

TWISTED TALES



Annette de Jonge

Acknowledgments.

I wish to dedicate this e-book to my editor and good friend Pat, without whose belief in me and constant encouragement this book would never have been published.

Thank you, Pat.

Annette de Jonge

Introduction.

Many of the stories contained in this book began as exercises created in writing classes I attended. Each completed story was submitted, accepted and broadcast over two community radio stations. One radio station was in Brisbane and the other in Rockhampton at their interestingly named N.A.G. Radio Station. My understanding is that N.A.G is the first initial of each of the owners of the radio station.

Our small writing group met once a week and we all took turns in hosting at our respective homes. There were only ever eight of us because that is all the chairs that would fit around the dining tables.

At each gathering, a casual word for our exercise was selected from a dictionary and a random sentence taken from a book. A time limit, usually of fifteen minutes was chosen to complete our project. Our story had to have the necessary requirements of a story and at times ending we read out loud what we had created.

It was amazing to learn how the creative minds there had all started with the one word and sentence yet wrote something completely different for their story.

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Amma Alcheringa.



The original image and idea for this story was taken from a picture in some long-forgotten magazine read several years ago. The picture was uniquely Australian and showed the rocky interior of an aboriginal cave with ochre, white and black hand paintings on the sloping ceiling. Long, angular rocks juttied up from the sandy floor of the cave. There were no signs of life, or any kind of remains within the cave, hence the word 'sterile' used in the story.

It was mysterious; an image frozen in time. Who made those markings, and why? Were they of symbolic importance? If so, were they still relevant? It offered a beckoning, a landscape to explore. There were no captions, or story with the picture yet it commanded one. This image of that cave was the beginning of the idea for the story.

The title 'Amma Alcheringa' is a from a Northern Territory aboriginal tribe dialect that means men's cave. The plot idea formulated for the story from the image was to combine a mixture of cultures and gender issues. The perceived timelessness and nebulosness of the Aboriginal Dreamtime combined with the supernatural seemed to be an interesting way to evolve this storyline meant to portray its 'Australianness' intermingling with other levels of reality. The subject matter of the cave paintings is meant to depict a surreal situation that gets more surreal the further Kelly enters the cave.

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Kelly tilted the water bottle to her lips and sighed as the fluid ran down her parched throat. The heat outside the cave was intense and perspiration saturated her clothes and trickled down her body.

She grinned as she looked inside. Yes! I made it. She laughed and thrust her fist into the air. Amma Alcheringa, the Aboriginal men's initiation cave from the Dreamtime. I'm really inside.

Flicking her halogen torch on Kelly swung its strong beam into the cave. Man-sized pinnacles of rock rose like sentinels from the red sandy soil, throwing grotesque shadows into the darkness.

She flashed the light onto the floor. Strange. There aren't any animal signs, she thought. She sniffed the air. No bat smells either. It feels ... sterile.

Kelly guided the torch beam over the domed ceiling and discovered the hand paintings patterned there. Well, some unknown artist had been here and daubed his ochre, black and white colours onto the rocky canvas, she thought.

The paintings followed the roofline, ending at a narrow opening at the back of the cave. Kelly moved toward it. Shining her torch through the gap Kelly could see a round passageway. A faint current of air touched her face and with it a feeling of foreboding.

“Turn back, “a voice hissed inside Kelly’s head. “Enter and be lost forever.”

Kelly froze, hardly breathing. What was that?

The voice repeated “Enter and be lost forever.”

Goose bumps popped up on Kelly’s arms. Her gaze slid around trying to locate the speaker. She whispered into the void. “But I’ve only come to see the cave. I’m not going to take anything.”

“Women are forbidden. Powerful men’s magic is here. If you enter, you never leave.”

Kelly wavered, undecided. She thought of her struggle to get here. Of battling to keep her four-wheel drive on the bumpy track through the desolate rocky country to this cave. A cave few white people knew about - and no aboriginal would enter.

She thought about Steve Parker, her boss. The derogatory remarks he made a week ago when she told him about the cave and asked for funding so she could lead a group of other archaeologists to it. Even when she showed him the map he had laughed in her face.

“An attractive woman like you should just find some male to settle down with and raise kids as you are biologically programmed to do” he had told her. “Leave the field work to the men”. Chuckling, he turned and walked away leaving a furious, red-faced Kelly staring after him.

In her mind’s eye she was a child again in the family’s small fibro home at Liverpool. Mum cooking, washing, mending, always trying to please. No life of her own outside the home or wishes of her family; dad calling to her from the lounge-room. “Jeanie,” he would call and Mum would stop whatever she was doing, rush into the room and change the television channel or do whatever else dad was too lazy to get off the old brown velvet lounge and do for himself.

Kelly remembered her father’s reaction when she said she had won a scholarship to Uni and was moving to Darwin. Her family’s look of disbelief when she said she didn’t want to marry, stay home and raise kids. She wanted a career. To do something with her life, she told them, but she could see by their looks that no-one understood. “Your room will always be here for you when you get this foolishness out of your system” was all her father said – and that was that. They expected her to fail.

Steve Parker reminds me of dad, Kelly thought but despite their low opinions of me I have made it on my own. There was no going back now.

Probing the darkness with the torchlight and seeing nothing, Kelly called defiantly into the darkness. “I’m here now and I’m going to be the first woman to enter Amma Alcheringa.”

Kelly held her breath and waited. Only a current of air registered on her awareness. But to make sure I do come back I’ll use my precautions, she thought.

Unclipping a fishing spool from her belt Kelly carefully wound the loose end several times around one of the large rock sentinels. She tugged the line to test its firmness and, satisfied, Kelly entered the tunnel.

The smooth round walls were about two metres high and flowed out of sight. This must be an old lava tunnel, guessed Kelly. She swung her torch toward the wall and the beam illuminated the drawings there. Kelly stared in astonishment. Wow, I've never seen Aboriginal art like this. They’re more like hieroglyphics.

Kelly moved along slowly, studying each drawing. Men were depicted hunting large animals. She recognised emus and kangaroos but blinked in surprise at wombats as big as cows. At the next drawing Kelly gasped and moved her torch closer to get a better look. It was of a mammoth and next to it was a sabre-toothed tiger. Where would the aborigines have seen these animals, she wondered?

“Look, see here,” she called excitedly. “Here’s a picture of a centaur.” Then she froze. She had spoken to the person she felt standing next to her.

Galvanised, Kelly turned and flashed her torch up and down the tunnel. It was empty. She shone the torch onto the floor but the only imprints were her own in the soft red sand. Groping for her lifeline she tugged on it. It held firm so, summoning her courage, she moved on.

Pictures were drawn all along the wall and Kelly concentrated on them. I recognize the figures from the Aboriginal Dreamtime, but these are Maya drawings. Where did they come from?

She laughed excitedly; her nervousness forgotten. This is fabulous! When I bring the archaeologists and the scientist back here, they’re going to have a wonderful time working this out. I’m going to be remembered as the woman who changed what we know of early Australia.

Kelly stopped and had a drink from her water bottle. Slipping the bottle back onto her belt she shone the torch on her watch and stared in amazement. Hey, I’ve been walking for two hours but it only seems like ten minutes. This tunnel must go on forever.

The feeling she was being watched intensified the further Kelly moved into the tunnel and she kept flashing the torchlight along the passageway to see who was there. Without warning the tunnel opened into a huge chamber. Kelly started in amazement. Where did this come from? It had to have come out of thin air.

Kelly paused, reluctant to go inside. I’m not so sure this was a good idea after all, she thought. She flashed the torch into the cave. It’s creepy. Anything could be in there waiting to grab me. An oppressive feeling of resentment surrounded her and now she could feel many hostile eyes watching. Her mouth had gone dry and she licked her lips, undecided on what to do.

A strange low wail started in her head and spread out, growing, filling the huge cave the moans of didgeridoos and the sounds of bones being struck together. “Amma Alcheringa, Amma Alcheringa,” the didgeridoos kept repeating like a mantra.

Kelly clamped her hands over her ears trying to shut out the noise. Something flew silently at her, striking the torch out of her hand and it broke as it hit the floor throwing the cave into total darkness. The didgeridoos stopped suddenly but the bones tapped furiously in time with Kelly’s heartbeat. She screamed and her voice echoed around the cave.

As Kelly backed away, groping for the tunnel, her hand brushed against the reel on her belt. Thank God! I can get out of here.

Unseen forces filled the tunnel and Kelly's nerves snapped. She screamed into the darkness “Let me go! I promise I’ll never tell anyone about the cave. I don’t want to die.”

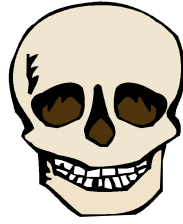
“I don’t want to die ...” Her voice reverberated, trailing away.

Skin scraped off Kelly’s upper arm and left pieces of her flesh on the rock wall as she pressed against it. Her nails were torn and her fingers raw from the fishing line but she only registered it feeding through her fingers as she edged toward safety.

Kelly’s foot struck something in the sand and it broke her concentration. Whatever it was her lifeline was twisted around it. Easing on hand down Kelly ran her fingers over it. It’s a torch! How long has it been here? It wasn’t here before. She flicked the switch on and the beam shone into the darkness. Kelly screwed her face up while her eyes adjusted to the light.

“No! Oh, no! It can’t be. The string should have led me back to the cave opening: Not ... not ...” She felt her mind slip as uncontrolled terror overwhelmed her.

“No, oh, no ...” Her high-pitched scream echoed, mocking her. She was back in the huge cave with the sinister forces. The didgeridoos started softly resounding “Amma Alcheringa, Amma Alcheringa.”



Craters.



This short story was an exercise in our writing group. I was given the word ‘craters’ and the first line “He didn’t look back as he boarded the ship and I never saw him again”. I had to complete the rest.

I wanted the story to portray how a bond of pure love can be forged between two men. The part with the three Japanese soldiers gave a different slant to the story and was inspired by the three thieves I read about in Chaucer’s ‘Canterbury Tales’.

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Craters was billeted in the bed next to mine at the barracks. Chalk and cheese the other soldiers used to call us, and I guess we were, but we hit it off from the start and became good mates.

Small, dark haired and wiry was Craters. Always on the go, his sharp blue eyes never missing a trick, or his brain an opportunity. Street smart, from the slums of Sydney, was Craters.

Next to him I was a muscly lump of lard. A red headed, freckled, sheep shearer as green as grass until the Army conscripted me to fight for my country. As mates, we shared, did everything together and he became closer to me than a brother.

Basic training was a breeze. I was fit and had grown up with guns. Craters was a natural crack shot and when our unit was shipped to New Guinea, the two of us went on regular jungle patrol together.

Craters ‘doctored’ his bullets so they exploded on impact, blowing a hole like a crater in whatever they hit. Said he’d read about it in some book when he was a kid. Said it gave him an edge. Anyhow, that was how he came to be called ‘Craters.’ His Army papers had him as Stephen David Martins, but everyone called him Craters, including me.

On patrol, I’d pull my khaki hat low to cover my ginger hair and we’d smear mud over our skin to camouflage ourselves. We carried light packs of rations and wet weather gear on our backs. Metal water bottles, grenades and extra rounds were on our webbing waist belts. Our rifles were always ready in our hands and after nearly five years together we had devised a system of body language to communicate in the jungle.

This day, Craters was leading, treading carefully on what was more like a slim parting of the undergrowth than a track. The weather was steamy and the place crawled with leeches and insects. It felt like hell on Earth and I tried not to think about snipers and a bullet with my name on it.

A large insect dropped from out of the canopy and onto my neck. I went to flick it off but it moved too quickly and crawled inside my battle greens. Before it had a chance to bit me, I grabbed it, crushing it between my index finger and thumb, but in death it retaliated, its revolting, pungent odour stinging my nostrils. Nauseated, I quickly wiped its soggy, stinking remains away from my face, off my fingers and down the side of my pants. God, I hate the jungle.

