I Came to Say Goodbye

Who is left behind when a family falls apart?
For Jacqueline Samantha
and Steven John (Overingtons all)
This is a work of fiction. Every single character in this book is completely fictional and bears no intentional resemblance to any real person whether living or now dead. Nor is the book based in any way on any real life event or factual situation.
It was four o’clock in the morning. The car park outside Sydney Children’s Hospital was quiet. A 27-year-old woman, dressed only in a dressing-gown and slippers, pushed through the front revolving door.

Security staff would later say they thought she was a new mother, returning to her child’s bedside – and in a way, she was.

The woman walked past the nurses’ station, where a lone matron sat in dim light, playing laptop Solitaire. She walked past Joeys – the room where pink and puckered babies lay row by row in perspex tubs – and into Pandas, where six infants – not newborns but babies under the age of one – lay sleeping in hospital cots.

The woman paused at the door for a moment, as though...
Caroline Overington

scanning the children. She then walked directly across the room, where a gorgeous baby girl had kicked herself free of her blankets. She was laying face down, the way babies sometimes do, her right cheek flat to the white sheet, her knees up under her chest. The white towelling of her nappy was brilliant against her dark skin.

The woman took a green, nylon shopping bag from the pocket of her nightie. It was one of those ones that had Woolworths, the Fresh Food People written across the side. She put the bag on the floor and lifted the baby girl from the cot.

The infant stirred, but she did not wake. The woman placed her gently in the bottom of the shopping bag, under a clown blanket she had taken from the cot. She stood, and looked around. There was a toy giraffe on the windowsill. The woman put that in the bag with the baby, too. Then she walked back down the corridor, past the matron at her laptop, through the front door and back into the hospital car park.

There is CCTV footage of what happened next, and most Australians would have seen it, either on the internet or the evening news.

The woman walked across the car park towards an old Corolla. She put the shopping bag on the ground, and opened the car’s rear door. She lifted the giraffe and the blanket out of the bag and dropped both by the wheels of the car.

For one long moment, she held the child gently against her breast. She put her nose against the rusty curls on the
I Came to Say Goodbye

top of the girl's head, and with her eyes closed, she smelled her.

She clipped the infant into the baby capsule, and got behind the wheel of the Corolla. She drove towards the exit barrier and put her ticket in the box. The barrier opened and the woman drove forward, turning left at the lights, towards Parramatta Road.

That is where the CCTV footage ends. It isn’t where the story ends, however. It’s not even where the story starts.
Med Atley

I was out on the tractor when a woman phoned to say I’d have to go into the cop shop and make a formal statement. I’d turned off the engine to take the call on the mobile and straightaway wished I hadn’t.

I told her. I said, ‘I’m not sure I can do that.’

She told me, ‘You don’t really have a choice, Mr Atley. The case is coming up. The judge wants statements from witnesses. We also need your signature.’

I told her, ‘I didn’t witness anything.’

The woman, she said, ‘We’re not suggesting that you did. It’s more that the judge has got to make a decision. It’s your grandchild we’re talking about.’

I said, ‘I know what it’s about.’
The woman said, ‘Mr Atley, if you don’t make a statement, the judge will call you in, and you’ll have to do it on the stand. It’s not something you’ve really got a choice about.’

I said, ‘It was still a free country last time I checked.’

I put the phone back in my pocket. The next day, a bloke from the local police station, a fellow I knew, put his head through the open flyscreen, into my kitchen. He said, ‘Med, you there?’

I’d been making coffee. I held up the cup, meaning, ‘Can I get you one?’ He nodded.

I said, ‘Mate, I appreciate you making the house call, but I know what this is about. I already had a girl on the blower yesterday.’

He said, ‘Well, are you going to make the statement, Med? Because if you don’t, they’ll only subpoena you, which means you’ll have to go in, and take the stand.’

I said, ‘I realise that. I’m just not sure what I’m going to say.’

He said, ‘Get yourself a lawyer then.’

I said, ‘You don’t think lawyers have got quite enough of the Atley money?’

He said, ‘Then do it yourself, but make sure you do it, Med. You’ve got a grandchild out there. Decisions are being made.’

I said, ‘I’m grateful for the reminder.’

Later that night, I went out onto the porch. It was dark all around. I flicked the switch on the outdoor light. Not for the first time, I thought, ‘How do the moths get inside the lightshade?’
There's an old table on the porch. I bought it for my wife back in 1974. It was the thing to have in those days. It had a formica surface, so cups didn't leave a ring. I pulled up a chair, the only one left now from the set of four. Those chairs, that marriage, it's all gone.

I sat for a while, doing nothing.

The dog saw me come out. She got up off her hessian bed, wandered over, wagged her tail. I bent down, gave her a bit of a rub along the spine with my knuckles. Her back leg kicked.

I said, 'Alright, old girl?'

Kick, kick, kick.

I said, 'Okay, old girl. Let's see what we can do.'

I had before me a pad of white paper. It wasn't anything fancy. I bought it from the newsagent. It was one of those lined pads with the pink gum across the top to hold the pages together. I had my old man's Parker pen with me. I twisted the barrel and the nib came down.

The first words I wrote were, 'Well, let me warn you now, Your Honour, this isn't going to be Shakespeare.'

I wrote, 'I can see you've got a problem here that you need to solve. You've got a grandchild of mine and you're trying to figure out what to do.'

I wrote, 'Police here have explained to me that you need a little background.'

I wrote, 'It occurs to me that there's a half-dozen experts out there, maybe more, who will be giving you their version
of my family history. They'll tell you what they think we are – kidnappers, child abusers, you name it. I've got no problem with that. Every man is entitled to his opinion.’

I wrote, ‘What I’m going to put down, it’s not going to be a theory, and it’s not just my point of view. It’s more going to be the nuts and bolts of what's gone on over the past four years.’

I wrote, ‘My mate in the police force here, he says I ought to get a lawyer to help me get it right, but bugger that, I’m perfectly capable of putting down what I think.’

I wrote, ‘There’s been plenty of lawyers caught up in this mess already, and mostly what they’ve done is lighten our wallets.’

I wrote, ‘Much of what I’m going to tell you I haven’t said out loud to anyone before. It’s not going to be easy for me. Parts of it, I might even have to get my oldest daughter, Kat, to write down for me.’

I can promise you this, though, Your Honour. Everything I put down here – every word of it – is going to be true.