



# The Last Breath of the Hour

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Image Peter Renshaw

**A**fter eight years and seven months it comes down to this, this hour, these sixty minutes. Fifty-nine minutes and twenty seconds, if anyone's counting, and Noel York is counting, he's been counting down to 11am on the eleventh of May since the final avenue of appeal was exhausted three months ago. This day has always been present, like storm clouds on the ranges in winter, soon to bring weather that will make the land freeze. Noel checks his watch again: now it's fifty-eight minutes and forty seconds. He has this hour – such that it is – to get the sheep from the dam paddock into the yards. This will be how he'll spend the morning, despite all his efforts to the contrary.

He knew that he'd needed to be alone for this, no chance of distractions, so he'd arranged for the sheep to be collected yesterday, but Lionel Longford – Caherciveen's long-time stock and station agent – rang last night to reschedule, saying that the best he could do was eleven in the morning. 'That simply won't work,' said Noel, hearing the bluntness of his tone, and regretting it. After a long pause that ended with 'I know tomorrow is going to be rough for you, mate,' Longford added that he'd rework things so Caherciveen was 'the first cab off the rank, nine o'clock at the latest', adding that he'd call at 'sparrow's chirp' if there were any issues. He did call at sparrow's chirp, because his truck had trouble starting and was now running late; he wouldn't be at Noel's until eleven. So, back to where they started.

As he crosses the garden to the machinery shed, Noel calls out to Gem to get to work. Despite her fourteen years, she jumps easily onto the back of the quad-bike and together they shoot off down the back road, the one that splits Caherciveen in two, the town paddocks on the right (being a one-pub-and-no-shops place there's no way anyone could call Governors Creek a 'town' but this is how Noel's grandfather referred to these paddocks and the name's stuck) and the creek paddocks on the left. Noel seriously considered getting the sheep ready at first light in case it took him longer than he thought and on the off-chance that Longford was early, but

his father told him decades ago that sheep become stressed when yarded for too long and it's a rule that Noel's obeyed ever since the property was left to him.

Within a year of his father's passing, in 1986, Noel sold off ninety per cent of the place, keeping only 100 acres including the house, the garden, and the home sheds. Back then, his career was ahead of him, meaning he didn't have the time to properly commit to a large parcel of land and the keeping of livestock. Plus, even though he wishes he could claim otherwise, he's simply not as handy with this kind of work as his father and mother and grandparents had been. Except herding sheep; Noel York understands the way a mob likes to move and he can get them from one paddock to another without difficulty, in fact he enjoys it, it's almost meditative, as he's thought more than once.

He stops the bike and opens the gate to the front dam paddock where he's had the sheep for the past week in preparation for being sold. They're looking good, alert and plump – there'll be a few thousand dollars in it (at last consumers are buying Suffolk meat as a delicacy). Except for Noel it's merely pocket money, not even that, it's just what he does when out at Caherciveen, and he's out here fulltime these days, because he has nowhere else to go.

Gem works the sheep into a single mass, moving them along the fenceline towards the yards. Noel gets back onto the bike but for the umpteenth time checks his watch. It's twenty past ten now, forty minutes to go. He looks down along the drive. No truck, only the sound of Gem barking and the sheep bleating at the thought of being taken away from these comfortable tableland paddocks.

Noel has to do it: he thinks of Peter Yieu in Singapore, in his cell, who too must be counting down these minutes. What on earth could be going through his mind? He's placid, effeminate even – for God's sake, he's probably smiling, believing that this is the only way it can be. Noel thinks of Scott's mother, Mrs Yieu. He'd always called her Mrs Yieu. Throughout their meetings and telephone conversations and email exchanges and court appearances – there would have been hundreds of each by the end – and despite her

softly spoken gentleness, he never called her by her first name. She'd handled her son's situation with such love and grace, and this deserved nothing but respect.