Suddenly Crates stopped. He'd heard something. We moved cautiously forward. Ahead, in a wider part of the track, under a banyan tree, three Japanese soldiers squatted, talking intently around a small shoebox sized container one of them was holding. We slid into the undergrowth and watched through the leaves.

Grinning, I glanced at Craters and gestured with the tip of my gun. Their rifles were propped against a tree and unarmed, they were sitting ducks. Craters moved his head a fraction. No, he signalled; let's see what they are doing.

The Japanese holding the box looked about forty. He wore wire-framed glasses and could have been an office worker, or a schoolteacher in civvie street. The second one seemed a few years younger and was the biggest. I guessed he'd been a farmer, or manual worker of some sort. The third looked and acted like a student. Small, with glasses, about twenty, he deferred to the other two.

Something rolled out of the opened box and the farmer picked it up, and bit into it. He held it and said something and they all started jabbering excitedly. We craned to see what he was holding. Craters' eyes lit up and he flashed me a triumphant smile. The box was full to the brim with gold!

A bird nearby emitted a loud mournful cry scaring the hell out of me. The three men jumped up, grabbed their rifles and pointed them in all directions into the thick undergrowth. They didn't see us.

Relaxing, the farmer laughed and slapped the teacher on the shoulder before turning and saying something to the student. Nodding, the student moved along the jungle track away from us. I think he was to check that the coast was clear.

The farmer gestured toward the track the student had gone on, then, whispering to the teacher, pointed to the box. The teacher licked his lips before slowly nodding. It looked to me like the two older men had made a deal about the gold, cutting the student out.

Craters nudged me and nodded and I shifted my gaze to where he had zeroed in. The student was hiding in the undergrowth, watching his comrades.

The two men were silent now, both looking at the gold. The farmer slid his bayonet out of its sheath and hid it under his outstretched leg. My eyes swivelled back to the student to watch his reaction, but he'd disappeared.

Birds screeched their noisy protest and flew from the trees as a shot exploded into the silence, followed by another. The first bullet hit the farmer in the throat. The second bullet took the teacher in the chest. They collapsed; blood oozing down their sweat soaked uniforms.

Cautiously, the student entered the clearing, his gun ready. He edged toward the farmer and watched, waiting for a movement from him. When there was none he leaned over and spat in his face. Then he kicked him and, turning to the teacher's body kicked it too. Apparently satisfied he dragged them out of sight behind the banyan tree.

The student leaned over to grab the gold when Craters took aim, fired once, his dum dum bullet shattering the student's skull like a burst watermelon and sending the birds into frenzy. I raced over and threw the student's body behind the banyan tree, grabbed the box and raced back to the shelter of the undergrowth. To the victor the spoils! I thought as I happily waved the box under Craters' nose.

We split the gold into two equal lots and carefully buried them in different locations near our base. We intended going into business together when we were demobbed, now we had the money to do it. All we had to do was sit tight and wait the war out.

But about six months later, while on patrol, a sniper's bullet blasted into Craters, dropping him like a stone. He lay unconscious on the damp track, his life's blood bubbling up, seeping in frothy pink foam out of the cavity in his chest.

I'd seen the flash from the sniper's rifle when he'd fired and I retaliated, my bullet finding its mark in the Japanese soldier's forehead. He toppled headfirst from the canopy into the jungle.

Craters was hurt bad and as I carried him back to base, I willed him to live, trying desperately to somehow pass some of my life force into him and keep him alive. The medics rushed him to surgery where the doctors operated to remove the bullet from his punctured lung. It was then they found he had TB and decided to send him home.

I dug our gold up and put it in Craters' kit bag just before he was to ship out. While he'd been in hospital, we'd worked it out. By going home early he'd have the jump on the rest of us and when I made it back to Australia, our building business would be up and running.

A last-minute swap of roster duty enabled me to race down to the wharf to see him off. He didn't expect me there and there was so much racket, he couldn't hear me yelling out to him but I watched him shuffle up the gangplank, our gold safe in his kit bag.

That night, March 3rd, 1944, at twenty-two hundred hours, off the coast of Australia, the hospital ship taking Craters home was torpedoed. There were no survivors.



The One Horse Town.



This story is loosely based on fact. It came from a real experience a girlfriend, Collette, had one day on the Sunshine Coast when she went to the movies with her husband. The amenities block for the building was down a long laneway at the side of the theatre.

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A thin band of perspiration trickled from between Collette's pendulous breasts and slid down her torso. Sighing, she reached over, picked up the plastic covered menu from the table and fanned herself. Somewhere above, Collette couldn't be bothered looking, the motor in the lone fan whirred away in the old café, any cooling effect it might have had was beaten by the size of the room and the heat of the day.

They were the only customers there and the table was still cluttered with the remains of their lunch. Collette's gaze flicked over to the two men at the table with her. Trevor, her husband and her brother Patrick were huddled over a sketch Patrick had drawn on a paper serviette in front of him. Neither man seemed to be feeling the heat, Collette thought enviously as she continued fanning herself.

She yawned and stretched. If she didn't make a move soon, she'd fall asleep. "Okay, guys," she said to her two companions. "I'm going to stretch my legs. I won't be long." Half listening the men nodded their attention focused on the diagram.

Collette wandered over to the counter and paused, watching the plump woman attendant there struggling to squeeze multi coloured marble sized lollies into a small glass container. Beads of perspiration dotted her upper lip and wisps of damp hair clung to the sides of her round face. Even the locals are feeling the heat today, Collette thought as she waited for the woman to finish her task.

"There! Got them all in" the woman muttered and satisfied, discarded the now empty cardboard container under the bench. Smiling, she looked up. "Can I help you, dear?" she asked.

"Sort of" Collette replied. "We're just passing through, but I'm intrigued by the name of your town. How did it get the unusual name of 'Hopetown'?"

The woman laughed. "Truth is, it should have been named 'Hopeless Town', but nobody wanted it called that."

Collette smiled, encouraging the woman to continue.

“You mightn’t believe it now, but in the 1860’s this was a boom town of 50,000 people. You can still see some of its past history in the lovely big old buildings in our main street”. She sighed. “But, once the gold ran out, so did the prospectors.”

“Was Hope the name of a big nugget?” Collette asked.

The woman chuckled. “No, the name of a cantankerous black horse - old Hopeless he was called. Belonged to an old prospector named Charlie Evans. The story goes that Charlie’s horse was tied up to a tree while Charlie went in to get some supplies in the general store. Now Old Hopeless wasn’t used to being tied up and to show his displeasure, he pawed at the ground with his black hooves. It was then he uncovered the gold nugget that set off the gold rush here.”

Collette laughed. “You’re having me on,” she said.

“S’ true. You can read all about it on the plaque at the base of Old Hopeless’ life-sized statue down at the end of Main Street.”

“Okay! I will. But first, where will I find the ‘Ladies’?”

“The nearest is behind the picture theatre.” The woman gestured. “Turn left; continue past the theatre to the alleyway at the side. Turn there, and it’s at the end. You can’t miss it if you go down the alleyway.”

Collette stood for a moment outside and glanced along the deserted main street, the shops now closed for a midday break. At the junction down the end of the main street, she could just see a dark blob she guessed was the statue of Old Hopeless. A real one-horse town, Collette thought.

A few utes and old Holdens were parked outside the local hotel, diagonally across from her. *The Royal George* was printed in faded red lettering over the doorway of the double-story, brown brick structure. A cream-coloured fibro-clad verandah ran the length of its top floor, shading the lower level where stunted bushes grew out of wooden casks sitting on the pavement.

Glancing to her right she looked at the empty shops there. Most had faded ‘To Lease’ signs propped behind their vacant, dusty glass fronts. Nearby, a blue heeler dog sprawled asleep on the shaded footpath and Collette sauntered over and knelt down beside him. Her long, thick brown hair fell forward and she pushed it back from her face. She stroked her hand along the dog’s side and a smell of farm manure wafted up from his dusty fur.

“Where’s your master, feller?” she whispered. “Did he go without you?” The dog lifted his tail a fraction off the footpath and let it flop. “Oh, is that the best you can manage in this heat?” she asked.

The dog’s eyelids fluttered as it made a feeble effort to open them but the exertion was too much and they stayed shut.

Collette patted the dog and strolled toward the old fibro picture theatre. In its recess, near the deserted ticket booth, a man in dusty jeans and a black T-shirt lounged against the wall watching her. His dark shoulder length hair hung in dull locks around his face.

Collette smiled and nodded. “Bit warm today,” she said.

He didn’t answer and surprised, she stopped, watching him. His gaze slowly moved up and down her slim frame, lingering at her well-formed breasts. She felt his eyes on her body, undressing her and shuddered.

Slowly, he slid the tip of his tongue past his lips and moved it in and out suggestively before sliding it back into his mouth. Collette gasped and his lips twisted into a sneer at her reaction, giving him a sinister appearance and the venom in his stare startled her.

My god! When did he last see a woman, she thought as she hurried on. What a creep, she added, running her hands up and down her arms, trying to cleanse herself of his stare and the dirty feeling it gave her.

Pausing at the entrance of the alleyway, Collette glanced back. No way was she going down there if he was watching her. She couldn't see him so she hurried down the long lane to the back of the building and into the door marked 'Ladies.'

Collette opened the door and looked in. There was one lone hand basin and three cubicles in the small, cream painted brick room and the room appeared to be empty. Not taking any chances, Collette stood as close to the entrance door as she could and kicked at the door to the first cubicle and leaped back. The door banged open against the divider. It was empty. She edged toward the next cubicle, kicked it open jumped back – and again with the third. They were all empty.

Suddenly aware that she'd been holding her breath, Collette exhaled. It's okay, she told herself, and entered the middle cubicle.

Collette had just slipped the bolt into its lock and unzipped her jeans when she heard the main door open and someone quietly enter. She froze, listening. Whoever it was had gone into the first cubicle and Collette held her breath, waiting for the sound of a zipper, movement of clothing, anything. She heard nothing.

Slowly bending down and leaning forward she looked under the partition dividing the cubicles. A pair of large, dirty sneakers pointed toward the toilet bowl. They're facing the wrong way, Collette thought, surprised. Why! she wondered as she leaned over further to get a better look.

Oh, no! She clamped her hands over her mouth to stop from screaming. It's him! He followed me. Terror surged like electric currents up her spine as she stared at the frail partition separating them. He's going to get me! I've got to get out of here. Hysteria threatened to overwhelm her and she fought to control it before it engulfed her.

Her glance slid to the door, then back to the divider. He's between the main door and me she reasoned, and I didn't hear him slip the bolt to that cubicle. That means he can get out any time he wants.

Very quietly, Collette eased her jeans back over her hips and, with trembling hands, fastened the button at her waist. She guessed he was listening to any sound from her. Stealthily she bent down and peered under the partition again - there was only one dirty sneaker on the floor. Her gaze flicked to the closed door and then to the top of the dividing partition. Collette gasped! His two large hands were already there, ready to pounce. Self-preservation took over and, before he could grab her, Collette lunged forward, slid the bolt, flung the door open and rushed as fast as she could along the alley.

Instinct told her even before she heard the door bang that he was behind her. To get this far was a miracle, she thought, as her legs raced, speeding her up the long alleyway.

Faster, faster, faster, the word raced through her mind like a mantra. The quick slap, slap, slap of her sandals and his heavy breathing were the only sounds in the alley but Collette heard nothing. Focused, she was running for her life.

Collette's breathing came in short, sharp gasps and her lungs felt on fire. She could sense, feel his fingers grasping for her from his outstretched arms.

"Haaahhh!" It was half hiss, half satisfaction as, nearing the end of the alley, the stranger put every last effort into catching Collette and his taloned fingers hooked onto her T-shirt.

"No!" It came out as a terrified sob. Using the last vestige of strength she had left, Collette twisted her body, pulling the fabric from his fingers and catapulted out of the alley where she lay sprawled in the main street, unable to move, her energy spent.

