

THE AUSTRALIAN

Printed February 12, 2009 03:10pm AEDT

Clubland

July 05, 2008

Article from: [The Australian](#)

What happens when a night of alcohol and violence spills over into the daytime world of office workers? Kate Legge delves into the events that led to a triple shooting and the murder of Brendan Keilar in Melbourne last year.



Sarah Durrell's husband roused her at 6am on Monday, June 18, last year with a mug of coffee because she's a slow starter. She showered, dressed in a black suit and drove "bleary-eyed" along the beachfront through bayside suburbs into Melbourne's CBD for an early meeting.

In the north of the city, John Hughes boarded a tram bound for the multi-storeyed concrete hive, gazing out at commuters, their faces as glum as he felt on an overcast day the wrong side of the weekend.

Wise to budget-saving tricks, Dutch tourist Paul de Waard spent the night at Southern Cross rail terminal, waking at 7am to freshen up before shouldering his backpack and heading towards the city's heart in search of a McDonald's to fill up on coffee.

After nabbing a car space in Alexandra Avenue, between the Botanical Gardens and the banks of the Yarra River, solicitor Brendan Keilar, 43, set out west towards Norton Gledhill, the legal firm where he handled commercial property cases. Dressed in a red fleece jacket over khaki shorts, his routine allowed for changing into a clean business shirt and suit once he arrived on the 23rd floor of 459 Collins Street.

Eighteen-year-old clerk Natalie Galluce caught a lift into town with her father, Carl Galluce, who, since losing his oldest daughter to meningococcal, took no chances shepherding her sibling to the office where she worked, processing insurance claims on the corner of William Street and Flinders Lane.

The wave of early birds sweeping towards the intersection with briefcases, homemade sandwiches, appointment books and lingering memories of the weekend was about to collide with a netherworld crawling forth after a night of partying in 24-hour licensed premises. This clash of civilisations would kill Keilar and wound de Waard as they went to help Kaera Douglas, a woman unable to wean herself from a dangerous man who spun out of control in the middle of a city street on a Monday morning. The tragedy awoke Melbourne to a subculture of alcohol and drug-fuelled violence that has spiked assaults during weekend revelry. One stark incident has a way of illuminating dark crevices in the landscape.

NIGHT AND DAY USED TO BE different as. People partied but you didn't see long queues snaking outside clubs at 6am. An average 55,000 patrons pass through Melbourne's Crown Casino precinct every Friday and Saturday night – almost as many as a Saturday football crowd at the MCG. Midnight to dawn is no longer the graveyard shift. Downtime is obsolete. A casualised workforce, 24-hour liquor licensing, ice, speed, ecstasy and the club scene are just some of the trends scrambling circadian rhythms.

Former Victorian premier John Cain, whose Labor cabinet deregulated liquor licensing 20 years ago, says: "I guess we never contemplated this culture when the laws were amended." Chief architect of the reforms, Professor John Nieuwenhuysen, winces at the unintended consequences but believes the increase in the number of licences from 3200 to 17,000 has spearheaded Melbourne's quest for a European-style sophistication with its graffiti-covered laneways and vibrant mix of commercial, residential and creative activities.

No one wants a wowsery-style crackdown so the Brumby Government last month announced a five-year alcohol action plan. Most controversial is the 2am lockout curbing traffic from bar to club in and around 150 high-risk premises. Of particular concern is the King Street strip, where the tide of white-collar innocence crashed into wretchedness just after 8am on Monday, June 18, 2007.

ON THE SUNDAY NIGHT before the mayhem, cleaners, clerks, lawyers and finance brokers slumbered in their beds while a disparate group of dancers and waitresses finished their shift at the Spearmint Rhino "gentlemen's club" and propped at the bar. The King Street entrance to this venue is stuccoed with Las Vegas-style glitz that palls by daybreak just like Christmas tinsel turns tacky out of season. While this club shares a postcode with the temples of capitalism, they are parallel universes. One skips all day to the tick-tock of conference calls, meetings, emails and laptops. The other grinds through the night to the beat of lap dancers, music, alcohol and sometimes drugs and sex.

