



The past is always close behind

GHOST CHILD

Caroline
Overington

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PART ONE

Lauren Cameron

When a young woman lives by herself, it's assumed she must be lonely. I'd say the opposite is true. In fact, if anybody had asked me what it was like when I first started living on my own, I would have said, 'It was perfect.' I was completely alone – I had no close friends, and nobody I called family – and that was precisely what I wanted.

The place I moved into was basically a shed, and it was built on a battle-axe block behind somebody else's house. The property itself was on Sydney's northern beaches. There was a family living in the main house, the one that fronted the beach. They owned the block and, like many Sydneysiders who had beachside property in the 1980s, they decided to make the most of it by carving a driveway down the side, building a granny flat out the back and renting it to me.

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After the first meeting, when they gave me the keys and we talked about the rent, I had nothing whatsoever to do with them. They were a family – a mum, a dad and two teenage kids – living in the main house, and I was the boarder. I could get to my place without bothering them. I just walked down the driveway, opened my door and I was home. I had my own toilet, shower and enough of a kitchen, so there was no reason to go knocking.

Before I moved in, I bought four things. The most expensive was a queen-size sheet set in a leopard-skin print, with two pillowcases. I bought a box of black crockery, with dinner plates shaped like hexagons. I had this idea, then, that I might one day have close friends who could come over for dinner. I also bought a new steam iron and ironing-board, these last things because it was a condition of my employment that my uniform be straight and clean.

I still remember the first morning I woke in my own place. I was seventeen years old. I padded into the kitchen in my moccasins, put the kettle on the stove top, and pressed the red button to make the flame ignite. I took the plastic cover off the new ironing-board and scrunched it into a ball. I was fiddling underneath the board, trying to find the lever that makes the legs stick out, when the kettle began to whistle itself into hysterics. I put the ironing-board down and took a cup from the crockery set, removing some of the cardboard that

had been packed around it, and made a cup of tea – hot and sugary, with the bag taken out, not left in – and I thought to myself, ‘This is just like playing house! I’m okay here. Things are going to be fine.’

When the family told the neighbours they’d rented out the granny flat, they probably wanted to know whether I was going to cause trouble – whether I was going to bring boys home and make a racket. But the answer was no, I was not. I amused myself in the granny flat by learning new and humble domestic tasks: sweeping the floor with a straw broom; bending to collect the mess in a dustpan and brush; buying garbage bags with two handles that tied at the top. My idea of a good night was to eat Tim Tams in bed and to smoke cigarettes on the porch, although only after I saw the lights in the main house go out.

The owners would have said, ‘Oh, she’s the perfect tenant, like a mouse, so quiet, you never even know she’s there.’

From time to time, I’d bump into the mum – not my mum, but the mum who lived in the main house. I’d be heading out to work and she’d be on the nature strip, getting shopping bags out of the boot of her car or something, and she’d smile at me – probably because everybody approves of hospital staff – and I’d smile back at her.

I didn’t see much of the dad. Perhaps he’d decided that there was nothing to be gained from getting too

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close to the girl who lived in his shed. I had nothing much to do with the children, either. I was closer in age to them than to their parents, but really, what did we have in common? They came out from time to time, to jump on the trampoline and to sit under the pirate flag in the old tree house, but we rarely spoke.

I'd taken a job as a nurse's aide in a city hospital, and I'm sure my co-workers at first understood why I lived alone. I was new to Sydney so it made sense, at least in the beginning, that I wouldn't have many friends. After I'd settled, though, they must have wondered why I continued to live in a granny flat when I could easily have shared a city apartment with one of the other aides. The noticeboard at work often had handwritten signs tacked up, advertising rooms for rent. 'Outgoing girl wanted to share FUN FLAT!' one of the ads said. The truth is, the things the other girls wanted to do – going to nightclubs, drinking Fluffy Ducks and Orgasms and Harvey Wallbangers – didn't sound like fun to me.