She felt the stranger's fingers dig into her ankles as he started to drag her back into the alley – then everything became confused. Collette heard the sound of a horse galloping, felt the stranger slacken his grip and heard him yelling. She

tried to see what was happening but the sun's rays blinded her and all she saw were rearing black hooves flaying over her.

Terrified of being trampled, Collette quickly rolled into a ball, her arms pulled tight over her head while she lay there too frightened to move. She could hear the stranger screaming and beating at the horse, struggling to escape the slashing hooves – then everything went quiet.

The dust had settled when Collette cautiously opened her eyes. She knew she owed her life to the black horse and his rider and, getting to her feet, turned to offer her profuse thanks to them. But where are they Collette wondered as she looked up and down the street. How could they disappear like that?

She looked to where she had heard her attacker screaming. Collette had mixed feelings about seeing his mangled body - but he was gone too. This is spooky, Collette thought shuddering. People don't just disappear into thin air. She looked up and down the street again, but apart from her and the dog still asleep on the pavement, the street was empty.

Everything looks – so normal, she thought in amazement, but, I couldn't have hallucinated it all – or, could I? No, Collette was emphatic. I don't know what just happened, but these marks on my ankles are real enough.

A bright flash of sunlight reflected off something at the end of Main Street and caught Collette's attention. "No, it couldn't be" she whispered, staring at the black life-sized statue of the old horse the township of Hope was named after. And, as Collette watched, the sun's rays shifted, intensified and illuminated the statue, turning it from black to gold.



Collette was accosted and nearly raped by a stranger but did manage to escape. Two weeks later she heard on the news that another woman had experienced the same thing at the same place but had not been as fortunate in escaping. Collette still carries remorse that she never reported the incident. She feels if she had she may have saved the other woman from this traumatic experience.

The idea for the horse came from a true story of how gold was found in a small town, I visited. I think the town was somewhere in South Australia.

Once Is More Than Enough.



Our writing group was given a home assignment; to write in a style of story different to what we normally write. I chose a violent tale as my topic and the story's plot evolved from a bank robbery I read about in a Sunday paper. It gave a brief description of the robber and I took it from there.

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Carol sighed as she watched their last customer enter the bank. That's right. Wait until we're closing, she thought as the lone male wandered in and over to the form counter.

Carol's gaze shifted to her friend Judith, in the cubicle next to her. Judith had just finished serving her last customer. Nodding toward the lone man, Carol said, "I'll take care of slow pokes and you can close and start balancing if you want."

"Okay, thanks". Judith slid her money drawer open, lifted the notes out and started counting.

Carol glanced at the back of the man and, while she waited, critically appraised him. His baggy maroon track pants faded blue checked shirt and grubby sneakers made him look scruffy, she decided. Like a scarecrow; in need of a decent meal.

Her mind wandered to food and the shopping she had to do. I'll pick up some lamb chops for tonight. They can go with last night's left over fried rice.

She looked up. At last! The man stood in front of her and, smiling as she had been trained to do, Carol asked, "Can I help you?"

Without speaking, the man slid a canvas bank deposit bag across to her. Carol opened the bag and pulled out a piece of paper. Scrawled in pencil was:

*'There's a dirty syringe under the jumper in front of you.
Keep quiet and put all the money into the bag.
Make a sound and I'll jab you with this needle.
I've got AIDS.'*

The impact of what was happening hit Carol like a ton of bricks. Oh, my god! We're being robbed. She tried to pull her arm back but his left hand snaked out grabbing her sleeve, holding her firm. She looked in to his face. Cold, unwavering eyes stared back, mesmerizing her.

The man moved his jacket a fraction, exposing the needle of the syringe. He edged it toward her hand. “Now!” he whispered, gesturing toward the bag. Shaking, Carol stuffed the notes into the bag with her free hand.

He scooped his jacket and bulging bag off the counter and, grinning, he saluted to Carol before walking quickly out the door, leaving her staring at the discarded syringe on the counter.

“Balanced! Now it’s your turn” Judith said. She stared at Carol’s stricken look. “Hey, you okay?”

Carol didn’t answer. Judith saw the drawer open and the money gone. Then she saw the syringe. Quickly sliding her foot over the button on the floor she pounded it underfoot. Bulletproof shields slid into place in front of the tellers, alarms screamed out and startled staff came running, but the robber was gone.

It was now six months since the robbery. The robber had been caught and Carol had undergone trauma counselling. Everything appeared to be normal, but Carol burned with a hidden rage that threatened to engulf her.

The two friends discussed the problem over lunch. “It’s affected my life,” Carol said. “I’m scared to go out at night. I’ve had extra security put in my unit; I wake up to every sound, thinking it’s a burglar. Every scruffy male that comes near me or into the bank I think is a robber – I’m scared of shadows. I’m telling you Judith; I don’t want to live like this”.

Sympathising, Judith patted Carol’s arm. “What did the counsellor say”? she asked.

Carol snorted. “That I’ll forget in time. Fat chance. Meanwhile, my life is hell.” She bit a large chunk out of her sandwich, her jaw pounding, venting her frustration.

“Relax,” Judith said. She slid her hand over Carol’s, stopping her from taking another big bite. “Have you thought about a change of scenery? Going on a holiday?”

Carol sighed. “Yes, I have. But it’s not an outer thing. It’s what’s in here” she said tapping over her heart. “That’s why it’s affecting me so much. It violated my rights as a human being.” She laughed mirthlessly. “What’s the saying, ‘took away my power?’ Well, it did – and I want it back”. For once, Judith didn’t know what to answer.

It was getting dark when Carol reached home and the tall bushes now had a sinister appearance as she hurried by. In her haste to get inside she fumbled with her keys. Once safely inside Carol breathed a sigh of relief and flicked the foyer switch, flooding the small space with light. She turned; security locked the outside door and hurried into the kitchen, flicking lights on as she went.

Carol cast a nervous, critical eye over the interior of her unit, looking for signs of forced entry. Its open plan design enabled her to see from the kitchen into the dining room and lounge area. She relaxed when she saw everything was as she had left it.

Taking a small glass out of a cupboard Carol poured wine into it and flicked the TV on with the remote control lying on the cupboard. The news was on and Carol listened to a high-ranking police officer debating with a civil libertarian as to who were the real victims of crime. Shaking her head in disbelief at what was said; Carol put her frozen dinner in the microwave.

“Better put these away first before I get comfy” she muttered and, scooping her handbag and jacket off the kitchen bench, she took them down the hall, into her bedroom.

It’s good to be safely at home, Carol thought, flicking her bedroom light on. Her earlier fears seemed ridiculous now, and laughing at herself for being scared, she slid the mirrored wardrobe door open and reached in for a coat hanger. Her splayed fingers groped, connecting with a squashed stocking-masked face of a man hiding in her wardrobe. Carol tried to scream but only a faint gurgling came out.

Moving fast, the man leapt out, his outstretched hands hitting Carol in her chest, knocking her backwards onto the bed.

Survival instincts kicked in over blind panic as Carol spun sideways, landing on all fours on the floor, bounced up and sprinted down the hall with him after her. She made it to the end of the hall before he caught her. Swinging his arm around her neck and leaping onto her back, his weight and their momentum brought them both crashing to the carpet in the lounge room.

Winded, Carol sprawled, face down. His arm was over her mouth and she bit as hard as she could into it.

“Bitch” he snarled, grabbed the back of Carol’s hair, pulled her head up and slammed it into the carpet.

Momentarily stunned, Carol lay there, pinned to the floor while he eased his sleeve up and examined his arm. Grabbing a fistful of hair and pulling hard he dragged Carol’s head up, twisting, forcing her to look at his arm. A large flap of bloodied skin hung, exposing the flesh and muscle underneath.

“You’ll pay for that,” he whispered menacingly into her ear. “I’ll make you wish you’d never been born”.

The intruder reached over, turning the television on full blast and the speakers quivered to the distorted sound blaring from them. Forcing Carol onto her back he straddled her torso and rained stinging blows to her head. Carol turned her head from side to side, trying to soften the blows. Panting, his initial fury spent, the man stopped to get his second wind.

Suddenly, all the emotion that had been festering inside Carol since the robbery flared, overrode her fear, giving her super human strength.

“Agggh” A savage scream of pure rage exploded from her. Jerking her body upward Carol toppled her surprised assailant backward, swung her legs up over his head and slammed her crossed ankles back against his throat, chopping them into his windpipe.

The intruder collapsed onto the carpet, with Carol on his chest. Exerting as much pressure onto her legs as she could Carol bore down while he clawed at her legs, trying to dislodge her.

Suddenly his flaying hands grabbed at Carol’s breasts and, digging his nails in, he yanked as hard as he could. Screaming in agony, Carol toppled off him and tried to crawl away.

He grabbed at her and fastened onto her ankle. Carol lashed at him with her other foot, hitting him in the face, lunged for the scissors lying by the side of the lounge, catapulted around and, putting all her weight behind her thrust, drove the scissors into his body. She heard metal scraping against bone a split second before his agonised scream rang out. Yanking the scissors out she lunged again “The worm has turned” she yelled.

Holding his damaged shoulder the intruder leaped over the lounge chair and sprinted toward the door, with Carol after him. Grappling unsuccessfully with the security lock the intruder turned to face Carol, who was edging toward him, scissors ready.

“How do you like being the victim” she shouted, raising her scissors, ready to strike. The intruder whimpered, cowering away from her.

“Open up! It’s the police.” Startled, Carol heard a loud thumping on her door.

“She’s in there officer. I saw her go in. Although how she can stay in there with that infernal racket going on I don’t know.” Carol recognised the voice of Don, her elderly neighbour.

“Just a minute officer” Carol yelled. Gesturing with her scissors, she said to the intruder, “You, flat on the floor face first while I let the cavalry in”.

Standing over him, Carol crunched her right foot onto his neck and reached into a nearby vase of dried flowers where she kept her spare security key. She looked down at the intruder. The feeling of absolute power over him was intoxicating. "It would be so easy for me to press a little harder, crush your spine and make you into a paraplegic" she said, applying more pressure. He stiffened in fear, powerless, waiting.

"No" she finally said, reaching over, inserting her key into the door. "If I did that I'd be no better than you".

Back at work Judith, mouth open-mouthed, listened to her friend telling her of her experience the previous night. "When the police came in and took the stocking of the intruder's face I recognized him straight away. He was the locksmith I had come and make my home secure. Turns out the police had their suspicions of him but no evidence to tie him to other home invasions and attacks on other women. Last night they caught him red handed and they said with the evidence they have now he will be in jail for a long, long time.

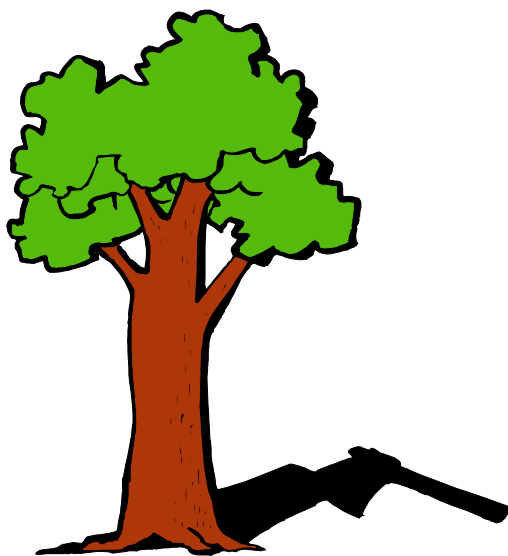
Judith smiled as she heard the satisfaction in her friend's voice. "So, how do you feel now", she asked?

Carol thought for a moment before answering. "Strange to say but I feel empowered. Yes, empowered. I know now that I can take care of myself and no longer need to feel afraid of shadows."

Judith smiled again.. "Good" was all she said. In companionable silence the two women finished their lunch.



The Pear Tree.



The idea for this story came about on my trip to Ireland. I visited a relative and was fascinated to learn that she had growing in her garden a pear tree that had been struck twice by lightning. The tree looked healthy but my relative said that its once prolific annual yield of luscious pears had now diminished to a few hard, inedible ones.