Like a grotesque version of A Midsummer Night's Dream, the menagerie of bottom-feeders drinking shots through the night and disappearing into the toilets unleashed mayhem in the bitumen and glass forest when the sun rose. The

dancers have stage names – Jazz, Savannah, Brianna. For some it's a second or third job; others come from abroad, here on working holidays. Jazz is Marie Gamard's nom de plume. A backpacker who'd been working at Spearmint Rhino for six months, she calls herself an entertainer.

Performing on the podium in the VIP room around midnight that Sunday, Gamard noticed patron Christopher Hudson, or "Huddo", in his black adidas top, white stripes down the length of his arms, the bogan's tuxedo. He was drinking and talking with Carly Rheinberger, who'd knocked off after a two-hour stint strutting around as "Brianna". She'd been a dancer at the club for a year and a half.

In the VIP club, clients must spend a minimum of \$250. Hudson, 29, was a temporary member, a privilege extended by purchasing a bottle of liquor. The theme for Sunday was disco night. Autumn Daly-Holt, who used the name Savannah, had given one private show and one stage performance that evening before she joined off-duty club manager Steve Kyriacou at the bar. His girlfriend had left early because her job in a logistics firm started at 6am.

Daly-Holt had been working at the club for six months, dancing Wednesday, Thursday and Friday from 6pm to 4am. She'd graduated from McKinnon Secondary College, one of the state's best public high schools, growing up in rural Western Australia where her father started a '70s-style alternative school, light on discipline, big on self-expression.

The dancers were told no drugs during their shifts but they could drink alcohol in moderation. Once they'd clocked off and changed into civilian clothes they were supposed to leave the premises.

Asked by police to judge the level of intoxication of the others there that night on a sliding scale of one to 10, Gamard reckoned Kyriacou was an eight, while Daly-Holt and another waitress, Cassie Hudson, were into the teens. "Both of them were the drunkest I have ever seen anybody in Australia," she recalled.

Some time in the early hours of Monday morning, a senior staff member asked Rheinberger to go home, which annoyed her because Daly-Holt was drinking freely with Kyriacou. Rheinberger wanted to stay and hang with Huddo, and felt she was the victim of double standards.

There was some argy-bargy over this, with Huddo trying to intervene on Rheinberger's behalf, so that resentments had begun simmering already when the motley troupe gathered their things about 4.30am and shifted to Bar Code, a neighbouring dive that occupies the same building as Spearmint Rhino.

When Rheinberger got there, she couldn't see Huddo so she rang him on his mobile. He was in the toilets. She and Gamard banged on the doors and found him in one for the disabled, appearing "a little agitated and distant". Rheinberger told police she asked if he was using drugs because she wanted some too, but he denied it. Half a long drinking straw floated in the pan. Huddo told her that he was "off the drugs" as he was back in training, trying to get fit again.

Everyone had been imbibing rocket fuel of one sort or another. Cassie Hudson's police statement documents the pattern of consumption. Despite being on antidepressants she'd downed three-quarters of a bottle of wine before arriving at Spearmint Rhino around 10.30pm, where she tossed back champagne shots. "I was blind drunk," she says. Not surprisingly, she vomited. She caught a cab home to Carlton, then, realising she'd lost her necklace, came back at 4.30am. At Bar Code she ordered Fresh Pussies, cocktails of schnapps, vodka and cranberry juice. She saw Huddo disappear into the toilets with Kyriacou, who had joined the crew at Bar Code. "We knocked and kicked at the door and nobody answered. When they came out, they both looked happy. I said, 'Excuse me, where is the love?'"

Happy one minute, crazed the next, Huddo paraded membership of the Hells Angels as a conversation starter. The Queenslander had no job, drove a black Mercedes convertible, boasted more than 60 prior convictions and was prone to violence, breaking doors or noses if someone forgot to leave a door key out for him.

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AS A RAT CRAWLS up from the sewer to pillage restaurant bins late at night, there's a toxic underworld that thrives in certain licensed venues, where patrons can't remember what they argued over or why they told someone to "f.k off", where disinhibition and ugliness grow like fungus on rotten food. Hundreds of pages of police interviews with the patrons who congregated at Bar Code provide a peephole into this subterranean world, the flesh on the statistical bones linking intoxication with random atrocities and acts of aggression.

