

DUSTFALL

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DUSTFALL

A NOVEL

Michelle Johnston



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For
Julian, Isabelle, and Richard

St Agnes' Eve – Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all its feathers, was a-cold
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold.

John Keats,
The Eve of St Agnes, 1819

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I

When a building dies it cracks open, and new life drifts in on breezes and seeds. A resurrection, blown in from elsewhere. Or perhaps more a rebirth, Lou thinks, reserved solely for things of bricks and mortar, for the never-lived. Not for people, that's for sure. Certainly, not for the little one with the jiggle in her step and the smell of unwashed clothes. No, when humans die they crumble into dust with barely a whisper, and are poured into urns for display on mute mantelpieces, or shelved away silently underground, leaving nothing but official paperwork and vast, endless wreckage.

Lou looks up to the craterous holes in the walls, the yawning openings, where these motes, inklings really, waft in from who knows where. The specks float to the floor without sound, looking like snow, except it's hot. Hotter than she's ever known it, which is something, considering she comes from Perth, a city as baked and dry as forgotten bread.

The hospital is a ruin, without plaque or monument, marked only by a broken *Keep Out* sign, its face canting and

creaking on the haunt of a wind, and an entrance flanked by listing pillars that she fancies look like fractured, crippled metacarpals.

Sitting propped up against a half-standing wall, the warmth soaks through her shirt, and the edges of bricks jut on angles into her back. Many of the walls have disintegrated entirely, leaving drifts of grey concrete crumbs which have settled into layers all the way through the building, writing down the story of the place; a chronicle that no one's around to read.

It must have been a large room, this central one. In a corner is a steel contraption, all rusted cylinders and curved pipes. An anaesthetic machine, she guesses, now just a relic – nothing like the modern ones she's been recently spinning the dials of, dispensing their lolly-like vapours of oblivion to the lucky ones under the mask. Lou hauls herself up, wiping her muddy hands on her pants, and walks towards it. She rubs the front of her wrist over one of the canisters. An asinine gesture, she thinks, as if a genie might appear and extinguish this whole episode on the wave of command. A hint of shine emerges – peculiar, after all these years.

On the floor nearby is a bundle of papers, covered in layers of dried muck. She squats next to it and picks off several clods. The top one is an Australian medical journal, dated from sometime in the fifties, although it's difficult to make out the bleached, rippled words. Amazing that they are here, as if waiting patiently to be read. Picking up the paper by its corner, it perishes with a puff, filling the air with the smell of gunpowder. Lying underneath is an envelope, eaten through by the hunger of years and the climate. The writing that remains is faded and barely visible – she can just

distinguish an elaborate, looping scrawl. She tries to lift it, but when she does, it also crumbles in her hand, the pieces drifting away like word pollen. Lost to the breeze. Gone. She imagines doing the same herself, dissolving on a breath of air and joining the backlit diaspora.

The wind is lifting. It sounds a lonely squeal as it courses through the holes and the broken windows, and the light is turning granular. Lou realises it's getting late. She has no idea what she'll do now. Perhaps she could camp the night among the ruin and the detritus. She could construct a tent, assembled from the worn seat covers pulled from the rental car, use her socks as a pillow, her change of underwear for decor. Her father would have loved this; she could see him sitting in the middle of it all, shining a torch under his chin for the telling of outlandish ghost stories, always the opportunist. He wouldn't have needed to make up much out here, she thinks. But if her father were present, this would drag her mother into this illogical scenario, and any joy would be stamped out, sprayed with pine-smelling disinfectant, all the stories bulldozed, with Lou and her father forced to feel ashamed of making things up when there was enough rubbish right in front of their eyes. And with him now only keeping the company of cold stone, while her mother sits in a darkened house, waiting for God only knows what in a cloud of synthetic cleaning products, such an image is ridiculous, and she shakes her head. Plus, she has no experience with camping, and joy is no longer hers for the taking.