Once back in Australia I used the pear tree as the main subject for a three part Australian story and include the clichéd idea of 'old age and cunning beats youth and exuberance any day'. I must have been successful enough with this as 'The Pear Tree' won second prize in the Victorian Sunraysia 2006 U3A Writing Competition.

oOo

Startled, Nana stared at her fourteen-year-old granddaughter. "What did you say, dear?" she asked.

"I said Dad's got the axe in the car" Belinda answered. "He said when he comes back, he's going to chop down your old tree today. Said it's an eyesore and needs to come down."

Flicking her long dark hair back as she leaned over the newly baked muffins, Belinda sniffed appreciatively at the sweet-smelling steam rising from them unaware of the change her statement had created in her grandmother.

Drat that son of mine, Nana thought. Since his father died, he always thinks he knows what's best for me. Well, I don't want my old pear tree chopped down.

She sighed and wiped her hands on her apron. Next, he'll be wanting me removed too. Too old to live here alone now Dad has gone, he'll say. I'll be more comfortable in a retirement home, he'll tell me. And just like the pear tree I'll be uprooted and expected to go without so much as a whimper. Her lips set in a determined line. Well, I'm not going. And neither is that pear tree. That pear tree and me, we're here to stay until I say differently!

Pouring the contents of a mixing bowl into two cake tins Nana slid them into the oven and glanced up, her attention momentarily taken by a print on the wall behind her granddaughter. The scene was of a muscular, dark haired man felling trees in the bush while his young wife and baby sat under a tree nearby and watched him.

Looking at her granddaughter she asked innocently "Did anyone ever tell you the story about the pear tree?"

Belinda shook her head.

"Well to me it was the greatest love story, ever" Nana said, sitting on the stool next to Belinda. "Better than any of those Jane Austen novels you love to read".

“Oh, Nan,” laughed Belinda.

Nana tapped Belinda’s arm. “Well, just you listen and make up your mind” she said. Her gaze flicked to the print on the wall and back to her granddaughter. “Did you know your grandfather and I were childhood sweethearts?” Nana said

Belinda shook her head.

Nodding, Nana glanced back at the print. “This area was all bush when we moved here just after we were married, and your grandfather built this house with his bare hands.” She sighed. “Yes, our little love nest, he called it. And when your father was born twelve months later your grandfather planted that pear tree as a token of his love. It was the most romantic, the best present I’ve ever had” she said softly.

“What! That old pear tree?” Belinda looked out the window at the tree.

“It’s what it symbolizes dear” Nana said. “Your grandfather always believed that while ever that tree grew, so did our love – and so it did.”

“Oh, Nan. That is so-o-o romantic”. Belinda’s eyes were moist.

“Of course the tree was quite small when your grandfather planted it but it did have one tiny pink blossom on its frail little branch” Nana touched Belinda’s arm. “Now, upstairs, in my wardrobe, is our family photo album and pressed between its pages is a tiny, faded blossom” she said. “It’s that first little pear tree flower. If you promise to look after it, I’ll entrust it to you for safe keeping.”

“Oh, Nana, thank you. I will look after it.” Belinda hugged her grandmother. “I’ll go and get it now”.

Nana looked up as her youngest grandson slouched into the kitchen. “Nana, I’m bored” he complained. “When will Daddy be back? I want to go home. There’s nothing to do here.”

Nana smiled at her seven-year-old grandson. His fine brown hair had fallen over his forehead, hiding the freckles there. “Bored, are you?” she said. “Well come have some milk and cake and I’ll tell you a story”.

“I’m not a baby. You don’t need to tell me stories” he said belligerently.

Nana hid a smile. “No indeed, Dennis” she said. “This story is about the bushrangers that used to live in these parts”.

Dennis glanced up, his face brightening. “There used to be bushrangers here, Nana?”

“Yep, there sure were. Lightning Jack and his gang used to roam these parts.” Smiling, Nana patted the stool near her. “Come and sit here and I’ll tell you all about them” she said.

“Now, nobody knows for sure, but some say Lightning Jack became a bushranger when he was put in jail on trumped-up charges”. Then, remembering her grandson’s love of animals she added. “And while he was in jail there was no-one to look after his farm animals and they all died of hunger and thirst.”

Dennis gasped.

“Well, you can imagine, after that he really hated the law” Nana added. Dennis nodded. He understood.

“He was a real Robin Hood bushranger, robbing the rich to give to the poor. All the people loved him but the troopers hated him because they couldn’t catch him and that made them look real bad.”

“Well, one day, Lightning Jack and some of his gang were riding along when what do they see but a group of uniformed troopers riding along looking for them.”

Dennis’ eyes widened. “Did the troopers see them, Nana?”

“Oh, yes, young Dennis, and a great shout went up from the troopers when they did. The chase was in open country and, lying flat over their horse’s neck, the horsemen all rode like the wind.” Slapping her hand to her side Nana leaned forward emulating the riders. Strands of grey hair escaped from behind her ears and she quickly brushed them back.

“Now, the bushrangers were riding mountain ponies and everyone knows mountain ponies are bred tough with strong hearts that just won’t give in, but they aren’t made for speed in the open country. Those tough little ponies gave it all they had, but the troopers were catching up fast.” Nana paused.

“Go on, Nana. What happened?”

“Well, a trooper’s bullet hit one of the horses and down went the horse – and down came his rider. But” she added, “quick as a flash Lightning Jack was by his side. Swung him up behind him on his horse and galloped off.”

“But he would have slowed Lightning Jack down and the troopers would have caught them.” Dennis said.

“Yes, things were looking pretty grim for Lightning Jack.”

“But did he get away?” demanded Dennis.

“Well, fortunately, sometime before, an old gold prospector had eaten a pear and spat the pip out.” Nana pointed out the window to the pear tree. “That pip had now grown into a small tree and the two bushrangers were able to take shelter behind the tree, pull their guns and start firing back at the troopers.”

“It’s not a very big tree” said Dennis, looking sceptically out at it.

“No” agreed his grandmother. “But it was the only shelter thereabouts at that time and Lightning Jack couldn’t afford to be choosy. Anyway, bullets were flying everywhere and the two bushrangers were nearly out of ammunition when all of a sudden, the troopers jumped on their horses and galloped away.”

“Yahoo! But why, Nana? Why did they leave?”

“‘Cause coming from just over that hill out there were the rest of the bushrangers. They were riding fast to save their leader. They outnumbered the troopers you see, so the troopers rode away.”

“Yippee, Lightning Jack was saved.” Dennis paused, deep in thought. “So that’s why the fruit from the tree is so hard and horrible. It’s got lead poisoning!” He thought some more. “Nana, do you think there might be some old bullets still out there?”

Nana shrugged. “I suppose there could be one or two still around the base of the tree.”

“I’m going out to have a look now” called Dennis, running out the door.

“And so you don’t miss any, it would be a good idea if you pulled out the grass from around the trunk of the tree” his grandmother called after him.

Nana glanced up at the sound of the screen door banging. David, Nana’s twelve-year-old grandson came in like an uncontrolled garden hose and draped his lanky frame over the stool near her. Nana smiled. David’s glasses had slid down his thin nose again.

“Look at him” he said half turning toward the window. “He’s weird. He’s digging around that old tree. Said the bushrangers left bullets there.” Turning toward his grandmother, he asked “Are you sure he is one of us? I think he comes from another planet.”

“Well, if he keeps looking, he might find ...” She shook her head. “No, no, he won’t. They said that it would fade. No-one is to know.”

Intrigued, David asked “Know what, Nana?”

Nana clamped her hands over her mouth “Oh dear. I’ve already said too much” she mumbled glancing out of the corner of her eye and studying her grandson. “Oh, I suppose I can tell you, but you must promise not to tell another living soul. Promise?”

David nodded. Satisfied, his grandmother whispered “One night, about two years ago I was woken by a funny sounding hum. I opened my eyes, sat up and, through my window, saw a big, bright silver light coming over the hill there” she said, pointing out the window.

“You saw a flying saucer?” David asked in awe. His grandmother nodded.

“Well, I didn’t know what it was at the time – couldn’t see what shape it was either because there was such a bright light, like a huge beam coming from it. As it came nearer it completely lit up my house and yard.”

David stared at his grandmother. “David, I was so scared I dived under the covers and tried to hide.”

“Go on, Nana. What happened?” he urged.

“Suddenly, as if by a giant unseen hand, the covers were lifted up to the ceiling and I was left exposed and huddled on the bed.”

David blinked several times. “Wow!”

His grandmother nodded. “Then, some mysterious force plucked me off the bed and held me suspended upright, just off the floor and I was propelled through the house and out into the backyard.”

“And there, right over the pear tree was a silver, metal flying saucer, just like you see in pictures. Well, you can imagine, there I was out in the yard, in my pyjamas with all these funny little people with big heads and shiny silver clothes who were all running around the yard. They seemed friendly enough though,” she added.

“What did they want?” David leaned forward and his glasses slipped down his nose again.

“They told me the pear tree was being specially magnetized to be used as a beacon. They told me to look after the tree because in the future they were coming back to communicate with an earthling and it could be one of my grandchildren when he is a man.” She clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh, dear. I didn’t mean to say that. They may change their mind.”

“It’s all right, Nana” said David, patting her arm. “If it’s going to happen, we both know which of your grandchildren they will be communicating with.”

Nana left him to his thoughts as she ran the water in the sink and added the detergent.

“A beacon, eh!” she heard him mutter.

“Here, David” she said moving to the cupboard and rummaging in the odds and ends drawer. “This is a picture of the pear tree after their visit. I’d like you to have the photo. People think it was damaged in a lightning strike, but we know better, don’t we?”

Nodding, David took the photo and went outside to compare the print with the tree. “Watch it with that tree” he yelled at his younger brother. “Are you trying to kill it?”

Nana heard the front door opening and her son calling her. “I’m in the kitchen, Trevor” she answered. “Come on in and have a cup of coffee and some freshly baked cake. And while you are here, did I ever tell you about that pear tree and how you were conceived? No? Well, one beautiful, starlit night your father and I...”



The Sacrifice.



The idea for this story came from a picture in a book called 'The History of the World.' It showed an Aztec, or Inca pyramid temples and village life around it. I took it from there.

oOo

“Happy birthday, birthday boy”, I said as I looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. “Yep! Fifty years old today and not looking a day over...?” I tilted my head and looked critically at my face. Mournful, bloodshot eyes stared back. What was it Jodie had said? “They’re not wrinkles Dad, they’re laughter lines.” Well Jodie, I’ve got news for you. Nobody, but nobody laughs that much.

I pulled at my jowls then let them sag back. Just like a floppy bloodhound, I moaned. What happened? Where’s the guy I used to be? I stared into my eyes, desperately seeking, wishing him back. “Just one more time I’d like to see me when I was the fittest I’ve ever been. That’s not asking too much on my birthday is it?” I called out in despair.

My vision blurred and I rubbed my eyes with my knuckles to clear it. What! – Who’s that? That’s not my reflection. I rubbed my eyes again and stared hard. An ancient Simian head was watching me from inside the mirror. His dark piercing eyes looked intently into mine, mesmerising me and I couldn’t tear my gaze away.

A mist swirled out from the mirror, turning, spinning, whirling, spinning, obliterating everything but the power of his stare and, locked into it, I was sucked, head first, through the mirror, toward him.

There was a roaring sound all around me, as some force pulled me further into the mist. Disorientated, I shot by hazy outlines, feeling like a comet rocketing through space and time. At some stage I slowed down, everything became quiet and just sort of drifted. Then I seemed to slowly descend until felt something solid underfoot. The mist cleared and I was on top of a tall stone building. I was alone.

Where am I? What’s going on? Totally confused I turned, trying to get my bearings and make sense of what was happening. “Help me somebody, “I whimpered scared and desperate for something, anything to help me, yet frightened of what might be there with me.

