



A Major Theft

Emma Rosetta



'Sarge says come back to station right away. Been a major theft. And he says bring him a bacon-and-egg sandwich from Rosa's.'

Nathan frowned at the radio. 'What about the theft?'

'Oh, yeah. It's not urgent.'

'The sandwich isn't urgent?'

'The theft. Make sure you bring the sandwich.' Maureen's bored, staticky voice signed off and the line went dead.

Sunlight splintered on the surface of the dam. Nathan let it sting his eyes for a few breaths before sliding on his sunnies. His neck ached from being slumped in the seat, his legs splayed so that his left knee rested on the shotgun in the console.

He guzzled water from his canteen, smoothed his uniform, put on his seatbelt. Sarge had a sandwich that needed buying and a major theft that needed solving. Nathan's sorrow would wait until after work, when he could get proper crooked, alone in his duplex with some whiskey and Hattie the Cow.

He backed the car out of the shade and bumped his way along the goat track to the highway. The township of Sudbury was a straight drive west. Everything was flat here. It was good farming land – dark soil and sideways summer rains.

On the drive back, Nathan contemplated the biggest of the gumtrees he passed; then, the light posts; then, as he got closer to town, the pylons of the dinky old bridge that ran over a nonexistent stream.

He'd never do it. The time for such measures, he believed, had come and gone. If he did it now, he imagined she'd greet the news with confusion – disgust, even. If she could survive their ordeal, why couldn't he? She had lost actual blood. The bright red death came away on her shaking hands, while he haunted the doorway like a ghost. Three times it'd happened. A sword to the stomach each time. A dimming of the sun.

Nathan reported back to station. The Australia Post scooter had been stolen during the night. After handing off Sarge's sandwich, Nathan went down to the post office to begin the investigation.

'Aren't you going to take notes?' the postie asked.

'Oh.' Nathan realised he hadn't been listening. He cleared his throat, took out his pad and pen, and readied them. 'Go ahead, Bruce.'

The postie continued his story, his round face glowing

with indignation. 'So, then I went back to sleep. Thought it was possums. They run amok at night, you know. But when I went out to the shed this morning, the door was busted open.' He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of his residence, which was attached to the rear of the post office. 'The scooter, gone. Never even heard the motor start.'

'The keys were in it?'

'I always leave the keys in it. Never had a reason not to. That's not a crime.'

Nathan kept writing, nodding, keeping his face impassive. 'Shouldn't be too hard to track it down. How fast does the scooter go, anyway?' He'd seen it around town, of course. Bruce in his high-vis, the shiny red scooter full of mail and self-importance, zipping up and down the wide quiet streets.

'Forty-five clicks, top speed.' Bruce shifted his weight back and forth between both feet, as if he was itching to get back on it. 'There was mail in the front compartment, you know? Already sorted. I need it back. People get mad when the mail is late. They're waiting on things. Expecting things.'

Nathan looked up. 'I'll find it, Bruce. Not to worry.'

'Good man.' Bruce gave him a friendly cuff on the shoulder and went back to the counter, where customers were waiting.

The Pickerings were Nathan's first stop. They were always the first stop. The Pickerings had been in the town for generations and they belonged to this place in a way Nathan never would. He knew he carried the starchy, smoggy scent of the city with him wherever he went in this town. In reality, he looked a right mess: face unshaven, uniform rumpled, eyes bloodshot.

He fronted up to the house. Cacti grew in the yard, limbs reaching out like alien things. The facade of the house was coming apart, white paint peeled away to reveal the desiccated timber beneath.

Justin Pickering answered the door. He was the eldest son of the most current iteration of the family. His girl, Merry or Sherry, hovered behind him in the half light, a baby on her hip. The child ignored him, but the mother eyed him with suspicion.

'G'day Justin,' said Nathan. He stood well back. A respectful distance. 'I'm here about an Australia Post scooter. It's gone missing.'

Justin blinked at him through the dusty fly-screen. 'There a question in there, officer?'

Nathan swallowed the urge to correct the man. He was a constable, not an officer.

‘Your brothers and sisters around?’ said Nathan. ‘School holidays can be boring for the young ones.’

‘I’ve never found this place boring. Always something going on. Ain’t there, Kerry?’ said Justin, without taking his eyes off Nathan.

From the shadows, Kerry nodded gravely.

Christ, these people gave him the willies. Even the baby was looking at him now, small pink mouth ajar, a trickle of drool making its way down the tiny chin.