Scraps of gauze and torn lengths of bandage tumble across the floor. Other items, heavy from rot, lie dumped in corners. A feather, curiously white, floats past her on a

draught. She squints and watches the strange thing sail by. Strewn around her are shards of cracked plastic, congealed clumps of paper and fragments of dull metal equipment. It was once new, this hospital; clean, hygienic, presumably painted. Now, it is silent dirt and debris.

At least nobody knows she's here. She thinks her letter of resignation would have been found by now, picked up from where she'd slid it under the door of the Director of Medical Services. He would have opened it and tossed it in with the rest of her dossier, disgusted. They had one on her, she was quite aware. They'd made that clear when she first started working, only a month ago, in that bristling tin-pot of a hospital several hours from here. Made it sound like it was her last chance, her one shot to redeem herself after what went on down in Perth. But a last chance wasn't much use to a body stripped of options; unmuscled and blind as she now felt. She should have known, they all should have known, that exchanging locations was no answer. No popcorn solution, pacifying only to those who liked their schedules blank and their office doors locked by five.

With the oncoming night, the heat starts to drain away and her sodden shirt cools. She pulls it away from her chest. The solitary whine of a dingo twists its way through the rubble. Lou looks up to where there ought to be a ceiling, but there is nothing but the beginnings of distant stars. It's clear that she is gnawingly alone, her only company the fiends who've taken up residence in her skull.

Perhaps she'll have to sleep in the car – it's probably her only option. Early that morning she'd set off, leaving Port Hedland, having planned to drive to Karijini – an unparalleled tourist destination with world-class sparkling

gorges, she had read in a glossy brochure, Australia's own Grand Canyon, superior camping grounds et cetera, the perfect place to wash away your troubles, to meditate, to find yourself in nature's beauty. But she hadn't ended up in Karijini, had she? At some non-descript fork in the road, she had seen a sign with the name of a town scratched out. Erased like a mistake. *Wittenoom*, the ghost of the words had said, and in that instant she'd known that this was the turn she should take.

She'd driven into a petrol station near that divergent road, knowing that whatever happened from there, she was going to need supplies. Filling up a bag with cold drinks from the mud-smears fridge and a handful of packets of nuts and crisps, she'd lugged it to the counter.

The guy behind the register had taken her credit card and turned it over, maybe looking for an explanation.

'You a doctor?' he'd asked, looking at the lonely title next to her name.

She didn't have a lot to show for it, that much she knew.

'Not anymore,' she'd said. Final, like she'd just decided.

'Where're you headed?'

'Wittenoom.'

He'd handed her back the card, shielding his eyes from the blast of the sun. The heat had worked itself into a fury while she'd been driving and she could feel the knife of it slicing through the glass doors into her back.

'I wouldn't. There's nothin' out there. It's bloody Chernobyl.'

She'd shrugged, slung the bag of goods over her shoulder, and walked through the automatic doors into the furnace of noon.

‘Only bloody madmen go out there,’ he’d called after her, but she didn’t turn around.

And by mid-afternoon, she’d arrived.

The air temperature is dropping and it’s a disconcerting sensation, as the floor, the fixtures, the crags of furniture are still on the roast, pouring out stored heat like old-fashioned radiators, keeping her legs hot. Is this how it is every night? Her chest is tight, and she’s not sure how close the dingoes are, with their mournful, hungry howl. The last of the light is spidery and silhouettes dance on the walls. With a start, she thinks she sees a figure, stiff and seated in a corner, but realises with relief that this too is merely shadow. The stink of dead animal wafts intermittently through to her, coming and going on the curl of the breeze.

She wanders through the last of the rooms, a ward by the look of it, with three low-slung, collapsing iron beds, the mattresses long ago rotted to nothing, still delaying her decision about where to go for the night. Her footsteps splinter the debris underfoot. How much history is she flattening? She knows so little about this spectre of a town. Just asbestos, death and obliteration.