Stepping back from the edge, I stumbled and the rough stone surface scraped my palms as I landed heavily on them, but I didn’t feel it. I was too astounded at what I had just seen. Crawling closer to the edge I peered over again, not believing my eyes. Stretching below me was what appeared to be – an ancient city!

In the predawn light golden skinned people were milling about below. Most wore brightly colored cloaks like mats draped over their naked torsos. Some had decorated feathered bands in their shoulder length dark hair. All were barefooted. A few workers dressed only in loincloths trudged along the street, carrying woven baskets or bundles of wood on their backs. Thin columns of smoke drifted out from flat-roofed white adobe buildings and beyond were all lush, tropical vegetation and steep mountains as far as my eyes could see.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing and, terrified that I was losing my mind, I tried to focus. Where am I, I wondered? And more important, how am I going to get out of here and back home?

I studied the structure I was on. It was the tallest building and on either side were two smaller, identical shaped buildings. All were four-tiered, flat-topped pyramids with a double row of steps going up their centre front. About a dozen paces in from the top of the steps of this pyramid was a big, stone slab. Past that, like the jewel in a crown, was a heavily ornate building, its pale color resembling the stars.

Boy, oh boy! I know what that is. Greed replaced fear and I raced over, embracing, rubbing my cheek against the smooth surface and stroking the shiny exterior. Gold - gold sheeting!

Well, why not take a piece, I thought? I glanced around. Who's to know? I dug at the corner of the wall with my fingernails, trying to peel some of the gold off. Damn! It held fast and I skinned my fingers, drawing blood.

The sound of slow rhythmic beating of drums drifted up, distracting me and I hurried to the edge to look down. A solemn procession of men was making their way to the pyramids.

I lay flat and watched twelve drummers in white loin clothes pounding a dirge on their kettledrums. Jeez! They're made of gold. I chuckled inanely. Talk about beaten gold. Now, if I could get one of those babies back home with me - I tore my gaze away to watch the parade.

The crowd was hushed as the procession moved past. Behind the drummers were two men I assumed to be high priests. They were dressed in long, bright, yellow-feathered cloaks, the edges touching the unpaved roadway as they walked. Large, yellow-feathered headgear adorned their heads.

Behind them, looking confident and proud walked a kid of about twenty. Jet black shoulder length hair fell loosely to his shoulders and on his head was a gold wreath. His muscular chest was covered by a golden breastplate and on his upper arms were big, gold bangles. A pristine white loincloth covered his hips and, like the others, he was barefoot.

Behind him, in two lines, were ten men dressed in orange. Lesser priests, I guessed. The procession arrived at the steps of the pyramid I was on and started to climb.

Oh-oh! They mustn't find me. Edging back, I ran inside the golden temple and hid, willing them away. The drummers had stopped beating their drums and it became quiet outside. I waited and when I didn't hear any further sounds, curiosity overcame my fear and I peered out.

In lines of three the drummers stood near the edge of the pyramid walls; their golden drums silent. The ten minor priests stood on either side of a stone altar, facing it. The two high priests flanked the youth in front of the altar. All were still, watching the faint, pink rays of the rising sun stretching like a halo from behind the mountains.

When the sun edged the mountaintops, its rays strengthening to crimson, flooding the valley with light, one of the priests stepped forward and lifted the golden wreath from the boy's head. Another unclasped the ornate breastplate while a third priest removed his armbands. Laying the golden objects at the feet of one of the high priests, they stepped back into line. It must be some sort of religious ritual to the sun, I guessed.

The high priest removed something from under his cape and I strained to get a better look. I gasped! It was a jewel encrusted gold container, shaped like a genie bottle!

Holding it in both hands he stepped up to the youth, bowed and offered the container to him. Solemnly, the boy took it, raised it high and saluted to the four winds. I stared at the bottle. It glowed, radiating an aura, a life of its own.

Facing the sun, the youth muttered something, an incantation perhaps; I couldn't hear what it was. Then taking a deep breath, he drained the contents of the container.

The other high priest stood in front of the youth and unwrapped the youth's loincloth. Standing naked he looked golden skinned, healthy, muscular and magnificent. Perfect man! Everything I aspired to be and could never achieve.

What's happening now? I edged out a fraction more to see. Two of the orange clad priests were slowly moving their arms in silent rhythmic gestures over and around the youth. He stood completely still, staring ahead, while they performed this ritual, then when they'd finished, they stepped back and he climbed unaided onto the altar and lay there, face up.

What - I don't understand. Something weird is happening to me. How can I be looking from the altar and here at the same time...? I blinked several times and wiped my face along my sleeve to clear my vision, but it stayed the same.

The boy smiled and my lips curved too. No! I shook my head, trying to clear it. Somehow he was influencing me. I clamped my lips tight.

A faint memory stirred ... 'When the sun strikes the golden temple Tinamaka will cleave my beating heart from my chest. The heart of a warrior prince. The gods are waiting to claim me.'

I shivered and looked behind me. Where in the hell did all that rubbish come from? Nobody spoke! It was in my head. Am I going mad? I was terrified.

Then the penny dropped and I shuddered, not wanting to believe. Somehow I'm reliving the past! That kid is me and I'm going to be sacrificed! Offered to some pagan god. The hairs on my neck stood up and I was clammy with fear.

The high priest raised a jewel-handled, double-edge knife. Its long, wide blade glinted in the crimson rays of the sun and I cringed, sick to my stomach, petrified.

I crouched in the sanctuary of the golden temple while at the same time looking up from the altar into the expressionless eyes of the priest. I stared, transfixed. They're the same dark eyes from the mirror!

No! He's going to slice me straight down the middle. I wanted to rush over and stop him but fear kept me paralyzed.

The sun's rays reached the golden tower, blinding me in a scarlet light. I heard the swift slice of the blade through the air; the thud and tearing sound.

No! No! I screamed as my world started to spin. Crimson, golden, silver, a kaleidoscope of blinding colors, blending, spinning – spinning. Then nothing else but the misty whirlpool pulling at me, drawing me headfirst into the vortex.

He murdered me, was all I could think. He murdered me. The thought kept repeating itself in my brain like a cracked record. My head stopped spinning and still disorientated, I opened my eyes. The mist was gone and I was alone in my bathroom. Emotionally spent, I vomited into the basin.

A thin line of saliva dribbled from my lips and I wiped it off with the back of my hand. My fingers were sore and wondering why, I glanced at them. The nails on my right hand were broken and torn, my fingertips raw. I shivered. I did that trying to peel the gold off the temple.



Date With the Devil.



This story came about as another group writing exercise. A random word and then a sentence were chosen from a book and a story was to be constructed by merging them into a story. 'Adrenalin' was the word and 'I've dreamed the same dream' was the sentence.

o0o

I slid further into the undergrowth as the beams from the torches probed, searching for us in the darkness. Five of us hid there, hearts hammering, sweating, not daring to move as the Germans methodically beat the bushes, looking for us.

Rivulets of water ran off the leaves and trickled down my neck, soaking me. The sodden earth was cold and I could feel my right leg starting to cramp.

Was it really the heavy cloud cutting visibility that confused the pilot into dropping us at the wrong place, I wondered, trying to ignore the spasm in my leg. Why didn't the Captain abort the mission when the weather turned bad? How will we meet up with the Belgian underground now – and just where the hell behind enemy lines are we anyway? – Maybe Johnno is right. Maybe this trip is cursed.

A German boot came within inches of my face and my heart lurched, pounding hard. I knew what to expect if they caught us. Torture, then shot as spies. I held my breath, waiting for him to yell to his comrades that he'd found the Englishmen but he moved on, searching, moving further away with the rest of his group.

Still we lay there in the mud. After about ten minutes I heard a rustling nearby as Captain Booth stirred. "Okay, lads" he whispered. Quietly and quickly. There may be more about".

Adrenaline surged through me as we emerged from the foliage and, Indian file, with rifles ready, moved in the opposite direction to the way the Germans had gone. I knew that any minute a burst of gunfire could flash out of the darkness, putting paid to us and our mission so I strained, all senses alerted, trying to hear any warning sounds in the forest as we hurried along.

We passed huge, uprooted dying trees lying in crazy angles next to fresh bomb craters while patches of bare ground denuded of any growth exposed raw, jagged gashes in the earth. It felt spooky and a chill ran up my spine as I remembered Johnno's dream and the scared sound in his voice as he told me.

"It's nearly a year since I had the first one and I'm telling you Clarkie, I've been given a warning".

I'd laughed and opened my mouth to give some smart Alec comment but his expression made me change my mind. I figured he needed to talk about what was bothering him, so I'd waited while he gathered his thoughts.

"It's been recurring, see – the dream" he'd said. "In the first one I was alone in a fog – a real pea souper. I couldn't tell where I was, but it was somewhere dark and creepy and I felt miserable, cold and wet. Then somebody stepped out of the shadows and stood beside me. I couldn't move to see who it was – they were just a silent, dark blob next to me but

there was a terrible feeling of malevolence all around us – as thick as the fog and we were both trapped in it, helpless. I woke up terrified at – I don't know – a horrible feeling of impending doom”.

I'd stared at him as he wiped his sweaty hands down the side of his fatigues and fumbled for his cigarettes. We'd been I battles together and I'd never seen him this scared before.

“I've dreamed the same dream three more times and each time another faceless, dark shape comes and stands in the heavy fog. There are five of us now. All helpless, not able to move, waiting for something, or someone to do – I don't know what. I know it sounds crazy but the feeling is evil and I always wake up in a sweat of fear”. He stopped speaking while he scratched around in his pockets looking for a match to light his cigarette.

I'd remained silent, not sure what to make of what Johnno was saying. I'd have bet a month's pay he'd be one of the last people to be spooked by a nightmare. Sucking hard on his cigarette, he'd filled his lungs with smoke, exhaled, then continued. ”In the last dream a few nights ago a cloaked figure stepped out of the shadows and stood, looking at us. The hood he was wearing hid his face but his eyes glowed, like two red hot coals. Then his hood slid off and we were looking into the face of - the Devil.

In slow motion he extended his covered arm, pointed his bony index finger and slowly moved it along our line. As he pointed at each one of us the fog cleared from around that person and I could see who was there. – Clarkie, there was you, the Captain, Sarg, Porter and me”.

Johnno sucked hard on his cigarette like it was a lifeline. He coughed and continued speaking. “Then the Devil started slowly moving his finger back along our line and I knew now why I'd been so scared. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that whoever he stopped at was a dead man, - but I woke up petrified before his pointing finger stopped”.

Johnno's words had sent a chill up my spine but I'd tried to sound flippant, passing it off as a joke. “So one of us had a year to go and their time is nearly up, eh?”

Johnno's hoarse whispered reply echoed around in my head. “Yeah, well if it's not an omen, how come there are five of us on this mission? The same five as in my dream”. I shivered, feeling as if someone had just stepped onto my grave.

The track we were on widened a fraction before ending at a narrow country road. We stopped, waiting to see if anybody came along. Nobody did, so after a few minutes Captain Booth signalled it was safe to proceed and, cautiously, still in single file, we moved onto the side of the road and, keeping to the edge, eased along.

The rain had eased and a feeble moon was struggling through the clouds. The forest was sparser now, as if there had been some sort of clearing done. The Captain was leading and without warning he moved off the road. We followed him onto a grassy section that I first thought was part of an estate but I gave a start when I recognised where we were and glanced behind at Johnno to see his reaction. He didn't look too happy either and stared stonily ahead.

The old graveyard hadn't escaped the bombing. Its huge dead elm trees, mostly split, had branches twisted like frozen arthritic hands reaching upward. A thick grey low-lying fog hung suspended and our bodies easing through caused it to rise up, only to settle back again as we moved on.

We edged past graves, their broken headstones lying at crazy angles. Onward, we went, toward the centre of the cemetery. It gave me the creeps being in this colourless, lifeless landscape and I wished I was anywhere but here.