Noel thought he could win, he really did. He'd had trickier cases, much trickier, cases that were so complex that table-sized maps had to be drawn to keep a handle on who'd allegedly done what to whom and when and why. But not this one, not Peter Yieu's. Peter Yieu's was a simple matter of naivety: he trusted people too much, the wrong people, with his life, you might say.

Noel turns back to his black-faced sheep. He really does need to be alone; anything else would be a cop-out, and if he's anything he's a man who doesn't take the easy path. 'You're so courageous it's almost to the point of stupidity,' Sarah told him once, in those days when she loved him, and they lived together. A red-bellied black snake had gotten into the cupboard beneath the kitchen sink and armed only with a broom Noel had coerced it all the way out the back door. 'If I was courageous to the point of stupidity,' he replied when the drama was over, 'I would have killed that thing with the stamp of my boot.'

He's walking to the rear of the mob when at last he sees Lionel Longford and his truck coming down the road. It makes him feel like when clouds finally break after a month of rain – it's as though the sun has the power to fix everything that's happening, fix the people who have left, or were taken away, or who are in the process of leaving, a life being snuffed out, just like that.

He extends his arm into the air to wave; he might also be smiling, actually smiling. He looks at Gem and says, 'Let's get this lot away.'

But there's a loud BANG! as if a rifle's been fired.

The sheep leap furiously this way and that. Gem darts from the left flank to the right flank to the left flank again, but the sheep are too spooked and they scatter madly. Noel corners a group of three against the rails and manages to get them in the yards and secure the gate, but the rest have bolted. He looks back down the drive, expecting to see Longford's truck stalled halfway along, but it's still

moving, and thank Christ for that. Who knows what had caused that bang, kids perhaps, or a neighbour or vet taking mercy.

As the truck pulls up at the other side of the yards, Noel waves a second time. He turns to watch Gem who's caught the sheep that had bolted and is bringing them back along the fenceline to the yards.

'Morning Noel,' shouts Lionel Longford cheerily as he jumps down out of the truck's cabin, its back-end hard up against the top of the timber ramp. The sky is the clearest and highest of blues but there's a damp chill in the air. Longford has a dark-blue beanie on his boyish head, getting in early for the winter that's coming.

'Lionel,' says Noel.

'Apologies for yesterday. And this morning.'

'You're just in time.'

'I moved things around to make sure I got here before anywhere else.'

'I appreciate that,' says Noel.

He looks at his watch again. It's 10.25.

He looks away and sees that despite her best efforts Gem has let a few slip.

He says, 'I'll go get those little bastards.'

Longford says, 'And then I'll leave you be.'

As he walks along the fenceline Noel tells himself to calm down – it's good to be busy in these last few minutes. If he was in the house he'd walk from room to room; how empty they'd feel, because he's alone at Caherciveen, as he's been for six months now, because Sarah couldn't stomach it any more, she couldn't handle her husband's around-the-clock commitment to the Chan case. She called it an *escapist obsession* and a *hopeless crutch*. 'You can't bring him back to life!' she shouted over dinner one night in January, as if Peter Yieu's case was already closed, *finito, caput*. But Noel knew his wife wasn't referring to his work; she may also have been right, despite all the time that that passed. Sarah left him by the end of that month, moving to Sydney to live with her ninety-

one-year-old mother with Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and the darkest of tempers.

It seems like only yesterday that a family lived at Caherciveen, weekends and holidays mostly because they had the house in Canberra for Monday to Friday, a nondescript sixties flat-roofed bungalow at the base of Red Hill and surrounded by embassies. Despite their street – their suburb – of privilege, it still felt to Noel that they lived out on the farm, that Caherciveen was their real home, that the homestead and its forever dehydrated garden and the sheds and the paddocks comprised the place of their existence. Not now. Now it's just a house, Noel's parents' house, and his grandparents', and the paddocks that these days never have enough sheep in them because it's hard to do this alone. It feels less alive now because less alive it is. A home can't breathe properly with only one person in it.

