

CITYNOVEL2011

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CITYNOVEL2011

new novelists, new novels

Introduced by
Jonathan Myerson

Walking Distance

by **Kate McAuley**



Originally from Australia, Kate has spent her adult life living in many different countries and travelling to countless others. She is a freelance writer and photographer who has survived a plane crash, been shot at in Papua New Guinea and arrested for espionage in Cameroon. As a journalist, she gives her opinion as a social issues columnist, travel expert and also interviews musicians, actors, authors, political figures, fashion designers, artists and others for magazines and online publications, including Time Out, Harper's Bazaar and Esquire.

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Walking Distance: Theodore, a hedonistic cobbler of no fixed abode, has spent the better part of his fifty years causing trouble in rural New South Wales. Annie is a young woman and mother with questionable knife skills and a taste for self-reinvention. Both are on a mission to make up for past transgressions. As the narrative shifts between the two, the secrets that bind them are revealed. Set in the harsh Australian outback, the affluent Northern Beaches of Sydney and the perilous streets of Port Moresby, this novel shows that you can run away, but never fully escape your past.

Flash

He was looking for a model for his final year project. Female. White. Blonde preferred. No experience necessary. I called the number. The voice answered after two rings. A deep, squishy resonance with an accent I couldn't place.

We met under the clock at the far end of the quadrangle. Among students rushing, dawdling, laughing. It was a foreign landscape regardless of the old stone buildings and perfect lawn.

'Are you waiting for me?' The sound slid up my spine.

I turned and stared. Red tartan pyjama bottoms. A purple waistcoat held together with tarnished brass buttons. His hair burst from his scalp, five-inches high, like it had been freshly germinated, searching for the sun.

'Flash?'

'You're perfect.'

He held out his hand. I took it. A shake. A pause.

'OK. Good.'

He walked away. I pulled my heels from the mud and trailed after him. He moved quickly, striding a few steps in front. We passed the dilapidated Social Science block and crossed Victoria Park before continuing on into the streaky innards of Chippendale. The same streets Michael had crossed out with a red biro.

It wasn't until he'd stopped at a terraced house that he turned back to beckon me through a rusty front gate. The garden was concreted over. The slabs were cracked and split by the cranky weeds below. A lace curtain fell across the window next door. He unlocked the door and held it open, balancing it on his toes, just wide enough to let me in.

The room was ordinary, sparse. There was a sink under the window. A gas ring on the counter. The neatly made bed had been pushed into the corner to clear space for a studio of sorts. There were dents in the carpet, a brown shag, where other furniture had been. A table and perhaps a couch too. A crumpled white sheet hung from nails high on the wall, cascading down, spreading across the floor. A camera was screwed onto a tripod. Its lens bowed as if peering over a cliff.

'You are a student?' Flash asked, head down, searching in the fridge. He emerged and broke the seal on two beers. The midday sun slanted through the window. He walked into its beam, as if on purpose to back-light his halo. He tugged at the blind.

'No.'

'You are working at the university?'

'No.'

I hesitated, then took a sip. I picked at the blue and white label while he flipped open film canisters, tested the flash, read the light. I thought about lying, but the questions stopped.

‘Let us begin.’

‘How does it work?’

‘We start with the hands.’

He gestured for me to join him on the floor. He folded my fingers with his and placed them between us. He pressed down on the cable release. Artificial light shot out, illuminating everything, right to the corners. And again. Click. Boom.

‘Your skin is perfect. The contrast. Look.’

His knuckles were dusted in fine white flakes. Dead cells, muting the darkness beneath. Nestled beside them, my fingers glowed. The skin above the joints bunched like the knots on a tree. The delicate places where the bark has grown over after a branch has been lost.

‘Is it bothering you?’

‘The flash? No. Is that how you got your name?’

‘No.’

‘Oh.’

‘It was a name given to me as a child. Where I am from.’

‘Where is that?’

‘Koki.’

‘Oh.’

‘Moresby.’

‘Port Moresby?’

‘Do you know of another? I was fast. It stuck. Toes now.’

He pressed our feet together. Flash. Arms linked. Flash. Knees bent upwards like the foothills of the Great Dividing Range. Flash. Legs balanced like pick-up sticks. Flash.

For his self-portrait, I stood behind him. He was seated in a wooden chair. I let my hair fall over his shoulders. He combed it into his own. The difference was textural, tactile. I hid my face from the lens. Drunk now on the soft, sweet smell.

‘I’d like to do one more.’

‘Yes.’

