

JUSTIN SMITH

‘Hello, Barry? Yeah, it’s Julie Barnes. Yes thanks – we have arrived.’

Donna held the phone between her head and shoulder to write down Barry’s directions to the Penguin Hill Cricket Ground. She needn’t have bothered.

He told her, ‘Just keep goin’ straight. You can’t miss it.’

At the Penguin Hill Cricket Club, Ruben wandered and looked through his lenses. Donna walked straight onto the grass. There was a warm wind and she took off her shoes and let the blades massage the long drive from the bottom of her feet. She was surprised at how close the trees were to the oval, but as she’d seen, everything was close to trees around here.

At the pitch, she got down and put her hand flat on the black turf. She smiled. This was cricket. Real cricket. None of the bullshit and the TV deals and the white balls and no bloody Wally Grants. She thought about her father. He’d spent a lot of time in the bush when he was a younger man, and he loved the country games and the knockabout players. And he was never happier than when a country boy got picked to play for Australia. It was as though the road to get there was longer and harder. On the field, there was grit to them that he didn’t find in the city lads. His favourite was Bill O’Reilly – a tall man who bowled quick leg breaks. O’Reilly played Test cricket before World War II and was born in outback New South Wales. His family was so poor they couldn’t afford a cricket ball, so he learnt to bowl with the chiselled root of a banksia shrub.

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Donna wished her dad could be there with her, getting his nose full of bush scents.

The stumps and bails were set up at each end and she suspected Barry the groundsman had done it just for her. Any bloke who could make a pitch like this would do anything to make it look better for a visitor. And just as she tried to imagine what he looked like, she heard a friendly cry from the clubhouse.

‘Oi,’ Barry called and waved both arms as though she was lost. She walked to the clubhouse, and under the orange towelling hat was just the face she was expecting – a kind one that had seen a lot of weather.

‘G’day, Julie, is it? Course it bloody is, have a listen to me.’

‘G’day, Barry. Thanks for having me.’

Inside it was cool and she got a smile and a nod from a middle-aged woman with big breasts, who wore clothes brighter than anything she’d seen since she left the city. And there was a young girl smiling at her. It had to be Cassie. She was beautiful and sweet. And she had a glow of intelligence and compassion, as though she’d been born a thousand years ago, but still wasn’t weary of living.

‘Well, this is big news – having Don Garrett writing something about the old club,’ said Barry when they all had a drink in front of them.

‘He loves a good story – what can I tell you? Hey, by the way, that’s a beautiful pitch you’ve got out there, Barry.’

‘Thanks, love. You like cricket, do ya, Julie?’

‘I do, Barry,’ said Donna. The question almost made her laugh. It was just something she’d never been asked. ‘I do.’

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'I guess you wouldn't have much choice if you work for Don Garrett. We all read him up here. And Cass is a big fan. Aren't you, kid?'

'Well, I think he's an even bigger fan of yours, Cassie,' Donna said. 'He likes the work you've done on this.'

The girl's heart had been filling since Julie first called and said Don Garrett got her letter. Don Garrett – the man who wrote those beautiful words and could put a dozen pictures in her head with just one sentence. And now she was sitting with his assistant.

She was wonderful too. Julie's hair had been messed up by the wind, but she could fix it with just two touches from her fingers. She had a loose white shirt that looked new and the toes in her open shoes were painted red. Julie had a small notepad that could fit right in her hand, she wrote with squiggles and half-finished words, and she was able to take notes and talk at the same time.

Cassie had heard of shorthand, but she'd never seen it. She decided she'd need to get a pad just like Julie's and then she would learn the scrawling art. Cassie didn't like people smoking, but the way Julie did it made it a special activity. Everything about her was graceful and impressive, and Cassie wondered which bits she could later imitate without being noticed.

'Is Roy coming?' Donna asked.

'I don't think so, Julie love,' Dolly said.

'Yeah, nah,' said Barry. 'He's on the van all afternoon, but don't worry, he'll be here tomorrow for the game. He always is.'

'Can I show you the scorebooks?' Cassie asked Donna, realising they were the first words she'd said.

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‘Please, Cassandra,’ Donna said smiling. ‘I would love you to.’