The soaking rain had started again making our saturated woollen uniforms heavier. It was freezing in the graveyard and I was chilled to the bone. All feeling had gone from my fingers and as I tried to move them to get the blood circulating, I hoped I didn't have to use my rifle. I was a goner if I did.

Captain Booth stopped and signalled for the sergeant to check out a damaged building up ahead while the rest of us waited nerves taut, listening. It seemed like ages before he returned. “All clear” he whispered.

The Captain nodded and quickly we followed him in through the bombed side of the stone building and down into the crypt.

“Well, men. We’ll shelter here for the night and in the morning, we’ll try to work out where we are and how to find the Resistance Movement. We don’t know if there are any Germans nearby so we can’t risk lighting a fire”.

Great, I thought. So, frozen and bone weary, Johnno, me and Porter huddled together to keep warm.

Captain Booth flipped the cover off his watch and peered at its luminous face. “It’s twenty-three hundred hours” he said. “You’ll each do a two-hour guard duty through the night”. He nodded toward Johnno. “Take the first shift, Stern”.

“Yes sir”. I could tell by Johnno’s voice he wasn’t too happy with the timing of his roster, but there wasn’t anything he could do. Orders are orders.

The Captain’s gaze swept around the chamber. “Move to that corner position, Private. You can cover both entrances from there, and at one hundred hours Clark will relieve you”.

“Yes sir” we both answered. Johnno took up his position while I settled against Porter and tried to sleep. I don’t know how long I slept for, but I was shocked back to reality by a high-pitched scream that frightened the hell out of me. Wide awake, the four of us scrambled up, rifles swinging, trying to get a bead on the enemy – but there was nobody in the crypt with us.

“What is the matter with you, Stern?” the Captain hissed. “Do you want to bring the whole German Army down on our heads”?

We all turned to Johnno. In the pale light of the moon we could just see him. He was backed up as far as he could against the wall and he was shaking and jabbering like he was having a fit, or something.

“He’s here. He’s come to get me” he babbled, eyes wide, staring.

“What are you talking about, man”? demanded the Captain. “Who’s here to get you”?

“The Devil! I heard him outside. The sound of his cloven hooves scraping on the graves, getting closer. Look!” Johnno screamed, pointing. “He’s here. It’s the Devil”.

We spun around and looked at the doorway. The moon silhouetted an outline there. My legs went weak and I staggered as I recognised the long-curved horns, the animal shaped head, that odd, misshapen body. Johnno’s dream! It *was* a premonition. Bile rose in my throat and I wanted to scream out to the creature “Don’t pick me. I’m not ready to die” but I couldn’t. Time seemed to have ceased moving for me – we all seemed suspended in time.

‘It’ moved first. Stepping into the doorway, it bleated once, then nimbly clambered over the fallen stonework and disappeared back into the mist. I was the first to react.

“You bloody idiot, Johnno” I yelled. “It was a goat you heard. Not the Devil - a bloody Billy goat”! Relief surged through me in waves. I wasn’t going to die after all. “You and your dream” I said turning to him. “That’s the last dream you’ll ever tell me”. There was no reply.

“Johnno”? I took a closer look. He was slumped against the crypt’s wall, slack jawed, eyes staring, lifeless.



The Wedding Dress.



This was a writing exercise in which I attempted to combine several short stories, all linked by a common thread, in this case, a wedding dress.

oOo

“And just what’s going on here?” Deidre stood in the doorway, staring at the couple on the bed.

They sprung apart. “Deidre darling, It’s not what it looks like” the man babbled.

“No,” Le-anne gasped. “I was just helping Tony with ... with ...”

“His trousers? Really, Le-anne. The bridesmaid is supposed to assist the bride on her wedding day, not the groom.” The contempt in Deidre’s voice cut through the air like a laser.

Tony grabbed Deidre. “Darling, listen to me. This is all a horrible mistake. I love you.”

Deidre’s self control snapped. “Well I don’t like your way of loving,” she shouted. Putting every ounce of her weight behind her balled fist Deidre swung hard and punched Tony in the face. Tony staggered under the blow. Wide eyed, Le-anne ducked out of sight behind the bed.

“I wouldn’t marry you if you were the last man on earth, you ... you...” Deidre screamed.

“Deidre darling. Just listen to me.” Tony rushed after Deidre as she ran down the hall pulling at her wedding dress, struggling to get it off.

“There goes the bride. There goes the bride. Dum-dum-de-dum-dum. There goes the bride” Le-anne hummed as, smiling, she walked over and closed the door on the shrieking turmoil down the hall.

oOo

The two women looked at the wedding dress in the window of the bridal hire shop.

“No! I won’t wear a second-hand wedding dress. I’d feel like Second-hand Rose.”

“Tania, face facts. Your dress was lost in transit. It’s two days to your wedding, we can’t get another dress made in time and none of the others you’ve tried on suit you.”

Tania glowered at her mother, not wanting to listen.

“This shop is our last hope if you want to get married on Saturday. You do want to get married, don’t you Tania?”

“But not is someone else’s dress” she muttered.

“Tania,” her mother said. “This dress has the love and happiness of the bride who wore it. It will be a lucky charm for you.”

Tania brooded as she stared in the window. “What do you say, love? Shall we go inside?”

“Nothing’s going right for my wedding” muttered Tania. “It’s an omen, I just know it.” Near tears, she followed her mother inside.

“The weather is just perfect for your wedding day, Tania. And you look beautiful in your wedding dress” Rita, Tania’s mother said as she stood behind her daughter and tucked a wayward curl under Tania’s veil. Tania surveyed her reflection. She had to admit she did look special.

When the wedding party arrived the small church was full of friends and well wishers. The groom and his two attendants, Tania’s brothers, entered and stood in front of the minister.

Aged organ pipes reverberated to the cords of ‘here comes the bride’ as everyone craned to get a look at the bridal party entering the church.

A tiny golden-haired flower girl dressed in white taffeta led the way. She clutched a white satin basket while her small, chubby fingers reached in and gathered red rose petals to scatter.

The two bridesmaids followed, dressed in long, blue satin gowns. They stepped slowly in time to the organ music, staring ahead, bodies rigid, their bouquets quivering in their trembling hands.

All eyes turned to Tania as, head bowed, face hidden behind her wedding veil, glided down the aisle, holding the arm of her proud father.

A woman running late quietly sat down in the last pew and leaned forward to watch the ceremony.

“Dearly beloved,” the minister intoned. The warmth of the afternoon sun and the heavy fragrance of the blooms was having a sleepy effect on the congregation.

“...and if there is anyone here who has reason why this wedding should not proceed. Let them speak now, or forever hold their peace.” The minister paused and glanced at the congregation.

“Yes, I do. I have a reason why this marriage should not proceed” a voice from the back of the church called.

“What!” the minister’s jaw dropped in astonishment.

Heads turned, staring at the woman walking down the aisle and who now stood in front of the bridal pair. Whispers started from the congregation, growing louder. “Who is she? What did she say? What’s happening?”

Jeffrey’s face was chalk white as he stared at the newcomer. Tania looked from Jeffrey to the woman and back to Jeffrey before asking “Do you know her, Jeffrey? Well, do you?”

“Answer your bride, Jeffrey” the woman said. “Tell her who I am.”

Jeffrey’s mouth opened several times but no sound came out. His gaze slid from one woman to the other.

“I’m sorry to spoil your wedding day,” the stranger said to Tania. “My name is Lenore Delaney. I am Jeffrey’s legal wife.”

“But Jeffrey never said he’d been married,” said Tania.

“And still is” Lenore answered.

“Oh, Mum,” wailed Tania turning and running to her parents.

Tania’s brothers reacted quickly. “Outside Jeffrey” they said grabbing the groom and frog-marching him toward the door. “We have something to discuss with you.”

oOo

Pauline ran her left hand down the long, white satin skirt while she studied her reflection. Her well-formed breasts swelled and thrust out as she took a deep breath. Fascinated by her reflection, she pirouetted and watched the long satin skirt swirl before the weight of the pearls at the hemline settled it back into place. It’s a beautiful dress, she thought. I wonder who wore it before.

Pauline played with the pearls at the neckline as she watched her image. Too bad it’s only for him, she thought. She smiled at her reflection. The old fool can’t last forever though. As long as I play the dutiful wife and keep him happy until he kicks the bucket the money will be all mine. Who says you can’t have it all, she gloated.

Turning to the assistant, Pauline said “Yes. I’ll take this one.”

“Oh, madam looks wonderful in it” the assistant gushed as she helped Pauline out of the gown. “That dress fits as if it was made for you.”

Pauline nodded her mind already on other things.

“Well, my dear. Did you find your wedding dress?” the old man asked when Pauline entered the room. Smiling, she nodded and kissed his cheek as she sat down beside him. “I hope you’ll let me buy it for you. It’s not every day a woman gets married.”

“Oh, Malcolm, don’t be upset with me, but I wanted to purchase my own wedding gown.” Plenty of time to spend big on me after we’re married Pauline thought.

She took his hand and looked at it. Her thumb traced the bony ridges showing through the thin, parchment like skin of the back of his hand. With all that’s wrong with him, I wonder how much longer he’ll last, she mused.

Malcolm patted her hand. “You’ve given me a new lease on life,” he said.

Oh, yes, she thought. Just wait until you see the ‘equipment’ I’ve bought for our wedding night. If you survive the first week of our marriage, you deserve to keep all your money.

“Now my lawyer, Charles, will be here tomorrow with the marriage celebrant. Are you sure you don’t have anyone to invite to our wedding?”

Pauline shook her head. Not likely, she thought. I’m not letting my bloodsucking relatives know I’m marrying money.

“Then Charles and Mrs Turner will be our witnesses.”

Pauline smiled. “You are so capable Malcolm. You think of everything.”

“And I have a little wedding present for you, my dear. It was to be a surprise but I want to share it with you now. I instructed Charles to draw up a contract and bring it with him for my signature.”

“No, Malcolm. It isn’t necessary” Pauline murmured.

“I know. I know” he said. “But tomorrow you will have a sizeable blue-chip portfolio of property and shares as my wedding present to you.”

“Oh, Malcolm” she whispered. “You are so good to me.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Oh, boy, she thought. Santa’s coming early.

Pauline was awake before her alarm rang. She lay in bed and smiled as she looked at her wedding dress. No more second-hand, cast-off clothes for me, she thought. Her mind wandered to the luxury she would indulge in after she became Mrs Malcolm Granger.

Insistent tapping on her door brought her out of her reverie as the housekeeper, Mrs Turner, hurried in. “Oh, Nurse Andrews, Rueben said to bring you right away to Mr Granger’s room. The doctor is already on his way.”

Pauline hurried after Mrs Tuner. “What is the matter with Malcolm? Has he had another turn? Why didn’t someone call me sooner?”

Mrs Turner was flustered and near tears. “Rueben brought Mr Granger his early morning tea, like he always does. It was he who found ...”

Pauline rushed to Malcolm. She felt for his pulse. Then she put her ear to his chest, but she already knew. Malcolm was cold, very cold; as cold as death. Pauline rested her head on his body and wept.

“I will notify My Granger’s lawyer of the tragedy” Rueben said. “He will attend to matters.”

Pauline hardly heard him. “Oh, Malcolm, you said you loved me. Couldn’t you have waited another day” she whispered.

o0o

The assistant’s eyes opened wide and her jaw dropped as she stared at the two walking into the store.

Oh, it’s Ronald McDonald, she thought relieved. It must be some sort of promotion. Then she looked at the other male. He thrust his pelvis provocatively toward her as she stared at the bulge in his very small, very tight purple leather shorts.

“Like what you’re seeing?” he asked and blew her a kiss. Shocked, her gaze quickly swung to his friend.

“Why, you’re not Ronald McDonald,” she accused.

“No!” he said, feigning surprise. He touched his lime green calf length satin pants. “Would Ronald be as well dressed as me?” he asked.

“Well you’ve got the same hair colouring as him” she retorted.