Of course, I wasn't famous then, far from it. I was just the quiet girl, the churchy girl that lived alone, prayed in the hospital chapel, and never socialised. I'm sure they all got a shock when photographs of me started appearing in newspapers, just as I'm sure the family I boarded with got a shock when journalists swarmed the granny flat, waving microphones on sticks.

I got a bit of a shock myself. I took refuge in my bed, hiding under the leopard-skin sheets, trying to fight

the urge to *run*. Because, really, run where? There was nowhere to go.

I don't know how long I would have stayed under the covers if Harley hadn't turned up. He walked down the side drive, past the windows of the main house. I heard the mum rap on the glass. 'Hey, you,' she said. 'Off our property!'

Harley said, 'I'm not with the media. I'm Harley Cashman. Lauren's my sister.'

She would have been startled. For one thing, the mum knew me not as Lauren Cashman but as Lauren *Cameron*, which was the name I'd given her when I moved in. She didn't know I had a brother, either. I'd told them what I used to tell everyone: 'I have no family.'

Harley knocked at my door and when I didn't answer, I heard him push it open. I didn't stir but I could feel warm sunshine pour across my bed.

Harley said, 'Mate, what *are* you doing? Everyone's looking for you.'

I didn't respond so he pulled back the doona and said, 'Lauren, seriously, this is ridiculous. Get up.'

I felt so frightened and overwhelmed that I wasn't sure that I could. I said to Harley, 'I can't.'

He said, 'Sure you can.'

We went on like that for a while, him saying, 'Come on, Lauren,' and me saying, 'Just go away, Harley,' until he said, 'Okay, look, I'm not going to hang around here forever. If you want me gone, I'm gone.'

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It was then that I realised I didn't want him to go, not without me, not ever again. I rose from the bed, untangling myself from the sheets, and said, 'Okay, all right.'

'That's right,' he said. 'Get up, and let's get you out of here.'

I was wearing only a T-shirt and a pair of knickers.

'You're going to need to get dressed,' he said, and started picking up some clothes I'd flung onto the floor. Compared with him – with anyone – I was tiny. He held up a pair of my pants and said, 'How do you even get one leg in here?'

I snatched them away and went into the bathroom to dress myself.

'Good on you,' he said when I emerged. 'Now, let's go.'

He ushered me to the door and we left the granny flat together, me with a jumper over my head in case there was a photographer still lurking, trying to get a picture. He'd parked his car on the nature strip. I couldn't see anything because the jumper was over my face so he guided me into the passenger seat. It was only once we'd started moving, once I was sure we were clear of the suburban streets and onto a freeway, that I took the jumper off, and said, 'Where are we going?'

Harley said, 'I've decided that you should meet the folks.'

I said, '*Whose* folks?'

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He said, 'Mum is gonna love you.'

I thought, '*Your* mum. Not mine.'

I rolled the jumper into a ball and put it on the floor near my feet. I said, 'She doesn't even *know* me, Harley.'

He said, 'Mate, you're my *sister*. What more is there to know?'

I didn't answer. What more was there to know? What do any of us know? We think we know the basic facts about our lives: those are my parents and these are my siblings and this is my story, at least as I've come to tell it. But, really, how much of it is true?

Detective Senior Sergeant Brian Muggeridge

When I first met Lauren Cameron her name was not Lauren Cameron, it was Lauren Cashman. I don't know when she changed it, although I've got a pretty good idea why.

Lauren likes to tell people that she has no parents and no siblings. It isn't true. When I first met her she had a mother, a sister, and not one but two brothers, and all of them were called Cashman.

I met them on the evening of 11 November 1982. I remember the date because it was Remembrance Day and I'd been on parade since dawn with the old Diggers at the Cenotaph on the Barrett Estate. I was hoping to knock off early, but then I got a call to go out to the Cashman place on DeCastella Drive. A mum had called triple-O, screaming that her kid had been bashed, and

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although a young constable was on her way to the scene, a more senior police officer was going to be needed.