"Alcohol, alcohol, alcohol," says Professor Jon Currie, director of Addictive Medicine and Mental Health at St Vincent's Hospital, when I ask him whether the rise in amphetamines, ice and steroids has given unruly behaviour a violent edge. Currie heads the Victorian advisory council that was set up late last year to address alcohol and drug-related injury. He points to the figures: between April and December 2007, alcohol made up 40 per cent of drug-related events requiring ambulance attendance in Melbourne, up a staggering 30 per cent from 2006; hospital admissions caused by alcohol involving Victorians aged 15 to 24 are also up substantially.

"Intoxication and violence go hand in hand," says Currie. "Intoxicated people make bad decisions. Their reflexes and judgment are impaired. If you are still looking for an environment to be with friends at 3am, 4am or 5am, you're often searching for trouble."

Currie might as well be describing events in Bar Code that Monday morning as the mood grew foul. Daly-Holt had begun stripping for Kyriacou in a seamy seduction, at one stage biting his tongue until he bled. This sideshow was the loose thread that led to the night's unravelling, self-control undone by alcohol, testosterone, lust. Even in dens of iniquity, there are dos and don'ts and Daly-Holt's friskiness stirred jealousy and muttering among women dishevelled by grog.

When Daly-Holt bared her breasts, Gamard tried to halt the exhibition but Kyriacou brushed her aside. Rheinberger told Huddo: "Autumn shouldn't be flirting with Steve when he has a girlfriend." Huddo agreed with her and explained he had a sister and that he really "wouldn't want her behaving in that manner either". Daly-Holt remembers being upset when the pair ticked her off.

The altercation overshadowed news from outside that a tow operator was preparing to hook up Rheinberger's car as the city readied itself for morning peak hour, when King Street becomes a clearway. Huddo offered to go out and talk the truckie round but he was too late, the car had gone.

Inside the bar, Daly-Holt removed her G-string to dance naked for Kyriacou. Egged on by Rheinberger's disapproval, Huddo strode over and pulled the dancer by the hair in an eerie prelude to what lay ahead. The caveman antics suggest sexual tensions in a company with scant humanity, intelligence or reason – behaviour bordering on barbaric.

Around the corner in the Flinders Lane block of Punt Hill apartments, 26-year-old Kaera Douglas, one of the drama's main characters, was still sound asleep. She'd told Daly-Holt on Friday she was going to a city hotel to see a guy she'd been having sex with on and off for about three months.

Douglas worked part-time as a travel consultant for Flight Centre, dancing in clubs and doing modelling promotions to earn extra cash. She'd gone to bed on Sunday morning after spending all Saturday night clubbing with a girlfriend, and had dozed through until 6am on Monday when Huddo sent a text message telling her to come down to Bar Code. Her initial instinct was to stay put. Then she noticed her car keys and money were missing.

She'd been trying to detach herself from Huddo, but he would ring and wear her down. He'd broken her nose on two previous occasions, scaring her so much that she once refused a ride to her brother's place because she didn't want him knowing where her family lived. She says she wanted to be "good" – less drinking, more gym visits – yet she couldn't end this unhealthiest of relationships. Why she stayed with him beggars belief.

Douglas says when Huddo contacted her that Monday morning he was "blind drunk" but she wanted her keys back. "I couldn't leave my car there because it would have been smashed to pieces ... I just know what sort of person he is" – a violent man bent on satisfying his cravings.

Moments before Douglas arrived at Bar Code, Rheinberger was sitting with Huddo on the couch. "When he got off the phone he started telling me something and then he crunched his phone in his hand and broke it to pieces before throwing it across the floor," said Rheinberger. She noticed Douglas entering: "I said hello to her and she gave me a look, a pissed-off look."

Douglas asked Huddo for her keys and he stormed off. "I'd been in bed all night, I'd just woken up to this disgusting zoo of people, just repulsive," she recalled – and she's no stranger to the animals on show, or the cage where they lounged.

Daly-Holt told police she'd had "some kind of argument" with Huddo and vaguely recalled leaving the premises and sitting somewhere. "I remember being approached by him and not wanting him near me," she said, fearful since he'd grabbed her hair. She brushed him away "because he was invading my space" and the next thing she felt was sharp pain.

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OUTSIDE, the early-morning symphony was in swing. Banking operations manager Sarah Durrell clocked her car in at Crown Casino's parking station at 8am. The 45-year-old mother of three crossed the bridge over the Yarra and walked up King Street as Huddo emerged into the daylight carrying the topless Daly-Holt. Durrell saw him dump the girl on the footpath but she kept walking, one eye on what was happening, "not really knowing what I should or could do to help". Huddo began to kick the dancer in the face. Now running late for her breakfast meeting, the sight of his face "white with rage" made Durrell avoid eye contact, keeping to herself.

