

Just a Job

I dunno why anyone needs to point the finger. It was a job. I needed the work, and there's not too many jobs for women my age, especially if you don't have qualifications. It was a chance to get on my feet again. Pay was fantastic, training provided, free accommodation. And I kind of liked the idea that I was doing something for my country. With all that terrorism crap going on all over the world, I thought at least I'll be doing my bit. And it wasn't like joining the army or anything. I got to stay right here. Never appealed to me, going overseas. Too many foreigners. That's what my Dad always said. Used to crack me up, that did. Don't reckon it's that funny anymore.

Anyway, it was only a short-term contract. Six months in the desert, babysitting a few illegal immigrants until the government got the paperwork organised to chuck 'em out again. I thought, how hard can it be?

Training was paid for, which kind of made up for the fact that it was pretty boring most of the time. There was heaps of health and safety, all things I'd heard before when I'd worked in factories. Then we had this duty of care stuff to learn. The guy that ran it was from Immigration. You had to get your Immigration Department stamp of approval before you could legally go into Baxter, for a start. Have to say, the first-aid course had me a bit worried, but they said we could use our discretion when it came down to the line. If we didn't want to deal with resuscitating someone, or whatever, we could just get the doctor in. After all, you never know what some of these people have got. They could've brought anything into the country.

Having said that, I want it on record that all that training was bullshit, when it came down to it. Once you hit the ground at Baxter, it was nothing like they said. And there's a good reason for that. No one would've ever signed up if they'd known. Except a couple of them whacko boofheads, out to prove a point, with a punch or two if they can swing it. They would've taken it on regardless. But me? No way.

On my first morning, there was a fire in the behaviour management unit. That's where they kept the troublemakers. Some crazy had managed to light up his bedding in the one of the cells. I was alone in the block at the time. I wasn't even supposed to be there, but some other officer had taken off, back to the city, the night before, and I was the only spare they had. There was a fire extinguisher right next to me, and all I could do was stare at it. Might've been useful if someone had showed us how to use the thing, when we were getting trained. As it was, that fire ripped through four cells before I managed to get back with help. Geez, if you've ever seen someone burned, you'll know what I'm talking about. They told me to go home for the rest of the day. That was it. Still don't know how to use a bloody fire extinguisher.

The protestors were a welcome break, though. They were the kind of people I could never stomach. Private-school types, who could afford a couple of weeks in the desert, playing at revolutionaries. I used to wonder who was paying their rent at home. All of 'em dressed in their shabby designer gear. I reckon none of 'em ever had to shop at Vinnies 'cos they had to. Just a game to them. No idea how the rest of us live.

Anyway, it was a bit of entertainment, getting to whack your baton at the fence whenever they did one of their charges. Now, that was one thing that was never

a surprise at Baxter. You always knew when the protestors were about to get all stirred up. You'd see the dust rising in the distance along the Port Augusta road. Television crews from the city. By the time they'd pulled up, the protestors were in full swing. Used to give us a great laugh, that did.

But, inside the fence it was another thing altogether. Nothing was predictable. Every moment of every day, you never knew what you'd have to deal with. I didn't have to cut down any suicides. I could've. I'm bigger and stronger than some of the other officers. But it was one of the rules. Only the male officers could cut down suicides. There was a twelve year old, once. I could've easily cut him down. As it was, I wasn't on duty when it happened. They got him in time, took him to the hospital down in Adelaide. Most of the suicides turned out all right. There wasn't much those detainees could do, without someone noticing. Not a lot of privacy at Baxter. Even if there wasn't an officer around, most of the detainee rooms were doubled up, so there wasn't much chance of doing anything in private.

It was a suicide that kicked off all this mess for me - the troubles I've got now. I was called in because the man's wife and kid were still in the room. They have to call in a female officer for things like that. They'd already carted the husband off to the hospital. He survived an' all, so that wasn't a worry.

But the woman was a basket case. I'd seen a few screaming women, biting and scratching, trying to get some attention. But this was the first time I'd seen catatonic. She was sitting on the bed, just staring at the wall. I grabbed her arm, tried to get her to stand up. Geez, she was rigid as steel. It occurred to me for a minute that she might've died sitting up. But catatonic's like that - they look dead, but you can see in

their eyes that their not. She had a little kid with her, just walking, maybe a year old. You know how they hang on to things and walk their way around the room. He was tugging at her skirts, trying to get her to lift him up onto her lap. And even that wasn't making a dent.

My daughter's got little kids. Yeah, that makes me a grandmother. In name only. I've never seen 'em, not even a photograph. We don't talk. I won't go into all the reasons for that. Blame on both sides. Anyway, this woman was about the same age as my daughter. The kid started to cry and, since I wasn't having any luck with the woman, I picked him up. He snuggled into me the minute he was in my arms. I can't tell you how that felt. Bloody nearly brought me to tears. So I put him down, and he starts crying again. So I'm standing there, the kid's crying, the mother's sitting on the bed like the living dead and I'm thinking, they never told me anything about this. Nothing. I'm supposed to be doing this job for the government and the government's just dropped me in it. So, I thought, not my problem. Go and find the doctor.