Picking up a pair of rusted metal artery forceps, she can suddenly visualise the hospital peopled, a doctor wielding this instrument, furiously suturing wounds with silk. Perhaps performing operations, or clamping great chest tubes. She lifts up the forceps, making sweeping motions, sensing the rhythm of them, feeling the weighted way they slot into thumb and ring finger, Teutonically engineered and unaltered over decades. The solid metal of them clunks as she opens and closes the ratchets.

But then a more urgent sound becomes apparent and it echoes under the beds. The footsteps belonging to another, crunching up the gravelly front of the hospital. Suddenly she feels loose inside, watery, and puts down the forceps, reaching into her pocket for the jingle of the car keys. She shouldn't be here. She should be back home, but back before. Back before a blink of a job in Port Hedland, back before that mess of a stint in a small suburban Perth hospital, even back before medical school so that she could choose a different career, one with gentle hours and nobody's blood on her uniform. But she's not. She's now crouched behind a carcass of a bed, hoping that the owner of the loping footsteps, the unmistakable sound of a heavy man, will not find her. The swinging light of a torch arcs across from her and she can see bursts of dust in its beam. She remembers that she has parked the stupid little hire car right out the front, a compact Daihatsu that began the day bride white, but is now caked in maroon dust and pockmarked from the ding of rocks. No point hiding, then, she guesses. She stands in time to see a hulk of a man walk in.

He shines the torch right at her and says nothing.

'Hello?' She tries out her dry, croaking voice, surprised at the sound of it, having barely heard it all day.

In the scatter of light she can see a beard of intriguing colour – streaks of black, speckles of orange, and other shades she can't quite make out. It's wiry and full, and he looks like some type of gingery bushranger. On his head, though, his hair is black and thick, and his face is a weathery olive.

'Thought I heard someone out here,' he says after an unsettling pause. 'Don't get many cars like that baby

coming through.’ He gestures out to the front. His face is Mediterranean, but his voice is pure Australian. ‘In fact,’ and he lowers the torch, ‘we don’t get many of anyone coming through. Not since the tourist buses stopped coming. Name’s Dave.’ And he sticks out his mound of a hand for her to shake. Lou calculates whether she can trust this guy. It used to be one of her talents, sizing things up in a heartbeat.

‘Lou,’ she says, taking his hand, but has a vision of being clamped in a vice, expecting a taipan strike, and quickly drops it.

‘What’re you doing here?’ he asks, looking around.

How can she answer? ‘Just checking it out.’

He looks at her. She knows that look. She starts again. ‘Actually, I needed a bit of space. Thought I’d see what’s out here.’

‘You staying the night?’

‘I’m not sure. I’m a bit underprepared.’

He chuckles, and the sound is deep and throaty. It softens her, and she feels her anxiety back off.

‘Nobody’s ever prepared for here. Do you need somewhere to stay?’

‘In Wittenoom? You can stay here?’

‘If you want. Not for long, though.’ He doesn’t explain why, just keeps watching her.

Lou realises he’s said *we* earlier on. ‘Do you live here? Do others?’ She thinks back to when she drove in, bumping up roads that were more suggestions, the few remaining shacks left to cook out their days in the sun. None of the dwellings looked occupied with their shabby rags of curtains, rusted trucks with long flat tyres abandoned in yards, and the quiet of seized-up generators.

He smiles. 'Sure do.' His teeth are white and disarmingly straight. He continues to watch her, a look narrowed to a point somewhere within. She's ashamed – she knows she looks terrible. Her hair is stringy, unwashed, tied back roughly. She had not bothered with makeup when she drove off this morning and her shirt is steeped in sweat and mud. Only twenty-eight and she looks like she's no age. Hardly even human, she thinks, let alone a fair-looking woman.

'But you can't stay with me. Come out and I'll help you get sorted.'

Lou walks behind this hefty man and she can see dust billowing from the ground with each step. He's wearing a checked shirt and heavy, silted-up boots. The pair stand on the slab of concrete that was presumably a verandah of sorts.

