

TANYA BRETHERTON

# THE HUSBAND POISONER



SUBURBAN WOMEN WHO KILLED IN  
POST-WORLD WAR II SYDNEY

**TANYA BRETHERTON**

**THE  
HUSBAND  
POISONER**

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*For Freddie and Joan*

# 1

## THE BONOX HABIT

IN OCTOBER 1947, SYDNEY HOUSEWIFE YVONNE GLADYS BUTLER planned the perfect murder. She didn't arrange an alibi, because she wouldn't need one. In fact, she felt so confident of getting away with it she left the victim's body out in plain sight and didn't bother to hide it. Yvonne believed the perfect murder was possible if it could be made to look like something else entirely and no one even realised that a crime had been committed.

Her recipe for murder was simple. In her small kitchen at 57 Ferndale Street in the working-class suburb of Newtown, she waited for the kettle to boil. She carefully measured from two small glass bottles, one labelled 'Bonox', the other 'Thall-Rat'. Although both products were described as economical and easy to use, only one was marked 'poison'.

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Cooking by feel, Yvonne did not measure precisely. She tapped a small amount from each bottle into a porcelain teacup, poured boiling water over the mixture and stirred.

Her plan was now in motion.

She watched the swirling vortex of liquid and paused to ensure the mixture had dissolved. She leaned over it. Curls of steam spiralled slowly and ominously from the cup. The flame-shaped clouds of water vapour touched her nose. Satisfied that the hot brew looked and smelled like a cup of regular ‘beef tea’, she picked it up and walked down the hall and upstairs to the bedroom. She flicked off the hall light as she passed and the entire house fell into darkness. She handed the hot tea to her husband, Desmond, who was propped up in bed reading the newspaper by lamplight.

‘Your Bonox, dear.’



Desmond woke early the next morning feeling sick, though not sick enough to warrant medical attention. His diarrhoea was dismissed as an upset stomach. He attributed his headache and nausea to a hangover. He went to work.

That night, Yvonne reached again for the two small glass bottles with the strange-sounding names.

The following day, Desmond felt worse; sufficiently so to take a few days off from his job as a cleaner at the Grace Bros. department store. He felt exhausted and had aches and pains, and an odd stiffness in his legs. He decided to see the local doctor. His sore throat and lethargy might be

something more serious. The diphtheria bacterium was still fairly common in the community and it affected the throat. Poliomyelitis, although less common in adults, was also raised as a possibility. When the more serious diseases were ruled out, the doctor diagnosed a common cold. He prescribed bed rest. And more Bonox.

A thick, brown, concentrated paste, Bonox was known by a few different names, including beef tea, clear beef and fluid beef. It was a regular grocery item for many working-class families because it was cheap and, according to the advertising, provided all the nutrients of meat for those who could not afford to buy it fresh. Doctors recommended Bonox because, as ‘pre-digested beef’, it was gentle on the stomach and could be dissolved quickly in hot water. High in iron, it was frequently served to patients in recovery on hospital wards. There was even a term coined for a daily intake of liquid beef when one was recuperating: the ‘Bonox habit’.

Yvonne followed the doctor’s orders. She made beef tea for her husband every night.

After a few days, Desmond’s lethargy and the worst of his symptoms seemed to go away. He hadn’t completely recovered, but he felt better.

In Newtown’s close-knit community, neighbours noticed everything. They noticed when Desmond missed work and they noticed when a doctor made a house call. The Butlers lived in a particularly cramped part of the densely populated suburb. Buildings were terraced closely together – common fences, narrow lanes and shared walls meant that families

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came to know far more about each other than perhaps they cared to. A neighbour could be heard coughing from next door, even when the windows were closed. Everyone knew which marriages were happy and which ones weren't; who had sons who'd gone away to war, and who had sons who hadn't come home. Many of the twenty-five families living on Ferndale Street had been there for more than a decade. Desmond and Yvonne Butler had lived there for only a few years, but everyone in the street seemed to know them – or know of them.

Families with young children were the most obvious. Babies woke up the neighbourhood as they cried for morning feeds like urban roosters crowing at dawn. Desmond, aged twenty-nine, and Yvonne, twenty-five, had two children – Raymond and Ellen. Neighbours heard baby Ellen crying and little Ray on his squeaky scooter playing in the street.

With his aquiline features, athletic figure, cleft chin, deep-set eyes and thick flop of jet hair, Desmond was hard to miss. In his dark suit and with his long, bounding legs, he cut a dramatic figure as he strode through the suburb. A quiet man, he spoke with a gravelly timbre which most thought was due to a poorly performed childhood tonsillectomy.

