

**HOW I FAKED MY OWN DEATH
AND DID *NOT* GET AWAY WITH IT**

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AND DID *NOT* GET
AWAY WITH IT**

A TRUE STORY

HARRY GORDON



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Some of the names in this book have been changed.

Dedicated
to David Collon

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1

The disappearance

JUNE 2000

The winter sun had long since set over the deserted waters of the Karuah estuary, east of the Hunter Valley in New South Wales, Australia. Darkness was falling quickly. There were no other boats in sight, no sign of life on the uninhabited shore where the trees had already merged into an indistinct blur.

When I switched off the motor there was a brief sloshing sound, as my 'quickboat' lost its momentum. Then there was nothing but silence. The last gentle gliding motion washed the boat up to a channel marker post that I had aimed for. I quickly slipped a rope around the marker, hitched the rope to a rail and settled back to relax. There was no sound or movement of any kind; in that huge expanse of water I was quite alone. I poured myself another glass of champagne from the open bottle then telephoned my daughter on her mobile phone. She had left the yacht club after a Saturday winter series race but was still in

Sydney with places to go and things to do before she would even start her journey up to our North Arm Cove home.

She said that by the time she finished all her errands then drove the 250 kilometres to North Arm Cove it would probably be well after 11 o'clock. Then she asked what I was up to.

'I am still on my way back from an excellent seafood lunch at Zacs Restaurant in Karuah,' I explained. 'The outboard motor has broken down, nothing serious, probably dirty fuel. I will just have to clean the intake jets.'

I had been out on my boat for much of the day, south of my home in Port Stephens. I had returned briefly to my house earlier, before proceeding north up the Karuah River in the afternoon for lunch. During my brief stop at my house I made some basic preparations in case I did really decide to go through with my plan. I loaded some clothing, odds and ends, plus a bag with \$100,000 cash into a VW campervan. I drove the van to a public parking space at the other end of my street. I walked through a bush shortcut to my home and onto my private wharf to continue my day on the water.

'Are you safe Dad?' Josaphine asked in a concerned voice.

'I am perfectly safe,' I replied. 'The boat is tied to a marker post in perfectly calm water in the Karuah Estuary; I could paddle to the shore from here if I needed to.'

She asked some minor follow up questions until she was satisfied then we gossiped a bit before exchanging mutual declarations of love, as was our habit, then the telephone call ended. My message had been reasonably obscure and everybody processes information differently, but I felt sure that on reflection the message that 'I would be all right no matter what happened' would give her the assurance she would need for what was to follow.

I finished the glass of champagne, poured myself another,

then sat back with my feet up to relax and reflect on my next move. 'Shall I do this or not? It's not too late to change your mind,' I said out loud. 'This will probably end badly!'

Then ignoring my own sensible advice I emptied my glass of champagne overboard before starting out on the biggest journey of my life.

First I removed the rubber dinghy from under its cover, inflated it with the foot pump then slid it over the side and secured it. Next, I lent over the side and fitted my brand new, tiny outboard motor to the rubber dinghy before throwing the foot pump, torch and carry bag into it.

I moved quickly about the boat, overturning loose items to simulate the effect of the boat having run into something at speed. Next I disconnected the fuel tank, drained the remaining fuel, reconnected it then started the boat's large outboard motor and ran it for a couple of minutes until it ran out of fuel and spluttered to a stop.

I looked around the cockpit, where my mobile phone and wallet containing credit cards and cash sat on the dashboard where they would remain. All around me were commonplace items, all familiar and personal. I knew I would never see them again and felt a twinge of loss. I unhitched the rope from the channel marker post allowing the boat to float free with the tide before slipping myself over the side and into the rubber dinghy.

