

Project Mercury

0400 hours:

Something in the air this morning. Everyone trying to act casual, but all hopped up on some palpable energy. Feels like the whole body's whirring. They've done this before and the key is, gotta keep the mood light, even if everyone knows they're all silently shitting themselves. So he stands up and sticks his hand out and says Project Mercury on three? Everyone grins, but no-one goes for it. Glen says, gear up gents. And Lauren.

0440 hours:

Cool morning but really working up a sweat. Bulky vest making him sit rigid in the passenger seat, but everyone pretending like it's just another day another dollar. Examine stubby fingernails. Hey, Cameron. D'you hear the inventor of fairy bread died today? Nah mate, give us the punchline then. There were hundreds and thousands at his funeral. Chuckles. Voices on the radio. Glen says eyes up lads, nearly there. Turn onto Mawson Lakes Boulevard and snake their way past Technology Park, little lakes dotted here and there. Pretty much night-time dark at this hour o' morning but can still tell Mawson Lakes's got a certain charm to it. Can imagine it peak summer, taking the kids out to the playground, feeding bread to the ducks after a babycino at the shopping centre. Would be nice. Takes 'em a while to reach the address 'cause so many streets are just dead ends, no cul-de-sacs, just ends. Spies a real sleek looking VW ute sitting on a driveway and files it away in his mental list of cars the missus would never let him get. Man can dream, though.

0450 hours:

Shut car doors real quiet. 6-way gentle thuds but street's that bloody quiet reckons you could hear them from Mars. Sky still dark. Glen says, making history today gents. And Lauren.

Gettin' real tired of that joke, Glen. Keep your voice down. Belly don't feel too good but smile through it. Examine vest, little tugs, gun's on belt, taser, baton, gangs all here. Quick promise to the wife, be home for lunch love. Dark grey brick houses with little second-storey balconies look on. Always wanted one of them buzzers on the gate that lets a quiet zzztt through the house when guests arrive to be let in. Man can dream.

0452 hours:

Advance on the house, nice neat house, white rose bushes neatly pruned framing the front path to the door. Lauren's boots make no sound at all, but his feet suddenly feel real heavy. Can't seem to make his footsteps light. A woman comes walking up the footpath. What the fuck's woman doing out at 5 in the morning? Can bet your arse he'd be in bed if he didn't have to be here arresting future murderers. 6 hands swat furiously. Shoo woman. Woman's eyes go real wide and then she turns and runs back the way she came. Gonna have a hell of a story to tell the office today. Streetlight made to look like old-timey gas lamp goes out right as their boots whisper under its soft orange glow. Lauren whisper-sings *doodoodoodoo*. Does nothing good for the knots in his stomach.

0455 hours:

It's Glen, Cameron, and Mohammed at the front, Lauren and him round the back. Clasps his hands to boost her over the gate and then clambers over after her. Tight corridor, squeeze past the wheelie bins, get a whiff of old food. Lauren clicks on a torch but keeps the beam low. Light sparks on something in the flowerbed, both of them stop dead, hands flit to guns on belts. Figure out it's the flashing eyes of a cat dark as shadows at the same time and give shaky smiles at each other. Would bet her heart's punching about as hard as his right now. Shadow cat comes to slink around their feet. Shoo shadow cat. Gentle boot and shadow cat screams, but with a look

like letting them know it was him decided to go and the boot had nothing to do with it. Quiet step from grass to patio, around the outdoor dining set, can't help admiring the tv set up, reach the back door. Torch off. Quick glance at the watch and they settle themselves into position. Breathe in.

0459 hours:

Crouched like crabs by the door listening to the gargle of magpies rousing. Clotheshorse full of undergarments under the pergola. Stares at a pair of large briefs hanging all sad and deflated and emblazoned with BONDSBONDSBONDS on the waist band. He's wearing the same ones under layer layer layer of protective equipment and uniform. Thinks of sharing this with Lauren, of saying hey Lauren me and this murderer wear the same undies how funny. Sometimes thinks saying stuff out loud gives them less power. Words just fizzle out in the air and then your brain not having to hold the thought anymore. Glances at Lauren and opens his mouth but Lauren's got one eye on her watch and her fingers flash 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

0500 hours:

Break the glass in the back door and unlatch the lock and hear the crack of the door separating from the jamb round front of house. Guns raised, swift movements through the house. Sidestep from room to room, dance punctuated by shouts of CLEAR. CLEAR in kitchen. CLEAR in living room. Glen crackles over the radio. Unit 1 moving upstairs. A moment later hears cries that tell him unit 1's encountered the family. Can hear the wife yelling, probably waking up the whole damn neighbourhood, but he understands. Can't imagine what it's like being woken at 5am by a decked-out team of AFP waving guns in your face. Thinks he'd prolly be yelling too, nothing sensical either. One of the kids wailing like a banshee. Cameron bristles over the

radio, suspect's not here. So that's it, then. Lauren lets herself outside to go start stringing crime scene tape and he stands in the kitchen feeling too big for it.