‘Well –’ said Nathan. ‘If you hear anything, you’ll let us know?’

‘Sure will, officer.’

Justin retreated, closing the door behind him.

Nathan stared blankly at the house for a while, feeling strangely bereft, before returning to the squad car. He spent the rest of the day getting nowhere with the locals. The scooter had vanished.

On his way home that evening, he hit a roo. The reddish-brown apparition bounded in front his vehicle in the murky dusk. He slammed on the brakes, sending clouds of dust into the air, and flicked on the red-and-blue police lights.

The animal was dead, its glazed eyes staring at Nathan in accusation. He dragged the body off the road, onto the grassy verge.

He had to psych himself up for what came next.

Quinn had taught him how to check dead marsupials for surviving young. He stood there, queasy, not wanting to do it, but knowing he’d feel even worse if he didn’t. Eventually he lifted one of the hindquarters of the roo to check for testicles. There were none. Dammit. He felt around the stomach until he found the furry fold, and slipped his hand inside, trying not to scream. The blue and red lights made the dense surrounding bush look apocalyptic.

The pouch was blessedly empty. There was nothing left for him to do except say a silent, grossly inadequate ‘sorry’, and leave.

Once home, he tore off his uniform in the bathroom, tears of frustration and anger and grief welling up inside of him.

Nights were the worst.

He sat alone on his back verandah, listening to crickets and blurring his mind with drink. Hattie the Cow – from the children’s book – was snuggled under one arm and he nursed a glass of whiskey in his other hand. Hattie was meant for

the kids he’d never have, belonged to a life that didn’t exist in this universe. In that way, Hattie was a cosmic anomaly.

Nathan didn’t take sips of the drink. He took great gulps, whenever he remembered to, like it was lifesaving medicine. Memories swam through his hazy mind like fish in a muddy dam.

The first time Quinn had gotten pregnant, man, they were elated. So foolishly ecstatic with this secret between them. ‘We mustn’t tell anyone until three months,’ they’d agreed, not really believing they were in any danger of losing the pregnancy. Waiting three months was just what people did.

Nathan treated her like she was made of glass. He walked around smiling. When the three months was up, they called their parents with the news, made a Facebook announcement. A photo with their hands on her belly, showing their wedding rings.

Two days after that, he’d woken to the sound of loud sobbing from the bathroom.

It’d taken them six months to try again. They’d grieved. The doctor gave them the talk about how miscarriage was normal. Well-meaning friends reassured them, shared their own stories.

It happened twice more before Nathan and Quinn agreed to stop trying for good. The rift between them had grown too wide, too jagged. Nathan let out a private exhale of relief, thinking at least they had each other. They could get their marriage back on track. They could be happy, just the two of them.

Then, Quinn left him. There was nothing he could do, she’d said with a blank expression. There was no one to blame. She returned to the city, and he stayed here in Sudbury to experience a never-ending kaleidoscope of sadness.

Nathan let his head tilt back, his blood alcohol level reaching that elusive perfect point. It wouldn’t last more than twenty minutes, but for now he got a modicum of relief.

He thought of the way her long hair fell over his face as she kissed him in bed, sunlight streaming through open windows. The way she still blushed when he recounted the moment he knew he loved her. How her expression changed when she caught sight of him in public, her proud gaze softening and her lips forming a slow, easy smile.

Used to. The way she *used to* do those things.

Did their love exist anymore? Was it out there, wandering around, lost? Or had it been extinguished like the flame of a candle, throwing them both into darkness?

The twenty minutes ran out, like it always did, and he crossed the line from pleasantly numb to plain, rotten drunk.





Nathan's phone was switched off and in a lockbox, which was wrapped in a towel under his bed. The hiding of the phone was part of his nightly routine now. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. He tried not to visualise the phone, to not dwell on its whereabouts. She didn't need any more grief than he'd already given her.

The night was hot, and the foetid scent of the abattoir threaded the air, making him want to retch. Hattie felt warm in his arms, like a living thing. He'd started drinking early, almost as soon as he got home, so he'd be right for work the next day.

An unnatural sound reached his ears, out of place in the sleepy quiet. The crickets had stopped a while ago. This was something like a giant mosquito, buzzing back and forth, somewhere out there.

Without thinking, he stood. He swayed on bare feet, straining his ears. His booze-filled blood rushed from his head to his limbs and made him start walking.

He made his way through the house and out the front door. All he wore were his cotton pyjama pants and a track of half-dried drool down his chin.

