

## The Path to Redemption

As they trudged through mud, a jungle of mangroves surrounded the two men as the hunt continued. Knowing that the enormous, simple Manilaman was still out there, his hands probably still stained with blood. This thought kept O'Rourke determined and focused on bringing the murderer to justice.

This mangrove forest had been searched from north to south, and every other bearing in between. Only one place was left unsearched, only one place could be sanctuary for the killer and the innocent fools who fled to his aid. O'Rourke was worried, no, he was fearful. Out here was a known murderer, no matter how simple his mind was, no matter how terrified the man became, he was a killer, and nothing could change that fact. And it wasn't just Jesus that had the sergeant worried. It was the man's brother, and the poor, foolish kid as well.

The sun raised as the search lengthened. The heat from the bright, harsh, yellow star was almost unbearable. O'Rourke's deeply reddened nose was peeling after days searching under the unforgiving sun. His brow was soaked in hot sweat and forced his forearm to wipe it off every few minutes. O'Rourke was tired. Tired of the sun, tired of the pain that his body and brain had embraced, and tired of this search. His body wanted to stop and give up, but his mind refused to let up. He couldn't allow himself to give up. The memory wouldn't let him. It only pushed further to the edge.

As the heat made itself welcome, and as the sun reached its peak, O'Rourke was hoping for a miracle. He knew they had to be out here, somewhere at Entrance Point, among the mud and mangroves, among chaos and fear. Just as O'Rourke was about to lose his temper he saw something in the distance. The anger suddenly disappeared like smoke in thin air and a far worse feeling set in. In the distance, three figures stood out awkwardly. Two of these figures looked more like mice when compared to the hulking giant that towered above them. At first, O'Rourke had to relieve his eyes of the sweat that had made a direct path to impair his vision. But his eyes were not fooling him, this was no mirage that was born by the heat.

His body acted out of muscle memory. But the sergeant was fuelled by a memory that was locked deep inside his mind. He had hoped it was buried and dead. That the sickening memory was pushed further back, that the darkness would consume it and swallow it whole. But now... now the memory that had caused so much pain, so much guilt, had seen the light and rushed forward to meet it. The three elusive figures must have noticed O'Rourke rushing towards them. He must have looked like a raging bull to the smaller figure. The hulking giant would be able to stomp on O'Rourke though, and consequently banish him down to join the mud and the mangroves in a forever sleep. However, the brut did not charge towards O'Rourke in an aggressive frenzy, but fled in the opposite direction in an act of fear and uncertainty.

The pursuit suddenly became a frantic rush. O'Rourke and Jesus became locked in a race for life. The mangroves around them ruptured into thousands of wooden shards, and colossal concrete structures erected in their place. The brown slop that was the terrain transformed into a solid, grey surface. He was still running, still in pursuit, and still afraid. However the gigantic Manilaman was reduced to what seemed like a twig with legs, his skin now a light, milky colour instead of the polished bronze it should have been. His hair was rough and grainy like sandpaper, and the colour of wet sand as well. He was a ghost. A ghost that the sergeant wanted gone forever.

O'Rourke could not see the elusive man's face, only his back. Long, black trousers and a white top that had been dashed and splattered with a dark, sickening red. O'Rourke knew nothing of this estranged person, only that he was to be brought to justice. He had never decided what justice was and what a man deserved. He never had, or wanted, the overbearing weight dropped on his shoulders. The sergeant was just a policeman. He wasn't a grubby lawyer that was built on words. He wasn't a judge that could condemn a man to a life of darkness. He was just a sergeant in Perth.

The ghost suddenly dropped downward. His leg somehow had collapsed and the man was on the cold, hard ground. *This is the time*, familiarly ran through the sergeant's head, *I can get him now*. Before O'Rourke was in grasping distance of the man, he was already back upright and away once more. *This man is fast, a viper not a bull*, O'Rourke quickly realised as he frantically dashed past the grey concrete ground with a pair of red hands, freshly stained to the pavement.

O'Rourke raced around a corner and into a small, confined space between two buildings. The alley let no light in. O'Rourke was surrounded by darkness. He could not see his near surroundings. He only saw the ghost of white and red. This mysterious, yet familiar ghost had stopped fleeing. He now only stood 15 yards away from the sergeant. But to O'Rourke, that mere 15 yards seemed a lifetime away. But that past lifetime had returned. He had to act; it was his duty. O'Rourke looked down from the elusive figure to his rough, callused hands. Hands that held a pistol. A pistol that had mysteriously crept into the sergeant's grasp among the recent and present chaos.

