

Murder under the Microscope 2012

Lament in the Luck Country – Case notes

Introduction

Years before the murder took place, the bankrupt owner of Candy Downs Station (Laura) heard about the successful trials of a highly productive exotic grass in the Northern Territory. Seizing the chance to make her property profitable, Laura called a colleague (Lawrence) in Darwin, and asked him to sell off her furniture and paintings and buy some of this seed to enhance her pasture. At the same time Laura negotiated to buy a painting from Mick, a local man and truck driver, with the leftover money.

On his way back from Darwin with Mick and the seeds in the truck, Lawrence asked if he could see the painting. It was a masterpiece. Telling Mick he was buying it for Laura, Lawrence bought it on the spot.

Falling out


On the drive into the station, Lawrence skidded crossing a creek and spilt the seed into a creek bed. When Laura asked Lawrence about the seed, Lawrence told her that Mick had taken it for his own use when they stopped off at his property. Lawrence also told Laura that he was unable to see her promised painting as Mick had sold it for twice the sum she had been prepared to pay. Furious, Laura vowed never to deal with, or speak to, Mick again. This was the reaction that Lawrence had banked on.

Mick was initially puzzled that Laura never spoke to him. This turned to anger when he realised that it also seemed highly unlikely that she would ever put his painting on exhibition. Meanwhile, the grass seed was already sprouting along the creek-lines on Candy Downs station.

Exotic grass

A year later, Laura hired Tom, a young local, to manage the station. After five years the property returned a profit. Tom knew this was due to the exotic grass. Highly productive and heavy seeding it had rapidly invaded areas of native grass and could sustain a great deal more cattle than native grasses. Tom also assumed Laura knew but he never discussed it as the seed was now on the State's prohibited list. Instead he instituted a twice yearly back burning regime to make sure it didn't stray into other properties.

But the imported grass thrived on more frequent fires. It supported bigger, more intense fires and then recovered more quickly, sealing the fate of the native grasses and adjacent woodlands that stood in its path. Eventually this 'ecosystem transformer' reached Calicut Gorge, home of a rare colony of small marsupials. If the change of ecosystem had made things hard for the colony, the increased fire regime made things impossible. The males only live a year while the babies are nest bound for the first two months. So a fire in October effectively robs the colony of any males. With both their habitat and breeding cycle destroyed the marsupials quickly perished through starvation, predators and fire.



Mick returns

By now Mick was 60 and blind from glaucoma. Sensing that his death was near, Mick wanted to visit Calicut Gorge and the marsupial colony one last time. Without Laura's knowledge Mick and his son Surrey travelled into the Gorge. Both men knew the colony had gone but only Mick realised the devastation of the area and he was struck dumb by the knowledge.

The next day Mick had a heart attack. Frantic with worry, Surrey remembered that his friend, Dave Bookham had a brother who was an Investigator with an environmental organisation. He sent Dave a text message and the next day reported the crime to Catchment HQ.

Solution

Victim: Northern Quoll – *Dasyurus hallucatus*

Villain: Gamba Grass – *Andropogon gayanus*

Crime site: Pentecost River, Kununurra, WA