He followed the sound, the bitumen warm under the soles of his feet. The buzzing got closer, then further away, then closer again. As if pulled by an invisible string, he arrived at the Main Street crossing in the centre of town. The intersection boasted the only set of traffic lights in Sudbury. No one was around, except him. The windows of the closed shops stared like eyes.

The sound was louder here. It was definitely an engine – a small one. It was the bloody scooter, he was sure of it.

Could he run it down? Tonight, he felt like he could. He was fuelled by Jameson and regret and the most absurd sense of righteousness. You couldn't just take things that belonged to someone. He wouldn't allow it.

The middle of the intersection was the best vantage point. He got into position, crouching on the bitumen.

The engine got loud, very suddenly, and he whipped around just in time to see a streak of red pass through the dark a few blocks away. A kid whooped with glee.

Nathan froze, undecided. He couldn't actually run the scooter down. He knew that. The best he could do was catch a proper look at the culprits and deal with them in the morning, when he was on duty and sober and not barefoot.

He scurried into the shadows of a shopfront, like a night creature, and waited.

It didn't take them long to show. The scooter came careening down the street, two scrawny kids straddling the seat and

another one perched on the rear luggage rack, having the time of their lives.

Nathan squinted as they passed him. *Yep. Pickerings.*

The surge of vindication this gave him was pure, almost holy. He walked home, humming to himself, bright with the knowledge that tomorrow would bear fruit.

To celebrate, he finished the whiskey.

Quinn used to say she got a few moments of reprieve when she first woke up in the morning, before she remembered what they'd lost. For those magical seconds, she'd feel normal and at peace.

Nathan didn't have that. The strength of his hangover meant he didn't get a single second of tranquility. The pain hit him like a lorry, right away. The splitting headache, the woollen mouth, the acid stomach. Then, the gloom and anxiety descended on him like a shroud.

His first thought was always his phone. Had it stayed out of his reach? Eyes half closed, he groped around on the mattress beside him.

Shit. It was there. He'd taken it out of the box last night.

Groaning, he sat up. It was better to get this over with so he could move on with his day. He tapped the screen and opened the mostly one-sided text conversation he'd had with Quinn. Spelling atrocious, melodramatic statements, pleadings, cursing, the whole nine yards. She'd responded only once, just after 5am, with a single sentence: *Have you gotten it yet?*

He rubbed his face in confusion. Gotten what? Obviously, he hadn't, because he didn't know what the hell she was talking about. He skimmed his messages for clues, grimacing with embarrassment, but nothing he'd said made any real sense.

The resignation in her reply was implied. She expected this from him, that was the worst part. He texted back a quick apology, then deleted the entire message chain, as if doing so meant it never happened.

He showered, dressed, chugged a bottle of water, blew a zero into the breathalyser. Or, near enough to zero, anyway. It'd be zero by the time he took his belt and gun out of the locker.

Today, he had a purpose. A real one. He knew who was to blame for the scooter.

'There you are!' Maureen smiled up at him from her desk when he arrived at the station. 'Guess what arrived this morning?'

She pointed to where Sarge was poring over a mountain of envelopes that were dirty and raggedy around the edges. 'Rosa found our lost mail out the back of her joint this morning. Dumped there, must've been last night. Scooter's still nowhere to be seen. Bruce is on his way over now to grab the mail.'

'It was the Pickering kids,' said Nathan, hands on his hips. 'I saw them riding the scooter last night.'

'Did you, eh?' Sarge continued sifting through the mail. 'Good job then. You better go 'round and pay them a visit.'

Nathan was kitting up in the locker room when Sarge brought in a single large, thick envelope. 'There's one for you.' He placed it in Nathan's hands, but he didn't let go. 'Mate, you'll talk to me if you need to, won't you? Nothing I haven't seen. Near nothing I haven't done.'

Sarge only released his hold when Nathan gave a sheepish nod, then he went back out the front.

Nathan stared at the solicitor's logo on the top corner of the letter. A strange weightlessness came over him, like he was in a dream. He stuffed the envelope in his locker and strapped on his belt.

At the Pickering house Nathan knocked, stood back, waited. It took a long time for the door to open.

'G'day, officer.' Justin stared through the fly-screen. He was alone. 'What can I do for you today?'

Nathan opened his mouth, then closed it, suddenly unable to remember why he was here, or why he should care about anything. He felt exhausted on a soul level. His eyes slid unfocused, only vaguely aware of Justin peering at him.

The fly-screen door swung open. 'Come on in, if you want,' said Justin.