He elevated the gun to an angle that was in direct line with the man's narrow back. O'Rourke knew what he had to do. In the academy he was drilled with situation after situation. But this was not a drill, not some simulation a far more intelligent man had created. This was real. The man had nowhere to escape. The walls of darkness had closed in on both men. The world was gone, encompassed by darkness. O'Rourke was now fearful, perhaps for the first time in his life. This fear had left his thick muscles tightened, his rigid jaw clenched, and his stomach knotted. Despite this pain his body felt, his mind was in utter dismay. Thoughts of right and wrong clashed, and duty raged war against morals.

O'Rourke was not the judge, he was not the jury and he certainly wasn't the executioner. This thought outweighed all others. It wasn't his job to decide what the nauseating red that covered the man was. It wasn't his job to comprehend the situation. It wasn't his job to convict the man with a punishment that would last a lifetime. He was only a police officer.

The ghost of white and red was fading away, like a dream that had to return to the light. O'Rourke was frozen still. Still fearful and ashamed. He had escaped; the sergeant did not stop him, and he could not stop him. O'Rourke lowered his gun so it was facing the cold, dark ground. His head followed the gun. It was lowered in disgust, just as much as it should have been raised in pride. How could he feel pride when his mind was full of personal resentment? He obeyed his morals but betrayed his duty. How could he continue on this path? How could he face what was to come next?

As he wished for this nightmare to be eradicated, an intense, powerful light beamed down on O'Rourke. He raised his head with his robust hand over his squinting eyes. The light was overbearing. The darkness had been overpowered by the light. This light felt like it was crushing O'Rourke beneath all of its uncomprehending weight. He couldn't stare any longer. He had forced his eyes

shut, but the light somehow had found a way to invade the darkness once again. He had been granted no other options, so the sergeant abruptly opened his eyes to the light.

The sky cracked as if something had ruptured the atmosphere. The beaming light died away to reveal a rifle aiming at the unforgiving sun in the background of peaceful blue. O'Rourke grimaced and was relieved that the past thought had ended, but was worried for the moments to come. He had begun to lower his gun, but this time it was not facing the ground. It was in direct line with the broad back of the colossal Manilaman. O'Rourke had to do his duty this time, not just for justice, not just for the people of Broome, but for redemption. A murderer was trying to escape O'Rourke again. All the other factors meant nothing. He was a murderer; he would not be given the chance to escape like the ghost of white and red. Just before the sergeant finally secured the retribution he craved and needed, a white figure appeared in between O'Rourke and redemption. It was insignificant in size compared to the bronze mountain it was trailing. But to O'Rourke, this boy was innocent and innocence held great significance to the sergeant.

The world around had slowed down; it was like everything went at a fraction of time. The birds in the peaceful sky were travelling little distances for the time. The shouts were ongoing instead of the loud bursts they should have been and the fool boy and the hulking giant were racing away in slow motion. This still changed nothing. The fear was still in O'Rourke's knotted stomach, still in his thick muscles and it could be smelt from a mile away. However, O'Rourke's mind was already decided; the same mistake would not be repeated on his watch. He would not allow a killer to escape again; he would not be responsible for the murders of innocent people. O'Rourke took no pleasure in what he had to do, but he didn't have a choice either.

Sam had to get out of the way so O'Rourke could take the shot. The boy was a fool, from the first time they met all the way up to now. It was stupid, immature and brave to place yourself in-between a bullet and its target but the boy did it regardless.

"Sam, get out of the way!" pleaded the sergeant with all the authority he could muster into his deep, desperate voice.

But this order, this plea, was not heard by the foolish boy. However it was heard by the mangroves. While he was in mid-flight, a root had made a path to sabotage Sam's chase. The brave fool hit the earth and opened a direct link for the bullet to make contact with its target.

O'Rourke's finger closed around the trigger. A deafening crack was heard and simultaneously the fleeing bronze mountain collapsed to the cold, muddy earth. It could have been a surprise that the earth did not rumble and quake when the colossal Manilaman crashed against the ground. But it was not a time for jokes, it was a time for retribution. O'Rourke had brought a killer to justice. He had protected the innocent from a monster and he had walked the last few steps of the path to redemption.