Desmond's laconic manner didn't stop him from communicating, though. One female neighbour described him as a 'physical man'. Others knew him as the dark-haired chap who would sidle up to women and wrap his arm around their shoulders while having a friendly chat. He was known to pinch a bottom here and there as well. Some women viewed



the behaviour as playful, others as predatory. Desmond did not hide the pleasure he took in flirting with women, not even from his wife. Yvonne once said, ‘He’s not a cranky type. But he just can’t seem to talk to a woman without pawing and mauling her. He’s a real tiger.’

If Desmond was the resident tiger, Yvonne was the leopard. She was also hard to miss. Her favourite coat went down past her knees, had wide lapels, and featured a synthetic leopard-skin print. Yvonne would team this with a garish scarf around her neck, a patterned turban to restrain her wild tangle of hair, and a bold two-toned heel. She was doll like: a small-framed woman with a long, smooth face and tiny, flat features. She painted her face with precision: her blue–red satin lips were shapely, her eyes defined by a sharp brow, and the red rouge on the apple of her cheeks gave her the appearance of someone blushing shyly. Her curly hair bounced cheekily when she walked and was rolled at the front to create a fringe. Though Mattel’s first Barbie doll would not be available for sale in Australia for more than a decade, with her heavy-lidded eyes, sharply contoured eyebrows and pouting lips, Yvonne’s look bore an uncanny resemblance to it.

Neighbours not only noticed Yvonne and Desmond, they judged them. Like every family in Ferndale Street, the Butlers had been affected by the war. Although Desmond’s army service record was long, his war stories were not heroic. In his Australian Military Forces file, the ‘service and casualty’ section typically used to record injuries, promotions

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and positions was instead devoted to listing his arrests and prosecutions.

In simple terms, Desmond Butler was a deserter.

Desmond had joined the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) in 1941 but failed to report when required. Absent without leave, he was declared an illegal absentee and was caught and sent to the detention barracks in Bendigo. Once released, he again failed to turn up for assigned duty and was again sent to detention. He faced even more charges when he was caught trying to escape. On another occasion, a search of his possessions uncovered a full naval uniform. It was an offence viewed very dimly by military officials because it was assumed that Desmond, a known deserter, was impersonating an enlisted officer of significant status and rank. The cycle of capture, punishment and release went on for two years. In April 1943, he was formally charged with desertion and convicted. It was now part of his permanent criminal record. Sentenced to two years with hard labour, he was dishonourably discharged. Crucially, he also forfeited the 797 days' pay he was owed.

With her husband in gaol and with no other way of supporting herself and Ray, who was still a baby at the time, Yvonne found work in a factory in Redfern which supplied cardboard packing for foodstuffs and artillery supplies. She organised care for Ray. Neighbours were happy to help the struggling mother making a contribution to the war effort. Yvonne carefully saved to make sure there was money to help Desmond get back on his feet when he finished his sentence.

He was released in January 1945, but struggled to find work. He quickly gambled and drank the savings in the family bank account. To make matters worse, when the war ended, Yvonne's box factory work dried up. The couple's second child, Ellen, was born in 1946. Between 1943 and 1947, Yvonne had wed and had two children, but had spent less than half her married life living with her husband. The marriage had spanned only four years but there was plenty of time for resentments to brew.

While the sound of children was regularly heard coming from the Butlers' house, so too was the sound of yelling parents. Sunday mornings were especially bad, as the couple rebuked each other for the shenanigans of Friday and Saturday nights. Yvonne's voice could be heard at fever pitch over the rooftops with the high-note emotion of a diva in a sweeping soprano solo. 'Stop running around the billiard rooms!' It might momentarily go quiet. Without fail, however, a short time later divo Desmond could be heard booming out a baritone response: 'I'm not stupid, Vonnie, I know *you're* seeing someone!' The residents of Ferndale Street had front-row seats to a working-class melodrama underscored with jealousy and revenge.

Neighbours had seen Yvonne with an older man. Herbert Wood was a well-known retired fireman from Glebe who had worked in the area for years. He was forty years older than Yvonne and widowed. When asked why he spent so much time with a young married woman with children his response was always the same: 'I'm helping her hang wallpaper.'

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Rumours spread like wildfire. One neighbour told another, who told the next, who passed the information on to Desmond. Seething over the humiliation, he followed Yvonne one night to the door of Herbert Wood's home. Desmond waited for them to go in, then he waited a little longer before he finally knocked on the front door. Wood opened the door to a man with a look of absolute thunder on his face. Taciturn, even in a state of rage, Desmond simply said, 'You'll see what she's like.' Then he left.

A week or so later, Desmond went out to play cards with the boys. And Yvonne believed it to be true, until neighbour Mrs Thompson told her otherwise: Desmond was at the Surryville Dance Hall on City Road, just near the University of Sydney. Yvonne stormed straight up there in a fury and found him. It led to a very public altercation in the street. The words 'Father?!' and 'Husband?!' were screamed like questions, as if Yvonne were publicly stripping Desmond of his right to hold these titles. 'Stay home!' was shouted so loudly the words bounced off the sandstone of the surrounding university buildings. By the end of October 1947, most of Newtown appeared to be looking on, fearful of the trouble brewing in the Butler household.