Cassie took her guest to the table stacked with books in various stages of ageing and with her neat notes on the top.

Donna put her hands on the two piles. ‘Right, so Roy Cooper is in all of these?’

‘Yes,’ said Cassie. ‘There’s one for every season.’

‘Righto.’ Donna grabbed one from the middle of a stack and opened it to the first page she could find. It was 1977 and the handwriting was neat. She landed on the innings of the opposition and saw ‘Cooper’ had taken two catches. She turned the page and there he was at the top. Opening the order.

“‘R. Cooper’,’ Donna said aloud. ‘Eight runs. “Not out.” Eight runs?’ She looked at Barry. ‘Only eight runs?’

‘Yep.’

‘And he opened the batting?’

‘Oh yeah, he always opens. Ever since he was a kid.’

Donna found another page. “‘R. Cooper. Eleven. Not out.’” And she kept going. Nine. Six. Fourteen. All not out.

‘Fourteen?’ said Barry, lifting his eyes from the same page Donna was reading. ‘That was a big day, Julie.’

‘Was it?’

‘Oh yeah, I think he might have hit a four in that. Not a bad shot from memory.’

‘Really? Fourteen is a big one? What’s his highest score?’

Barry’s eyes rolled to the ceiling in thought. ‘Ummm.’

‘Nineteen,’ Cassie jumped in.

‘Nineteen? That’s his highest? Is that his highest for 1977?’

‘No,’ answered Cassie. ‘For all of them.’

‘What? Ever?’

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‘Yep.’

‘Yeah, well, that sounds about right,’ Barry said. ‘Nineteen is about right.’

Donna looked out over the ground as she processed the cricketing career of Sergeant Roy Cooper. ‘So,’ she said, putting her hand on a pile. ‘In all of these seasons . . . he’s never made more than 19?’

‘Yep.’

‘And he always opens the batting?’

‘Yep.’

‘It’s not a lot, is it? The other boys get a few . . . 76 . . . 124 . . .’ Donna started pointing at scores as she flicked the pages.

‘But Roy still opens? Is he the captain or something?’

‘Oh no,’ said Barry. ‘Roy wouldn’t want to do that.’

‘But he opens? Every game?’

Barry shrugged. ‘Yeah, well, it seems to work – Roy holds up an end and the boys can play a few shots. And we’ve done pretty well. We win more than we lose.’

‘And Roy never gets out? Just to be clear.’

‘Never,’ Cassie said and lifted up a large piece of white cardboard covered in charts and columns, under the title ‘THE BATTING HISTORY OF ROY COOPER’. It was a bigger version of what she’d sent Donna. She’d used different coloured pens for each section. Donna smiled – it was just how she would have done it when she was at school.

She studied the chart and opened more scorebooks, putting them against Cassie’s work. Everything was checking out. And at the bottom of each scoresheet, there were always two signatures – one from each club representative.

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If this was all bullshit, Donna thought, then someone had put a lot of work in. She understood bullshit and she had heard plenty in her years. Donna had listened to politicians and bureaucrats and sports administrators. They were motivated by self-interest and used too many words and were too shameless. And when there was silence between questions, they'd fill it with more bullshit.

Donna's instincts on this country policeman were telling her that it was all true. If someone was going to bullshit about a batting record, they'd have the hero making a century in every innings – or at least more than nine, six and 14.

Donna looked out through the big windows and saw Ruben lying under a tree on the other side of the oval. She couldn't see her photographer's face but judging by the slanting angle of his feet, he was asleep. She'd leave him there, and spend the next couple of hours going through every one of Roy's innings, and tomorrow she would meet with the copper. She'd ask him questions and she'd look at his face and she would give him silence. Then she'd really know if it was bullshit.

Dolly put down a plate of scones between the towers of scorebooks and as she leaned over, Donna got a full view of her cleavage. It was like looking into an unlit cave with two heavily tanned rocks on either side.

'Here you go, love,' Dolly said to Donna, sliding the plate over. 'Have a go at those. Hey listen, you seem real smart – it's 1984, right? Did you read that book – 1984?'

'I did.'

'Well, I didn't, but doesn't it say that the world's gonna get taken over and we're all gonna have video cameras in our house