

‘My name is David James Forrester. I’m a solicitor. Tonight, at 6.10, I killed my wife. This is my statement.’

He plugs his mouth with a cigarette as the dictaphone hovers. He lets his car steer itself. He’s thinking about the difference between admitting and confessing. Admit to one element of a crime too many and you’ve confessed. Murder included. That much he can remember.

He stops the tape.

In the middle of Tennyson Street, his car is travelling so slowly it’s about to stall. Seddon, in Melbourne’s inner-west, is silent around him. He stares at the ubiquitous picket fences and rose bushes. The weatherboard period houses, all like hers: double-fronted, two-toned and immaculate. Once, this sameness had made her laugh,

him too. During its decade or so make-over – from industrial, working class to young professional – Seddon seemed to have consulted the same housepainter and landscape gardener. ‘A busy pair,’ she’d called them, ‘with a limited palate.’ But tonight, looking at the tricked-up houses, all he sees are grim replicas of his crime scene.

He closes his eyes and his car shudders; dies.

The dictaphone slips from his fingers and bounces against the steering wheel and into his lap. Its door springs open and the tape pops up. He smokes. He thinks of the story he has to tell, and of his pain. Usually he can order his thoughts without seeing them, usually he can recall names and dates without notes. But can he tonight? When the mistake’s fresh and his hands are hurting? Maybe not. But he has to try, before his words are skewed and his memories muddled. Before his guilt becomes fact. He retrieves the cassette with its ribbon unspooled. What he feels, he realises, is sick.

He shoves open his door. The cold hits his face as he hawks onto the road.

At least he knows his way around a statement; in more than twenty years he’s taken thousands. While his interviewees tend to be merely grouchy bankers, the principles are the same. Suing or being sued is an emotional business. And he’s become a professional hand holder. He tells their shaky chins to put it simply, their own way, but that, he can see now, is a tough ask. In the twilight, he hawks again and sits up. His thoughts clear. He’ll structure the thing chronologically. That way, the acts constituting his crime won’t be tackled for hours. Besides, what came before is often more telling than those acts. What came before shapes the liability, reveals it. It’s only once the damage has been done that anyone bothers about what came before.

With his gut churning, he restarts the car and rolls it along the kerb. He parks outside Tennyson Street's only brick-veneer house, inserts his pinkie into the wheel in the centre of the cassette and turns, like he's cleaning his ear. He watches as the tape smoothly coils. And an image comes. This picture is key to their story, maybe as defining as this wintry night. As much as it hurts, he can't avoid it. She's straddling him, long, gleaming and naked.



# 1

It was mid-August, almost exactly two years ago. He was buying a ticket to see *Talk to Her* as part of an Almodóvar retrospective when he saw her, alone, two people away from him in the queue. He recognised her immediately, though he'd only seen her once before. He watched her read up on the Spanish director. Up close she wasn't, technically speaking, beautiful. Her face lacked symmetry as her nose turned to the left and one eyelid was heavier than the other, but her face was so much better for these flaws. He admired her olive complexion and her hair, no longer solicitor-sleek and shoulder length, but now the mop of an urchin. It was this change, he suspected, that created her spectacular new look. In her heart-shaped face her pale eyes were enormous and ethereal.

If he had a type, she was it. He introduced himself and they chatted. After the film, she agreed to join him in the crowded bar across the road from the Sun Theatre. They were discussing Almodóvar's early work, when, somehow intuiting his tiredness, she nestled behind him and swept her hands across his shoulders, then rested her fingertips at his nape as if asking permission. When he didn't speak or step away she began massaging, her long fingers working the skin beneath his hair.

'Is that better?' she whispered.

*Ah, yeah*, he thought. He wasn't game to speak. It was such a rash yet fitting act, shattering something between them that might've taken hours, if not days, to demolish.

By 1 a.m. they were kissing in a taxi on their way to her place. Her little house was a cream-and-green Victorian affair, ornate, high-ceilinged. And he liked it, especially the decor with its old-world Eurasian flavour. She had an eye for second-hand art deco furniture and Chinese engravings, sideboards and lamps. The rooms were furnished with green and blue Turkish rugs and paintings of the sea and trees by artists he didn't know. In every room, bookshelves overflowed. He would never have expected a young, single person to occupy such a house. Although she'd told him she'd only recently bought it, nothing about it was half done, nothing uncommitted. By the time she opened her fridge, which was loaded with fruit and vegetables, he felt intimidated.

'Want an omelette or a plate of antipasto?' she said.

'No, thank you.'