Every witness to this drama made a split-second decision determining their involvement. The "what ifs" that chase sanity into the landscape of madness haunt some of them still.

Shannon Molloy was driving to her office in Custom House Lane when she pulled up at the lights on the corner of King Street and Flinders Lane. "I saw him draw his foot back and kick through with what looked like absolute force straight into the girl's face ... her whole head and upper body went flying back onto the concrete." Molloy dialled triple-o on her mobile. "I was horrified by what I had seen and I was petrified for the girl." The lights turned green and Molloy headed for a car park as she fired details of what was unfolding to an emergency operator. Durrell walked past Molloy weighing up her response to a man she thought was "one angry person".

A security camera outside Bar Code recorded the assault. Homicide detective Matthew Garbutt says it captured the most violent, vicious attack he's seen since joining the force 15 years ago. Daly-Holt suffered a broken nose, fractured eye sockets, chipped teeth and bruises to her skull and face.

Inside Bar Code, brain synapses were so impaired that some patrons went on drinking as if Huddo had crunched a paper cup rather than Daly-Holt's cranial structure. Cassie Hudson learnt an ambulance was collecting her co-worker but "it went in one ear and straight out the other".

No bouncers stood guard at the doors of Bar Code. Huddo walked out and up to the corner of King Street and Flinders Lane with Kaera Douglas following him. He grabbed her by the arm, revealing the 40-calibre handgun down the front of his pants. "He goes, 'Walk with me' and that's when it started," she said. "It was horrid, it was psychotic ... I couldn't believe it was happening ... he's bigger, stronger, faster than me ... he was completely out of his mind, insane, just completely gone ... I was trying to calm him down, saying, 'You don't have to do this, and he's like, 'No, walk with me. You and me we're going for a little walk', and then I wasn't walking and he goes, 'Have you forgotten how to walk? I'll show you how, you stop and watch me. Now this is how we walk, one foot in front of the other ... now you try it.'"

That's how they stumbled down Flinders Lane towards William Street.

On the corner of the intersection is Swann House, an elegant, 10-storey tower striking for its old-world charm of brass door fittings, dark wooden panelling and a carpeted foyer that houses literary enterprises such as Text Publishing and crikey.com.au.

Huddo shoved Douglas inside the Flinders Lane entrance, spilling her bag as he forced her down a set of stairs to the car park, pinning her against the wall. Emmanuel Borg, the janitor, was junking armfuls of rubbish into a skip parked in William Street when he heard screaming and went to investigate.

All he remembers as he rounded the corner of the stairwell is Christopher Hudson's weapon pointed between his eyes. He yelled "gun" as he swivelled into his co-worker, who ran left into a storeroom, scaling a one-and-a-half-metre cabinet that he couldn't have climbed without adrenalin pulsing through his veins. Borg flew across the car park and out into William Street. Hudson chased after Borg, giving Douglas a chance to grope her way back upstairs to Flinders Lane, where she ran to a taxi waiting at the lights. She tried to open the back door, then the front door, but they were locked.

Nearby at the Southern Cross rail station, backpacker Paul de Waard had brushed his teeth, eaten breakfast and, wearing a green hoodie, was walking up Flinders Lane towards William Street looking for the nearest McDonald's where he could read a newspaper and drink multiple refills of coffee for free.

Brendan Keilar was walking west towards the crossroads. He might have been thinking through the business

appointments he'd lined up, or maybe his thoughts were entertaining improvements to the Point Lonsdale weekend he'd just bought with his wife, Alice, for holidays with their young children.

John Hughes was on the tram gliding uneventfully down the Williams Street hill. "It was a pretty dull Monday morning. Everyone was on their way to work, no one seemed particularly keen to get there, but I remember later the contrast between this mundane feeling as we headed into the eye of a scene that few of us would ever imagine witnessing."

Once Huddo realised Borg had got away, he raced back upstairs and into Flinders Lane where Douglas was wrestling with the taxi's door. He grabbed her by the hair.

