

THE QUARRY

Amy Way

The Forrest

It's just after 10am when I'm standing at the head of the road. Behind me and to the left are golden paddocks with fat cows and dams sparkling with reflected sunlight. In front and to the right is the forest. The pine trees stand like soldiers in their state assigned grids. Tall, regimented, plain. Yet in their shadows is something sinister that's hard to distinguish. Is it the tangy smell of sawdust that burns the nostrils? The way the wind makes a muffled roar through the pine needles? Or the light that flickers in the corner of my eyes?

Back on the road, I shift my feet on the finely ground gravel. The sun is warm on my back but I feel cold as I watch the road ahead disappear into the shadows of the forest. Beside me is the sign, parading its welcome and warning:

'Welcome To Belanglo State Forest. Please Be Careful.'

The sign is almost scarier than the forest itself. From a distance it's impressive and dominant, but up close you can see etched into the enamel the myriad of messages that make up its power. Names followed by dates, and 'Tim loves Jess', 'Lackey was here.' Then there's the more ominous: 'ANT (DENGY) NOW RULES THESE WOODS! BEWARE!' and 'IVAN WAS HERE.' Beside this last message, some cunning visitor has written, 'No shit.'

I can't remember exactly when I first heard the stories of Ivan Milat and the 'Backpacker Murders', but like most Australians, the killer's name and the place of his crimes has long lurked my consciousness. It was a story so unbelievable that it existed for me only in the realm of fiction. That was, until November 2010, when 17-year-old Matthew Milat brutally murdered his friend in the same forest as his notorious great-uncle. Lured with the promise of alcohol and marijuana to celebrate his 17th birthday, the victim, David Auchterlonie, was taken to the forest by Milat and two others. I couldn't understand it. Why would someone go to Belanglo State Forest with Ivan Milat's *nephew*? What did they think would happen?

It's not exactly superstition, nor is it the workings of a cautionary tale. So what is this feeling of a dreadful knowledge inside me? Surely David Auchterlonie would have felt it too, knowing what had happened there. The forest is imbued with symbolism to the point of being tainted by it, and the more I think about it, the more places I can list whose connotations have been altered by some conflict or event.

Sometimes it's a physical alteration, a mark on the landscape whose effect your eyes can comprehend in the instant it takes your heartbeat to quicken. In Pripyat, the 'ghost city' of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, time is suspended and the ground is littered with remnants of a former life. Its population of nearly 50,000, all nuclear plant workers and young families, were evacuated in 1986 after the explosion in Reactor 4. Resting within the 2,600 square kilometre Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, the entire city is abandoned.

Six-storey apartment buildings stand silent in their decay, hidden among overgrown trees. Their interiors, along with those of the hotels, the fire station, schools and kindergartens, are full of dust and rubble. Most haunting, are the kindergartens. Once the playground of several hundred children they now resemble tombs. Dolls lay scattered among the debris, their eyes clicked shut, their hair and faces rotten. Others sit stoically on small, toddler-sized chairs, staring with a weary determination through the cobwebs that cloud their faces. Desks are overturned, the wallpaper peeling, and in the nursery rusty bunk beds and broken wooden cots lie awkwardly on a floor of shredded feather pillows and tiny shoes. On the wall hangs a list of names: children of Pripyat, and the allocated beds they once called their own.

Such places may never be anything more than large-scale memorials and museums. Suspended by past horrors, their function now is to educate and to mourn. Over time, they may lose some of their stigma. But for the foreseeable future at least,

their scars are too visible. Sometimes, the effect is more subtle. You may see slight changes in the landscape or perhaps no noticeable marks at all. Everything about it will look unimpressive and benign. It's only for people privy to the stories and the whispers that something else emerges.

When I was ten years old, my grandmother tripped on an uneven bit of a footpath in Castle Cove. The offending piece of concrete, protruding almost invisibly on the corner of Kendall Road and Holly Street, had been part of her daily walk to the shops for over fifteen years. Nothing much had changed, but that day she just went down. Split her head open and needed four stitches. For months, years afterwards, her blood stained the concrete with spectacular ferocity. For a while it was a source of pride and amusement. Walking hand in hand every weekend, we'd pass the spot and I'd laugh and marvel: 'Look Gran! Your blood's still there!' And sometimes with friends or visitors: 'See that? That's where my Gran fell that time. She's a trooper.'