'See there,' he points and directs his torch beam to the east, away from where she came in, 'if you drive over, I'll bring around some stuff for you.' And without waiting for her reply, he disappears off down the road to some unknown blackness.

Without Dave's torchlight, things fall to dark, although a glimmer from a half-moon keeps totality at bay. She treads carefully out to her car. The place smells of fresh earth. A dead fence skirts the perimeter of the hospital, and its detached wires poke out in twisted yawns. As she walks through, she goes to close the dilapidated gate, probably just out of habit, but it catches and slides off its rusted hinge, crashing to the ground. A startled spinifex pigeon takes flight and stirs up a whorl of dust. The sound of the wings leaves a ringing in the otherwise empty air.

When she opens the car door and the interior light clicks on, she can see that there are scattered rocks near the front

wheel. She picks one up, turning it over. It has a silvery seam cut through the middle, and the fibres pull off with little effort. They look like the grizzled hair of an old man, and she realises this is asbestos, right here in her hand. She knows how dangerous the filaments are; that inhaling a single fibre can sound the march of death, so she drops the rock and wipes her hands on her pants, but then thinks, what does it matter, anyway?

She hops in the car and with the lights on high beam trundles down what she believes are roads. Unseen kerbs and rocks bash at the undercarriage and she hopes the tyres will withstand the jags. Ahead is the row of Nissen huts Dave had pointed out. As she eases the car up close to the first of them, she spies a faded sign over the lean-to door. *Tourist Accommodation*. She has a moment of hope, but when she gets out of the car she realises that these too were abandoned years ago. Hesitating, she smooths down her hair and, after rumbling around in her handbag on the front seat, pulls out her lipstick, just a melted burgundy ingot after today but she slicks some on just the same. *At the very least I'll match the dust*, she thinks.

Leaving the engine running and the lights of the car directed inwards, she creeps inside the first of the huts. The floor is covered in rubbish – empty bottles and cigarette butts interred in dunes of ash and dirt – but good enough for a night.

Lou's bladder calls to her, and she wonders nervously where she is supposed to go to the toilet. So frustrating, her hang-ups about voiding into anything that's not ceramic and disinfected, but some ideas get ingrained young and they're difficult to shake. The travelling she did as a child

was demure, her sedate family of four staying in box-like motels booked well in advance. Sure, when they were little they'd go out fishing with their dad, in the little tinny, and they'd pee over the side as if it were a great joke, so when she thinks back on it, it was likely her mother's fear of germs and her great sloshing buckets of Ajax over anything contacting bodily fluid had ruined her for any type of outdoor ablution. But tonight she's got no choice. She slips through a gaping side in the tin wall, where there is still a little light, and squats. Branches brush her face and her haunches and she wees as fast as she can squeeze it out, imagining all sorts of wild Pilbara creatures that might find her white city backside appetising. She stands quickly and zips up her pants, in time to see a lantern swinging up the road. Scrambling back inside, she gets there before Dave does, and he strides through the front entrance, a khaki swag slung over his shoulder.

'Got some bread rolls here.' He starts pulling things out and handing them to Lou. 'Actually, grab this first.' It's a stiff grey army blanket, coarse as bitumen, and she guesses this will be her bedding.

She lays it down and they set out a picnic of sorts, complete with kerosene lantern for mood. He has turned off her car engine on the way through, which leaves only the quiet and the flickering flame. It creates something other-worldly.

'More rolls. Not too stale,' he says, giving them a squeeze. 'Bit of ham, too if you want.' He continues producing items, one at a time, like a magic show. 'Sausages, only cooked yesterday.' He rustles around in the stiff bag. Like everything around here, it is encased in red dust. 'And tada!' He pulls out two cans. 'Beer. Bit warm. But still.'

He passes one to her. She takes it reverentially, like a sacrament.

‘Oh, and this.’ From the bottom of the swag he removes another blanket, this one a little softer. ‘It gets bloody cold here at night. You wouldn’t reckon so, but it does.’

