

Wonderland

By Sean O'Leary

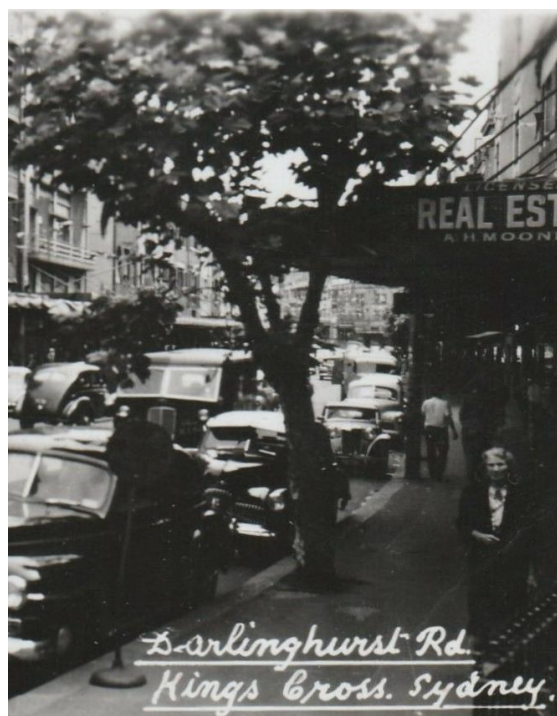
For SD Harvey

The night manager stands in the doorway of the motel on Darlinghurst Road. He lights a cigarette. The bloodstained sheets are still upstairs in room 303. The vision of the girl cut to pieces flashes in his mind. A crime scene tape spans across the door. Two uniformed cops stand outside. The walls are grimy. The nylon carpet is thin, sticky and stained.

A sea of people moves back and forth under the neon haze. Strip club spruikers shout. Outside, the people are laughing, threatening, drunk, stoned, wide-eyed and sober. Tourists, mums and dads, and wild suburban boys and girls are all out for the party. It is mad, the night manager thinks. Friday and Saturday will be madder.

He wears black suit pants and a long sleeve white shirt, along with a thin black tie, and hard, thick black shoes on his feet. He is fresh-faced and solidly built with light brown hair. Years of heavy smoking have not damaged him, yet.

He hears the switchboard ringing and quickly locks the front door. He reaches over the reception desk—his cigarette pressed firmly between two fingers in his left hand—and hits answer with the middle finger of his right hand. He picks up the handset.



“Darlo Motel,” he says

“What happened?” It was the owner, Mick.

“You have to come in.”

“Bullshit I do. What happened?”

“A junkie, a working girl, her trick cut her to pieces it was fuck—”

“Paying guest?”

The night manager swallows and takes a quick hit of his cigarette. Smoke billows out of his nose and mouth as he replies.

“You know my deal with Katya.”

“But it wasn't Katya, was it? It was some

junkie whore friend of Katya's you let use the room for free, or you charged her and pocketed the money, and now the cops are there. The media might turn up too if it's a quiet night."

"Cops don't care about freebie motel rooms."

"You know what? The law does care. That's right, *the law* says that everyone's got to register. Did you know that *by law*, I'm supposed to keep those registration cards for seven years?"

"Sorry, Mick."

"You getting any PI work?"

"Not a lot."

"You might need some, and a good lawyer. You're on your own on this one," he says and hangs up.

Someone is knocking on the front door.

The night manager turns and looks. It's the forensic cops and two detectives. Behind them are two guests from Albury who were asking him earlier about the Mardi Gras—even though it is winter and the Mardi Gras was in March.

He unlocks the door. He can't quit. Would Mick sack him? He needs the money. The forensic cops put plastic covers over their shoes while the Albury tourists gawk. They put on gloves and elastic hats, already suited up in blue coveralls. The guests get in the lift with them. The two detectives look at the night manager.

"Got your guest list up to date?" asks the bigger of the two.

"I'll print one for you."

Both cops carry guns, the bigger on his hip, the other in a shoulder holster. The night

manager locks the door behind them. Once he is back behind the reception desk the bigger cop introduces himself.