## 2

### JITTERBUG AND JUGS

AROUND 8 P.M. ON SATURDAY, 15 NOVEMBER 1947, FOUR MEN arrived at a community dance hall in the western Sydney suburb of Merrylands. They had a big night planned. Desmond Butler was accompanied by his younger brother Lionel, who was visiting from Victoria, and his two closest friends, Ronald Hicks (nicknamed Podgey) and Ronald Harding (nicknamed Ronnie). Desmond and Lionel, in particular, loved the dance hall scene. Their father had been a musician and band leader in the bayside suburbs of Albert Park and St Kilda, and the boys had grown up with rowdy big band music and rollicking musical theatre.

Unlike many of the men known to herd together in Newtown's pubs after work, the friendship between Desmond, Podgey and Ronnie had not formed because they worked

together, but because they lived together. All three resided in the same neighbourhood – a block of streets off Edgeware Road which had Ferndale Street at its centre. Ronnie drove a truck and lived next door to Desmond at 59 Ferndale Street in an almost identical terrace, with his married sister Mrs Phyllis Stewart and her husband, Roy. Podgey made local deliveries of milk and ice, and raced greyhounds on the side, and lived just around the corner. The trio gambled, played cards, smoked and drank, often on the tiny porch in front of Desmond's home. It was well known to anyone that Desmond assumed the lifestyle of a single man. In fact, of the four at the dance hall that night, he was the only one who was married, and the only one with children.

When Lionel asked Desmond if Yvonne was coming, he curled his lip. 'She's got a boyfriend.'

'Do you know who he is?'

Desmond responded with disgust. 'Some old geezer in Glebe. Wood is his name. Old enough to be her father.'

That same night, Yvonne had travelled to the popular Albert Palais dance hall in Leichhardt with her mother, Dottie Bogan. It was one of the most popular entertainment venues in the city because it offered the public the full experience of a dance hall, with a stage large enough to accommodate a twenty-piece band.

Yvonne and Dottie worked nights in the supper room, serving drinks and tea, and preparing and selling sandwiches. A small-framed woman fond of colourful, tight frocks, it was Dottie's hair people noticed first. She had dyed it platinum

blonde, but it was so brassy that even with the screaming trumpet and the piercing metallic notes of the trombone in full swing, her hair was still the loudest thing in the room. Dottie was cheeky and flirtatious, and playfully conspired with Yvonne like a girlfriend. The clatter and chatter of the two women behind the rattling crockery and sandwich stand only enhanced the Palais' revelrous tone. On meeting them for the first time, few realised they were mother and daughter.

To appreciate why it was significant that Desmond and Yvonne did not attend dances together, it is important to understand both the culture of dance halls and the culture of marriage in Sydney at the time. For those wanting to cut loose, dance halls provided an opportunity to do so. Swing jazz allowed improvisation and attracted people who wanted to flout convention. Old time dances, like country or waltz, were slower and stiffer and reliant on a set sequence of movements. They were popular with older couples. But the new and wilder forms of dance – such as the 'cakewalk' and 'the black bottom' – brought irreverence with strutting and pigeon-neck movements. Racier and faster styles like the 'Lindy hop' and the 'jitterbug' were suggestive and signalled that the rules of sexual engagement had begun to change.

Men and women who were usually governed by the constraints of polite engagement found themselves able to be cheeky and flirtatious and downright sexual. Dance partners openly touched each other – and not just with their hands, or rigidly with their upper bodies; the more adventurous and athletic dancers straddled, as their bodies bounced against

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each other openly, breasts jiggling and hips rolling. Men dropped low to the ground, weak at the knees and slick with sweat while they bounced and kicked and wiggled. Skirts lifted outrageously as women twirled. The male body provided the solid foundation for the dance; the slapping and spanking of the double bass providing an infectious rhythm and the trumpets squealed with delight. This was sex, standing up, with clothes on. If dance halls were places to meet and size up potential partners, dance floors allowed potential mates to ‘try before you buy’. The Palais had a reputation as more than a dance hall. Singles went there to find partners. It was rumoured that so many people had wed after first meeting at the Palais that the hall had a nickname – the Marriage Bureau.

The community dance halls that Desmond and his mates frequented, like the one in Merrylands, were rougher than the Palais and the Trocadero in the city. A refreshment room offered cut sandwiches, pitchers of cordial and urns of tea. Unless a liquor permit had been issued, alcohol was not permitted. However, at some of the smaller suburban dance halls, enterprising locals organised refreshments straight off the back of a truck. At Merrylands a local woodcutter had established a lucrative black market business selling cheap plonk. While inside the hall there was dancing, outside was a lorry full of sly grog, parked conveniently in a nearby street. A tarp was usually thrown roughly over the load to cover the sight of the beer bottles and wine jugs. The tray of the truck functioned as a makeshift bar and dance goers could buy warm home brew and vinegary wine, cheap, and on the sly.