His nerves left him then with nothing but his smile. She'd been this way ever since he'd introduced himself – open, warm, uncomplicated. So unlike his expectations of her; he couldn't work her out.

She led him through her lounge room, which was lamp-lit

and heated by a gas log fire, into a dining room housing a honey-coloured timber dining table and chairs. He managed to admire the setting and she seemed pleased.

‘Recycled Victorian ash, courtesy of Film Victoria and its script development program,’ she said, moving towards him. He must have looked confused. ‘The funding was meant to get my script, *Daisy*, from draft one to two.’

That had been her first direct allusion to her new career. During the evening, though they’d found a shared passion for art-house movies, they hadn’t discussed her role in the film industry.

He made appreciative noises as she unbuckled his belt. The chairs’ cushions were covered in fine olive suede. The suede was silken against the skin. Conducive, he supposed, to scriptwriting.

By 1.30 they were both naked and she was astride him on a dining chair. Her breath was humid on his neck and her grip tight, enveloping, the way he liked it. Practically everything she’d done had been the way he liked it: perceptive and playful. They’d been at it for twenty minutes. Dictating the pace, she was curved on top, her slender arms locked across him. Beneath her fingers, from his shoulders, hair sprouted. There was hair on his back too. Hair tinged with ginger. He’d been watching her when his shirt came away, and her initial reaction had been akin to shock. But now, in the light of the gas fire, he saw her admiring the red-gold glistening on his skin.

‘It wasn’t there when I got up this morning,’ he whispered.

‘I like it.’ She rocked slowly upon him. ‘And I like your teeth and their gap, and your lips . . .’ She traced them with a fingertip. ‘Just enough to see when you smile, and just enough to . . .’ She kissed him softly, and he stifled a groan. ‘And I like your kinky hair,’ she said, snagging her fingers in it, ‘with its gingery highlights. It matches the hair on your back.’ She grinned.

Unused to coital chitchat, self-conscious, he kissed her. But she was enjoying herself. 'No one feature of your face is particularly striking,' she said, pulling back, 'but all together it's compelling.'

He stared, stunned by her scrutiny.

She laughed. 'David, it's a compliment.'

She returned her focus to their bodies. Flattered and relieved, he watched her. Before long, their breathing was rapid and in sync. With his eyes shut, he felt her every detail: her thigh muscles above his, her tongue's tip at his ear, her hand at his neck. Any second now he would come. He opened his eyes to verify she was flesh, and not the look-alike he'd dreamed about four years ago. He rolled his hips and, within her, another chamber yielded. She moaned. Leaned back. He took in her flushed neck and her blue eyes pale and bright against her treacly skin. He tried to hold on. It wasn't easy. Then, as she gasped, he became aware of the perspiration above her lips, under her breasts, between her thighs. It was as if she was melting. All over him. He was reluctant to interrupt but he felt obliged.

'Ah,' he said, 'I think you're urinating on me.'

The room was silent but for their breathing and the purr of the heater. Neither of them moved. He kept his gaze on hers, praying he hadn't snapped the slender thread she'd spun around them.

'What did you say?' she whispered.

'I think you're ur—'

'What?'

She raised herself up, her inner thighs dripping. His groin was saturated and half the suede was soaked. She touched the cushion. Sniffed her fingers, her big eyes wide.

'I could do with a towel,' he said. He couldn't read her expression, but her cheeks were burning. 'It's okay,' he said with a gentle smile. 'Just very wet.'



Before he could speak again, she streaked to the door.

His pulse was still galloping as he examined the evidence. He dabbed at the chair, paused. Since his wife left, he'd bemoaned the inverse relationship between hygiene and sex. Often it was better not to identify flavours. If only he hadn't been quite so blunt, though – his fingers were at his nostrils when he glanced up to see she'd reappeared, bearing towels. Looking impossibly tall, she hesitated at the doorway.

'Well?' she said. 'What's the verdict?'

There was no avoiding it. He sniffed. 'Odourless,' he said with relief. 'Definitely.'

'Ha, I never doubted it!' she said, beaming. But relief crossed her face too, as she tossed him a towel.

In her galley kitchen, he was propped on a bench and eating vegemite toast. The condom had been binned, the cushion leaned towards the gas fire.

'Four years ago,' he said, 'I'd just started at Freeman & Milne when I stumbled across your farewell drinks.'

She finished her toast with gusto. 'I know, and when Andrew Milne began my legal eulogy, you fled.'