Yes, if he was in that house right now he wouldn't know what to do. He might end up in the office – today, after all, is a workday, or at least the result of a thousand workdays, the worst result imaginable. He genuinely never thought it would come do this. Despite knowing at the very core of his being that this could be the only outcome – everyone – repeat: *everyone* – knows Singapore's immovable stance on this – he believed that he would somehow find a way of getting something better for his young client, a young man just one year out of his teens, which isn't really a young man at all.

'I don't know how he does it,' a colleague said in an award-winning ABC documentary on Noel York QC and the Peter Yieu death-row case, 'but he just seems to know how to win. It's partly his intelligence and partly his ability to strategise a case. But there's also his charm. Everyone seems to like Noel, and that does sometimes have an effect on how the legal system can make its conclusions. But also – and he'd hate me for saying it – he has had some extraordinarily good luck. I really do think that he might win this, at least he'll come up with a way of getting Peter Yieu back to Australia and saving his life.'

Yes, thinks Noel as he and Gem work the small group of recalci-

trant sheep back to the yards, I've had extraordinary luck with my work. Until now.

'Keep them moving,' he says to the dog. 'We're almost done.'  
The dog yelps. She understands.

In the months and weeks and days gone by, Noel's thought more and more about McAllister; he's remembered events that he'd thought he'd forgotten. For instance, when he was six years old McAllister brought in from the paddocks a fledgling yellow-tailed black cockatoo. The young bird's wings were badly damaged – it had fallen from its nest and mauled by a dog or a fox and left for dead. Mac cradled the bird in front of the fire in the lounge room, he simply wouldn't leave the heat. He fell asleep there, curled up on the floorboards, the bird tucked into the folds of his jumper. Noel carried the boy and the bird to bed. Come dawn the next morning there was a loud, groany cry; at some stage in the night Mac had rolled onto the bird and squashed it. Noel and Sarah tried telling him it was never likely that the bird would survive its injuries, but Mac couldn't be consoled – he really did think he could heal it.

Noel's wondered why a memory such as this has been suppressed for so long, only to emerge now, in the ten-year anniversary of Mac's death. That would be it, wouldn't it, the ten-year anniversary. And the no-small matter of counting down to this, 11am on the eleventh of May.

'There's no doubt about it,' says Lionel Longford, 'Caherciveen's Suffolks are the best in the district.'

He and Noel and Gem are back together in the yards.

'You buy them for me,' says Noel. 'All I do them is grow them on.'

'I could give you a hundred at death's door and this place would still turn them around.'

Noel knows how he should respond – you're too kind – but the words don't come. He just stares at Longford as though the man's just admitted to a crime.

'Oh mate,' says Lionel Longford. 'I'm so sorry.'

‘No, you’re alright.’

‘As the wife keeps telling me, I just don’t *think* sometimes.’

‘No harm done.’

Longford pauses, rearranges the beanie for no apparent practical reason. ‘It really is a shit of a morning for you, isn’t it.’

Noel checks his watch. ‘In seventeen minutes time.’

‘It’s all over the news.’

‘It’s his mother that I worry about.’

‘All for smuggling drugs.’

‘Mrs Yieu is a hurt woman. But she has her faith. Scott was all she had left of a family that’s had such a terrifying run.’

Lionel Longford says, ‘I heard on the radio that she’s in Singapore for the...this morning.’

‘She’s with a church group,’ says Noel. ‘They’ll be looking after her. They’ll be praying. Probably right now as we speak.’

‘I’m not a religious man,’ says Longford, ‘but it almost makes sense, you know, believing in something just to get you through.’

‘It almost makes sense to me as well, Lionel. But how about we get these sheep into your truck, eh?’

‘Ah yes, and then I really better leave you be.’

Noel steps back and watches as Longford and Gem expertly work the yards. Buying and selling and moving stock is all Lionel Longford has ever done. He can direct a mob whilst lost in a conversation about anything and everything – national politics, district politics, the parlous state of agriculture in Australia, who really knows if the weather’s changing, no one seems to be able to speak convincingly about this.