Desmond may have been in the grip of dance fever, but on that night in November he was in the grip of another fever as well. On the crowded dance floor, while kicking his legs wildly, he suddenly began to feel sharp pins and needles in his feet. The prickly sensation in his toes quickly spread to his legs. As the dancers around him jerked and hopped and spun, Desmond struggled to maintain control of the lower half of his body. Before he had time to break his fall, his knees buckled and he dropped to the floor. Those around him initially dismissed his jangly movements as a wild improvisation of the jitterbug. They assumed he was drunk. Since there was no alcohol legally for sale, and half the hall was inebriated, most turned a blind eye to his plight, deciding it was best for all concerned to ignore him, lest they get into trouble. It took more time than it should have for onlookers to realise something was very wrong. His two friends, Podgey and Ronnie, and his brother Lionel eventually noticed what was going on and rushed over.

Still lying on the floor, Desmond's body was limp but he couldn't control his legs. With a man under each arm bearing his weight, he was lifted from the dance floor and dragged forward with a definite lean. Podgey was short but strong, so he shouldered much of Desmond's weight. Ronnie had seen Desmond drunk before – he'd had to drive him home on occasion – but he had never seen him this sick from booze. Lionel walked ahead, cutting a path through the crowd towards the exit.

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Desmond rallied a little as he was shuffled through the crowd. But then, clearly in great pain, he started wailing loudly. 'I feel like I'm on fire!' Embarrassed by the man's hysteria, his friends moved even more quickly to get him outside.

To their dismay, Desmond's vocal distress did not subside. His voice remained panicky. He threw one hand across his face, trying to shield his eyes from the glare of the large electric flood lamp mounted outside. He flinched, squinting at the glowing orb of light. Conscious of his discomfort, his friends dragged him well away from the blaring trumpets which continued to echo out of the hall. Embarrassed by his feminine shrieks, they were rattled by seeing such a steely man as Desmond lose self-control. They felt empathy for him, but most of all they just wanted him to be quiet.

A short distance away, they propped him at the base of a tree and considered how to get him home. He seemed unable, or at least reluctant, to walk. Ronnie agreed to go to the nearest main road, hail a cab, then return for the rest of the group.

Refreshed by the cool night air, Desmond rallied a little. Lionel and Podgey hoped for calm and for their friend to regain control of himself. Their hopes were misplaced. Legs splayed like a floppy marionette, Desmond was quieter but not silent. He began to weep. Podgey and Lionel looked awkwardly at each other with no idea what to do. All that Lionel could hear was his brother's sobbing and heavy breathing. The atmosphere was finally broken by Ronnie's return. He had

successfully hailed a driver who agreed to take the men back to Newtown.

Desmond was now staring vacantly into space. This frightened Podgey even more than the screaming. He looked at his friend, sitting defeated in the dirt, and could tell he was in no condition to walk. Podgey turned to his two companions. 'I'll take his head, if you two can take the feet.' Before Lionel and Ronnie could answer, Podgey slid between Desmond's back and the tree trunk, put his arms under his mate's armpits and hoisted him up with all the expertise of a rescue vessel's crew swiftly and heroically saving a man who has fallen overboard.

The taxi wound its way through the streets of suburban Merrylands, past the many new red-brick homes being built for growing families. They passed a hospital at one point. Podgey glanced at his mate, and for a moment considered diverting the driver. But he thought better of it. It had all come on suddenly, but he had not seen Desmond be physically injured. Podgey believed if he could just get him home, he'd be fine.

Desmond grimaced with every turn in the road. Even the sensation of his leg pressing against the car seat seemed to cause him pain. Podgey asked the driver to speed up. 'Won't be too long, mate,' Podgey said to his friend.

In agony, Desmond seemed barely able to hear him.

It was around midnight when the cab finally turned off busy King Street into the block of terraces bordered by Edgware Road in Newtown. No lights were on in any of the houses as the cab cruised up Ferndale Street and pulled

up outside number 57. The lights were off and Podgey guessed that Yvonne wasn't home.

The three men hopped out of the car and conferred briefly and quietly again, with Desmond still prostrate on the back seat. There was no way to contact Yvonne, and no one wanted to leave Desmond alone. For a fleeting moment, Ronnie wondered if his sisters might be able to help. One sister, Phyllis Stewart, lived next door with her husband, Roy. His other sister, Lillian Backhouse, lived directly across the road. Ronnie thought better of it. He knew how this looked. Desmond was distressed, but he also seemed drunk, and for that he would receive no sympathy. 'He didn't have much to drink, did he?' Ronnie asked the others.