‘Our bodies. Our torsos, I mean.’

‘Ok,’ I said. I removed my shirt.

His body on mine. Flash. His lips. Flash. A connection. Silence.

The Dawning

I thought Jack was spinning me one when it dawned on me last week. He'd come into the pub all puffed up and feathery with news. I didn't get the full gist of it, but he did babble something about a newspaperman coming to town and that got me counting. I was through my second set of toes and fingers by the time the thought burrowed to the front. It's been more than a year since I'd heard a word.

The bloke sounded like him, but it probably wasn't. It was more likely to be some new troublemaker braving the flies to grapple with their own ideas of the Real Australia. I didn't reckon that The Thief – that bastard who stole my girl – would put a foot this side of the mountains without getting on the blower first.

Not that any of this changed the fact that I'd been left stranded. Dry and high without a note or a nod in my direction for too long now. I knew things were really off when Bev chucked her bad eye at me and said I looked a little squiffy. She hadn't had a kind thought or word for me since I'd taken her down the back paddock for a dip and a drink a little while ago. I was pretending to be a gentleman that day, and that got her all out of sorts. She kicked and screamed, wanting to know what the matter was. My giggles at the truth of it signed me up for seventeen fingers of withering stares and the slick of lipstick-stained spit that I would often find floating in my beer when I wasn't paying my full attention.

Today though, her good orb was ogling the schooner she was filling for me with kindness rumpling all around her mouth and a pair of rosy red cheeks to boot. She was being careful not to overflow. Anything more than the standard measure came out of her wages. Not that I could figure how Doogan could figure it. Nothing but a few drops of nectar on the sawdust turned to cents and dollars. He always was a cheap bastard, that Doogan. Pressing me on prices, complaining when his bottom-dollar soles wore through, demanding I settle my tab at the bar before the last bell rings. He'll always be a bloke most unbecoming of a proper gent, as mother would say.

Bev set down the glass in front of me with a look that said all was forgiven. She'd been keeping tabs too, it seemed. I downed it in three long pulls and tumbled off the stool, fortified myself to standing and went to wake Lotty from her after-lunch zeds.

The sun slapped me across the face the moment I crossed into its glare. The streets were naked apart from the few usual busybodies out for their afternoon shop, looking for a morsel to nibble on before tea. I don't even make the headlines among that bunch of loose-lipped ninnies anymore.

Those days have all been patched over by the scallywags and scandals that have turned up since.

I clung to the shadows beneath the iron awnings and the pathetic string barks that lined the main drag. It wasn't the usual reason I was calling on Lotty, though she did look mighty fetching with her toes poking from beneath an old picnic blanky. Not to worry. Nothing was going to distract me from the matter at hand. It was urgent business that had me whistling that tune. My precious file was inside and a thorough checking was in order. My marbles needed to be put to rights.

'That you, Ted?' she said.

'It's my pong, isn't it?' I replied.

It had been more than a twinset of twelve months since the last time I stopped by to welcome in the evening, but old ways crept into her day dreamings and off came her skirt faster than a roo bouncing from here to the Never Never.

Look, I'll admit that I had a twinkle and an itch, but a man with a singular purpose is nothing but that. Rejection never sat well with Lotty. Up the ladder she went when I told her there'd be none of the hokey-pokey. Right to the peak of it she climbed with her knocked knees bumping against the slats and her sagging knickers drooping behind her. At the top, she turned and thrust her head in her hands, filling them full with all kinds of snot and tears. She always did have a sense of things.

'What you want with that ledger, Mister?'

'Come down, you old bag, before your behind gives out on you.'

Lotty had taken my messages since the first one shot into town and rattled my nerves. She kept them in a cardboard box that she'd got on special from the new Woolworths. The clip inside was busted, but it served its own purpose.

The telegrams and letters had started to trickle in about three toes and a pinky finger after the girl had upped her sticks and left me. Missives from The Thief, not his bounty.

WE ARE IN SYDNEY. STOP.

IT'S FOR THE BEST. STOP.

TRY TO UNDERSTAND. STOP.

The Thief had come to take my picture and jot my story. As it turned out, he was a greedy bastard. He wasn't happy until he had captured my pretty purple soul as well. That first telegram shook me into a jumble. As did each one that came after. I was never any good at the art of fathoming. Mr Cookson he wasn't, but this lad was number two on my list of people better avoided. No bees and birds about it.

'Don't be a wench. Pass it over, darlin'. Time's come. I'm listening to the walrus.'

