

WHAT THE LIGHT REVEALS
MICK McCOY



CONRAD

They appeared out of the gathering dusk. The land's edge, sharp and hard and empty but for the red ball of sun, quickly grew gauzy as the boiling mass fanned out, so thick in the air Conrad thought it was a dust storm blowing in from the west. But it wasn't dust. It was alive and full of havoc.

‘Locusts.’

Conrad's only travelling companion sat beside the window directly across the train's narrow compartment; each had a leather bench to himself. It was the first word to pass between them in more than two hours since leaving Albury. The traveller's hands and face told of a life lived outdoors, in paddocks and wide fields, and his blue eyes were so pale they might've been faded from squinting too long at the sun. But his fine boots were made for indoors and footpaths, and his Sunday jacket hung creased and unfamiliar across his shoulders.

Back at Albury station they'd nodded a greeting to each other, which Conrad hoped would be the last of their communication. He wanted to keep to himself, to avoid being asked why he was headed to Sydney. To avoid confessing that he'd been summoned to appear before the Espionage Royal Commission on suspicion he was a Soviet spy. To avoid lying.

The pale-eyed man tapped a finger against the window. ‘Heard on the wireless they were comin’.’ He eased back against the wide bench, an arm slung across the wooden top rail. ‘And here they are, on the wing, lookin’ for beasts to madden and crops to waste,’ he said. ‘But why this fool would slow the train is beyond me. They don't fly that fucken fast.’

Conrad raised his eyebrows in agreement even though he knew nothing about the habits and abilities of locusts.

‘Just keep going and get out of the fucken way would be better, you’d reckon. Rather than slow down and give ’em something to aim at.’

The approaching swarm spread as it drew closer, as if not just descending upon them but multiplying, growing broader and deeper as it fanned out across a front stretching far beyond the length of the train. Leaning towards the window, Conrad gazed into the murky distance as the first of the approaching throng suddenly sharpened his sight. He pulled back from the glass as their bodies began to crack against the train’s flank like winged hail stones, a staccato rhythm to their impacts at first but within seconds rapid-fire as the window was veiled with their yellow insides.

The pale-eyed man placed the palm of his hand flat against the glass, as you do when driving down a gravel road so your windscreen doesn’t shatter. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘what we’re seeing here is why this train driver is a fucken train driver.’

The train stopped, locusts thwacking into the carriage. A boyhood memory of a thunderstorm came to Conrad, of crashing and hailing in a dark night, of uncertainty about how long it would last and how the world outside would survive. With blankets pulled over his head and eyes wide, he’d listened to the riot on the tin roof and the thunder in the clouds, no more than fairly certain that the house was strong enough to keep him and his parents safe and dry. He’d known he shouldn’t feel more secure in a blanket’s woollen warmth, but he had. As he sat in the train, locusts hammering at the glass for twenty minutes or more, the

same ignorance about nature's extremes made him pull tight the lapels of his jacket.

Once the surviving vermin had finally teemed past and become a departing stream to the east, the train remained moored to the tracks. Conrad ran his fingertips down the inside of the window, half expecting the thick film of yellow muck to have seeped through the glass. He turned his hand over and pressed together the pads of his thumb and index finger.

Under his fellow traveller's steady gaze Conrad picked up his hat, which rested beside him on the seat, then put it back down again. He bent to retrieve his newspaper from the floor, unfolded and then refolded its broadsheets, placed it back beside him and laid his hat across the top.

'You on business, then?'

Conrad was dressed in his usual brown brogues, woollen trousers, shirt and tie, and sleeveless woollen vest under a tweed jacket. Overdressed for the weather. Wire-rimmed glasses straddled the bridge of his nose and his thin hair was subdued with Brylcreem.

'Sorry, mate. Got the order of proceedings all wrong, haven't I?' A calloused palm was extended across the aisle. 'Dominic Lowry's the name.'

Conrad gripped Lowry's hand. 'Conrad Murphy,' he said, and confirmed he was on a business trip.

'What trade you in?'

'Engineering,' Conrad said. 'I'm a mechanical engineer.'

'That so? You might want to wander up front and see what you can teach 'em about cleaning locust guts from their engines.'

‘Not my line, unfortunately.’ Conrad tugged at his shirt cuffs, one then the other. ‘And you’re from Albury?’