She died less than a year ago. Quite unexpectedly. Now, whenever I pass that spot, I can't bring myself to look at the faded black stain. As I avert my eyes it whispers to me of past happiness and future evils. Like a glob of slick paint it withstood the storms and the sun and has marked that place forever.

As my car crawls along the gravel road I look from window to window at the lines of trees, scanning the needled undergrowth for something out of the ordinary. But life seems to continue as normal in the forest. As I pass a crossroads, loggers in high-vis vests and hardhats lumber between the green shadows of the trees and a dusty Ute. In another hundred metres I see a woman walking two dogs.

'What the...'

I follow her with my gaze. She's sporting sunnies and a nonchalant expression as she clambers over branches on the side of the road.

I shake my head and continue following the main road into the trees. It skirts along the southern side of the forest and before long I come out the western edge into more paddocks of private property. I do a U-turn in the first driveway I see. From the porch of a small house, a dark haired woman and an aging Labrador regard me with squinted eyes.

Back beneath the gaze of the trees I spend ten minutes driving around the gridded roads before pulling off onto a patch of grass. This area of the forest looks the same as all the others: sparse, dull. I can look down the lines of the skinny trees and

the gaps between, but I can't see through to the other side and the road I know is there.

'Well,' I say to no one. 'Nothing left for it.'

I have no plan, I have no map, I have no phone reception. For a moment I am still. In my head is a soft memory, a warning echoed by a girl in a red hood.

Don't wander from the forest path.

But like I've told myself before, this is not the working of a cautionary tale. Trying not to look too wistfully back at my car, I walk slowly off the road and into the trees. I've gone about five or six metres when I allow myself to look back. I let out a gasp when I can't see the road at all. The deceptively skinny trees have closed in at an alarming speed.

'Right. Well...'

If I just stick to the grassy rivet between the tree-rows, I'm sure to come out the other side. I glance up at the sun snaking down through the branches of the pines. There are a few clouds in the sky but overall it's a beautiful day. I bring myself back to earth and start to examine the trees and forest floor as I move gently across it. Pinecones dapple the ground just as regularly as shadows. Everything is a mixture of dull shades of green, brown, grey and white. Nothing shines, nothing glimmers, but still, there is lightness.

It's very quiet. Almost peaceful, until I realise why: there are absolutely no animals. Only several minute spiders, strung undisturbed between grass blades. Once or twice I see the flitting of grey birds. They don't chirp or sing, and their wings are swift and silent. At that moment a cloud swallows the sun. I pull my jumper tighter around my shoulders and head deeper into the trees.

Somewhere near the centre of my chosen grid I come across a clearing. There are different types of plants here. Shrubs that look almost tropical with their straight shining leaves and sharper shades of green. Every metre or so sits a severed stump, old and flaking. I smile at the unexpected change but it disappears when I recall old news stories. The remains of many of Milat's victims were found in small clearings. So too were nearby campsites, evidence that the killer spent considerable time with his victims both before and after their deaths.

I don't cross the clearing. Instead, I turn sideways and shuffle around its border, heading back into the trees more quickly than before. As I'm hurrying away from the clearing I start to hear noises. Thuds, thumps, something clunking nearby.

My whole body shudders with the sound and I can think of nothing but getting out of the trees. As abruptly as I left it I find myself stumbling out onto the road again. It isn't the road I started from, but the section that stretches away to my left ends in a T-intersection. On the corner I can just make out the nose of my car.

The thuds return, this time accompanied by the murmur of voices. I spin to my right, breathing fast. At the end of the road I can see the beginning of another clearing, this one much larger. Slowly, I walk towards it. The closer I get the more familiar the thudding becomes. As the trees start to thin, I can see it but I don't believe it.

It's a camping area. And it's full.