She drove a mineshaft into my gullet with her stare. The red splotch in the centre of her face had spread all over in mottles and patches. She tried to catch me out with a big toothy grin and a lick of her lips. Not this time. Lotty wouldn't be urging any kind of smooching from me, even if it was the normal prescription for a woman in this sort of state. Sometimes it was easier to give in, but not today.

I grabbed her skirt from where she'd tossed it on the floor and eased it up over her legs, careful not to make any official contact. She gave in and stood up, balancing herself on a handy rung, pressing her pretty pink talons into my neck. The elastic band let out a snap as I pulled it back and pinged it against her waist. With a whisper from me and a whimper from her, I coaxed her away from the edge.

'Not like old times then?' she said.

'Not this arvo. I'm sorry, darlin'.'

'You need to catch your breath,' she said as she slumped into her creaky chair and began sorting the afternoon post. Your sweat is steaming up the windows. People will get to talking.' She parted her lips and shot me a wry smile.

My palms were as shiny as rain on corrugated iron, but I'd wasted so much time forgetting and distracting that the present nipped at my heels and took on an urgency of its very own. I dripped and slid through the brownish scraps. My fingernails catching on the corners.

MARRIED. STOP.

BABY GIRL. STOP.

HAPPY. STOP.

That little ditty already carried its own burden of smudges and wrinkles. There were phone messages too taken down by Lotty's liver-stained hands on scraps of paper.

One had their new address. Somewhere in Whale Beach. The light-fingered bastard had taken her to the sea. I looked it up in the UBD one time when Mrs Cookson fixed me lunch. It wasn't just an around the corner amble. Hills and valleys were involved. A jostle with the tourists near the Three Sisters was unpreventable.

A pink piece of paper covered in blue flowers and Lotty's shopping list had a telephone number. The digits were still there among once needed apples, oranges and furniture polish. I could've got someone to dial, though there was no message asking me to return the favour.

Lotty, done sorting, took it all off me then. Grabbing at her scribbles and putting everything back tidy and neat. She pressed the pages together carefully, like she was putting a hard-to-find flannel flower to bed between the notes and scraps. Mother used to dry blooms like that. Sucking the life out of them

for months. The petals turned to paper, their colours all muted.

‘It’s been more than a year, Ted.’

‘So it seems.’

No secrets had been biding their time for me. There was nothing she’d forgotten to pass on. The last message wasn’t in the ledger. That one I’d kept in my top left pocket along with her hairband and a grubby sock. Her foot – a funny little thing that fit in the curve of my hand – had once worn it. The yellow and black honeybee stripes stretched all the way to her knee.

Lotty had said his voice had been all stretched and silent that last time. He asked if I was still kicking and said nothing more. Her face pinched up when she recounted it, like she was trying to put her mind’s eye on the infamous bastard. He’s got fangs, horns and a golden fob watch, I told her once when she dared to ask what he looked like. That put a plug in it.

There were no words or dashes to indicate a date, but it had been delivered before the scorcher and after Mrs Cookson’s funeral. The last snippets of everything worth anything left that day. First the girl, then her. Both gone within five fingers of each other.

All that’s left are digits in a sequence with no meaning. Dates and phone numbers and years past. Not that it has stopped the evil brewing. He’s still there, perched with a signet ring up his arse behind a lump of oak in the centre of town. All the blame sitting ugly on his shoulders.

The Dying

The tubes fall from his face and arms, disappearing beneath the thin white sheet and knitted blanket. Clear and coloured liquid streams in and out. Yellow into the bag that is hanging on a stainless steel hook beside his bed. Red into the machine that is buzzing and shaking next to him. Cleaning his blood. Wringing and washing and leaving out to dry what his body can’t.

His eyes are closed, but he knows I’m here. A twitch at the side of his mouth when I mumbled a quick hello from the doorway gave him away. Nothing much has moved since then, not even a shudder. His toes are curled up as if in anticipation of what I’m going to do next, but that’s it.

It’s not him lying there. The instruments have more vigour. I take a deep breath and try to gather my words, but my mouth is sewn closed with a blanket stitch of invisible yellow string. It’s a feeling that I’m used to, though never tried to conquer until today.

The room is clean and white and empty despite everything in it. There is an

open window on the far wall. The sounds of the ocean below – the lapping water, the seagulls and the harbour ferry traffic – beat and hum in time with the medical equipment. It’s a tuneless dirge that suits the situation and annoys me in equal measure.