0510 hours:

There's a bowl of lemons on the island in the kitchen. Feels early for sunrise yet, but window above the sink shows the sun just starting to burst through the skin of the lake. Sees Russ waiting out by the paddy wagon, cigarette dangling from his lips. Stands in the deep blue morning light for a moment, wonders why his nerves are still clinging to his stomach lining. Would like to go watch the sunrise. Erase the paddy wagon and scene would be perfect. Shifts his vest, feels shirt underneath peel away from sheen of sweat on his skin and paste itself again somewhere else, like a wilting sticky note. He's in the garage, small voice behind him says. One hand flies to belt out of instinct and turns to see a young girl, teenager maybe, clinging to the doorframe. Don't touch the motorcycle, girl says, then turns and runs silently in socked feet back up the stairs.

Shit. The garage.

0511 hours:

Got to move quickly because by now, the suspect has to know they're here. Nothing quiet about busting open a front door and the screaming wife in the bedroom. Haven't heard the roller door go though, so knows the suspect hasn't split. Means he could be armed with one of the many weapons their informant told them he's got stashed around the house. Means he could be waiting to put up a fight. Takes deep breath at the door, raises gun, flicks the handle. There's a parked SUV, moves around it. First sign of movement and reflex kicks in. Can't stop his finger pulling the trigger once it's already started. Shot rings out.

Shit.

0512 hours:

Just shot the bloody cat. Has no idea how it's even gotten in here, but shadow cat is a goner. Knows he has to radio the team and let them know what the shot was. Can't quite seem to move. Lauren bursting through the garage door, gun raised, stops when she sees him. You good? Yeah. Just um...She moves around the motorcycle and he hears her words come out of her mouth at the same time as they crackle through the radio at his belt and she says, suspect apprehended in the garage. Non-fatal injuries. Officers all clear. Wonders why she's arresting a dead cat before she hauls a man to his feet, *the* man, their man, the suspect, shot shoulder leaking red, looking like regular old bloke without the bikie getup. Middle-aged, greying, belly, just a bloke who wears BONDSBONDSBONDS undies and wouldn't look outta place at a grocery store. Just a bloke who plans a murder easy as calling an uber. *Broke his contract, so we'll have his blood. Make it look like a drive-by. Kane pull through with the semi?* Lauren handcuffs hands behind his back. Asks what happened and he says I thought he was a cat and she says pardon and he says strewth I don't know. Man looks at him with this kind of look in his eyes like something knows it's got you cornered, even though he's the one in handcuffs. Lauren yanks at the handcuffs and says do us a favour and get your eyes checked and then presses the button on the wall to rumble the roller door up and hauls him out.

0515 hours:

Kinda quiet with them both gone, just him alone in the garage again with the SUV on his one side and the bike on his other. Starts thinking about lemons. Something his wife said to him last night as he was waking up and she was getting into bed. First thing she wants to do when they finally buy a place, she said, was plant a lemon tree. All them other fruits are useless but she wants a lemon tree for when she gets sick in the winter, and when she doesn't need 'em for

eating, she'll put a bowl of 'em in every room so the place always has a smatter of sunshine. She thinks like that, his wife. A smatter of sunshine if every room. Stares down at the small pool of blood on the concrete floor next to the bike and thinks what a headfuck the paperwork on this one's gonna be. Looks out the rectangle mouth of the garage at the view across the street, watches the pretty, old-timey streetlights wink out one by one as the sun keeps coming up. Coming down off the adrenaline now, can feel a panic set in as Lauren and Russ wrangle the man into the back of the paddy wagon. Wife's got out the front somehow, given Mohammed the slip, who's jogging to catch up with her as she strides across the lawn screaming what have you done to him where are you taking him he ain't done nothin' wrong. Presses the button to rumble the roller door back down and lock himself in the garage.

0520 hours:

Should be calling in the CSU, to search the house for the drugs and firearms they know are stashed somewhere. Forensics report will tell him if the blood stain in the garage is human or cat, but all he can do is stare at it. Tries to think grounding thoughts: His wife. The new, gentle swell of her stomach...Think of a joke. Where does the king keep his armies?...Can't remember the punchline. The tire swing in his childhood home in Redwood Park, the creak of the gum tree branch and the rough rope in his fists. A bowl of lemons in the kitchen. The motorcycle. The tar black tires and blood red paint. Without thinking splays his hands on the taught leather of the motorcycle seat, imagines he feels a heat emanating from the bike, a thrum through his fingertips. Shining chrome curves reflect his face back to him a thousand times, pre-maturely lined with stress. Ain't even got the first baby out yet and looking a little old in the face. Feels like he's false started and now he'll always be a little behind.