'Nah, Ron, you saw it yourself,' said Podgey. 'He barely touched the grog tonight.'

Podgey fumbled in Desmond's pocket for his keys. He then fumbled to get the key in the door. The lighting was dim, and there was a bang and crash as he tripped over a garden chair and knocked over a brass pot out the front. With the door finally open, they managed to get Desmond inside. To any neighbours who might have witnessed the scene, it would not have looked out of the ordinary: three men carrying a drunk brother-in-arms to sleep off a big one.

Inside, Ronnie headed straight for the kitchen to put the kettle on. Podgey helped Desmond out of his jacket with some difficulty and lowered him onto his bed. He slipped off his shoes, loosened his belt, unknotted his tie and removed it from his neck.

By the time Ronnie had made tea, Desmond opened his eyes, rolled over in bed and said, 'Thanks.' The men breathed a sigh of relief, but the mystery of what was wrong with him remained. They wanted to know how someone who had been so deathly ill only an hour before could be returning to normal so quickly. Desmond was no longer grimacing with pain, yet he had taken no painkillers. Privately, each of the three men wondered if his symptoms had not been quite as bad as he had made them out to be.



When Yvonne came home the next morning, Desmond was alone. His condition had improved slightly, but he still felt unwell. Yvonne called a local GP, Dr Cummings, a locum who had attended Desmond before. Each time, Dr Cummings could find nothing physically wrong with the man. This time was no different. He left Yvonne with the same instructions: Bonox and bed rest.

In the week following the dance, Desmond's condition worsened. In addition to pins and needles in his feet, he now had excruciating pain travelling up his legs. He had trouble keeping food down, and his stomach was on fire. Doctors came and went. None seemed to be able to offer a diagnosis. 'It seems mental,' one said. 'Typical of someone having a nervous breakdown,' said another.

Two weeks later, Desmond could barely even drink his Bonox. He spent whole days in bed. Yvonne sat with him, lighting cigarettes for him for chain-smoking when he did

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not feel quite so sick. He was angry. The constant pain had made him disagreeable. The couple began to argue again. Neighbours noticed.

Early one morning, around 2 a.m., Podgey was sound asleep when he heard a loud and frantic banging on his front door. He stumbled through the house in the dark and flicked on the porch light. Through the glass panel in the door he could see the silhouette of a woman. It was Yvonne. Standing in slippers and a night coat, her hair in curlers, she looked nervous and upset. Her fingers twitched as she drew deeply on her cigarette.

‘Podge, you gotta come, please come. Des is really sick. He won’t stop crying, I just can’t stop him. He’s out of his mind.’

Podgey heard Desmond’s screams before he even got to the house. He was a strong man and a steady person in times of crisis, but the baseness of the cries spooked him. Podgey asked Desmond what was wrong but Desmond couldn’t hear him. He went next door to number 59 to fetch Ronnie. The screaming had woken Roy and Phyllis Stewart, and Ronnie as well, but so many arguments could be heard coming from the Butlers’ house that they were reluctant to interfere. When Podgey knocked, however, the couple was already awake and trying to decide what to do. Ronnie was ashamed to admit that the screaming had been frightening and had kept them at bay.

Back at number 57, Podgey took control. He lifted Desmond gently out of bed, helped him to pull a suit coat over his pyjamas, and then slid the man’s limp feet into some loafers.

He sent Ronnie to flag a cab and told him to bring it to the front of the house. Podgey turned to Yvonne. Her eyes were bright red from crying. He rested his giant bear-paw hands on her narrow shoulders and tried to reassure her. ‘Vonnie, me and Ronnie are taking Dessie to hospital.’

All of Ferndale Street heard Desmond Butler’s blood-curdling screams that morning. As the cab drove away, Podgey looked back. Yvonne was standing in the middle of the road, her hair wild and woolly. Podgey thought she looked terrified.



A few hours later, another cab pulled up outside 57 Ferndale Street. Podgey ran in to tell Yvonne the news: they had taken Desmond to the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Camperdown, one of the biggest and best in the state, where he had been seen by some of Sydney’s most experienced doctors. ‘There’s nothing wrong with him,’ Podgey said, then paused as if he was about to say something else, but thought better of it. They had brought him home.

With Desmond now in bed on the first floor, the three friends – Ronnie, Podgey and Yvonne – sat huddled around the kitchen table at the bottom of the stairs. No one seemed to know quite what to say. Yvonne sobbed quietly into a handkerchief which was mangled in her fist. Ronnie, suddenly aware there was something heavy in his pocket, emptied the contents onto the table, and placed a bottle of liniment down with a crack. Yvonne and Podgey jumped at the sound of the glass bottle hitting the laminate. ‘They said you could rub it

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on his legs,' Ronnie said and looked at Yvonne, frustrated that there was little else to do. Under his breath, he told Yvonne what the doctors had said. 'They thought he was shamming,' he whispered. This made Yvonne cry even harder.