‘Hang on,’ Lou says, and she nips out to the car to grab several packets of salt-and-vinegar chips and some crispy noodle mix, adding them to the rug.

‘A banquet.’ Dave smiles, and they pull the tops off the beer cans.

Lou takes a great swig and can taste grit from the rim. Even so, it’s heavenly and full in her mouth.

‘So, what are you really doing here?’ He relaxes back on the blanket, propped up by one elbow, the other hand holding the can.

It should be the place, the time, to unload. She wishes she could open up, talk to this hulking, unfurled man who has brought her offerings as though she is worth something. But there’s nothing that she’ll manage to get out. She’d like to tell him that she feels hunted, her failures following her like a mongrel dog, snarly and vicious, and they won’t leave her alone, so she thought the best thing was to keep moving, outrun them. But now she’s here in Wittenoom and she knows there can’t be anywhere else further to run. She wants to be able to tell him that she’s just flushed a career down the toilet, and that she hasn’t told anyone back home, least of all her mother, who found enough shame in having a daughter with ambition in the first place, but now that Lou’s wholly screwed up everything that had been grudgingly scrimped and saved for, her actions will be deemed unforgiveable. She wants him to hear it all, and have him respond that it’s OK,

everybody makes mistakes, and to mean it. But she can't. And she knows that once some words come out they can never be put back and things change.

'Travelling,' she says, and tastes the lie smeared on her lips. She can see he doesn't believe her.

'I'm sorry,' she starts again. 'I just can't.'

He nods – maybe buried truths are entirely expected in this implausible place.

The warm beer emits a yeasty aroma, and it mixes with the fine dust to make each breath dense and strangely tasty. They stay quiet for a bit.

'I had no idea people actually lived here,' she says.

Dave snorts. 'Of course they do. There's not many of us for sure, but why wouldn't you? Best bloody place on the planet. No government interference. No rates. No rules. Most magnificent landscape on God's green earth. Some things are a bit of a hassle it's true, like no electricity, and it's a bit far to get supplies, but when you take all the good things into account I can't understand why everybody doesn't want to live up here.' He sits forward. 'I'm glad they don't though. It's the whole bloody point.'

Lou watches the veins in his neck while he speaks. They are ropes. His hands are muscled, terracotta paws.

'And others?' she asks.

'There's about eight of us. We don't see much of each other. Like to keep to ourselves, really. Occasionally somebody organises a get-together, a few drinks, a barbie, then half of us don't turn up.'

'How long have you been here?'

'About five years. Worked in the pub right until she was closed down. Saw almost everybody leave, then the buildings

start to come down. When the government workers come to do it, raze the buildings, they wear all sorts of gear, respirators and whatever other protective kit they've lugged up with them. I like to stand alongside, watching them, having a smoke, just to get up their noses. They're sweating away like bastards, and I'm drinking a cold beer, enjoying the spectacle.' He grins.

'I don't get it,' Lou says. 'I thought asbestos was some of the most dangerous stuff on earth. How are you ...?' It feels like prying, asking.

'It is and it isn't,' Dave says. He doesn't offer more.

He hands her a second can of beer. They pick at the food.

'Your turn,' he says.

She carefully chooses her entry point, a small, cordoned-off snippet.

'I've been working in Port Hedland Hospital. They were understaffed so I was given the job at the last minute.' The first real untruth. It was the farthest place from Perth the administrators could think of, she was sure. Somewhere she could clean up her act.

'Routine registrar job,' she continues. 'Wards, looking after the admitted patients, helping out in surgery with the anaesthetics, that sort of thing.' She will leave out the part about being rostered onto the emergency department overnight, the only doctor in the hospital, help not even a phone call away. Not describe those nights lying in the white cage of an on-call room on a thin mattress under papery sheets, with the thud of the ceiling fan overhead. Not tell him how she would lie the whole night, stiff as a shop dummy next to the phone, her eyes unable to close from the drone of fear in her head, and that she couldn't even turn off the light. How she came to know the moment before the phone

actually rang, some type of psychic click it must have made, and she'd tense up with terror. Even if she ever managed to doze off, she could sense this sound, and she'd wake, wildly alert, just before the phone rang, and she would stumble like a condemned man approaching his noose, down to the cramped little department, where an unknown, nameless, broken person would be waiting for her to see. She shudders.