Borg watched from the foyer of 15 William Street, where he'd run for sanctuary because he knew Huddo was armed. Douglas was petrified for the same reason. No one else nearby had a clue the thug in the adidas top manhandling the girl with the long hair had a weapon, and wouldn't hesitate to use it.

De Waard crossed William Street certain the man was drunk, although he couldn't smell alcohol fumes. "The thing that stood out about Hudson most was that he had a mad look in his eyes," the Dutchman recalls. "I remember the look in her eyes and she was totally frightened. Also, her voice sounded scared. She was saying, 'Help, help.' I thought about the recent commercials in Australia about violence against women. I felt that I had to stop him. Then I looked around to see if there were more people to help me."

De Waard thinks Keilar was walking with him in the same direction, but the father of three, grey streaks in his thinning hair, was crossing from the opposite side when he stopped halfway across William Street. De Waard felt Keilar behind him lending support. "As we walked towards them, I said, 'What are you doing, mate? Let her go.' I can't remember if Brendan said anything. It all happened so quickly. I was just trying to settle (the attacker) down by talking to him. Brendan did not physically intervene either – he was behind me."

Hughes watched the disturbance escalate from the stationary tram. He struggled with whether to jump off and assist. "I was actually looking around me to see if anyone else was helping. I could see Brendan walk past. He stopped and stood for a while, watching, like all of us, hoping it would stop by itself. When it didn't, he started to walk back towards them. I remember thinking, 'I hope this guy's OK.'"

Keilar typified the commuter crowd, whereas Huddo's aggression telegraphed an alien intruder. The lawyer appeared smaller, older, greyer than the menacing Hudson. Hughes thinks Keilar's hands were by his side. Others describe them as raised up in a questioning gesture. Borg thinks Keilar was about halfway across William Street, only turning around to face Hudson when the first shot was fired.

The precise chronology of who was hit first – Keilar, de Waard or Douglas – eludes police. Witness statements tell what happened from every imaginable angle, accuracy distorted by shades of fear, recollections blurred by shock and panic. Hughes describes Keilar as a man reluctantly, tentatively, reeled in to the fray: "Everything about his body language was non-threatening. The reaction from Hudson was an extraordinary, devastating, violent response to the mildest of interventions."

Passengers on the tram crouched on the floor as the gunfire sounded. Natalie Galluce hid behind a pillar in front of her workplace diagonally opposite Swann House. She was on the phone to her mother. "I heard five or six shots ... I saw the orange flame come from the gun. I screamed and dropped my phone and bags." Her mother, who'd already lost a daughter, was hysterical when she rang her husband, Carl. He sprinted from his Bourke Street office, praying as he ran, his eyes skyward, pleading for Natalie's life.

Donna McGowan was on the first floor overlooking the intersection. She ran downstairs and knelt beside de Waard, holding his hand, telling him how brave he'd been. "I was losing blood fast. "I saw the other guy (Keilar) gasping for breath. I watched him die."

Emergency training kicked in for nurse Coralann Walker, who leapt out of her car to assist Keilar. "His pulse was very weak. I tried to reassure him that he was going to be OK and stroked his hair." She performed 20 cardiac compressions before she was relieved by paramedics who'd converged on the scene, sirens blaring; but they were unable to save him.

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CHRISTOPHER HUDSON has pleaded guilty to charges of murdering Brendan Keilar, attempting to murder Paul de Waard and Kaera Douglas, and intentionally causing serious injury to Daly-Holt, and awaits sentencing. He was a conflagration in the making, his personal history littered with brawls and weapons, drug-taking, drinking and wanton aggression, notching up 62 offences in Queensland and NSW since 2001. Six days before the Melbourne rampage he'd fired shots into the air as he sped across the Bolte Bridge with AFL footballer Alan Didak a passenger in his Mercedes. They'd met at Spearmint Rhino after Didak had gone on a seven-hour post-game drinking binge ending at 4am when the Collingwood forward accepted Huddo's lift home via the Hells Angels clubhouse at Campbellfield.

But there's more to this singular tragedy than the smoking fuse of a psychotic personality. The Bar Code nightclub where Hudson exploded had attracted notoriety, too. The venue migrated to King Street in 2004 after Crown Casino bought the business out of a tenancy deal because the gaming giant didn't like its modus operandi. Crown paid about \$5 million to get rid of Bar Code and three other nightclubs from its Southbank location, believing they bled trouble.