'Shh, mate,' Podgey said to Ronnie. 'Why do you think I didn't say that before?'

Both Ronnie and Podgey now firmly believed that their friend was afflicted, but not with something physical. The two men closest to Desmond Butler had come to the conclusion that it was all in their friend's head.



Desmond stayed in bed for weeks. For long stretches he lay as if dead. Yvonne brought him food. He threw it at the wall. With little control of his bowels, the smell of faeces soon filled the house. She helped him to bathe, but this was done with a sponge in bed because she could not lift him. She sat and talked with him. She smoked with him, holding the cigarette to his lips.

But still his condition worsened.

Neighbours began to see Yvonne less and less. The Butler children – Raymond and Ellen – had been moved almost permanently to Dottie's home around the corner. Aware of the noise of Desmond's screams carrying across the neighbourhood, Yvonne called Dr Cummings again, and again. Several times that week, either Dr Cummings or one of his assistants attended the Butler home. Every time, they left with no firm diagnosis other than severe nervous tension. The man was



on the brink of mental collapse, they believed, and there was little they could do.

Desmond grew so weak he could barely lift his arms above his head. This only intensified his anger and frustration. Though Yvonne brought him food and water, the only toilet was outside at the back corner of the yard. When he had enough strength, he took to crawling. Yvonne slept downstairs, and the couple yelled between floors, their voices carrying not just up the stairwell but out onto the street as well.

The noises coming from the Butler house frightened the neighbours. In the daylight it was bad enough, but at night it was chilling. One night Phyllis, who was home more than her husband and brother, heard a grunting noise coming from next door that she could not explain. The persistence of the noise worried her. She waited for it to resume, which it did, and then went outside to listen more carefully. She bent down and peered between the fence palings that separated her property from the Butlers'. To her horror, she saw Desmond within arm's reach. He was dragging his body along the ground, grunting in pain.

Neighbours now rarely saw Yvonne in Ferndale Street. When she was at home, the Butlers argued constantly. The smell of urine and faeces was like an aura surrounding their house. Yvonne wanted Desmond admitted to hospital. But the doctors continued to say there was nothing wrong with him. There seemed to be no solution in sight.

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Then, in the last week of November, neighbours witnessed a strange altercation which, to this day, has never been explained. A group of friends had come to visit to cheer Desmond up and had assembled in his bedroom. Podgey and Ronnie were there, as well as Phyllis and Lillian, Ronnie's two sisters who lived next door and across the road. Phyllis's husband, Roy, had also come over. The group had dragged chairs into the bedroom and sat crowded around Desmond's bed.

Suddenly, Yvonne stormed into the room. She stood at the foot of the bed and in front of everyone shoved her arm under her skirt and plunged her hand into her underwear. She pulled out her fingers, which were smeared with blood. 'You are responsible for this, you bastard!' she yelled, waving her fingers in the air in front of her husband's face. She then turned on her heel and left without saying another word. Desmond stared after her, his face blank. The other men in the room were so shocked, they froze. Phyllis and Lillian jumped up and followed Yvonne out. Phyllis helped Yvonne pin and tighten the sanitary pad that she was wearing back into place. Yvonne said nothing more and no one seemed able to work out what on earth had prompted it all.

Later, Lillian and Phyllis speculated. Had Yvonne been pregnant? Had she miscarried? Had the stress of caring for Desmond made her lose a baby? Or was she accusing her husband of something more sinister? Had he hurt her? No one believed he could do harm. His once strong and virile body was curled into a foetal form, crumpled in his soaking and stinking sheets.

Desmond's friends continued to visit, trying to maintain a semblance of normality. They drank spirits with him, poured neat in heavy-bottomed glasses. Desmond was not steady enough to hold a glass, so Podgey held it to his lips. They lit his cigarette, though he struggled to maintain the fine motor dexterity to smoke it. He was so weak he could barely hold a hand of cards, though the men tried to help him. They propped him outside in the little strip of tiled ground, next to the untended garden, and helped him play his turn. They tried to wedge the cards between his fingers, to hold them there while other players had their turns, but the cards simply slipped from his grasp and fluttered to the ground.

A few days later, on 30 November, Yvonne banged on the front door of Podgey's house in the early hours of the morning. She had all but given up hope that the doctors could help, but asked Podgey if he could come around. 'Could you just come sit with Dessie for a while? Please, Podge. He is crying all the time.'