The campground is surprisingly big, almost the size of a football oval. On the right, 4WDs, station wagons and trailers with motorbikes are slotted tightly into a grassy car park. Closest to the car park is a huddle of eight tents. They circle a makeshift communal area with a fire, several dogs, and parents who watch their kids play from the comfort of foldout chairs. To the left of the tents stretches an expanse of mowed grass. On the far left of it, nestled in some trees, are a few swags and a dome tent. A man methodically pegs his swag to the ground. The background to the camping area is a small brown lake.

The campers laugh together and pat their dogs, but I don't cross this clearing either. I stick to the road and make my way to the next intersection. A few of the campers look my way, and for an instant I wonder if they're startled to see a lone stranger stalking through the trees. But I wager if they're brave enough to camp here then they wouldn't be fazed by me.

I've reached the intersection and I'm about to turn right, away from the campsite, when something catches my eye. Down at the very back of the campground, there's a tiny green toilet block and a State Forest noticeboard. Moving closer, I can see it's covered with pamphlets and posters. I'm expecting some information on the Backpacker Murders: dates, names, a memorial perhaps. But instead the noticeboard is bursting with State approved advice on how best to explore the forest, particularly its two main activities, motorbike riding and mushroom picking.

In the mushroom foraging community, Belanglo Forest exists as a place filled to the brim with desirable fungi. You don't need a permit, and as long as you don't pilfer any timber, mushrooming is a popular hobby in all of NSW's State forests. In

late 2011, a group of foragers went to Belanglo to harvest mushrooms. I've tracked them down through an organic forager's online forum, and despite enjoying the day, group leader Elizabeth Perez-Meza explains to me that the trip was structured and business-like.

'We knew that we would have to get there by about 11am and leave by 4pm, way before sunset. Definitely go in a group of 4-5 people, bring walkie-talkies, make sure everyone is wearing boots or gumboots, plus gloves. And leave way before sunset.'

Just like me the sign at the entrance to the forest made a lasting impression for her, but what is most evident when Liz speaks of her time in the forest are its silence and baleful conformity.

'I wasn't scared but you just know that something bad has happened there,' she says. 'I understand why the Milats went there to kill: it's dead quiet and everywhere looks the same. It's so easy to get lost and if you were to scream out for help, your calls may go unanswered.'

The sun vanishes as I'm examining the noticeboard. When I look up, the entire blue sky is doused with grey. The wind is picking up and the muffled roar of it through the pines is starting to irk me. I pull my jumper tighter around me but it yields no extra warmth. Head down, I walk back past the campsite in the direction of my car. The man has finished pegging his swag, and the voices of the campers are lost in the wind.

Climbing into the warm air of my car, I expect instant relief. Instead I find myself desperately trying to look anywhere but at the trees. An impossible feat: I am surrounded. Some relief comes when my car starts on the first try. I buckle up and drive, weaving my way through the dirt roads towards the entrance. I'm almost on the main road when around a corner there emerges a log cabin. Thin white curtains veil every window of the squat brown building. I slow down slightly until I see a maroon commodore parked on the other side of the house. It's just a park ranger, I tell myself as I speed up again. But this doesn't stop my fantasy of owning a hidden log cabin from being quashed somewhat.

Finally, I'm back on the main road. Ahead of me are the entrance and the silver back of the sign. As I pass it I can't help but look back. The paddocks of the

surrounding farmland are still golden despite the clouds. Perhaps they will shine forever, always in contrast to their silent neighbour.

Later, I'll find out that there *was* a visible reminder to the past. Hidden at the other end of the forest is a rock memorial to Ivan Milat's victims. The boulder would blend into the background of shrubbery if it weren't for the dark plaque. In brassy letters, it commemorates the memory of the seven backpackers and the efforts of the state services' members who aided the investigation into their deaths. A bible quote reminds the reader: 'Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Looking at photos, safe in the comfort of my lounge room, it strikes me just how ordinary the forest is. Unlike Pripyat, there is nothing to suggest that this was, or ever will be, anything more than a lonely pine forest. Only being there, once you've heard the stories and you can stand listening to the sound of nothing, only then do you feel it.