

## Death Pledge

1620 words

I was halfway down page 954 of *Routledge on Securities* when I heard shouting, so I put my finger on the page at "the equity of redemption can rewrite unconscionable bargains" and looked up from the old leather armchair in which I was sitting, cross-legged in a pool of light from my uncle Hans' Anglepoise lamp. As I did, the door to the living room slammed open and Hans stormed through. Sally dog was barking at his feet, thrilled to be taking part in family life.

"Your bloody marks aren't up to it and we had an agreement, Melissa. You cannot go!"

My cousin Melissa was five steps behind him, blonde curls glinting in the lamplight. She stopped in the doorway when she saw me and flicked me a 'dads, eh, whatcha gonna do?' sort of look; I lifted my shoulders in a cautious shrug. I collared Sally as she bounced past me and scratched her furry ears as I held her.

"Dad, it's already arranged! They won't be able to hire the boat without me to —

"Good!"

"—sign for it and I'll let them down. I *promised*."

Hans had already stomped out the back door, jamming his feet into gumboots, waving a hand back through the open door, before fuming off towards his vineyard.

This fight had been simmering for the last three days, but this was Hans' final effort to stop Mel heading down the New Year's party at Anderson's Bay. The rest of the family had kept well out of it; Melissa had both her father's doggedness and her mother's impressive ability to hold a grudge so there was an unspoken agreement to let them fight it out.

Melissa plonked herself down in a chair beside me. "What are you reading, Andy?"

"Textbook. Mortgages; thrilling stuff. So what do you think, are you going to...?"

Melissa set her jaw. She looked like Hans. "Thinking about it. What do you reckon?"

I let Sally go and she bounded off out the door, looking for Hans. "Well... Better to regret something you have done, I guess?"

Melissa considered this, then smiled faintly. "True. He'll change his mind. Or not. Either way. Anyhoo, g'night."

I waved at her, then went back to my textbook.

She was gone before dawn; sneaking off to Anderson's Bay in the back of a schoolfriend's ute, and not long after that she disappeared forever, so I never saw her again.

**Weak and wordy and feeble. Could function as the beginning of a much, much longer piece, but the dialogue/interaction here serves neither your characters nor your plot. Could literally be cut to three sentences.**

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I found out about the disappearance over the phone. I'd been at a festival up the hills round Nelson, all glowsticks and puppets and oonst oonst oonst, so was feeling sleepless and strung out when I called from a payphone by the side of the road. It was Hans.

**Actually, you could've started the story here, and it would have had much more emotional impact. You already chose to tell the story from the perspective of a character several times removed from the action (by the way, I have *no* idea why you chose to do that: indifferent helplessness is one of the least interesting ways to be sad, especially when your character is barely invested in the sad person), so why not cut the bit that seems only to serve to say 'yes, these two characters are on reasonably but uninterestingly friendly terms'?**

"Have you seen her."

His voice down the phone bit out each syllable like chopping off lengths of wire, teeth haggard and splintered. I mumbled something about being up in the hills, and hoping it all worked out, then stood there for a while after he hung up on me.

I had a sense of the life I'd been living before, the one where people didn't just vanish, like a version of me staring at me through the lit-up window of a train carriage at night, from a train carriage on another set of tracks, bound for a different destination and drifting away, all smooth and inevitable.

**Cool metaphor, poorly placed and poorly written. I don't know anything about the narrator's life, or about the narrator, frankly, so this isn't illustrative - it actually just reads like something *clever* and *writerly* that you're expecting me to take at face value.**

I didn't see Hans for a while; he was on the news, coordinating search parties and whatnot. **too casual** I had to go back to varsity in Auckland so I didn't stay to help. They never found anything, of course. I called him when they arrested the guy they thought had killed her, and again when he got found guilty. Each time, on the phone, Hans' voice sound hard and glassy; he talked of practicalities; trial dates, interviews, next steps, and the conversations didn't last long.

After I got my degree I worked for the bank. They liked to move people round through the regions and by chance I ended up back in the same town as my uncle.

It wasn't actually by chance; I asked for it. There were some words stuck in me, some last words I hadn't said and now I needed to find out if I'd ever be able to say them.

**I have read this story three times and haven't worked out what those 'last words' were, or why the narrator suddenly seems so bothered when the rest of his nattering is about his job and he refers to the disappearance so casually.**

**By the way, the story you *didn't* write - the one about Hans - is way more compelling than this, albeit a little rote.**

The local office was busy; lots of farmers in the area, there was always at least one burly laconic bloke in moleskin trousers and unironed chambray in the waiting area when I came in from my lunchtime run. The manager was called Colin; he used to play rugby and had a thick neck furred with fine silver.

"Mate," he said one afternoon, dumping a bunch of files on my desk. "Get your head around this lot. Risk's getting up and we need to get it sorted."