The little 1hp outboard motor didn't start on the first five pulls. 'Oh dear!' I said to myself anxiously. 'This journey could be over before it even starts if I don't have a getaway boat.' The outboard motor came alive on the sixth pull and using the rubber dinghy as a sort of tug boat I shunted the 'quickboat' into the shoreline. To my dismay when I reached the shore I found that the little outboard motor didn't have enough power to shunt the quickboat hard aground. 'Oh dear!' I said again as

I slipped myself over the side waist deep in the cold water. ‘This wasn’t in the script.’

I pushed the ‘quickboat’ hard aground by hand then heaved myself back into the rubber dinghy – it seemed to be smaller than I remembered it. It felt unstable and unsafe. The little outboard motor wouldn’t start again. ‘I don’t know that my heart can take this,’ I said to myself, but on the sixth pull it started once again.

Running at about half throttle, I steered the rubber dinghy towards one of the flashing red channel marker posts as I shivered miserably with the cold. As the dinghy left the calm estuary waters and entered the exposed waters of Port Stephens, the wind picked up and the water turned lumpy. As the last channel marker of the estuary faded behind me, the only visible light ahead was a faint white light glimmering from the oyster farm island in the distance.

‘It’s a moonless night,’ I chided myself. ‘It’s mid-winter, you have never been in these waters at night before, you have no chart, so even if you do finally see shore lights you have no way of knowing where you are. You are in a tiny rubber dinghy with a tiny little fuel tank that may last you an hour or so before running out of fuel, then you will be in an open waterway with no power, you could die here tonight you know. You really didn’t think this through did you? You are a very, very foolish man.’

As it happened, running at half throttle it took two hours to finally reach my destination and there was still a little fuel left in the tank when I arrived. I had been lost and in despair several times during the voyage but at last I switched off the motor and glided into the deserted beach. Shivering with fear and cold, I pulled the dinghy up on the beach well clear of the water line, disconnected the outboard motor then stiff with cold and cramp I hobbled up the beach with it before laying it down

quietly next to my campervan. I went back down the beach and returned with the dinghy and remaining odds and ends. I paused, took a deep breath, then opened the side door of the campervan, shoved in the dinghy and the outboard motor, slammed the side door shut swung open the door and slid into the driver’s seat in a single movement. The motor burst into life with the typical, deafening Volkswagen clatter that could wake the dead. Thankfully no lights came on in the nearby houses as I selected first gear, gunned the engine and clattered away. ‘The getaway vehicle was certainly an inspired choice wasn’t it?’, I mumbled to myself.

At least the Volkswagen’s heater could blow warming hot air on me. Within 20 minutes my teeth were still chattering and I continued to shake, probably more from anxiety than from the cold. I remembered the money in the back and stopped to check it was still there – another risk taken. Fortunately, it was still there.

The drive seemed to take forever, but actually less than two hours passed before the Caltex roadhouse on the freeway to Sydney came into view. I pulled the campervan into the truck stop area and parked it in front of two large truck and trailer rigs that were overnighting there. I slipped myself into the back, out of my wet clothes and quickly into bed. Despite the enormity of all that had happened I was exhausted and fell into a deep dreamless sleep almost immediately.

In the morning I slid out of bed, dressed myself, deflated the dinghy and stowed both it and the outboard motor into storage compartments in the van. I hung up all the clothing from an overnight bag then fussed about in the van until everything seemed tidy and shipshape. I looked longingly at the roadhouse and considered going in for a hot breakfast of bacon and eggs

but decided, on balance, that it was too risky. I drove away hungry but thankfully now warm and dry.

Right there and then I knew I had made a huge mistake. I wanted to go back to my former life but I knew that it was already too late. 'This is a huge mistake, why are you doing this Harry? You don't even have a plan, this can only end badly', I said out loud to myself as the Volkswagen campervan clattered down the freeway to Sydney.

When I arrived at the St Ives turn-off on the North Shore, I turned left and drove across to the Northern Beaches and turned left again. Along the way I stopped at a fast food outlet and bought some fish and chips then I stopped again at a liquor store for a couple of bottles of champagne. At last I parked at Palm Beach and looked out to the ocean and ate the first meal of my new life as I sipped champagne. With the hot food in my stomach and feeling slightly light-headed from the champagne much of the tension washed away from me.