‘Yeah, mate. Just outside, anyway.’ Lowry placed a hand on the seat either side of him. ‘Cattle,’ he said extending his legs and crossing his feet. He glanced at his clean boots. ‘Good land, mostly. Real good land.’ He fell quiet, thinking. ‘Except for drought and bloody pestilence.’

‘I can imagine,’ Conrad said, immediately wishing he hadn’t. It would be obvious to Dominic Lowry that someone in city clothes couldn’t possibly imagine the tolls of drought and pestilence on a cattle farm.

A shadow of resignation hung in Lowry’s smile. ‘Do you mind if I read your paper?’

Conrad handed it to him. ‘Be my guest.’

Since leaving Melbourne he’d read it cover to cover. The waterside strike, which coincided with testimony from Seamen’s Union Secretary Bill Bird at the Espionage Royal Commission, was front-page news. Opposition leader Doc Evatt was complaining again about bias in the media; a US B-29 bomber had fallen from the sky above the Soviet Union just off the Sea of Japan; and Rising Fast, a New Zealand-bred racehorse, had won the Melbourne Cup. The first horse to achieve the Spring Grand Slam, as they called it, having already claimed the Caulfield Cup and the Cox Plate.

Lowry opened out the front page and stabbed a finger at the broadsheet. ‘They paid that bastard Petrov five thousand pounds. Did you see that?’ He shook his head. ‘The bloody government. All for the lying prick to dob in some of ours.’

The curtain of muck on the window made it too difficult

for Conrad to read Lowry's face in the deepening evening light. 'Five thousand pounds,' he said. 'That's a year's wage.'

'A year's fucken wage,' Lowry said. 'What I could do with that kind of money.' He paused, imagining. 'Still, I hope they get the bastards.' He looked directly at Conrad. 'Commie spies, the lot of 'em. Traitors. Line 'em up and shoot 'em, I reckon. Guilty as fucken sin.'

Conrad rolled his wedding ring half a turn round his bony finger then rolled it back. 'They've uncovered precious little so far at the commission,' he said. 'Don't you think?'

Lowry squinted at Conrad. 'What have you been readin?'' He leant forward, holding up the newspaper for Conrad to examine, as if the plain fact of its existence rendered the words printed in it undeniably true. 'It's all here, mate. Like that Lockwood prick sellin' secrets for thirty bob. Thirty fucken bob is all our country's worth to him! Or whatshisname for the Seamen's Union today.' He flicked to the front page and held it up for Conrad to see. 'Calling a strike on the waterfront 'cos he's been exposed for what he is. A spy. A commie fucken spy. Called a strike just so he can hold us all to ransom. For payback.'

Conrad slapped his hands against his thighs and stood. 'You may be right, Mr Lowry. I should go up front and offer my assistance to the driver.'

'But wait on. That's more than the *precious fucken little* you were talking about, isn't it?'

Conrad stood at the compartment door. 'You'd need to be in the courtroom to really know, wouldn't you?' His sweating palm slipped on the door handle.

Lowry looked at him like he was even more of a stranger now that they'd shared a locust storm and a newspaper. He

returned to the print. 'Line 'em up against the wall and fucken shoot 'em.'

Conrad crossed from carriage to carriage, and in not a single one was anybody showing the slightest concern about having been stopped in the middle of nowhere by an event of genuinely biblical proportions, or about the possible length of their delay. He'd reached the front of the train before he came across the conductor.

'Engine's buggered,' he was saying to a compartment of passengers. 'We'll have to wait here for a replacement.'

'And how long's that going to take?' one asked.

'Shouldn't be more than a couple of hours before the new engine arrives from Wagga Wagga, then another hour or so to tow the broken one to a siding a little way north.' The conductor nudged the visor of his cap away from his eyes. 'Then double back, hook us up and we'll be underway.'

'So, five hours?' Conrad said. 'Six?'

The conductor squinted. 'Sounds about right.'

'Rolling again by midnight?'

'I reckon.' He yawned. 'Before,' he said, nodding. 'Before midnight.'