“But he can’t cook hamburgers, dearie, and doesn’t like children” his friend said. “No, we’ve come to select a gown. Well, Nigel has. I’m going to help him.”

“What! Is this some sort of joke?”

“No, it’s no joke. We’re going to the Gay Mardi Gras in Sydney and we’re on a float. I’m going as a fairy queen. I’ve found my dress, a lovely pink frothy one. Now we’re looking for Nigel. He wants to be a bride.”

“You can’t hire one of our gowns.” The assistant was outraged. These are for proper brides. Not for some ... some I won’t hire you one. You’ll have to go as something else.”

“Ohhh, did you hear that, Nigel?” He blew the assistant a kiss. “Well, you’ve got no choice, dearie. The law says you must.” Frustrated and angry the woman watched as a gown was selected.

That night the assistant and her flatmate were eating pizza and watching the procession on TV. “I don’t care what you say Leslie that dress is not going back on the racks.” She reached for her glass of wine. “They were both so ...so... well, you know. I couldn’t hire that gown out again without thinking of them.”

“Then you do what you feel is best, Magda” her flatmate said, running her long, red fingernail up her friend’s thigh. “You always do what is right.”



The Séance.



'The Séance' was created as an exercise in humour. I have been to séances and the scene as is described could be a factual portrayal of almost any one of them.

oOo

“Is this the place we’re looking for?” Ruby asked peering with one eye through a narrow gap in the tall wooden fence. Her view was limited by the size of the gap and what appeared to be the spindly branches of a conifer growing against the fence on the other side. Looking beyond the long, narrow, overgrown front yard and a curving row of tall trees separating the yard down the middle she could just make out the outline of a dark brick Federation style cottage. I’ve got a bad feeling about this place, Ruby thought. I hope Pauline knows what she is doing. Turning to her friend she asked “Are you sure this is the place?”

Pauline reread the address on the slip of paper she was holding and looked again at the numbers painted on the fence. “Yes, number 61. This is it. Come on.” The rusting hinges on the gate squeaked a protest as Pauline eased it open and stepped into the yard. Taking a deep breath Ruby slowly followed.

Dark conifers on either side of the cracked concrete path leaned toward each other creating a tunnel of greenery to the old house, forcing the two women to walk single file up the narrow path. Ruby moved closer to Pauline, trying to shelter her large body behind her friend’s smaller one as they walked toward the front door.

Pauline stopped and Ruby bumped into her. “Ruby, what’s the matter with you? You’re closer to me than my shadow. If you want to walk in my footsteps, let me get out of them first” she said.

“Sorry,” Ruby mumbled. The poorly lit, funnel effect created by the foliage made her nervous. It feels like we’re entering into the Twilight Zone, she thought. Oh, I really hope Pauline knows what she’s getting us into.

Pauline pressed the brass button on the front door and a faint ring echoed somewhere inside. Pauline smiled at her friend. “Well, it’s our first time and we made it” she said. “Aren’t you excited?”

Before Ruby could answer the door was flung open and a small, thin woman, about sixty years of age stood there. “Welcome, ladies. Do come in” she said graciously. Her quick movement as she stepped aside caused the skirt of her mottled brown chiffon layered dress to swirl against her legs.

“Is this is your first time to one of our meetings?” she asked. Before either woman could reply she went on “I thought so. I never forget a face. My name is Lavinia Cook. And you are - of course; Pauline and Ruby. Yes, I took your phone call saying you’d be coming. Welcome ladies. Now, if you’ll just follow me we will join the rest of our little assembly.”

The two women were led into a room where about fifteen people were standing about in small groups, chatting. They looked up as the women entered and, not recognising Pauline and Ruby, smiled absently at them, and went on with their conversations.

“Do make yourself known” Lavinia said. “You’ll find we’re all friendly, here. I would introduce you, but until Enid starts our séance, I’m rostered on door duty tonight. Gracious me! There goes the front door bell. I must away”. And, with a small tinkling laugh, she hurried off, leaving Pauline and Ruby to their own devices.

“So, what do you think?” Pauline asked.

“Well, I have to admit, it all looks ... normal” Ruby said, glancing around.

“What did you expect? Pointed black hats and cauldrons,” laughed Pauline.

Ruby shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never been to a séance before.”

“Oooh! Then be careful when they turn the lights out” teased Pauline. Her blue eyes twinkled.

“Oh, they’re not going to turn the lights out, are they?” protested Ruby. “I’m telling you now Pauline, I’m leaving if they do.”

“Then we really will have things that go bump in the night,” laughed Pauline. She patted Ruby’s arm. “Relax” she said. “They’ve got to turn the lights out.”

“Why?” demanded Ruby.

“It’s a well-known fact” Pauline said. “Spirits don’t materialise in a lit room; something to do with the ectoplasm.”

Ruby opened her mouth to ask what ectoplasm was, and then thought better of it. “I don’t know why I come with you to these places” she complained. “You’re always getting us into trouble. Why can’t we go to the movies like everyone else?”

“Variety is the spice of life,” said Pauline. She thought for a moment. “You know what your trouble is, Ruby. You’ve got to live a little. You’re too timid. Anyway, as for getting us into trouble, was it me that asked at that Hare Krishna banquet if the little puffy things were meat balls?”

“How was I to know they didn’t eat meat?” protested Ruby.

“Well, what about that very masculine wax figure, hmmm?” Pauline grinned as she looked at Ruby. “You nearly had us thrown out because of that episode.”

“Well, the flowers draped over him were real” mumbled Ruby. “They confused me.”

“Want me to continue?” teased Pauline.

Ruby’s lips curved in a silent “NO!” She turned away from Pauline and gazed around the large room. A flickering gas fire in a nearby grate caught her attention. Then her gaze shifted to the picture of Jesus hanging above it, hands outstretched in supplication, as if apologising for the feeble flame. He wouldn’t be hanging here if they were into voodoo, hoodoo, she thought, comforted by His image.

Ruby scanned the rest of the room. A well worn, old-fashioned three-piece burgundy velvet lounge suite, a heavy oak sideboard and assorted bric-a-brac completed the permanent furnishings. She glanced to the middle of the room where twenty white plastic chairs were positioned around a large brass crucifix sitting on the floor. Hope they don’t have sacrifices, thought Ruby. Looking at the elderly faces in the room she giggled to Pauline. “Not many vestal virgins here.”

Pauline stared at her friend. “Sometimes I worry about you, Ruby, I really do.”

A well-built, middle-aged woman glanced at a tiny watch on her wrist. She clapped her hands to attract attention. Everyone stopped talking and looked at her. “Thank you” she said, smiling. “I think everyone has arrived now so if you take your places, we can start our meeting.”

“She must be Enid, the medium” whispered Pauline to Ruby as they joined the others on the circle of chairs around the crucifix.

Enid waited for everyone to settle. “Welcome,” she said. Her voice was cultured, theatrical. “We have come together to make contact with those in spirit who wish to communicate with us.” She looked at the circle of rapt faces staring back at her. “To raise the vibrations in the room and make it more harmonious for our unseen visitors, we’ll start the evening with that lovely old hymn, ‘God be with us ‘till we meet again’” she said.

Taking a deep breath that thrust her ample bosom out, Enid led the group in song. “Till we meee...ee...eet. Till we meee...ee...eet. God be with us till we meet again.” The thin reedy voices of the elderly ladies struggled for the high notes of the hymn.

Ruby watched fascinated as a woman across from her extended her scrawny neck upward to its limit, her gaze tilted heavenward as if searching for the elusive sounds. Nudging Pauline, Ruby leaned toward her. “Like a roomful of badly tuned bagpipes” she giggled.

“Shhh, they’ll hear you” Pauline whispered, elbowing her friend to keep quiet.

The hymn ended and Enid spoke. “All join hands to form an unbroken circle,” she said. “We’ll say the ‘The Lord’s Prayer,’ then follow with a prayer of blessings and wait for the first spirit to contact us. Everyone, eyes closed and head bowed, please.” There was a charged feeling of excitement and anticipation in the room.

Uneasy, Ruby opened one eye and quickly scanned the faces of the people grouped in the circle.

Pauline nudged her. “Eyes closed, Ruby,” she whispered.

Someone tiptoed over to the door and flicked the light off. The faint glow from the heater cast eerie shadows into the silent room. Ruby kept her eyes shut. Anything touches me and they’ll get a ghost all right, she thought. Mine, as I die of fright.

Everyone was quiet, heads bowed, eyes closed, waiting.

“Great Scott! What’s that?” Enid thundered, shattering the silence.

Ruby jumped, her eyes flicking open at the loud, unexpected noise. Chills rocketed up her spine as she saw that everyone was staring at her. “Pauline...” she whimpered.

“At last, after all these years I can see an aura” a frail old lady whispered. Tears ran in rivulets down her cheeks.

“Rubbish! It’s nothing of the sort” Enid said, glaring at Ruby.

“Pauline ...” Ruby’s voice quavered. “Oh please! Tell me there isn’t. – Oh, get my brown paper bag out of my handbag. Quick! I’m starting to hyperventilate.”

Enid stomped over and stood in front of Ruby. “How dare you ruin our evening” she thundered. Ruby moaned at the onslaught and wheezed short fast breathes into her paper bag. Pointing to the door Enid yelled “Now, get out, you ... you ... disbelievers, and never come back.”

Ruby and Pauline fled.

Outside Pauline burst out laughing. “Okay, tell me how you did it.”

“What?”

“That on your skin; what is it?” asked Pauline.

Ruby looked down. A faint fluorescent glow emanated from her hands. Surprised, she turned her hand over several times, looking. “It’s as if I’m wearing gloves” she said, intrigued.

Pauline rummaged in her handbag and pulled out a compact. “Here,” she said as she flipped it open and handed it to Ruby. “See. It’s on your face too.”

Ruby tilted her head and studied her image in the small mirror.

“Is it a kid’s paint that only shows in darkness?” asked Pauline.

Ruby shook her head, absorbed in her reflection.

“Well then,” demanded Pauline. “What is it?”

Ruby glanced up. “I’ve never seen it before. I wonder if it’s the phosphorous health tablets I’ve been taking lately. They said one three times a day, but I thought, if three were good, six would be better.”

“That wouldn’t have you lighting up like a Christmas tree.”

“Well, actually I have been taking twelve a day” admitted Ruby. “Sometimes more if I forget how many I’ve taken.”

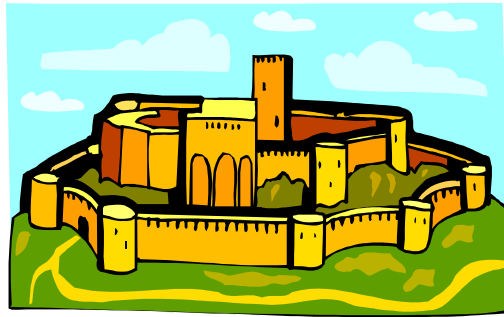
Pauline shook her head. “You’ve excelled yourself this time Ruby,” she said. “And how are we going to get you home? If someone sees you, they’ll have a heart attack. Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. Just walk three paces behind me and pretend we’re not together.”

Pauline set off at a brisk pace. “And stop smiling!” she said as she glanced back at Ruby. “You look like a grinning skull.”

Good! thought Ruby. And maybe next time our excitement will be at the movies and not at all these wacky gatherings Pauline likes to go to. Her grin widened.



The Lesson.



This story is an adult's fairy tale and, like all fairy tales, has a moral to it.

oOo

Once upon a time, a long time ago, in a far-off land, there lived a kind, wise old king. Now this king wasn't perfect, but he didn't suffer fools gladly and he had a very bad temper. Still, he was a philosopher who admired learning. So from far and wide all manner of educated and interesting people came to his small kingdom to share their knowledge and, in appreciation, he would reward them with a purse full of gold – and sometimes precious jewels too.

He would sit on his golden throne, with his counsellors, members of the royal court and gentry around him in the great hall of the palace, all listening and nodding in understanding, or wonderment, at the learned men who graced their fair kingdom. One especially fine day one of the king's men hurried into the great hall to notify him that a wise man had wandered into their kingdom seeking an audience with their king.