'Can't imagine a doctor's job would ever be routine,' he says.

'Hmm. Truth is, I'm taking a bit of a break from it. You know, the stress.'

He nods again, like he understands.

She has nowhere else to go with this conversation. Any further back from Port Hedland and she'll be in Perth, sitting in the director's office on a seat opposite a bare desk, under perfectly straight portraits, next to impeccably manicured pot plants. Well, the desk bare apart from a stack of papers, all relating to complaints and concerns about her, about her work. In an office that smelled of dry-cleaning, where he pushed the pile of words towards her, asking what she had to say for herself, when they'd been so lenient, so *understanding* after the incident. And, of course, any further back from that and they'd be there in that miserable winter, in that suburban emergency department. But she's not going there. She doesn't need to go there. She's done with all that.

'What do you like to do? You know, for fun. Hobbies?' he asks.

She shrugs. 'Not much really. I like to write.'

He becomes visibly interested and inches closer. 'Brilliant.' He sets down his beer. 'Maybe it's fate that's brought you here, then.'

‘Really? Ha. But no. Nothing brilliant about it. I haven’t written anything decent for years, although I guess ...’ An idea shakes her.

He’s animated now. ‘This place. This story. It needs someone to write it. It needs to be down on paper. I’ve tried for years. Got some great photos, interviews, stuff like that, but I’m no good at getting it to lie down right on the page. Never sounds any good from my head.’

She looks up at him. ‘I know what that’s like.’

He’s still leaning towards her, blocking out most of the light from the lantern. Off to the side his mammoth shadow is flickering, waltzing.

‘This town,’ he says again, ‘it needs it. Before it all goes. Before we all do.’

The urgency in his voice surprises her. But she understands so little about this place that she doesn’t press further.

‘Tomorrow,’ he says, ‘I’ll show you round properly. Give you the tour.’ He pushes to his feet and dusts himself down.

‘Sure,’ Lou says. ‘I’d like that. And thanks,’ she gestures to the remains of the food and the kero lantern.

‘My pleasure,’ he says, slinging the empty bag over his shoulder. ‘Have a peaceful night.’ And he smiles and walks off into the night.

Lou arranges the scratchy blankets so they are banked up in one corner, covering as much of the dirt as she can. Dave’s departure leaves a void, and the air inside is menacingly quiet. Cold has washed into the shed through its leaks, and she folds the edges of the rug over her. Sporadic caws spear the silence, and once in a while she hears branches scraping, only to then abruptly cease. She can smell campfire, that

smoky eucalyptus scent. It's coming from the blanket. It's a smell that never leaves, she thinks. Like having history, a unique Australian history, embroidered into the fabric.

She leans up against the metal corrugations of the wall, knowing she will not sleep. The image of the hospital is stuck firmly in her head, an all-senses blast of that derelict building. A husk, just like her. Her knowledge about anything that happened round here is meagre, but the idea of it is strong. The bell tolled for this place sometime in the sixties, this much she knows. Somehow, though, the building had looked as though it had been abandoned in a hurry, the breath of life suddenly sucked out. And that despite its ossified appearance, and the evaporation of the town around it, life was now germinating back inside. Or is that just her strange, distorted perception? It's an impression, however, that will not leave her alone.

She stands and creeps out to the car, where she knows she has an empty notebook. Maybe Dave has a point. But perhaps it ought to be her own ruin laid out on a page. And if she never leaves, perhaps someone in the future will find it here, pick it up like the papers she saw today. Settling herself back, she begins, and she does not stop until the heat and the horizonless red of the land beyond the shed have woken and have begun to roll themselves out, once again.