"I'm DI Olsen, this is DC Lynch," he says, pointing to his offsider.

Olsen has pale—almost translucent—white skin to match his red hair. His biceps press hard against his black suit. He has a thick, bull-like neck, giving the impression of a gym junkie or ex-rugby league player. He is a dangerous looking man. He stands round-shouldered and begins his questions.

"What's your name?"

"Travis Whyte."

"Travis? Haven't heard of a Travis before."

"That's your business."

"Got balls too, Travis."

Travis doesn't reply. Olsen shrugs his big shoulders and stares blankly.

"What the fuck happened here, Travis?"

"The girl took a trick up to her room. About ten minutes later I hear screaming, but I don't know if it's coming from inside or outside." Travis flings his arm out in the direction of the street. "Then again, the screaming; loud, wild screaming. I go for the stairs, bolt up to 303, figuring it must be the hooker. The door is wide open. I see her lying on the bed, cuts and blood all over her. She's frozen still, bleeding so much—the sheets already soaked in blood. I'm hyperventilating standing by the bed, no sign of the guy. I turn around. He's in the doorway with a knife. He points it at me, then runs the knife

slowly across his throat, eyes bulging out of his face. Then he turns and runs. I ring the ambos.”

“You try and help the girl?”

“I talked to her. Talked crap about football, cricket, anything. I held her hand, told her that she was going to make it, told her to hang on. Just kept talking until the ambos arrived.”

“What happened when you checked her in?”

“It was a cash job. We agreed on one hundred and twenty for the room. The guy paid.”

“He get a good look at you?”

“Of course.”

“You got a registration card?”

“No.”

The cops look at each other but say nothing.

The switchboard starts ringing just as a guest knocks on the door. Travis answers the phone while Lynch opens the door and checks him against the list. He lets the guest through to the lift. Travis puts the handset down. Olsen returns to his questions.

“You get a good look at him?”

“Yeah, he was right in front of me.”

“He knows you work here, now, so—”

“I know what you’re getting at. We don’t have CCTV but the council must on Darlington Road, you can get—”

“You telling me my job, Travis?”

“No.”

“What time do you knock off?”

“Half an hour from now. Eleven.”

“I’ll walk you down to the station after you knock off. We’ll get a statement and get you to do

an identikit of the attacker.”

Travis nods.

“John, time to go upstairs,” Olsen tells Lynch.

For a moment there is quiet inside the small reception area. Just outside the door there is yelling, laughing; craziness. The street is on fire with energy.

The switchboard rings again. Travis hits the answer button hard.

“Darlo Motel.”

“Travis?”

“Ahn, is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s Ahn. Travis, you have to help me find Billy.”

“Oh wow. Tonight of all nights, you ring me. Shit. You want me to find Billy? What the fuck?”

“He’s missing. It’s what you do. You find people. I’ll pay.”

“You mean your father will.”

“Whatever. I need your help.”

“How long has he been missing?”

“Ten days.”

“Billy might be just doing what Billy does.”

Even for Billy, this is too long for just a fling. Then Travis thinks of the money. He might be able to string the search out for a while.

“Travis?”

“I’m not feeling that great, Ahn.”

“Come over when you knock off. I’ll give you the key to Billy’s place. He doesn’t just disappear like that anymore. He’s changed. You might find something at his place to—”

“I get it. I’ll pick up the key after I speak to

the cops. But only because it's you. If it was anybody else."

"Thanks Travis."

"I'll call you later."

Olsen walks Travis to the Kings Cross Police Station, buying him coffee on the way.

"The guy had tats on his neck, like raindrops or teardrops. Thick short black hair. Like an old-fashioned short back and sides. Blue eyes. Acne scars on his left cheek. His teeth were stained yellow. Gaunt. Cheekbones showing."

After the interview, Olsen takes Travis into an even smaller office. Lynch joins them. Olsen takes his gun off his hip, puts it on the desk, and stares straight at Travis.

"I want to know, Travis. Why no registration card? Why was this transaction cash? Why no receipt?"