Conrad didn't believe him. The faces of his fellow travellers suggested they didn't either. He returned as far as the gantry between the first two carriages and stopped on the narrow steel walkway. He wanted to sit but a stew of insect wing and thorax and leg and head coated every surface. He lit a cigarette then wrapped himself in his own arms. It was after 7 p.m., just over nine hours since he'd left Ruby and Alex on the platform at Spencer Street station, back down in Melbourne. If this rescue mission did somehow go to schedule, he'd arrive at Central

Station in Sydney early the next morning. He had a briefing at his lawyer's office at eleven, so there'd be time to walk to the guesthouse, check in, have a quick nap and a shower. He examined the glowing tip of his cigarette, a thread of smoke coiling lazily in the night. At home, Ruby would be in the kitchen eating her dinner. Alex would have been fed. He'd be inside his playpen rattling toys and chewing wooden blocks and dribbling and laughing. It was warm in the middle of outback nowhere and the stars poked holes in the clear black sky. No locusts now, no wind. Conrad jumped, the skin on the back of his neck tingling, as the conductor opened the carriage door. He stepped inside the carriage to let him pass, then stepped back out onto the walkway. He lit another cigarette and checked his watch. Maybe Dominic Lowry would be asleep.

He was. Conrad retrieved the newspaper, scanned the stories he'd already read but which Lowry had examined with a different lens, then folded the paper and slipped it into his overnight bag. He buttoned his jacket, covered his eyes and forehead with his hat.

Midnight and the morning's early hours came and went, but no replacement engine arrived, nor sleep. Nothing had changed by dawn. At least he wasn't due to appear at the commission until the following day.

With an eye on his companion, he patted at his breast pocket and quietly dug out the summons even though he already knew what it said about non-attendance.

Failure to comply will result in the issue of a warrant authorising your apprehension for the purpose of being brought before the Commission, including any necessary detention in custody, and until released by the Chairman.

What about locust plagues? Surely acts of God would be deemed by the chairman reason enough not to enforce 'any necessary detention in custody'?

Across the compartment Dominic Lowry dozed noisily, his head resting against the windows. So completely was the outside of the glass soiled, and just a quarter inch from Lowry's temple, the muck coating it couldn't possibly have left his dreams unaffected.

Conrad rubbed at the corners of his eyes then stood to stretch his legs. Sleep still rumbled from the cattle farmer's open mouth as Conrad slid the compartment door closed. He tiptoed along the passageway to open the adjoining door between carriages and jumped down to the silent earth.

Standing in the clear early morning, some fifty yards to the side of the railway line, he pushed the toe of his brogue into the topsoil. He considered the train's engine, fouled beyond repair, and let his eyes stumble down the line of lifeless carriages, heavy and unyieldingly static.

The yellow earth beneath his feet was as fine and dry as talcum powder. He kicked at it, raising small clouds of dust so light they dissolved in the air. Balancing on one foot, he polished his shoe against his trouser leg over the back of his calf. He stopped twice to check he'd restored the leather to its previous shine, before repeating the process with the other shoe. Had Ruby witnessed such useless primping she'd have got a big laugh out of it. He wished she was there to tease him.

Both feet back on the ground, he stuffed his balled hands deep inside his pockets. A chill breeze had sprung up from beyond the flat expanse to the west, stirred into flurrying breath by the sun's waking rays. It was after six, almost twelve hours

since the conductor had made his dubious forecasts. Even if the replacement arrived in the next hour, they would still have to haul the crippled engine away and double back to hook up to the carriages, which meant they wouldn't reach Central Station until late into the afternoon. No briefing with the lawyer then, that was certain. But so be it. In that courtroom at least, he had nothing to hide.

A distant hooting finally signalled the approach of the new engine and soon after Dominic Lowry walked heavy-limbed through the scrub. Conrad smiled in greeting and offered a cigarette. They stood side by side smoking, watching the work of the railwaymen who uncoupled the fouled engine to be towed away.

'Not long now,' Conrad said.

Lowry blew smoke through pursed lips. 'In the end,' he said, 'there's no chance of avoiding it, is there?'

Conrad watched the farmer's unwavering profile and convinced himself he wasn't referring to Petrov or the commission or lining up men to shoot them. Lowry was referring to his own reasons, whatever they were, for travelling to Sydney in his tweed coat and good boots.

Conrad examined the outcrops of rock that pocked the dry ground like warts, and the desiccated grass and scrub that defied it. He took a small tin from his pocket, the Kiwi shoe polish it once held long since exhausted, prised open the lid and pressed his cigarette butt into its base, along with the too many others already inside. He held out the tin for Lowry, who did the same.

'Thanks,' Lowry said, raising his arm in the direction of the train. 'Shall we?'

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Conrad replaced the lid, slid the tin into his pocket and began the walk back towards their carriage.