'I'll be right round,' Podgey said. 'You go back now, I'll follow you in a few minutes.' He grabbed a coat and threw on some pants. As he headed towards the front door, he changed his mind and went to the kitchen. He began digging through the cabinet where his mother kept her tea. Next to the caddy, there was a small white and unmarked bottle of pills. Podgey's mother suffered from high blood pressure and had been told by doctors to lay off the salt and sugar. Unable to give up sweet tea, she had turned to artificial sweetener, which came

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in the form of small tablets. She had decanted the tablets into a pharmacist's bottle because it was more convenient. Though they looked just like drugs from the chemist, they were nothing more than saccharine, purchased at the grocery store. Podgey slipped the bottle into his pocket and set off for the Butler house.

Podgey sat with his friend all night. He talked. Desmond wailed. Podgey was shocked, and scared, and distressed – though let none of this show. In desperation, he offered the only comfort he believed he could. He poured Desmond a huge slug of brandy and emptied a handful of the little white pills into the man's shaking hand. 'This will fix you up, mate,' he said, 'it's morphine.' When Podgey saw Desmond fall asleep shortly afterwards, he took it as further evidence that his friend was not right in the head.



Later that morning, Podgey went to fetch Ronnie and sat down with Yvonne to hatch yet another plan. Since Desmond had become ill, their pattern of communication with him had changed. Now used to his incoherence and stupor, family and friends had become so accustomed to being unable to talk to him they had simply stopped trying. On this day, like many others in recent times, his loved ones negotiated his fate, talking about and around him, but not to him.

'We need the hospital to take notice,' said Yvonne, standing at the foot of the bed. Desmond was in a supine position. He looked like he was in a coma.

‘We’ll force them to take him, Von, don’t worry,’ said Podgey.

‘You’ve tried that, it didn’t work. We need to do something different,’ she said dismissively.

Ronnie also felt that hospital was the only solution. Living next door, he had heard Desmond screaming. It was almost constant now. Whether his friend’s ailments were real, or imagined, he believed the doctors had a responsibility to do more. ‘We’ve got to get him to hospital somehow,’ he said.

‘But we couldn’t get him into Prince Alfred, you know that,’ said Yvonne, shaking her head in frustration. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and crushed her face into it, holding back tears. ‘How are you going to get him in this time?’ The room fell quiet. ‘Tell them he tried to take something,’ she then said. ‘Tell them he tried to take poison. Just so long as you get him into the hospital.’

The room fell quiet again. Ronnie and Podgey were clearly giving serious thought to what Yvonne had just said. To everyone’s surprise, it was Desmond who finally broke the silence. His eyes had been closed, but it seemed he had been listening. In a slurred voice, he said, ‘Don’t worry, Vonnie, I’ll tell them.’ He spoke more slowly than usual, but he was lucid. ‘I won’t worry you anymore. I’ll get into hospital.’

Ronnie and Podgey lifted Desmond out of bed. They made no real effort to dress him, although they did attempt to bend his aching limbs into a robe because this helped to cover the immodesty of the open fly in his drawstring pyjamas. It also helped to cover the smell. Ronnie and Podgey were not sure

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if it was his bedroom or the man that stank of faeces, but they did all they could to maintain his dignity. Meanwhile, Yvonne stuffed some clothes into a small bag.

The two men hauled Desmond down the narrow staircase, negotiated the small front door and led him through the wonky courtyard path to the street just as they had so many times before. Yvonne held the small, broken wire gate for them, and cleared the garden path as the three men staggered out to the taxi parked on the street.

Podgey sat beside the driver so he could give directions. Ronnie climbed into the back, next to what appeared to be an unconscious Desmond. Yvonne, clearly distressed, leaned in the window of the cab and in hushed tones urged again, 'Tell them, Podge, tell them he's threatening to eat poison.' Podgey nodded, and the cab took off.

Once the vehicle began to move, the vibrations set Desmond's nerves on edge. As the cab accelerated and slowed, swerved and turned, the man groaned. He wailed. He wept. Much to the dismay of his friends, this all happened very openly – and very loudly. They looked on, helpless. Desmond's body contorted. He rolled forward and placed his head between his knees. When this position didn't help he flung his body wildly about again. This time he arched his back and violently stamped his feet like a child having a tantrum. The driver, alarmed by the erratic behaviour, slowed the vehicle. Reluctant to proceed, he seemed hopeful the occupants might just get out, if given the opportunity. Podgey would not have it. He motioned the driver on.

Both Podgey and Ronnie tried to speak to Desmond, to momentarily distract him from his pain, but their efforts were in vain. Desmond seemed crazed. Podgey twisted in his seat, turning around as far as he could so his back faced the windshield, his attention focused firmly on the drama unfolding behind him. Ronnie and Podgey discussed what to do next. By now both had lost confidence in the plan they had hatched before they left. Doctors had not believed Desmond before and had attributed his physical symptoms to ‘nervous tension’ or ‘hypochondria’. In 1947, these kinds of statements were tantamount to saying ‘it’s all in his head’. Both men feared the worst – that Desmond would be sent home in the same state he had been in when he left.