He held the door with one arm, revealing a skull tattoo on his pale inner bicep. Nathan climbed the steps.

'Through here.' Justin disappeared down the narrow hallway.

The interior of the house was musty, peeling, threadbare. It had obviously never been renovated, never been updated. Nathan found the house comforting. It felt like he was going back in time.

The lounge room smelled faintly of baby powder and an ancient gramophone sat in the corner. No television. Not even a radio. The house was on stumps and Nathan could see sunlight filtering up through the cracks.

'I'll get us a cup of tea, eh?' said Justin, continuing down the hallway.

Nathan sank down onto the couch. All he could think about was the big envelope in his locker. It was the great divider,

the finaliser, the end. A stolen scooter seemed so trivial now, in comparison.

Movement in one of the adjoining rooms caught Nathan's eye. It was Kerry, wearing a white nightdress, nursing the baby. Slowly she put a finger to her lips to say 'shhh', then moved away again, swallowed by the inky depths of the room.

Justin returned with two steaming mugs, placing one in the constable's hand.

'Thanks.' Nathan tried to gather his flailing wits. 'Kids not around?'

'No kids.' Justin settled into one of the armchairs. 'Except for the little tyke in there.' He tilted his head towards the room where Kerry was nursing the baby. 'Don't think you'll find what you're looking for here.'

The clock on the wall ticked relentlessly. It was antique, with a pendulum swinging back and forth inside the case. Nathan kept his eyes on it.

'I don't know where to go now,' he said.

Justin took a long draw on his mug. He was completely at ease, sitting back in his armchair, surveying the constable.

'Yeah,' he replied. 'Happens to the best of us.'

They finished their tea in silence. Nathan's shock wore off enough that he began to feel embarrassed for his odd behaviour. In a state of confused dejection, he returned to the station.

'Nah, mate. You look like death,' said Sarge as soon as he laid eyes on him. 'You're going home. Now.'

He followed Nathan to the locker room and watched him remove his gear.

'I'll drop by to check on you after my shift, okay?' said Sarge.

Nathan agreed, to get Sarge off his back, but he didn't go home. What would he do there, anyway? Ruminant, drink, rot away. He was sick of it.

Instead, he drove. He got on the highway and cruised at a comfortable speed, enjoying the vibration of the seat against his back. He silenced his radio, and his phone.

Near the turnoff for the dam, he spotted something that made his blood tingle with excitement. A flicker of red through the trees. The scooter.

He sped up and turned onto the goat track. His tyre marks were still visible from yesterday, and he saw a new pattern in the dirt too.

As he got closer to the clearing, he slowed down. He parked in a thicket of gumtrees and climbed out, closing the door with care. The only sounds were magpies warbling, the crunch of his boots in the dirt, and a stiff breeze whistling through the ghost gums.

He entered the clearing, which merged with the pebbly shore of the dam. The kids were nowhere in sight, but the scooter was parked in the middle of the shore. Nathan approached it.

The scooter was a bit worse for wear – dinged up and dirty – but would survive its ordeal. He flipped open the front compartment, where Bruce usually put the mail. It was empty inside.

Behind him, the trees rustled. He didn't look at the kids head on, not wanting to spook them, but he saw glimpses out of the corner of his eye. Bare feet, skinny limbs, tangled hair. One girl and two boys, he guessed. They were no doubt wondering what he was going to do. Well, he was wondering that himself.

The dam was the colour of black tea, steady ripples moving endlessly across the surface. Sweat trickled down Nathan's back. Something big and deep within him ached for release.

He removed his boots and, still in his uniform, he went down to where the water lapped the bank. And he kept going. He strode into the dam, sighing at the encompassing coolness. When he was waist deep, he took a breath and dove in. He kicked long and hard, until he was weak. He rolled over underwater, opening his eyes and gazing up at the shifting, stippled light.

A great cry escaped his lungs. Huge glass-like bubbles floated upwards, breaking at the surface. He sank deeper, until his feet touched the silty floor. He saw the flash of fins as fish swam away from him, disappearing into the gloom. When his body started to go numb from lack of oxygen, he kicked straight up from the bottom. He broke the surface of the water and shook off his hair.

On the shore, the kids had come out from their hiding places. Next to his empty boots they stood shoulder to shoulder in silence, watching him. ▼

Emma Rosetta is a fiction writer from Toowoomba. She writes short stories, poems, and recently finished the manuscript for an Aussie thriller novel. She loves reading, bushwalking and her cat.

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