'You can do this Harry, it's not for the faint-hearted but you can do it,' I told myself. I drove to the nearest shopping centre supermarket and bought some groceries, then made my way to a beach camping ground. As I expected the camping ground was almost empty in mid-winter so I had no problem at all securing a vacant site.

The man on reception duty was so involved with his computer screen that he hardly even looked at me as he issued me a receipt then recited directions without even thinking about what he was saying. It was obvious that I was of no interest to him. 'So far so good,' I said to myself as I clattered the Volkswagen down to the nominated site.

There were a few caravans and tents dotted sparsely here about the grounds in no particular pattern that I could detect and I was relieved to find that I had no immediate neighbours

on either side of my particular site. None of the people took the slightest interest in me and I felt quite safe and secure. I worked out how to plug in the mains power cable to the box provided. I then found a good hiding place for the money in a panel in the campervan. After shaving I luxuriated in a long hot soapy shower in one of the communal shower blocks and walked through the camping grounds and along the waterfront. Later, as dinner was cooking on the little campervan stove and I poured myself another glass of champagne I smugly remarked to myself. 'Ah, this is the life.' I had never, ever been camping in my life before. This was all new to me. I had always been a hotel man and this was starting to feel like a real adventure holiday.

In the morning I felt as bright as a button. I shaved and showered and with a real spring in my step I walked out of the camping ground and down the road to a small block of shops. 'What an excellent morning!' I remarked to the young Asian shop assistant behind the counter of the first shop I entered and bought a few items, fresh bread rolls, newspapers and some butter before strolling back to the campervan.

With hot coffee and a bread roll dripping with butter and jam I opened the newspaper. There on page three of the newspaper was a quarter page article about my disappearance with a photo of me that was a very good likeness. 'This is bad, very, very bad,' I muttered. Just a few minutes ago I had been carefree and in high spirits but now I felt dangerously exposed. I peeked out the windows of the campervan, half expecting the staff, other campers, perhaps even the police to come rushing up to me and say: 'Isn't this you?'

As I looked out the window, there was nobody rushing up to the campervan, nobody was interested in me, all was quiet, it was really hard to believe.

Those first weeks were very tense. The newspaper coverage

seemed relentless and when the weekend came there were huge photos of me in the Sunday papers and so much copy; goodness knows why, I was not a public figure, I was just a Sydney businessman.

‘What the hell is all this about?’ I asked myself. ‘Fishermen get washed off the rocks all the time and blokes drown when their boats turn over, heck they don’t get this sort of publicity, what is this all about?’

The media seemed to make a lot of the fact that I was a millionaire. ‘Gosh, it’s not as if I am a tycoon or anything, anyone of my age who has a reasonable size business and a decent freehold home is a millionaire,’ I said to myself. ‘What an earth are they going on about?’

The exposure was so relentless that I felt certain I would be discovered. In those first weeks I wore a hat and sunglasses as I shuttled between various camping grounds. When there was a lull in the newspaper coverage I slipped down to Kensington in Sydney’s eastern suburbs and into a tiny flat I rented. I paid cash with no questions asked, using the name Bill Teare.

The little flat was in a dilapidated block of flats where most of the other tenants were Middle Eastern and Asian people who had no interest in socialising with me. It allowed me to settle anonymously and find my feet. I knew that in due course I would be able to make contact with my wife Sheila to resolve our future, but in the meantime I needed to maintain the lowest profile I could.

In the first month after my ‘disappearance’, despite my best efforts to keep a low profile I still had face to face speaking contact with more than 20 people. I often wore a hat and sometimes glasses, but it seemed to me at the time to be nothing short of a miracle that nobody recognised me. I was pleased that my short-lived camping adventure was well and

truly behind me and I happily settled into my little Kensington flat and changed my routine.