In the hallway, nurses and orderlies shuffle past in their squeaky shoes, speaking of weekends and parties and cigarette breaks in quiet yet discernible tones. They’re never in a rush to get anywhere. Not like those TV drama copycats. There’s no exciting hallway tracheotomies or severed limbs being rushed to car crash victims. Heroics seem to be beyond them in this place. Instead it’s depressing and real and lonely.

I let go of the door I didn’t realise I was holding and move closer. It swings shut behind me with a creak and a whoosh and a delayed little slam that makes me jump.

What’s left of him is waiting for the inevitable release. And for me to talk. It’s written all over his pale face. This man, his green eyes gazing up at me from beneath his closed lids. I know that look. Even laid out like this, there is no denying he is still my teacher. Our roles cemented since the beginning. I remain his favourite.

‘Come now, darling,’ I can almost hear him say in his considered voice. ‘There are no wrong answers here. Nobody is judging.’ The words flow in his well-heeled accent that speaks of good breeding. The sound of it rattles around my head, soothing me and making me brave.

With his very presence, he probes and digs and encourages. It’s too powerful to bear and I begin to buckle. I shift my focus from his face to the floor. There are fake marble veins and splotches on the faded linoleum tiles. I spend a moment looking for a noticeable pattern before stepping across the boundary to lean against the protective metal frame that rises from the side of the bed. There is a chair in the corner under the open window, but it’s a move too far and comfort is not what’s needed.

I place my hands upon his shins and am strangely consoled by the warmth that is only slightly detectable through the thin layers. I lower the rail and shift myself up against him. There isn’t much room and I end up tipping like a seesaw on the edge of the mattress. My feet don’t touch the floor.

I pick up the hand closest to me. His fingernails are brittle and flakey. The tiny pink half moons are waning against his cuticles. I rub my thumb across his palm, tracing the strong indent of his lifeline. It stretches all the way down to his wrist. I bring his fingers to my lips.

This is it. I cup my cheek to his hand. My voice echoes and bounces off the bare walls. The words surprise me more than they do him. Goodbye, my love.

The Girl

All buggers were born. You, me, that singlet who tried to deck me down the pub. Even mother. We're all a cry and a shout. Skin and muscle all ripped up and jagged. And a stench that would outlast The Dreaming.

If I look closely, I can see the sound of it hover over a crowd of them. It tells a story of anguish and the pain of it. It clouds up across their shoulders like streaky diesel fumes rising off bitumen on a mid-Summer stinker. The screams flow in red and orange. The whimpers are pink and blue. Laughter and joy and drugs are green, purple or grey, but they're a rarity in this business. Nothing is ever black.

I'd never met anyone whose worldly introduction I couldn't see in my mind's eye until Alkina. She was about five when she first kicked me in the head, scraping off a piece of my ruddy nose for her trouble. It was a rude awakening. My first glimpse of a new day was the clump of grass I'd used as a pillow and a little flap of skin caught beneath a big toenail. It hung there in shock, just like the rest of me.

But don't go thinking it was the pain or the assault on my gentle slumber that had me spooked. I've suffered much worse than the volatile manoeuvres of a little chickadee such as this. Nope. It was the purity of her. No pollution clung to her. The air around was as clear as cling wrap. Like she'd been made of wood or clay or some other unlikely material from the Bible and fairy stories.

It was the first and last time I'd be wrong about something like this. Alkina had been brought forth in the normal way, slipping out of Trish seven months and three days after I'd wandered in there myself for a jiggle and a grind. Or so I was told once I wiped the salt and crud from my eyes and sat bolt up straight in the grass to avoid further injury. Alkina's middle toe, alarmingly longer than the rest, was poking skywards. Rearing up like a funnel web on the warpath. Or perhaps it was just giving me the finger.

Trish was standing next to her. I know because I never forget a shoe and those red platforms were showstoppers. Something about her brought out the best work in me way back then. The feet nestled inside them, perfect. From there up the only way was down. The woman, if I can call her such a thing, was skinny, twenty-two if a day and premature in the true sense of the meaning. It was a calamity and a shame, to use mother's phrase, with a frown and a crinkle in a deeper place between my ears.

'Hello, Trish,' I said.

'This is your daughter. Her name is Alkina. I'm leaving her with you. Goodbye'.

She pirouetted and walked away. The little one and I watched the red shoes disappear down the backyard path and around the corner. We listened to them hit the dirt road and crunch along, gaining distance.