As the cab headed up Enmore Road towards the hospital, the two men hatched an alternate plan. Podgey directed the cabbie to drive on past RPA. But the driver objected. Podgey ignored his protests and insisted he continue through Newtown and into the city. ‘Macquarie Street, please,’ he said, with a grim tone. Even Podgey, a man known for his cheerful demeanour, could not disguise the fear in his voice.

The driver knew immediately where to go. Macquarie Street was well known as an important medical precinct comprising a large general hospital and numerous private practices. The driver pulled up sharply outside Sydney Hospital, killed the engine and went to get out of the car, eager to be free of the troublesome passengers. Podgey cuffed the man on the arm before he could get out. ‘Drive on,’ he said, ‘to the Board building.’ The cabbie shook his head, turned

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the ignition over once more and the cab roared on down Macquarie Street.

At the time, the NSW Department of Health, including a board of experts, was the highest-profile organisation in the state in the field of disease control. In the late 1940s, the Board of Health was known to employ an impressive array of scientific staff who were experts in their respective fields of medical practice and microbiology. These experts also played an active role in health promotion and ensuring the public followed their safety protocols and quarantine instructions during times of crisis. Though Podgey knew little about science, and was not a medical man, he hoped he could convince one of the officials that Desmond was the victim of an as yet unidentified and possibly dangerous new disease. When the cab pulled up outside the sandstone building and Podgey saw the word 'HEALTH' adorning the archway, he jumped out and rushed to the heavy glass doors. But they would not budge, no matter how hard he pushed them.

Through a large clear panel, he could see a man inside. He rapped on the door loudly to get his attention. Dressed in overalls, the man looked up, stared at Podgey, then shook his head firmly while mouthing the word 'closed'. It was only then that Podgey realised what day it was. In his haste, he had forgotten it was Sunday.

Podgey had left Newtown with no intention of doing what Yvonne suggested. As he returned to the cab, however, he caught a glimpse of Desmond through the window and reconsidered. His friend's face was twisted with pain and his body



was lathered in sweat. Podgey felt a renewed sense of determination: he needed to do whatever was necessary. He hopped back in the cab and asked the driver to take them to the emergency entrance of the nearby Sydney Hospital. Sometime before 10 a.m., Podgey and Ronnie dragged Desmond through the hospital doors.

By 10.15 a.m., hospital staff had made their decision. They refused to admit Desmond because they could find nothing wrong with him, physically at least. The physician on duty, Dr Blackman, said there was ‘no diagnosis’ and that the hospital could not admit a man who was not sick. Podgey and Ronnie watched on helplessly as they saw hospital staff move to evict Desmond from the hospital bed where he’d been examined.

Podgey pulled the doctor aside. ‘He’s been really ill,’ he told him, ‘in so much pain he’s been threatening to eat poisoned wheat. His wife told us so.’ This was a shameful and humiliating declaration to make about someone, particularly a man. It suggested Desmond was weak, hysterical and unstable.

Podgey and Ronnie would have known that a threat of suicide would be taken seriously but it’s unclear whether they understood the legal gravity of what Podgey had just said. In 1947, the threat to commit suicide was a criminal act, and therefore an entirely different set of medico-legal protocols applied. Rather than being admitted to hospital, Desmond would now be taken to prison. As soon as Podgey made the admission to the doctor, the police were called and Desmond was taken into custody.

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He was transferred to Reception House near the gaol at Darlington, a facility where criminals considered to be psychiatrically impaired were held and assessed. Again, Desmond wailed, wept, gnashed his teeth, and passed out. He roused, and the cycle continued. Unable to find any physical source for the man's pain, or for the weakness in his lower limbs, his distress was defined to be the result of 'nervous tension and anxiety'. It was legal grounds sufficient to certify him legally 'insane', and this meant the state could hold him against his will. It was the first diagnosis that Desmond had received that claimed to explain his unusual symptoms.



Later that day, a cab pulled up in Ferndale Street and Podgey and Ronnie got out. They knocked on Yvonne's door. 'They've kept him, Von,' said Podgey, deliberately censoring the horror of what they had just witnessed and trying to shield Yvonne from the humiliation and shame.

Ronnie was less delicate. 'They've locked him up. They said he's mad.'

Podgey nudged Ronnie. He knew Yvonne was prone to hysteria too – he had seen and heard her arguing with Desmond. He wanted to offer her some comfort, but words failed him. 'They'll keep him for a while,' he said eventually. 'Are you sure you're gonna be all right here?'

Yvonne didn't answer. She collapsed into Podgey's arms and cried like someone who had held back tears for a very long time.