One of the first things I did was to buy a bicycle for myself. Kensington is just a few kilometres from downtown Sydney so the bicycle provided me with a quick cost effective commute without any parking problems. I decided that until my future was resolved with Sheila I would spend some time on creative writing to put some much needed structure back in my daily life. I resolved to spend some time reading then learning to write poetry, to develop better prose, then I would attempt to write short stories. I didn’t know how long it would take to even meet with Sheila but however long it took I knew I would never get disposable free time like this again in my life so it was important to extract as much value as I could from it, rather than just let it drift by.

Each morning, like millions of other people, I would shave, shower then eat a small breakfast before bicycling into the Aquatic Centre in Park Street, Sydney. After swimming 50 laps of the pool I would bicycle down to the NSW Public Library in Macquarie Street to start my creative writing time. I immersed myself in Tennyson, Yates and Kipling for a full month before starting to write a simple poem each week for myself. Six words to a line, four lines to a verse with the rhyme in the second and fourth line, four verses per poem. I was worse than hopeless. I would never be able to write a simple poem for a Hallmark card.

Before starting with my short stories I turned my attention to Shakespeare, *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* then *Macbeth*. Neither Shakespeare nor Tolstoy helped me, they both just made me feel inadequate but at long last I started to write. I set myself a target of 3,000 words a week, 600 a day but by the time I edited

my work the final output was closer to 600 words per week. At least I was engaged in writing, not just drifting through time.

After my morning swim and creative reading and writing I would slip out of the library at about one o'clock to buy myself a sandwich for my lunch. I would normally walk through Hyde Park, pausing to eat my sandwich on a park bench. Then I would make my way to the Art Gallery of NSW where, on average, I would spend about an hour each day. My favourite painting was and still is *The Queen of Sheba meets King Solomon* by Sir Edward Poynter but in fact after spending so much time with them many of the old masters became firm friends that I looked forward to visiting with them each day. I also spent time absorbing many of the large nineteenth century New World landscape paintings. I really only enjoy the great outdoors when it is captured on canvas and I am standing in air conditioning. I never enjoyed hiking in the real great outdoors with the heat and flies, so art is the only way for me to really get involved with it. As it happens, I am exactly the opposite with the naked female form – I rather like looking at the naked body of my lover, but nudes on canvas leave me cold. I find them vaguely embarrassing for some reason. After my art gallery visit each day I would bicycle home to my little flat and write until about six o'clock in the evening.

Some evenings I would walk to the local bottle shop to buy a cold bottle of champagne, then return home to cook myself dinner and settle in for the evening.

As had been my habit for many years I continued to go to the cinema in George Street Sydney each Tuesday night and at least once a week to a live show, the opera maybe, perhaps a play or to the comedy club to give myself a laugh. Adopting the theory that all work and no play would make me a very dull person I did not work on weekends, not even housework, it

was strictly playtime. I often spent Saturday or Sunday at the seaside, different beaches every time with lunchtime feasts of fish and chips for a special treat.

I took ferry trips to Manly, delighting again to have the feel of water movement under my feet, the smell of the ocean and the salty sea breeze against my face. I even spent the odd weekend out of town in the campervan, including two days at the War Memorial Museum in Canberra. Thus my life settled into a new and steady routine of work and play. I was writing – however slowly and badly I was at last writing. I found that I didn't miss my business life at all although I did miss the companionship of friends at work. Most of all I missed my daughter Josaphine and my wife Sheila. To my surprise I missed sex more than I had expected – much more than sex I just missed the physical contact. It was a big gap in my life.

'I am going to try and work my way through this stuff,' I had told her before she left for Egypt. 'But if I can't and I have to disappear I will be in contact with you in about three months but no later than six months. If you don't hear from me within six months you can assume I am dead, claim the life insurance and just get on with your life.'