I flicked through them and stopped when I got to the one with Hans' name. I pulled it out. Hans had been busy too; hundreds of acres of vineyards, stock, machinery. Debt, he was sunk in it. Fathoms and fathoms of heavy debt and him far below, drowning.

I tapped the folder. "I'll pay this one a visit?"

Colin leant forward to look at the name, then grimaced, his weather-beaten face scrunching up into a complicated mass of furrows. "Yeah, sure mate. If you think you're up to it. Hard luck, all that stuff."

I could feel the hole in me pulling down the sides of my mouth, and I turned it into the brave sort of smile you were supposed to have.

**Our first hint of conflict. Too bad there's no sign elsewhere in the story that he's trying to put on a brave face, and that it's hard for him. You don't have to hit me in the face with it, but I do need to see *something*.**

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The countryside was parched and shimmering with the summer heat, gusty northerlies blowing the poplar trees around like the fans of a long-dead Egyptian queen. My Camry crunched over the gravel and rolled up to the front door of the house. Hans was waiting in the doorway, Sally by his side.

"Andrew," he said. "Cup of tea." It wasn't really a question, but I nodded and five minutes later we were sitting at the kitchen table. The leather armchair was still in the same place, lamp still arching over it like a steel question mark. I went to take a sip of tea, but it was too hot; I blew on it instead.

"Hans, the numbers aren't looking good."

Hans wasn't looking good. His long face, which I remember as being mobile and expressive, was parched and drawn like an over-botoxed actor. He shook his head.

"Economic conditions." He pronounced the words like each was a ghost he was trying to avoid looking at. His hands were white on the handle of the mug. "I need to stay here; I'll sell up some land." He gestured out the window at the rows of vineyards marching across the hills.

"You said it, though, Hans. Economic conditions. You've had those patches on the market for months, now. Bargain basement rates, and no-one's grabbing them."

Hans sat, hunched and shrunken. The big old farmhouse creaked in a sudden gust of wind and I saw him sway a little in sympathy. I pulled out a piece of paper. "Colin told me to give you this. I'm, I'm really sorry." I put the Notice of Foreclosure on the table.

**Now, I don't get why your narrator was willing to do this. Wouldn't he try to come up with a way to help Hans? Or is he really that much of a robot, that it doesn't even bother him? This guy is just so boring.**

He didn't look at it. Instead, he stood up. "Come on. I want to show you something."

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Hans set a fast pace up the hill, Sally bounding in front and me making heavy going of it behind in my townie shoes. The sun was a sharp-edged hole on the blue bronze sky and I could feel the drops of sweat trickling down my back as I panted up the final rise.

It was a good view; rolling hills, the house down in the valley, the stream glinting in the sun, a few sheep in the paddock out back. Hans seemed to drink it in, stand taller at the sight. I found myself drawing imaginary lines across the property; that parcel bought at a loss, this parcel financed at 12.5%, and closed my eyes so I could stop.

"I made a promise. Can't break a promise."

I felt a wave of nausea wash through me, took a deep breath, and opened my eyes. Squinted at him. *Better to regret something you have done.*

"Hans, it's killing you. Keeping this up. You have to let it go; we can work something out. She, Mel, she would have..."

Hans laughed, the faintest exhalation of breath and a twitch of his sun-cracked lips.

"She would have wanted me out long ago. But this is the place, Andy. This is where I saw her last. I was up here trellising and I saw her sneaking out. Sun was just coming up. And I thought, well, I thought. Why not. She's grown up. She's nearly grown up. Let her go. Why not. She had a promise to keep. Didn't she? She had a promise to keep, and she kept it, and it was the end of her. And so do I, what do they call mortgages? Death pledge. Pledge to death. So. There you have it. There you have it."

**The connection between the land and Melissa is strained, as is the connection between Hans and Melissa. Because I know almost nothing about Hans - even less than your narrator seems to - I'm not buying his regret whatsoever, except 'well of course he's regretful, she's his kid' which is p uninteresting.**

**Another strained connection is the one with the 'promise' thing. You didn't give me anything that suggests that Hans is a person who puts an unusual amount of faith in promises (especially given how he initially reacts to Melissa, even though he knows that she's made a promisee). Could be interesting, but just wasn't there.**

I stood there a while longer, words a logjam in my throat. Then I turned, and stumbled my way back down to the car, drove my blurry-eyed way back to town.

**So... what was it that the narrator wanted to say? Or did he have some sudden realization that you're not going to fucking tell me about?**

It was in the newspaper, of course, the fertiliser delivery guy heard Sally dog howling, found Hans' body leaning up against the vine trellis next to the shotgun. I don't know who owns the property now, but they ploughed all the vines into the soil and now it is all bright green grass as far as the eye can see; grazed by incurious cows that make no promises and feel no regrets.