0535 hours:

Doesn't really know how long he's been in the garage for. Could be minutes, could be hours. No-one's come looking for him yet though so can't be that long. Realises at some point he's gone and stepped a boot into the pool of blood on the concrete. Pulls his foot up and blood clings like syrup, red waffle shape printed onto the floor. Can't bring himself to get concerned about it though. Hands keep coming back to the seat of the motorcycle. He's like a compass needle flickering, stuttering over North. And when he wraps a palm around the handle, the bike feels alive. Swings a leg over the seat and it breathes underneath him, warm body between his thighs. Rips his vest off with a Velcro scream and catches sight of the veins in his arms, a blackened network of roots pointing to his hands on the throttle, pointing him forwards, towards the closed garage door and beyond that, towards the lake, the plains.

0545 hours:

He ducks under the roller door as it groans upwards and emerges into daylight and chaos. Neighbours are dotting their front yards up and down the street, a few having ventured out onto the asphalt before being stopped by the police tape Lauren's strung up between light posts like a sagging finish line. Voices demand to know what's going on and Mohammed's managed to get the wife sat down on the front doorstep, though every so often she pops up from her perch as a new thought about injustice comes to her and she gives her performance to the local looky-loos before running out of steam again. The children have stayed inside, no sign of the teenager who alerted him to her father's location in the garage. Lauren is on the phone to Crime Scene, Russ once again holding up the paddy wagon as he smokes another cigarette, bristling chatter crunching up from the radio at his belt. None of this much interests him. He feels years removed, as if watching an old home video of a Christmas morning that has since melted into

the memories of all the others. He feels like a newly sharpened knife, hears the singing of it in his bloodstream.

0550 hours:

The looky-loos disperse to get ready for work as his team stand around the street waiting for Crime Scene. Cameron joins Mohammed with the wife. Got one for ya. What's the difference between Cinderella and the Melbourne footy team? This'll be good. Cinderella wanted to get to the ball.

0555 hours:

Glen walks over to the paddy wagon and orders Russ, open up the wagon would ya? I wanna speed up the search a little. See if he's willing to tell us where 'e's stashed the Okey doke. Russ jangles open the padlock, cigarette at a cliff-hanger on his lips. He knows even before Lauren's bewildered mouth utters, he's gone, that the man has given them the slip. Lauren says, that's impossible, and Glen immediately starts barking orders to cordon off the street, call for backup, start a suburb-wide sweep. He lets a smile stretch his lips and rolls his eyes towards the hedges bordering the lake's footpath, finding those of the shadow cat, fur slightly darkened with drying blood. He watches as shadow cat darts up the gentle slope of the driveway, where slivers of quartz sparkle in the early morning sun.

0600 hours:

Hear a motorcycle rev and the noise ripples its way up from the soles of his boots, crackles like lightning through his veins.

He cracks his neck. His body thrums.

The man comes tearing out of the garage, motorcycle roaring, and he's off down the street faster than you could say Project Mercury.

He grins.

As his team scramble to get into the cars and give chase, he stands in the middle of the street, one foot on either side of the white line dividing the road into two neat halves, and lets his body purr itself apart, mingle with the exhaust of the shadow's motorcycle.

2000 hours:

He reforms on the cusp of the night and as the streetlights wink on in the crepuscular gloom, he turns them all out again. He stands for a moment, transfixed, watching them flicker in a wave down the curving body of the road.

2010 hours:

Inside the house the bowl of lemons has been pushed to the side and paper MacDonalds bags left abandoned, half-eaten food going cold and a film of greasy fingerprints shining in the dying light from the window. Something about the scene that niggles at him, like there's something important he's forgetting.

2015 hours:

In the bedroom the wife's breath whistles slow. There's a bottle of pills on the nightstand and she's asleep atop the covers, still fully dressed. He goes to the wardrobe and pulls out a box labelled 'Wedding Dress', shoves aside the tulle to find a little black photo album filled with contracts signed in red. Doesn't bother putting the box back. When he turns to leave, the girl is standing in the doorway, watching him. I told you not to touch the bike, she says. He's not sure what she's referring to, but he nods and brushes past her. She lets him go. When he's

halfway down the stairs, her voice comes again. He's not coming back, is he? He might, he says, when it blows over. She says, do me a favour and tell him not to bother.

2030 hours:

Back out on the street there's that feeling again that there's somewhere he should be right now. He's thinking about lemons. He curls his hand into a fist and watches the veins in his arm throb from blue to black and back again. Dissolves back into shadow.

0000 hours:

The informant's got floating floorboards and a gaming room, a fishpond in the yard. One neat little hole in the forehead and Project Mercury is stalled in its tracks. His blood tastes sweet like lemon-curd.