Sheila hadn't taken any of it seriously. 'Oh, fuck off!' she replied laughingly. 'You will work your way through the problems, you always do, and how could you leave this magnificent body?' she asked wiggling her recently enhanced breasts.

On my third outing to the George Street cinema, just a month after my 'disappearance', I had my first unplanned encounter with my past. Like most people, I had a working relationship with about 150 to 200 people, but outside that I knew perhaps 500 to 1000 more of past clients, old employees, subcontractors, their spouses, old suppliers, people I met at social, political

and commercial functions. People who I have seen but I don't remember their names.

I had my ticket and an ice cream in my right hand as I wandered through the lobby from the ticket counter to the theatre door passage when I noticed her blinking nervously at me about 20 metres away. She was about 45 years old, very attractive with bright green eyes and very black hair. Well groomed with a floaty dress and classy accessories, she was in fact quite a picture. Now she started walking towards me as if she knew me. Flight was pointless, so with my heart pounding I braced myself.

'It's you isn't it?' she asked earnestly, grasping my arm so firmly that my ice cream was at risk.

'Well it certainly was me, in an earlier life,' I confirmed with my warmest smile.

'But now I am someone else, in a witness protection program, the person you knew died I'm afraid.'

The unrehearsed explanation sounded silly as it came out of my mouth, like the line from a third rate actor in a B-grade movie. Why didn't I think and rehearse an intelligent explanation, I wondered as I smiled at her. Surely a meeting like this was always possible. Strangely she didn't seem to notice how disingenuous the explanation was.

'Oh, oh, I see, how awful for you!,' she said wrinkling her nose with genuine concern.

'Shouldn't you be in another country or at least in another state?,' she asked earnestly. She was fully and deliciously fragranced and at that least appropriate moment I swooned slightly in her company, becoming aware of her breasts and her femininity and without conscious thought I moved closer to her until we were almost touching.

'Yes, of course, and I will be relocated in due course but in

the meantime they need me here in Sydney to make statements for evidence.'

I lowered my voice to almost a whisper. 'I am not really supposed to be out and about you know. I sneaked out of the safe house for a movie to give myself a little break from it all.'

Does your wife know about this?' she asked in a whisper.

'No she doesn't, she will just have to move on and make a new life,' I replied.

'How awful,' she replied but her expression indicated she was not displeased at all. She obviously knew us but felt no sympathy for Sheila, perhaps she didn't even like Sheila. She searched my face for almost a minute, then seeming satisfied she continued.

'Don't worry; your secret is safe with me.'

She kissed me on the cheek then wafted off to join a girlfriend. I didn't know who she was then and I don't know to this day but I do know that her word was good. The secret was safe with her and it was also safe with several other people I met in Sydney that year by chance, none of them close personal friends. It was quite amazing that after I said 'Witness protection program.' very few asked personal or awkward questions. They all seemed very kind, sympathetic and helpful.

Although my life had settled into a safe, steady and secure routine I was aware that it was a temporary life. I calculated that at my current rate of frugal expenditure the cash reserve I had on me could last another two years but by that time I would be flat broke and all out of options. I firmly resolved to limit my current life to no more than one year. By June 2001, the anniversary of my disappearance, I would need to be running with a new plan. Could I return to my old life? I wondered. That was doubtful, but if not I would need to create a new life where I generated income and constructed wealth again. Very soon

it would be time for me to make contact with Sheila again and although I missed her and missed married life I wasn't looking forward to what I knew would be a difficult meeting.

I had taken a huge leap of faith with Sheila and now she controlled all our assets, our cash reserves, including the slush fund, our income, everything. She was the keeper now.



I suppose I had come to accept that all women are probably a bit odd. In fact it seemed to me that part of growing up was learning to accept that women were very different from men, that was just life! My mother had always seemed irrational and more than a bit odd. Both of my sisters could be awkward, irrational and were quite strange in some of their behaviours. My wife Sheila was even more different than most but I didn't understand how much or why. That information took years to seep into my consciousness. In the beginning she just seemed to be a bit highly strung and a real handful like my sister True. There was nothing wrong with that in my opinion.