Crown is hypersensitive to security. For years, its management has urged the State Government to increase uniformed policing within the Southbank precinct at night, even offering free accommodation for a visible mobile unit to discourage a criminal element drawn like moths to the neon glow.

Superintendent Stephen Leane heads the strategic response to public disorder in and around high-risk licensed premises. In July last year, he thought he'd never win the war as assaults, property damage and theft around the city spiked at 33 offences every weekend. Twelve months later, the average has fallen nearer 30. "We've taken the edge off it but we've got a long way to go," he says.

New late-night liquor licences have been frozen; a state taskforce is targeting hot-spots to enforce compliance with existing regulations; the 2am lockout pilot began on June 1 with nine weeks to run; police have the power to ban troublemakers from entertainment precincts for 24 hours; and campaigns against binge-drinking are being rolled out.

Leane says police and government are struggling with a phenomenon he attributes to a fistful of trends from increases in disposable income to heightened intoxication from drugs and alcohol and the sheer numbers flocking to all-night venues.

City apartment dweller Tim Wilson, a director at the Institute of Public Affairs, takes the bad with the good but worries at increasing signs of disorder. "It's been getting noticeably worse for the past year. After about 9pm the streets become a law unto themselves. Not just drunks, but people who are out very, very late with no particular purpose."

Paul Mullett, spokesman for the state's police association, says nothing works so well as a uniformed presence on the street. He doubts the lockout will solve a problem aggravated by increased drug use, and advocates the return of a stand-alone unit to monitor licensed premises.

British chief constable Peter Neyroud, who visited Melbourne the week young Harry Potter actor Robert Knox was stabbed to death outside a London bar, confirms that days are as busy as nights in big cities. When he started out decades ago, the 6am shift was a sleepy time for doing paperwork. "Now coppers are straight out the door dealing with drunks coming out of clubs," he said.

Borrowing a slogan from the gun lobby, liquor industry advocates insist that alcohol doesn't kill, deranged individuals do. Peter Iwaniuk, director of Entertainment Management Services, says: "It's a cheap shot to blame licensed premises for the actions of Christopher Hudson." He argues the 2am lockout "would have had no bearing whatsoever on the tragic consequences of his actions".

But if Hudson and his crowd had been refused entry to another licensed club that Monday morning, Brendan Keilar might have lived.

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AS POLICE began containing the crime scene, news of the shooting fanned across the city. Staff from Norton Gledhill were concerned when their senior partner failed to show up for his appointments. They rang the police station to report his absence. Some time after midday, a member of the firm accompanied Detective Daniel Ryan to the Hawthorn home of Keilar's wife, Alice Edwards.

Perhaps she hadn't been listening to radio or television coverage, or if she'd heard the news maybe she didn't think the unimaginable, because she didn't seem to have any forewarning that the victim might be her husband, her kindred spirit. Together since university, they'd married in Scots' Church up the Paris end of Collins Street, where the European ideal of restaurants and bars that Melbourne celebrates is a world away from the King Street scourge at the other end of town.

A pillar of kindergarten and community, Edwards' friends doubt she's ever been to a nightclub. She has endured her grief privately. Her brother-in-law, Paul Firth, collected her husband's car from Alexandra Avenue that night. Another family member identified the body. "We'll never get over the loss," Firth says.

Other witnesses nurse scars. Galluce sleeps with her light on. She hasn't been able to resume work and still undergoes counselling for the trauma.

Hughes says the events of June 18, 2007, are never far from his mind. "I don't ever go by that corner without thinking about it," he says. "Before this incident, I'd never felt scared or threatened going about my business. I try to rationalise it as an extremely rare event, an isolated incident, but I know now that there are people around who are armed and dangerous ... it's a strange thing to fear that going about your life."

One of the last images of Brendan Keilar flickers brightly in Hughes' memory. He can still see the solicitor stopping, turning around, borne by a strong sense of obligation, his gentle bearing, the concern on his face, his daily journey interrupted by a monster he could not have fathomed in the minute before he was felled. Hughes has thought of contacting Keilar's wife to pass on his vivid glimpse of her husband, but he hasn't, holding on to the relic of a day she will carry with her forever.

Staff writer Kate Legge's previous story was "Funerals to die for" (May 10-11), about unusual send-offs.

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