The Cashmans lived in a Commission house – quite a few of the neighbours later made a point of telling me that when I went around taking statements from them. They said, ‘Those people, they don’t own here. It’s Housing Commission. They’re just renting.’

What did they mean by that? Not that the family was poor. There were plenty of poor people on the Barrett Estate. I don’t mean down-and-outs. We had quite a few old-age pensioners and a few single mums on the estate, but in those days, most people worked. We had labourers, hairdressers, panel beaters, and a good bunch of guys down at Barrett Glass. Nobody was flush. At a guess, the highest earner on the estate would have been the school principal, on something like \$45,000 a year. It was a ‘working-class’ estate in the proper sense of the word: people worked, although not for much.

So no, the neighbours didn’t mean ‘poor’. They meant something else, something that in those days was harder to define. These days, we wouldn’t hesitate. We’d say the mother was a bludger with four kids under six to three different blokes, none of whom were on the scene.

Anyway, I drove up to the house as fast as I could. I was in one of those white Commodores they gave coppers in those days. The idea was to give us the speed and the muscle we’d need to catch the crooks. Trouble

was, every bloke under thirty on the Barrett Estate had a white Commodore, and they souped them up to make them go faster. There were a couple of Commodores already parked in the driveway of the Cashman house when I got there. At first I thought they were both police cars, but on second glance it was pretty obvious that one of them wasn't. The suspension had been lowered – in those days we used a beer can to check, and there was no way you'd get a VB under this car – plus the windows had been tinted. No, this one wasn't a police car. This car belonged either to a man who lived in the house, or to a man who at least visited often enough to feel comfortable parking in the drive.

The ambulance was already there and I saw the paramedics leap from it and move like lightning across the lawn, the white soles of their shoes flashing. I got out of the car and made my way up the path, expecting to find the house in a state of chaos. I mean, that's quite normal, isn't it? If a kid has come a cropper and the parents have had to call an ambulance, well, you can expect a lot of noise. The parents will be screaming and crying and it's my job to get them to settle down, so we can start figuring out what happened. But there was no panic in Lauren's house.

The mother, Lisa, was in the kitchen with the young female police constable. Lisa was pale and extremely thin, a chain-smoker, with hair that had been frizzed and dyed red so many times you couldn't tell what colour it

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originally was. She was twenty-six years old, but she had that worn-down look that women get when they've fallen pregnant for the first time at a young age. If I was to hold up a picture of her alongside pictures of today's twenty-six-year-old girls, fresh from university and still giggly, you'd have said she was forty.

Anyway, Lisa was standing in the kitchen when I arrived, holding herself up against the laminate bench and chewing the skin around her thumb. Like I say, I expected some kind of frenzy, but I got the feeling she was just plain irritated, like here was something she really didn't need; all these people in uniform in her house, it pissed her off.

In the lounge room a big bloke – a near-naked bloke – was holding this kid up under the arms like a puppet, trying to make his feet grip the carpet. It was hopeless. The kid's legs kept buckling, and his head was lolling about on his neck.

I could see what the big fella was trying to do. He was trying to make the boy stand up, but I could see that wasn't going to happen. The kid was all floppy and he had those 'sunset eyes' you get when the brain is gone, with the eyeballs not focused and the lids half-closed. The paramedics were trying to intervene. They weren't shouting at him, but they were talking loudly, saying, 'Please, put the boy down.'