There were hints in our early time together but the first real proof that there was a problem came to me just before our daughter Josaphine was born in January 1975. It was typical Auckland weather for that time of year, warm but not yet really hot. Sheila was in distress and felt an overwhelming urge to throw herself out the third floor window of St Helens Maternity Hospital. I put my arms around her and spoke softly, soothing words of love and reason but in reality I didn't understand or relate to her feelings at all. I felt insincere, like a third rate actor in a play. Had I really left Wendy for this unattractive creature? Perhaps she would jump. I considered the scenario. I would be

rid of her without any guilt. Wendy would probably take me back.

As these thoughts ran through my mind loving, soothing words of reason continued to flow from me, washing over her until at last the crisis was past and the madness subsided. The next day our daughter Josaphine was born. 'Welcome to the world my little daughter,' I greeted her.

I hadn't expected to love Josaphine. Much of my emotional life with Sheila prior to the birth had been emotionally shallow but I loved Josaphine from the moment I saw her.

She wasn't a cute baby. To call her ugly would have been too harsh but her fat little face and strange hair were certainly unfortunate. I loved her then and I love her now. My life with Sheila often required fraudulent displays of emotion but Josaphine has always been an enduring connection with emotional reality.

To leave Sheila now would be to leave Josaphine and that was unthinkable, I would have to make it work.

In the early years of our marriage Sheila had managed to hide her erratic nature from me. It wasn't hard as I certainly wasn't on a quest to discover new problems. I had learned that with each new 'coming out' of one of her behaviours my acceptance allowed that behaviour or belief to become normal within family life. In June 1983, I was about to take Josaphine to a GFS meeting, a sort of Anglican Girl Guides organisation. It was early evening as we walked downstairs to the basement garage. Sheila appeared at the top of the stairs, eyes ablaze with rage, shouting at us. Further paroxysms of rage continued as we walked into the garage but the sounds coming out were not identifiable words.

Josaphine sat in silence, seeming tiny in the passenger seat as we drove away, waiting for me to open the conversation.

'Sometimes your mother is not quite herself. She doesn't seem well, sometimes.' There, in that seminal moment, for the very first time I had spoken out loud to Josaphine about her mother's behaviour and there was no way for me to withdraw the words now. It was of course cowardly to attack Sheila behind her back without giving her the opportunity to defend herself. There would have been more decency to have spoken the words in front of her, but it was too late now and from that day onwards father and daughter would manage Shiela together, like an endless evening with a drunk who won't go to bed.

This was the same wife in whom I had placed all my trust when I started my journey of survival in June 2000. We may have had 25 years of marriage together, but allowing her to be my only lifeline was a huge leap of faith.

Before returning to her I needed to review all the reasons for my journey. Were they all still valid? Had they ever been valid or was I caught up in some irrational paranoia? We would need to jointly decide what should happen next and it is fair to say that I had some misgivings.

2

The pressures to disappear

1999

I think it was in late 1998 or early 1999 when Alek first telephoned me. 'Hello, hello again to you Harry,' his deep voice boomed. 'This is Alek, perhaps your thinking will remember me?'

The voice and slightly muddled accent were indeed familiar, as was Ukrainian Alek. He was about 45 years old, tall, handsome with jet-black hair, a huge moustache and bright twinkling blue eyes behind old fashioned steel rimmed glasses. He was larger than life, charming and charismatic, I remembered him instantly with pleasure. In 1997 I had been on a one-week industry course at Monash University and remembered chatting with Alek several times during coffee breaks as he was taking a similar course at the same time. He had been entertaining company and I smiled with pleasure on hearing his voice. '*Privet Alek, kak dewaa?*' (Hello Alek, how are things?) I responded with the only couple of words in broken Russian I could remember.