Surprised and flattered again, he could only nod. She'd been a senior associate then, up for partnership, and he was a freshly minted partner at the firm. When he heard she'd resigned, he'd been bemused and impressed. He'd taken a dozen years to achieve what she had in five, aged barely thirty. Hearing about her then, he'd assumed that she'd been educated at the right private school and reared in a leafy eastern suburb of Melbourne – that greatness

had always been expected of her. That she was leaving the law was, he'd assumed, the most unexpected thing about her. About that he now knew he was wrong.

On safer, drier ground, they discussed his colleagues and her former bosses. The upper echelons of the legal profession, the elite inbred. There were few they both knew and liked – despite the two hundred-strong professional staff of Freeman & Milne.

'I always felt like the odd one out in that place,' she said.

At the sink she filled her teapot and smiled. He remembered then the sight of her, years before, in that boardroom. Encircled by mid-career lawyers, she was like a beacon in a sea of grey: animated, tactile, aglow. And now he knew why. Lawyers could be split into three groups: the minority of believers who loved legal practice; the agnostic majority who stayed (or sometimes left but came back) because they didn't know what else to do; and the lucky ones, the atheists, who left because they had another calling. She was, he realised, one of the latter. Back then, in that vast boardroom, she'd been alight with happiness. As she was tonight. A reminder to him of his flat-footed agnosticism.

Wrapped in a navy towel, he felt himself emitting a low-burning energy. 'You're intense, aren't you,' she said, 'like a blue flame.' He couldn't help but smile. She was pouring black tea, letting the steaming liquid arc from pot to mug. He touched her cheek with the back of his fingers and she over-poured, a reaction he found ridiculously gratifying. He thought he saw her blush, but in the steam couldn't be sure.

'Has it happened before?' he said.

She sipped her scorching tea. 'No.'

Leaning against the fridge, clad in her towel, with her straight back and long feet, she was a stately teenager at the school fence.

The sort of girl he'd always liked but rarely approached. Definitely top-shelf.

'Well then, I'm flattered,' he said. 'I've only ever heard of female ejaculation.'

This time her colour was unmistakable. 'I couldn't have done it without you.'

He laughed, at her jangling bravado and blush. She could say almost anything and he'd be amused.

'And I'm sorry we were cut short,' she said.

'Don't be. I'm completely satisfied.'

Mastering her embarrassment, she abandoned her tea and busied herself with dishes. He hopped from the bench to take a soiled butter knife from her hand. In front of him, barefoot, she was still tall. He liked that she didn't need to incline her head to meet his eye. He was aware anew of her breath: fresh, familiar, vegemite.

'What are you doing in ten hours?' he asked, entwining her wet fingers in his.

'Working.' She stepped away. Dried her hands. 'Don't take this personally, but I've pegged you as my first one-night stand.'

Frowning, he dusted his fingers against his chest, causing crumbs to cling. He wondered whether to parry: *I wasn't suggesting otherwise*, etc. 'And why's that?'

She hesitated. 'To see what it felt like, I guess.'

'And what does it feel like?'

'Exciting, fun . . .' She held his gaze. 'And finite.'

He gave her twenty seconds to change her mind. Or at least come clean about his effect on her. When he stepped towards her, she ran her hands through her mop of hair. When he brushed his fingers against her cheek again, her face became pink, again. Beneath his gaze, her lips were trembling.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘have any of your other relationships begun like this?’

She mouthed rather than said: ‘No.’

‘And have any of your other relationships worked?’

Shaking her head, she was that stately schoolgirl again. ‘But you’re divorced,’ she said, inching from him, ‘and you’re old and you’re a lawyer.’

He blinked to mask his surprise. ‘Ouch.’

‘And,’ she said, clearing her throat as if to garner authority, ‘there’s nowhere to go after a beginning like this.’

His red-brown eyes danced. ‘Of course there is,’ he said. ‘We can go anywhere – anywhere, that is, with plastic lining.’

Her laugh was a loud, clear sound in her kitchen. And he rang with it.

He doesn’t know where memory is stored: right side of the brain or left, or somewhere in between? But tonight his temple throbs, as home movies nearly two years old play in his head. Stricken in his driver’s seat, he’s swept up in a collage of her: grinning over her laptop, baking vegetable lasagne, weeding her tomatoes. In their twenty-two months together, her moods went from joyous to despairing. But in the beginning, she was luminous. He closes his eyes. Regret is distant but visible on the horizon.