There were other kids in the house: a boy of about three, and a girl who was still a toddler, both of them in

the lounge room, all curious and afraid. And then there was Lauren. She's wasn't in the lounge room. She was in the hall. How did she look? Well, what can I say? In the looks department, she was blessed. She had buck teeth and freckles across her nose, and she was wearing a T-shirt that had some kind of cartoon animal on the front. She could have been anybody's little Aussie rug rat except that, like all the other kids in the house, she had this extraordinary white hair. I don't mean white-blonde, like some kids have, I mean white-white, like a Samoyed dog. It was curled all around her face and cascaded down her back, so long that she probably would have been able to sit on it. She had white eyelashes, and white eyebrows, too, but she wasn't albino – that would be going too far. No, she was more like a ghost. And it wasn't just the hair that made me think that. It was the way she was hovering in the hallway, like she was trying to decide whether it was all right to come and look at what was going on.

The first words I heard out of Lisa's mouth were: 'Get up.' I've got to say, it struck me as strange. The big bloke had let the boy fall to the floor and the paramedics were leaning over him, and I'd say it should have been obvious to anyone that the boy was in no position to stand up, but that's what the mother said. She came out from the kitchen, broke into the huddle around him, and said, 'Jacob, get up.'

'Is he dead?' Those were the first words I heard from

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Lauren. She'd come creeping down the hall, wanting to get a good look.

'Don't be stupid, Lauren,' her mother said. 'Go get the heater.'

Again, it was such a strange thing to say. This was November, remember, so it was as good as summer in Melbourne. We'd been sweating out by the Cenotaph. Some of the school kids who'd been standing to attention while the band played, they'd actually fainted. Lauren didn't argue with her mother, though. She went off down the hall and came back with a portable heater. It was three orange bars in an aluminium shell, and it was covered in dust, but Lisa took it from her and plugged it in, and within seconds the whole house was filled with smoke from the dust on the elements. That didn't stop the mother, though. She put the thing close to Jacob's head, and his white hair began to steam. I realised his hair must have been damp.

The paramedics were working like crazy. One of the paramedics said, 'Please, get it out of the way,' and the other said, 'What's the boy's name? How old is he?'

'He's five,' said Lisa. 'He's Jake. Jacob.'

The paramedic said, 'We're going to have to get him to hospital.'

'Jesus,' said Lisa. 'I ain't got ambulance cover.'

I think that's when I stepped in. I'm pretty sure my first words would have been, 'Hello. I'm Detective Senior Sergeant Brian Muggeridge, Barrett CIB.'

Nobody paid any attention. One of the paramedics was trying to fit an oxygen mask over the boy's face, and the other was kicking the heater out of the way while trying to get the wheels out from under a stretcher, so they could get Jake off the floor and out the door.

'You won't need cover,' said the paramedic.

'You'll need to come with us,' said the other.

I said, 'Hang on, I'm just going to need a few seconds here.'

Lisa glared at me and then turned her back, so I went over to the copper in the kitchen and said, 'What you got?'

The young constable must have been a new recruit because her shirt was still sharp across the creases. By that time I'd been a copper for about eight years, I suppose, and maybe it was starting to show. My father had been in the force and he'd told me, 'The pay's lousy but at least you get to retire at fifty-five.' That appealed to me. All I could see myself doing as a young fella was working long enough to buy a boat and spend my retirement fishing. What I didn't know then was what I'd have to go through to get to retirement age. The human misery, it was already wearing me down.

The new recruit told me the mother had sent her boys to the shops for cigarettes. Jacob, who was five, and Harley, who was three, were on their way home when a man came up and told them to hand over the

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change. They refused, and so the man started roughing them up, knocking them to the ground and kicking them. The younger boy, Harley, managed to break away, run home and raise the alarm. Lisa had followed him back to the school grounds and found Jacob lying there, unconscious. She carried him home in her arms.

I thought, 'No.'

I can't tell you exactly how or why I knew the story wasn't true. Instinct, maybe. I'll admit that I was swayed by the condition of the house. It was slumped on its foundations as if the burden of housing so many fractured families had taken a toll on the frame.