"I do it sometimes."

"Do what?"

"Cash transactions an—"

"I spoke to your boss, Mick. He said you have an arrangement with a street girl, Katya. This right?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"Don't know."

"I don't believe you, Travis."

"That's your business."

Travis imagines Katya in her spot, just to the left of the Darlo Motel front door. Where was she?

"You checked a guest in. And a prostitute. There was a used needle in the room. No registration card, no record of them and ten minutes later the prostitute's cut to pieces in the room. Her name is Ann, Travis, and she has a mother out there somewhere."

"No comment."

"You are in deep shit, Travis."

"No comment."

Travis walks out of the police station. Olsen had hit him with question after question. Then Lynch had started with the accusations. "You're a thief. Cheating on your boss. A rat, stealing money from him, and now a girl is lying near dead. You need to say something—"

"No comment."

Mick was right. He needs a lawyer. Ahn can find him one, and pay for it too.

Travis walks slowly back to the Darlo. Gavin, the night porter, does a sideline dealing in speed. Travis needs some and Gavin will give him credit. Katya had been with Perry when she last rang. Perry was bad news, a smack dealer and a user. Could they have known the attacker? Find Katya and Perry, then find the attacker. Travis doesn't want the guy finding him. Maybe he already had.

He snorts two lines of Gavin's speed in the back office of the Darlo Motel. Takes two one-gram bags with him. His car is parked on Ward Ave in an apartment building carpark. The owner, a friend of Mick's, lets the staff of the Darlo park there. Travis opens the door of his white

Triumph Dolomite Sprint. The previous owner had told him there was something extra under the hood, but Travis knew nothing about engines. It flew when he took it for a test drive. It was old but fast, the Millennium Falcon on the streets of Sydney. He shoots out of the driveway onto Ward Ave and floors it to Bondi.

Ahn opens the door wide, wearing a black dress and red lipstick.

“You going to let me in?” Travis asks.

She stands to one side. He walks past her into the hallway. She closes the door, then turns and put her arms around his neck, nuzzling her face against his shoulder and kissing him on the neck. “Nice welcome,” he says, smiling. He leans down and kisses her on her red lips and she kisses him back, hard, passionately. He lifts her up, pushing her against the wall as she reaches for his shirt, undoing his buttons, ripping at his belt.

Travis says nothing as he gets his breath back. He stares straight ahead as speed runs hard through his brain. The sensation is electric but he knows he has a job to do.

“Ahn, give me the keys to Billy’s place. I need a week up front into my bank account. I’ll text you the details. I need a lawyer by tomorrow. I’m sorry, I need to go. I need to find Katya.”

“The prostitute. Why? what did she do?”

“Three-hundred a day. Tomorrow or tonight. First seven days in advance.”

He stands up, pulls his briefs up, pulls up his

pants, tucks himself in.

“Ahn, the keys to Billy’s place. I’ve got to go, really.”

“I haven’t seen you this scared since Melbourne—”

“Keys Ahn. For fuck’s sake—”

“Alright.” She stands up and walks to her bedroom to get the keys.

Travis sits in his car. He tries Katya’s mobile. Nothing. He gets out and walks down to Ward Ave, quickly along to Bayswater Road then turns right. Katya sometimes hung out in the Kardomah Café. He walks down the stairs into the subterranean band room where a live act is playing. Travis searches the room with his eyes, but he can’t see her. He walks to the bar and orders a double vodka and lots of ice. She isn’t here.

He leaves quickly and walks towards the Crest Hotel bottle shop. About twenty metres past it is a set of stairs. He walks down into what was once a video arcade but has long since become a shooting gallery for addicts. Young people huddle together in the semi-dark. In a glass office, a teenaged, Indigenous boy sits on an orange swivel chair. Travis recognises the kid from around The Cross. They had talked AFL. Travis walks over to him.

“What’d you want?” the boy asks.

“I’m looking for Katya.”

“Bad shit at the Darlo I hear.”

“Katya. She here or not?”

Travis says nothing as gets his breath back. He stares straight ahead as speed runs hard through his brain. The sensation is electric but he knows he has a job to do.