Of course, the doctor's busy sorting out the husband, and he says he'll see her when he can. As I say, not my problem, so I finish my shift and, just before I go off duty, I check to see if the woman's been seen to. Fat chance. She's still sitting frozen to the bed. There's another woman in there, minding the baby, so he's all right. But the minute I poke my head around the door, this other woman starts pestering me, babbling away, hardly any words of English. So I just told her, "Not my problem." And then I went home for the night.

Except I didn't really leave, not in my head. All night, I kept waking up and this catatonic woman was sitting in front of me. One minute she looked like a detainee, and then the next minute she looked like my daughter. Did my head in, I tell you. Only thing that got me to sleep was a little cuddle with Mr Jim Beam. Tell you, I was probably still drunk when I turned up for work next day.

As soon as I could, I ducked in to see the woman. Couldn't believe it. She was still sitting on that damn bed, still dead to the world. Kid was nowhere in sight, probably been taken back to some other family's room.

So, as soon as I had a minute's break, I went to the doctor and asked if she'd been seen. I could tell he was annoyed at me pestering. He said he'd try and fit her in that day, but she'd probably need to see the psychiatrist. I told him she'd probably starve to death before then. See, the psychiatrist only came in for one day every second week. Anyway, the doctor said he'd noted it down and I could go back to my duties.

Him noting it down was probably what started all the shit that followed. Some other officer probably saw it, or maybe the doctor let it drop. Either way, by the next day, the teasing had started. *Care Bear*, that's what they call you. I know it doesn't sound that bad outside, but inside Baxter it meant you were almost a traitor to your country. It meant you were on their side, the illegals, and that meant you were fair game for any other officer that was up for a bit of fun. Geez, there's some sick people in this country. And I'm talking about the Aussies now. True blue isn't about mateship, let me tell you, it's about turning on your mates if they step over the line. Wherever that line is, and that's not always easy to tell.

It started out with childish stuff like putting salt in my coffee, or giving me a faked-up roster so I'd turn up for work on the wrong shift. At first, I couldn't tell who was behind it. Don't get me wrong, there were enough decent officers. But it only takes a couple of bad apples, and there's plenty who don't have the guts to stand up to them.

The woman and her kid got taken out of Baxter and put into the women's detention centre in Port Augusta. I've never been in there, but it was bound to be better than Baxter. No idea what happened to them after that. Or the husband. Most likely sent back to Iran. If you were a suicide, it usually meant all your avenues had been tried and failed. Anyway, just the fact that she got taken out of Baxter was enough to kick off a whole new game for the officers that had taken a dislike to me. I didn't have anything to do with her going to Port Augusta, but I'd already shown my hand by pestering the doctor, so it was assumed I'd had something to do with it.

It was at the end of a pretty quiet week. There'd been no snide comments or stupid pranks, and I thought they'd all got sick of it. Or moved on to someone else. So I was pretty much letting down my guard. I was on an evening shift and I had to drive out and lock up the visitors' carpark gate. It's dead quiet out there. The sun had disappeared behind the ranges but it wasn't dark enough to need your torch. After I locked the gate, I stood there for a bit and just breathed it all in. That country's big, you know. The plains, the Flinders, the sky. Then suddenly, I just felt like there was someone there. I turned around, scanned the whole three-sixty. Nothing.

I walked back to the car, got in the driver's seat and slammed the door. Then, wham, there's an arm around my neck, pulling me back into the headrest. I'm

fumbling like crazy, trying to pull that arm off me, and reaching back trying to scratch the eyes out of the bastard. Then suddenly, he lets go. I'm choking and pushing open the door. I throw myself out onto the ground and grab my baton. I'm on my feet in a split second. The back door of the car opens and I'm ready for him. Then I see the uniform, and he starts laughing like it's the best joke ever. It's my bloody supervisor. He's been hiding in the back of the car the whole time. I start throwing every bloody curse under the sun at him, and he just says, "That'll teach you to lock the car door." That's it. I threatened to write an incident report. He knew I wouldn't.

I came in the next morning, just to put in my resignation. Contract be damned. They all knew what I was doing, and, for the first time, I could tell which officers were in on it, by the stupid grins on their faces.

Back in Port Augusta, I had a good week of screamers with Mr Beam. Bugger 'em, I thought at the time. Then I came back to Sydney. Leave it all behind you, I told myself, don't give it a second thought.

But it doesn't work like that. There's the honeymoon period, see. That's what my psychiatrist says. When you're first free of whatever it is that's stressing you out, you think you can just get on with your life. Go back to the way it was before. Call it a bad experience and move on. Then the rubber hits the road. Reality sets in and if you've done stuff, seen stuff like what went on at Baxter, then you can't ever get it out of your head. I thought I was a decent person, a good Aussie. But I'm not. Maybe if I had helped that woman, I could live with it. But I didn't, and deep down I feel like a total shit.

I bought a dog when I got back, thought it'd be good for company. He barks like crazy and goes straight for the ankles if anyone sets foot on the property. I swear he'd bite your leg off, if you stepped inside this house without my permission. Know what I called him? Baxter. Hah! Thought it was hilarious at the time. But I don't do that much laughing nowadays.

And I still don't sleep real well. That woman sits on the end of my bed every night. She's that Iranian detainee and she's my daughter. And creeping round the edges of the bed, there's this little kid, tugging at the blankets. It's that little Muslim baby and it's my grandson.

It was a job. Just a job. I say it out loud every night. I repeat it over and over. But Mr Beam's the only one listening.