That was a quarter-century of little piggies ago. Alkina eventually left me too. It didn't seem like such a big deal for a while, but time has a funny way of working itself in me. Was there any use in searching for her now?

I left Lotty at the Post Office and wandered back to The Royal. I was risking a king hit from Doogan, but I had to get away from my thoughts for a moment or two. I've been in the vicinity ever since, spending days trying to block it all from bubbling to the surface. Nothing worked.

Epiphanies don't often visit, but after the boozy fog lifted, my eyes were split apart by that godforsaken, always shining sun. It hit in sprinkles and shards. Lighting up the closed mouth that spoke the truth of things. Eyelashes and nail polish, glittering like the desert sky at night, flashing from her hands and feet. The answer was Yes.

I turned in a circle and began the overture to the song that would get me back to the beginning. I needed to save the day. The rusty tune played over the beat of my feet. The lyrics were my map because I never trusted the paper kind. The cart wasn't any bother once I'd rolled her out and fixed her up. A new inner tube and a bit of oil on her old rusty hinges. Doogan on the other hand was a matter of a different caste. The bastard had figured my plans before the kernel of an idea had slipped between my ears and grown to full size. The itchy umbilical between us pulled taut.

'Ted. You're not going anywhere.'

There were things to settle. Cents, dollars and words. Three new soles and four fingers of fisticuffs. That was the price for a skedaddle this time. But the needle's back on the record and I'm moving now. No need for slinking and sliding. The lyrics pried themselves loose as I turned my bicycle, once heavy with Arcady's old haul, now filled with my chattels and goods. I pointed myself away from the town and towards the mountains.

The Escape

The lift doors close with a shudder, but the smell of disinfectant lingers. Faded posters remind me to wash my hands, cover my face, get a flu shot. I angle myself over a picture of a blonde woman clutching her stomach and scowling in fake pain until I can see my faint reflection in the plastic laminate cover. My fringe is in my eyes. I need a haircut. Perhaps I'll have it all lopped off. It'd be much easier to manage in the humidity and the heat. I need something to eat. I'm starving and today I'm going to need all my strength.

I drive to the school and find Seph's classroom, but it's just an empty shell

covered in poster paint and errant crayon marks. It's time for PE and her class is out on the back paddock playing a game that requires medicine balls and small plastic domes to mark out the boundaries. She's easy to spot with her long, brown legs topped off with the regulation blue shorts she's seconds from growing out of. She's running, being chased, laughing. Her head is thrown back, a neat row of teeth on display. The one on the bottom left is a relic from when she was a baby. Hanging around for years longer than it's needed to, as stubborn as its owner. I often catch her tugging at it, trying to pry it loose. She wants the money from the Tooth Fairy. Or to grow up quicker. Probably both.

The smile falls from her face when she spots me. The jingle of my keys hanging from my index finger has given me away. Seph told me once that they have a singular chime that lets her know I'm around. I've tested it out a couple of times and it's never failed.

She stays in the game, delaying the inevitable. Her head is lowered. Her elbows are out. She pushes past the other children in a blur. Slamming into them and dropping her shoulder. Finally, she trips and falls, letting out a cry that borders on a scream.

Her teacher walks over and tries to make small talk about the early summer and how Seph had aced her spelling test before little lunch.

'A way with words runs in the family,' she says.

'I need to take her with me,' I say.

I look her straight in the eye and offer no explanation, challenging her to quiz me. She nods and asks no questions, meeting my gaze with a forced look of sympathy that spreads across her elfin face. It's the kind that is easy to prey on. My phone buzzes in my pocket as she continues to talk at me. It could be the hospital, but it's probably Laurel. There is no point in looking or answering.

Seph is still on the ground, though she's turned over to stare at the sky. The children, even her best friend Kara, have left her alone to get on with other things. A couple of girls turn back to stare, laughing and talking behind their hands, nudging each other with shared awe. The noise Seph made while going down has sent a little shockwave through them.

I leave the teacher mid-sentence and walk over and hold my hands out to hers, pulling her up and onto her feet. Eight years old and almost my height already. She stands rigid and stares at me hard, silently bracing herself for the news.

'Daddy is OK,' I say, smiling over the lie. 'Go and get changed.'

I hold out my arms again, expecting her to lash out or crumble. Instead, she turns and does as she's told. While Seph gathers her things, I make sure no one is watching and drop my phone into the rubbish bin by the canteen, hiding it under a chocolate milk carton and a half-eaten sausage roll. I glance at my watch. Our plane leaves tonight. In a few hours we'll be at the airport.