

The Bronze Cast

A Novel

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cast (noun):

Something, such as molted skin, that is thrown off, out, or away

SYNOPSIS

What is it about driving across the Anzac Bridge that unnerves him? And why, when he has always been so active, is his energy slipping away?

Ryan has never doubted his strength. But for no accountable reason his sanity is on the line. He needs to talk to someone. But how do you communicate to another person what you don't know yourself?

With his options running out, he consults Clea, a therapist who is more at home in the world of emotion but who has unresolved issues of her own. Ryan, her new client, is not like her former lover in any obvious way. But in light of the evolving synchronicities, perhaps the source of his distress is similar.

In the process of client-therapist interaction, and with the stakes high for both of them, personal and professional boundaries intersect in navigating a path for which there are few sign posts.

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Beaded sweat, pupils dilated
behind his sunglasses.

Acceleration of the car, and of
his nervous system.

This is crazy, this is ridiculous.

*I'm one of thousands of people
who do this daily.
Indistinguishable from any
number of them.*

*I can do this! Look Mum – no
hands!*

Apprehension always assails
him on the Anzac Bridge. Its
stark iron work and clean
symmetrical lines are a
mocking inversion of his inner
turmoil.

Bridges don't normally bother him. But there is something about this one that unnerves him. That casts a lethal pebble into the still pool of his equilibrium.

It's clearly something psychological. Some buried association that, were he to confront it, might release its hold on him.

But trying to do that is not an option.

His teeth are gritted, his hands clench tightly on the wheel.

One of these days I'm going to have to get to the bottom of this.

Because it's getting harder to pretend that nothing is wrong.

Begin at the beginning. That's what they say, don't they? But who are 'they' anyway? And with what authority do they presume to give advice?

Advice is what he needs now though. Or at least some kind of affirmation.

Some kind of sign.

Had he not been feeling so bad, he would have laughed aloud.

Signs? Portents?

What the hell is happening to him?

He is the rationalist who examines every premise. It's one thing to see the limits of

that. It's another to embrace its opposite.

Next I'll be consulting fortune-tellers.

Begin at the beginning.

Why should that simple age-old injunction elicit such panic in him? And such a desperate need to deflect?

Do I even know what a beginning is?

Much less how to address it.

But the search for origins is surely misguided. There is enough contemporary complexity to be getting on with; sufficient grounds for unease in unfolding of the everyday.

Wars. Corruption. The genocidal decimation of whole peoples. Social problems the magnitude of which dwarf his own mysterious dilemmas. And which make him guilty about experiencing them at all.

Isn't this unease – this angst, these night-sweats - the corollary of existence? The price of being alive at this seething turn of the millennium?

Or is it more than that?

It is easier to pose the question than to query whether he is really 'alive' at all.

Shards of memory – razor-sharp. And the white expanse of nothingness.

It's the forgotten bits that scare the hell out of him. And that make him want to leave well enough alone.

Not that any part of me is functioning well.

How has it come to this?

How can he be sitting in the reception area of a counsellor waiting for an appointment?

Must have really lost it.

Should get out before trying to communicate what is incommunicable anyway.

What the hell am I hoping for?

She sees him before he sees her. And is glad of the instant of unobserved appraisal.

Apparently relaxed demeanor. But signs of tension as well.

The body doesn't lie.

Casually dressed, slightly dishevelled looking. Hard to read his age (*early forties?*)

'Ryan? I'm Clea. Please come this way'.

The room is small. *Too* small for his liking.

He feels caged, constrained. Wants to be out in the open air, to feel earth beneath his feet. Memories of the desert come back to him; the light, the space.

But things weren't good out there either. And he is past believing that all he needs is a change of scene.

*You think you want me to talk.
But are you prepared for what
you might hear? Am I?*

It lies dormant much of the time.

Until it erupts.

There are two comfortable looking chairs, and she is motioning him towards one of them.

But as the door closes behind them he feels nauseous and disoriented.

Rather than a safe space, the room feels overwhelming and suffocating.

He almost stumbles into the chair. Checks himself; leans back against the cushion with as much nonchalance as he can muster.

Barely a word spoken.

Jesus it's hard already.

'Are you right?'

Solicitous, but not overly so. She is not an intrusive presence. And if he were able to feel anything now it would be gratitude for that.

For the first time, he focuses on her face. Which is angular but not unattractive. Slightly olive skin, short hair, hazel eyes.

Dangly earrings which seem to catch the light. They are distracting; he resists the impulse to ask her to take them off.

'I'm fine'.

Off to a dishonest start.

'You said on the intake form –'

She is looking at him directly but it is not unnerving as he had thought it might be.

' - that you are experiencing panic attacks? How frequently? And what are they like?'

Straight into it, no preliminaries.

But for that, too, he is oddly grateful. Why exchange small

talk when she already has the
basic details?

Putting into words what he
experiences is a big ask though.
Not least because it means
acknowledging what he now
realizes he is still finding it hard
to accept within himself.

A silence it is impossible to fill.
Golden dust specks dance in
the air.

Her earrings gleam like
talismans.

‘How often would you say you
have them?’

*How often? When don't I
experience them?*

*My whole life has become a
panic attack.*

‘Oh – on and off throughout the week’.

*Did she raise an eyebrow?
Should he tone it down?*

‘And what are they like?’

What are they like?

Completely disabling. I’m a basket case. Have to pull over to the side of the road, sometimes can’t drive for thirty minutes.

‘It’s like - ‘

How could he describe them, even if he wanted to?

‘They’re – not pleasant’.

A rueful laugh.

Her eyes are directly on him again. But again it is not intrusive. If he could tell her, he would this time.

‘I need –’

She pauses; sounds almost apologetic.

‘I just need to get a sense of what it is you experience. I know it’s hard. And that it is certainly not pleasant. Do you sweat?’

‘Yes’.

No hesitation now.

‘Shake at all?’

‘Yes’.

‘Have trouble breathing?’

‘All of the above’.

‘And where are your thoughts?
Are you aware of thinking
anything? Of anything
specific?’

Too early to go there.

‘Not really, no’.

A shrewd look.

She doesn't buy it.

Some more talk, seemingly
inconsequential. Except that it
can't be; the context precludes
it.

He is likely revealing himself all
over the place.

Well that's OK. That's what I'm here for. I should say as much as I can say.

She is making it easy for him; she is implicitly helping him to relax. Some of his reserve is melting.

Some of it.

And then the session is over.

Hey, where did that go?

She is booking another one. Puts on little reading glasses; they make her look older.

How old is she? Late thirties? Forty? Around my age.

And her smile is warm.

`So see you then, Ryan'.

Those glinting earrings.

But he doesn't mind this time.

And if he were to tell her, to
the extent that he can, what
would she do?

*Does she really want to see my
fragility?*

To witness a gibbering mess?
But he is beyond 'big boys
don't cry'.

This goes deeper than that.

Memories of cowering; of
absolute, abject terror. But
little to attach them to.

Have I made things up?