I don't know whether Lisa had been listening to the constable who gave me these details, but when I moved again towards her, to try to ask a few questions, she got pretty agitated. She said, 'I gotta go with Jake,' and she came into the kitchen and started gathering cigarettes and other things off the kitchen bench. She had a Glomesh purse and a set of house keys with a plastic tag hanging off the ring that said 'Never Mind The Dog, Beware the Bitch Who Lives Here!' She stuffed those things into her handbag, and then she opened the fridge and took out a baby's bottle filled with orange cordial, which she gave to her boyfriend, saying, 'Make sure you give this to Hayley.'

The boyfriend said, 'Do you want me to come?'

She said, 'You stay here.'

I noticed straightaway that there was no tenderness

in the exchange. I mean, you might expect this guy to be comforting Lisa a bit at this stage, or at least to be saying, ‘Don’t worry, he’ll be fine,’ or something, given that they were obviously an item, but that wasn’t what was happening. It made me wonder how long they’d actually been together, or even known each other. Later, we’d find out they’d been together six weeks.

I thought to myself, ‘Did he do it?’ Look, I know that sounds biased against blokes, but how many times had I been to a situation where a kid was out cold and the de facto was the one who’d done it?

The paramedics looked ready to leave and were starting to push Jake out toward the ambulance. Lisa was obviously going to have to go with them, but getting her out the door was going to be no simple matter because by now the media was all over the lawn. In those days, reporters had access to police scanners. They can’t do it any more, not with mobile phones and scrambled messages and so forth, but in those days we basically had CB radios, and it wasn’t illegal, not then, to intercept what you heard on the two-way system. So they would have heard the call – a child had been beaten on the Barrett Estate; paramedics required – and they’d have followed the ambulance to the house, and now they were outside, waiting to hear what had gone on so they could write it up for the next day’s papers.

They wouldn’t interfere with the paramedics. They’d be allowed to make their way to the ambulance, to get

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the boy inside, but Lisa . . . well, she wasn't injured, so they'd see her as fair game.

I said to Lisa, 'I'm going to have to help you get past the press. They'll be shouting questions at you but you just stick with me and I'll get you though.'

She was nodding her head and gripping her bag. We went out the front door and I tried to help her into the back of the ambulance, but she tripped and we had to make a second go of it, which gave the snappers plenty of time to get a picture. I thought she'd immediately fuss over the boy when she got inside, but she didn't. Instead, she looked out through the glass doors of the ambulance, towards the flashes from the cameras and the bobbing, fuzzy microphones, and she was wearing a very strange expression. If I had to put a name to it, I'd say she was thrilled.

I made a note of the time. The call to triple-O had been placed at around 5.40 p.m. and now it was getting toward 7 p.m. The deadline for the newspaper reporters was 10 p.m., at the absolute latest, and the photographers were at least an hour from their dark-rooms in Melbourne's CBD, so it was clear that they'd soon have to get moving if they were going to get this story in the paper. I knew from experience, though, that they'd probably wait for a statement from the cops before they'd move. Lisa was shouting things at them through the glass doors of the ambulance, things like: 'They ought to lock 'em up and throw away the key!'

They knew they had a story – a good story – and now it was up to me to give the thing some context.

The other thing they'd want, of course, was a picture of Jake, not only of him going into the ambulance but a nice portrait, something good and clear, that they could whack on the front page. I scanned the pack, looking for somebody I recognised, and straightaway saw a guy from *The Sun* I remembered from some other job. I signalled to him to come forward, into the house, telling him I'd give him a photograph that he could share with the others. We stepped through the front door and walked straight into the boyfriend. He was standing in the lounge room, his massive legs and chest still bare, just looking like a stunned mullet, taking up all the space.

I said, 'I'm Detective Muggeridge. You're . . . ?'

He said, 'Peter Tabone.'

I said, 'Right, Mr Tabone, can you help me here? I need a photograph of Jacob that I can give to the press, something we can copy for the newspapers.'

By way of an answer, he said, 'He's not my kid.'