The boy points at a door in the far corner of the room.

Travis walks over and tries to pull it open. The door doesn't budge an inch. The young boy laughs—soon the other people in the room are laughing too. Travis wheels around and runs at the boy, the speed pushing him hard. He tries the door to the office but it doesn't move either. Everyone begins laughing again. Travis picks up a chair and swings it hard at the glass, which shatters, causing the boy to fall off his swivel chair. The boy stands up calmly and says, "Go. Katya's not here. Go."

Travis emerges back on Darlinghurst Road. There is another place she might be, further along, just before Springfield Park, next to a motel almost as shitty as the Darlo. He climbs the stairs. Katya works here sometimes when she is desperate. They have a set up like in *Paris, Texas*. Customers put money in a slot, and then a panel opens and a girl performs in front of you like Nastassja Kinski did for Harry Dean-Stanton. It is a surreal experience but the place is filthy. There are video booths set up for the same thing. Slot dollar coins and watch hardcore porno. Toilet paper hangs on a roll for patrons to clean up after finishing.

Travis goes to the counter where a bored clerk

asks him how many coins he wants.

"I'm looking for Katya." Travis's mobile begins to ring just as the clerk responds.

"Don't know any of the girls' names. I just work—"

"Yeah, you just work here." Travis turns to answer his mobile. It's the cop, Olsen.

"Ann is dead, Travis. The girl didn't survive the knife attack, so this is a murder investigation. I need you to come back in to the station."

"Alright. I'll come."

"Need you in here first thing. This is murder, Travis."

"You said that already. I'll be there at one or two in the afternoon, after I've had some sleep."

"Make sure of it."

Olsen hangs up.

Travis walks to the booth where the girls dance and feeds in some coins. The panel opens. It isn't Katya.

He sticks his hand under the panel, holding it open. "I need to see Katya, It's urgent."

Travis is shocked when the girl replies.

"She's in the private room, down the hallway."

He turns around and follows the hallway to an open door. A girl sits slumped in an old torn armchair, nodding off, needle marks in the

crooks of both arms. For a split second, he thinks it is Katya, but it isn't. Katya is a junkie but a functioning one.

"Where's Katya?" he asks loudly.

"I'm Katya," the girl yawns at him. "I'm Mary Lou and the skipper too on *Gilligan's Island*."

Travis shakes his head and leaves.

The kid from the arcade is sitting on the top step outside.

"Hey, Mister Footballer."

"Hey, sorry about the chair."

"Not my place. Just hang out there. Perry knows the knifeman."

"What?"

"Katya's friend, the transgender, he knows."

"How do you know this?"

"He talks to me afterwards when he's relaxed, know what I mean?"

"He pays you."

"Yeah."

"For sex?"

"Whatever you want to call it."

"What did—"

"He told me there was a guy wanted to do that shit. Cut someone up. I don't know anything else but like I said, Perry knows. Must."

"What's your name, kid?"

"Whatever you want it to be. I won't say nothing to the cops. I never met you, Mister Footballer."

"Okay. Alright."

Travis's mobile rings again.

"Hello." It is Katya.

"Katya, where the fuck are—"

"You tell the cops it was me that sent Ann?"

"Where are you?"

"Hey! You tell the cops that—"

"I told them I don't where you are, but they know. Mick told them I gave you a free room."

"Shit."

"Katya, she's dead. Ann is dead."

"I need a place to stay."

Travis feels in his pocket for the keys to Billy's place. He presses his fingers through his pants onto them.

"I got a place for you. Where's Perry?"

"Don't know. Where's this place?"

He gives her Billy's address in Darlinghurst.

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Thanks Travis."

Travis turns back to the kid.

"I play footy at Randwick. You want to come down for a game, just let me know. You know where I work. Might change your life."

"Like it changed yours?" the boy responds.

Travis shrugs and starts walking past him down the stairs. When he gets to the bottom step the boy calls out to him.

"Might do it. Might come for a game."