He pictures her the morning after her first one-night stand. Slipping from his arms, she wrapped herself in a towel. And he watched. Without makeup, her cheeks and lips were rose pink and her blue eyes were startling against her mussed fawn hair. She was the most naturally colourful woman he’d ever met. Flashing him a

grin, she swept up her clothes. Although it was a Saturday, he sensed she was late for her desk. But his weekend was, as usual, fairly empty.

‘Tell me, why romantic comedies?’

The question took her by surprise and he was pleased. The night before, he hadn’t mentioned her sassy romantic comedy, even though it’d been a critical and box-office hit. That morning, when she re-tucked her towel, he gathered she was vacillating about him. He smiled his best sultry smile.

‘I blame Katharine Hepburn,’ she said, with a sigh. ‘I grew up watching *The Philadelphia Story*, *Woman of the Year* and *His Girl Friday*.’

‘That was Rosalind Russell.’

Heading for her ensuite, over her shoulder: ‘Yes, I know. I blame her too.’

Cross-legged and naked on her bed, he sang out, ‘Screwball comedies, eh? Howard Hawks, George Cukor, the sparring and reversals?’

She paused. ‘Yes, that’s them.’ She refocused those big eyes on his. ‘As a teenager I thought that was the only way to relate to the opposite sex. For years, I’ve been waiting for some fast-talking man to realise that he can’t live without me.’

She paused, seeming surprised by her answer. He watched her think. He’d been trying to work out her solo status since the night began; there was always a reason for it. This was the closest she’d come to an admission. As she stood, framed by the doorway, he appraised her. Her understated beauty and intelligence. Once, he would’ve tried to draw her.

‘So,’ he said, ‘now you make romantic comedies to give other people false hope?’ He took her cocked eyebrow as a gentle concession. ‘There must be a law against that.’

‘Actually,’ she said, ‘those films give me solace.’

‘Do they now?’ he said, his confidence growing. ‘I get it from boxing, and Goya.’

When she smiled, he rose from the bed.

Her eyes grew serious. ‘David,’ she said, then paused. ‘Have you actually seen my film?’

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘twice. I liked it. And call me Dave.’

Gently, he kissed her curving lips. Cupped her warm head beneath her hair. Untucked her towel and pulled her back onto the mattress. To his relief, she let herself become entwined in him again. Six hours later, he left.

In his car, he groans and the black box clicks. Jesus, she was a gift. One of the two women in his life he’s loved. The enormity of what he’s done hits him. He is many things, he thinks – a drunk, a prick – but not a killer. He wouldn’t believe it if it weren’t for the evidence. The scratches on the back of his hands are deep and long, exposing the meat within. He’d been leaning, his hands tight around her long neck, his thumbs pushing down. That was all it took: his body weight and his two thumbs. Even with her hands on his, digging.

In his right thumb is one of her fingernails. A pink, jagged crescent. He plucks it out and that pressure in his abdomen bears down. Hard.

He blasts out of Tennyson Street, heading for the Yarraville Gardens. The bliss of a toilet. Or shadowy bush. The pain tightens and he lurches. He fears he won’t make it. Three long minutes later, the gardens come into view and he brakes, thrusts open his

door and runs. In the near distance is the Port of Melbourne with its cranes and containers. *What a goddamned place*, he thinks. *The scrapyard of the city.*

The concrete toilet block is icy and lit by a single bulb. He throws himself into a cubicle, yanks down his pants and erupts. The deluge is brief and fierce. Not the relief he expected. Perplexed, he hunches over the old wooden seat. He closes his eyes and sees himself. Bent and trembling, hot and cold. Totally fucking out of control.

Without warning, his guts burst into his throat. It's the perfect ambush. He swivels but doesn't make it, splattering the cement floor. Mid-retch, he flushes to expel what he can of the stink. He kicks up the seat and retches again. Too late he remembers the two glasses of red wine and her homemade tzatziki; it's all tasting far worse the second time. And the third. Had he eaten lunch he would've had a better chance. Breakfast too could've plugged him up. As it is, he's going to relive last night's Chinese, dim sims and all. He retches, his arse jutting from the cubicle like a pasty, ginger-haired invitation. He yanks up his trousers and belts them, mid-heave.

Thirty years of drinking to excess and he's never thrown up like this. He wipes his face with waxy toilet paper. Breathes. Waits. Heaves. It's as if a gremlin is sitting in his belly and hurling the contents up at him, handful by handful.

He stares at the foul toilet floor, then at the splatters on his shoes. He frowns. They aren't vomit, or bile, or even shit. His trousers too – at the cuffs – are darkly soiled. His gaze inches up his legs, and he groans. His knees have matching stains and his blue shirt is a butcher's apron.