I'd already figured that for myself, so I let it go and scanned the room, and immediately saw a portrait – a bright, white-and-blue portrait of four children – in a cardboard frame on the mantelpiece. I picked it up and said, 'Are these the children? Which one is Jake?'

Unaccountably, Peter brightened.

'I paid for that,' he said. 'Pretty all right, isn't it? Pretty good, actually.'

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He seemed not to understand the seriousness of the situation. We weren't here to *admire* the photo; we were here to find Jake's attacker. Again, I said, 'Which one is Jake?'

Peter considered the photograph for a moment, then pointed and said, 'That one.'

Jake was seated in the middle of the group. Like all of them, he was wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt, and he was flanked on both sides by siblings. Behind them was a cloudy background: not dull-cloudy, but a bright blue background with white clouds. I handed the photograph to the *Sun* photographer, who laid it down on the kitchen bench and said, 'Thanks, mate. We appreciate this.' He lifted up his camera and began photographing it. That was the easiest way to get a copy in those days, before digital prints and email, you'd just copy a photograph with your own camera, develop it in the darkroom, and send it by courier to colleagues from rival papers. The copies would be in colour, but in the newspaper they'd turn out black and white, which was a pity, because the thing that was most striking about the kids, the thing that any witness was likely to remember, was the hair.

Peter seemed very interested in the photographer and his gear, but he didn't seem too happy about his portrait being copied. He said, 'Why do they need a picture?'

I said, 'If anybody sees this picture, they might

remember seeing Jake on the way to the shops and they might remember something suspicious, and that's going to help us catch the culprit.'

Peter said, 'Yeah, okay, but remember, *I* paid for that picture.'

The photographer looked up, surprised. Was Peter suggesting that he should pay for the right to copy it? The photographer let it go. I remember thinking, 'These guys aren't bad. The press gets a bad rap but they've got a job to do and, on this occasion, that meant getting a picture, any picture of the kid, so people could look at it and say, "What a cute kid! How could anybody hurt a child like that? What's the world coming to?"'

When the *Sun* guy was done, I put the portrait back on the mantelpiece and went outside. The press was waiting for me, waiting for some kind of official comment to go with their stories. I stood in the forest of microphones and said, 'As you have no doubt gathered, we have a serious incident on our hands here.'

They nodded and waited.

'We've got a five-year-old boy who was sent to the shops with his brother, and it appears that they've been set upon by a man who has bashed him, possibly for the change they were carrying.'

I paused to give them time to write this down.

'I think you'll agree that's a cowardly crime, to beat an innocent boy, a five-year-old boy,' I continued.

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‘We are appealing for witnesses to come forward. We ask anyone who might have seen anything suspicious to please call Crime Stoppers. I think you’ve all got the number.’

One reporter said, ‘Can we speak to the parents?’ and I said no. Another reporter wanted to know what kind of injury the boy had suffered. I said, ‘That’s obviously a matter for the specialists. At this stage it’s unclear, but I think I’m safe in saying that the young lad is in quite a bad way.’

They wanted to know the boy’s name and I told them: Jacob Cashman. They wanted to know how to spell Jacob – was it Jakob or Jacob or, who knows these days, Jaycub? – and I confirmed it: It was J-A-C-O-B, Jacob. Jacob John Cashman. Referring to notes taken by the new recruit, I added: ‘Born 1 August, 1977. He’s five.’

‘He’s what?’ The reporters hadn’t heard me. Daylight was fading and the cockatoos that made their nests in Barrett’s gum trees had taken flight. They were swooping and screaming, apparently furious.

I repeated myself, louder this time. I said, ‘Five. The young boy, the victim, he’s five.’ And somehow, those words brought silence upon all of us.

I turned and went back through the front door. The boyfriend, Peter, had turned on the TV and the children were watching, of all things, *The Love Boat*. They didn’t turn to look at me. There was a day

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coming when they'd have to face up to what happened in that house on DeCastella Drive, but it wouldn't be that day and, likely, not for years, so I let them go on watching.