Billy's place is on Surrey Street, two blocks back from the bustling cafés of Victoria Street. Travis parks his car out the front and heads inside. Katya will be here soon. She will lead him to Perry. A foul smell hits him as he walks down the hallway to the kitchen. There is water seeping out from

under the fridge. He tries the lights. The power is off. He walks back down the hallway to the fuse box. Everything is switched on. He hears it begin to rain and shivers. His mobile rings once more. It is Katya.

“I’m outside.”

“Right.”

He opens the door and Katya is there. Damp blond hair, wet face, beautiful, in spite of the drugs. He pulls her in out of the rain. It is thumping down.

“It only started raining a few seconds ago but I’m soaked.”

“Come in. There should be clothes in the bedroom.”

He takes her hand and leads her down the hallway. In the bedroom Katya finds a blue flannelette shirt and a pair of track pants. She begins removing her soaked clothing; a short denim skirt, black leggings, a black camisole over a purple bra. Her hair is multi-coloured with a fringe above her blue eyes. Travis remembers staring into those eyes, laughing as she told him stories about all the mad stuff she got up to.

He is in love with her.

“The power has been cut off.”

“Whose place is this?” Katya asks.

“Billy’s—a friend of Ahn’s. He’s missing. I told you about Ahn. Right now I need to know where Perry is.”

“Alright but shut the front door. There’s a fucking cyclone coming down the hallway.”

Travis smiles. Then he thinks of the dead girl

and stops. He walks down the hallway and shuts the front door.

As he turns back towards the bedroom, a man lunges at him from out of the living room. Travis tries to jerk back but finds a knife is lodged in his arm. The stranger pulls out the knife and Travis falls back against the wall. The intruder lunges again, and this time the knife sticks in Travis’s shoulder before it is ripped back out. Shocked, Travis yells out as loud as he can.

“Katya! Katya! Run!”

Travis falls to the ground after a hard punch to the face. His attacker smiles at him through yellowed teeth. Travis swings a kick to the back of the other man’s knee and he buckles to the floor beside him. The attacker is stung but scrambles away and begins to get back up, but lets out a groan as Katya jumps onto his back and begins trying to choke him. He spins around and she is flung off against the wall. Travis manages to get to his feet; his right arm and shoulder are throbbing with pain. The man lunges again, this time at Katya, and stabs her viciously in the neck and face. Like Katya, Travis jumps on the attacker, but soon Travis too falls back to the floor. Blood spurts from Katya’s neck as she tries to stop it with her hands. Travis is sprawled on the floor as he watches her die.

Only then does Billy appear in the doorway.

The killer looks up and Billy freezes. Travis sees a chance, and with a final effort, hurls himself at the intruder, delivering a hard left hook to the head. The man wobbles briefly before

crashing to the floor. Grabbing the knife, Travis rams it into the stranger's chest as hard as he can, killing him.

Billy had been at Avoca on the central coast with a surfer girl until she got sick of him and kicked him out late on Thursday night. He arrived home to his apartment to find Travis, Katya and a stranger all scrambling around in pools of their own blood in his hallway.

Travis told the story of his night to Olsen, who had no choice but to believe him. He couldn't find the kid and Perry simply denied any knowledge of either the boy or the killer. Travis found the kid a week later, back at the derelict arcade, but he wasn't saying anything to anybody.

Ann and Katya were described as victims of the "Hooker Killer" in the press.

The Darlo Motel put in CCTV. Once Travis was patched up, he went back to working at the Darlo but cut back to three nights a week.

A month or so after the murders, Travis stands in the doorway of the motel on Darlinghurst Road at about ten minutes to eleven on a Thursday night. He lights a cigarette as the hoi polloi move to and fro in front of him under light rain and neon lights. He thinks about Katya and Ann and the senseless loss of life. The lights; the depravity; the sex and violence. It is like a fever dream. Not just this road, but the whole of the city. When Gavin arrives, he will score some speed from

him, hit the Kardomah and get lost in music, alcohol and drugs.

Image: "[Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross, Sydney.](#)" (Public Domain) by [Aussie~mobs](#)