHARON: What?

*SHARON and BILL look to each other, stunned.*

ETTIE: He didn't commit any murder.

SHARON: What?!

ETTIE: He was a protected witness.

SHARON: A protected witness?

ETTIE: Yes.

ETTIE: He saw a gangland shooting.

SHARON: No.

ETTIE: They moved him around a couple of times because of the threat to his life.

SHARON: He wasn't the Gold coast murderer?

ETTIE: No. But he wasn't an angel. He'd served some time for theft.

BILL: Oh.

ETTIE: He'd been shot at. An attempt on his life, only a few weeks ago.

SHARON: Oh. Now I know where I'd seen his face.

ETTIE: His whereabouts had to be secret.

BILL: Secret?

ETTIE: Yes. They just wanted people to know.

*Pause.*

BILL: Why didn't they tell us?

SHARON: Yes. Why didn't they?