Gem leaps across the backs of the sheep, dives down and disappears beneath the seething wool only to re-emerge somewhere else in the yards, as if she’s sewing this lot together, as if this is the greatest thrill.

Noel can’t help it: he looks back to the house, that wide-verandahed single-storey construction dating from the 1850s when Governors Creek was a place for prospectors to come and try their hand at finding gold. Once he’d dismissed the idea of spending

the morning in his office – this *isn't* a professional matter, he quite simply can't – won't – allow it to be that – he'd considered the possibility of being in the lounge room. On the wall to the left of the fireplace are the photographs of his mother and father, and both sets of grandparents, all of them looking so similar in their stiff formality and inherent goodness. Photographs of his and Sarah's wedding day. Photographs of McAllister as a baby, as a wide-eyed teenager who always pulled a face whenever a camera appeared, at his raucous twenty-first birthday held in a Canberra restaurant, the whole place booked out for the event.

That weekend, the one during which three lives were picked up and slammed back into the earth: Noel and Sarah had taken themselves down to Bermagui to stay in a colleague's beach house, a rare few days alone, no phones, no computers, no son, just some books, some good food and wine, and maybe a walk or two on the beach. McAllister took the opportunity to invite thirty of his closest mates out to Caherciveen to what someone would admit afterwards was called 'The Best Ever Twenty-First: Stage Two'. A DJ set himself up in the corner of the lounge room. They drank, they ate wood-fired pizzas from the oven father and son had built for the event at the edge of the garden. They danced in the house and on the lawn. At some point around midnight pills were handed out. Mac took one, just one. By 3am he was dead, the emergency-service helicopter having found its way to the property in the dark. A bad reaction to ecstasy, the coroner recorded, as though McAllister York would still be alive if only he'd been hardier.

The sheep are now in the truck. Except for one, which Gem is doing her best to turn around in the ramp. Longford is whistling and calling out confidently. Noel goes to help, his arms out wide, like wings, or he'd like them to be wings, or he's expecting to be crucified, or just taken away by a sudden gust of wind. The lone sheep turns and looks him in the eye; there's panic in the blackness of the face, as if it knows – completely knows – its fate. 'I'm sorry,' says Noel, but hopefully not loud enough to be heard above the stock-

yard commotion.

A minute later, Longford's truck is on its way, heading back out to the road, up to the abattoir in Goulburn.

And the paddocks are silent, the paddocks are still.

As if no one's lived here for years.


Noel comes through the back door, walks into the kitchen, the sound of his boot-steps on the flagstone floor. Gem remains outside; she's having the longest of drinks, her lapping is almost furious. Noel looks to the plastic digital clock above the kitchen fireplace – 11.15 it claims. But that can't be true. He goes into the hall and checks the grandfather clock, which indeed used to be his grandfather's – apparently it really is a quarter past eleven. For the last time he checks his wristwatch. It isn't moving. It stopped at ten to.

Peter Yieu is already dead.

Noel walks to the front door. It's open because as he'd eaten breakfast and filled in the hours that followed he'd gone back and forwards to take a look out there, waiting for Lionel Longford, hoping that he'd make it earlier than he'd said. In one of the ageing plum trees that cling to the edge of the drive as it curves around to the old stables, the leaves only now beginning to turn and fall, a yellow-tailed black cockatoo launches itself into the empty sky, screeching as it goes as though it knows something just isn't right.

Slowly Noel shuts the door, turns around, puts his shaking hands to his face, to his mouth and nose and eyes, his cold cold skin, the brittleness of his ageing bones. In the stillness of the house, in the stillness that is his life now, his throat tight and stiff and dry, he makes sure to keep breathing.

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Nigel Featherstone's novella *Fall On Me* is available through all good independent bookshops or directly from the publisher, Blemish Books. He lives in Goulburn, New South Wales. 

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