At the time, the king was playing chess with Sir Rodney, his sister's only son and was finding it hard going. He liked Sir Rodney well enough, but the problem was the boy took after his father's side of the family, who everyone knew were a few knights short of a tournament.

“Show him in” bellowed the king, glad of the diversion.

The stranger, barefoot, his body wrapped in saffron cheesecloth robes, entered, and, flanked by six of the royal guards, walked up the centre of the hall, oblivious to the curious stares of the court.

From his seat on a raised marble platform the king watched the wise man approach. “Welcome,” the king said smiling to the silver bearded old man who now stood before him.

The stranger bowed low. “It is an honor to be here, your majesty.” An aura of peace and serenity radiated from him and the king was impressed.

“What is your name, wise man, and what gives you your air of peace?” asked the king.

“I am known as Maharani. I have dedicated my life to knowledge, specializing in all forms of concentration and mind control your majesty” the wise man replied. “Mind control is how I attained peace”

“By controlling your mind?”

“Yes, your majesty. And my mind now controls my body to the extent that I do not age or feel pain.”

Lord Morgan, the Prime Minister, was standing behind the throne. “Impossible,” he muttered on hearing these words.

A half smile played around the mouth of Maharani. “Perhaps you would like to see a demonstration of my mind control?” he asked.

“I would indeed,” said the king.

Drawing a long needle and thread from the top of his robes, the wise man held it up for all to see. Then, breathing slowly and deeply, he pointed the fingers of his free hand toward his body and moved them up and down his torso. His eyes glazed, stared unseeing and, focused inwardly, Maharani plunged the needle into his right cheek, pushed it through his face and pulled it out the other side. The onlookers gasped in astonishment.

“Look,” cried Sir Rodney. “There is no blood seeping as he moves the thread backward and forward.”

Lady Agnetha moaned, her gaze slid upward and she fainted.

Lord Morgan recovered his wits first. “He’s using trickery,” he said, not bothering to lower his voice. “It’s a fake needle.”

Unperturbed, Maharani withdrew the needle and thread before asking, “If I could please have a lit candle, your majesty?” The king nodded and a servant whisked a candle off a nearby table and hurried with it to the wise man.

Holding his extended bared left arm on the flame Maharani said “I will stop the flesh of my left arm from burning. Watch.” The great hall was silent as everyone craned forward to see what was happening.

“He’s held it on his arm for ages” somebody whispered. “Can anyone smell his flesh burning?”

Maharani handed the candle to the servant and, extending his arm asked, “Perhaps your majesty would like a closer inspection?”

“I can see well enough from where you stand,” said the king. Leaning forward he acknowledged, “There is no mark on your arm.”

“Then perhaps you would like to see my other arm?” Maharani exposed his right arm showing a fresh fierce red burn.

There were gasps of surprise and horror from the onlookers. “

“Ooh, that looks painful,” said Sir Rodney, rubbing his arm in sympathy.

“How did you burn one arm, yet have the damage on the other?” asked the King in wonderment.

“By my mind controlling my body. I focused my concentration and told my left arm a gentle breeze was moving under it,” Maharani said. “I did not feel the flame. Nor, do I suffer any ill effects from the burn to my right arm.”

The king stroked his beard as he listened.

“In India, where I studied, it is what Sufis do,” explained Maharani. “They have such mastery over their mind, such perfect power of concentration, they are able to control their body to do whatever they want, to the exclusion of all else. As an example, they can be buried alive for days and when dug up will still be alive and well.”

Lord Morgan burst out laughing, then quickly coughed and looked away.

“Watch,” said Maharani, pointing to his damaged arm. Focusing on it, he started to breathe deeply, slowly and rhythmically and, to the onlooker’s astonishment, the arm healed, leaving no mark.

“How did he do that?” whispered Sir Rodney.

“Trickery” sneered Lord Morgan. “A cheap magician’s trick.”

Maharani smiled “Perhaps you would like to try it?” he said and gestured toward the candle.

“I’m not a magician” said Lord Morgan, stepping back.

“I think that is enough,” said the king, glaring at Lord Morgan. Turning, he addressed Maharani. “You are welcomed to stay as a guest in my palace. I would like to hear of your travels and learn more about mind power.”

“As you wish,” said the wise man, bowing low.

The king waited for Maharani to leave the great hall before turning on Lord Morgan. “You disgraced me and brought shame on our kingdom.” he blazed. “You inferred that we were imbeciles being duped by a magician.”

“But, sire, nobody could have such concentration, such mind power, to be able to control their body like that. It had to be trickery.”

“Silence!” the king roared. He clicked his fingers and six of the royal guards hurried over and stood before him. “Take Lord Morgan out and chop his head off.” He said.

Appalled, Lord Morgan collapsed at the feet of his king. “Mercy, sire” he sobbed. “I meant no harm. Don’t have me beheaded. ”

The king tapped his fingers on the golden arm of his throne and studied his prime minister. “Very well,” he said to the snivelling heap at his feet. “If you can perform a simple task I set you, I will spare your life. If not,” the king slid his finger across his throat.

Lord Morgan blanched. “Anything, sire,” he babbled.

Pointing to a large golden saucer-shaped fruit bowl on a nearby table, the king instructed the guards, “Take Lord Morgan to the well. Fill that container to the brim with water and give it to him. You are to accompany him around the inner wall of the palace courtyard. Watch him carefully. He is not to stop and if he spills even a single drop, you are to behead him then and there. Report back to me when he is finished.”

He looked at Lord Morgan, “...one way, or the other.”

Shoulders stooped, feet dragging, Lord Morgan was taken away.

The sun was starting to set in the west when Lord Morgan staggered in, haggard, exhausted, and collapsed at his king’s feet.

“We did as you instructed, your majesty,” one of the guards said, standing to attention before the throne. “We watched carefully and can report he did not spill a single drop of water.”

The king looked down at the prostrate form of his prime minister. “And what did you experience while you were carrying the water?” he asked him.

Lord Morgan’s blood-shot eyes gazed into his king’s face. “Nothing sire. I knew my life depended on not spilling any of the water and I concentrated so hard that, time, everything else, except that bowl of water ceased to exist for me.”

“And did you learn anything from this experience?”

“I learned that it is possible to control your mind and body by focused concentration if your motive is strong enough.”

“And what I gave you was the motivation,” the king said satisfied. He tapped his prime minister on the top of his head. “You also learned it is not wise to open your mouth when you don’t know what you are talking about.”

Lord Morgan hung his head and said nothing.



The Gargoyles of Hagalaz Castle.



This story is slightly more gothic but still an adult fairy story. It deals with betrayal and was inspired by a picture of gargoyles on a castle wall.

oOo

She sat alone staring into the flickering gold and orange flame of the torch in front of her. A greenish/blue smoke rose sluggishly from its centre, drifted up and disappeared into the high stone ceiling of the castle. Eerie shadows moved a slow macabre march along the tapestry draped walls of the huge room.

Queen Beatrice had banished everyone from her chamber so she could be alone to invoke her magic. Only, Merwinna, the young maid from their homeland stayed, sitting silent on cushions in a dark corner - forgotten by Beatrice while she stared intently into the flame.

The flame hissed and flared as more of the fine jade powder was sprinkled over it. Secret, ancient incantations that had been passed from mother to daughter down the royal bloodline were softly chanted by Beatrice, invoking unseen forces.

A rancid, sickly-sweet smell oozed from the torch permeated the huge room and a wall tapestry nearby billowed and moved as if by some unseen force. Terrified, Merwinna wrapped her arms over her ears and buried her face into her folded knees.

Slowly, bit by bit, an image formed in the flames. The Queen saw her husband, Leopold, leading his men. She smiled as the image became clearer, the golden eagle insignia on his white tabard worn over his armour now completely in focus. Then the flame flickered and she frowned. As the flame settled it focussed on the shape of a thickset, dark-haired man riding a black war horse.

Beatrice stared. By Odin's beard! she swore. It's that treacherous dog, Earl Doroff. Silently she watched the image unfolding. Four abreast his army marched, the flickering flame from the torch making their chain mail armour glitter. The scene changed again and the earl and his men were at the drawbridge of the castle.

The flame flickered and another picture emerged. It was of the great banquet hall and the visitors were being wined, dined and entertained at the long wooden tables. Everyone was laughing and happy as they gorged on the feast and drank tankards of mead.

Queen Beatrice looked at the image of herself sitting on her throne beside Earl Doroff. She watched him observing her out the corner of his eye, a sly, secret smile on his face. Slowly, one by one, she saw the inhabitants of the castle start to fall into a drunken stupor.

Suddenly the earl stood and raised his right fist. It was a signal to his men. Withdrawing hidden daggers from their clothing, they speedily went about butchering the defenceless inhabitants. She saw the earl's sneering face over hers

and the glint of the thin blade of his dagger as it slashed down toward her throat. The torch sputtered; its flame dying suddenly and with it all the images.

Beatrice sat; her jaw clenched. “That will never be”, she said. “Blood will flow, but it won’t be ours. I will summon my spirits”.

“Remember, Beatrice” a voice from the void rasped. “To command the unseen forces is not without peril. For every drop of blood spilt of your enemies, so yours will be forfeited tenfold.”

“But how can I stop this carnage without a drop of blood being shed”, she demanded? There was no reply.

Rising quickly Beatrice clapped her hands together to summon her maid. “Quick! Fetch Lord Godwin. At once” she ordered.

Curtsying, Merwinna fled from the room.

I need to be careful, Beatrice thought. Queen or not, these ignorant peasants could still burn me at the stake as a witch. They will never accept me, she admitted, but no matter. My gods have shown me many times where my duty lies. And I have followed my duty and come to this strange land to marry its leader as had been foretold.

She touched her swollen belly and smiled. And soon the next part of the prophecy will be fulfilled when I bear from my loins the son who, once a man will wield such power as to unite and reign sovereign over the land. One who will spawn a great lineage and live a long and glorious life. Yes, I am content with that.

“Remember, all of the prophecy, Beatrice” the unseen voice whispered. “No blood is to be spilt for the prophecy to come true and your son to rise to greatness.”

Beatrice frowned. “But how can I achieve this?” she asked into the darkness. Again, silence was her reply.

Beatrice touched her swollen belly. I need to plan very carefully, she thought.

Lord Godwin listened as his queen recalled her terrible dream. If he had not just received word from one of their sentries that the earl and an army of his men were marching toward the castle, he would have dismissed what was just said as the fanciful illusions of a pregnant woman.

He had heard the castle gossip about this beautiful foreign queen. Indeed, one of his duties was to listen and report all to the king any strange activities so that any plots or insurgences could be speedily dealt with.

He groaned inwardly. Ever since she had arrived at the castle as a bride for King Leopold there had been whispered gossip about her and her strange foreign powers, but none had ever dared speak outright about them. It was felt by all that it didn’t pay to meddle in what wasn’t of this world nor with anyone who did. It might have been his duty to report to the King, but to mention that the whole royal court thought his queen is a sorceress could very swiftly have him, as the bearer of the news, heading for the chopping block.

He broke the silence in the room. “My lady, what are we to do?” he asked. “We only have a force of two hundred men to protect the castle and they are here only because they are too old or feeble to go to the battlefields” he reminded her.

“Well, protect the castle we must, or when our king and his noblemen return weary from war, they will have to wage another conflict to reclaim their castle” she said.

“The earl seeks to take advantage of the situation. He does not believe we can protect ourselves.” She smiled a thin, mirthless smile. “He is unaware that we are prepared for his act of treachery. We will show him and other carrion dogs like him that we can, and will, protect all that is ours.”

It seemed to Lord Godwin that she spoke, not to him, but to some unseen force also in the room. He remembered again the whispered stories about her and clutched tight to his cross amulet as his lips moved in silent prayer.

“Tell no-one of what has transpired in this room” she commanded. The old man nodded. Whatever sorcery was being planned; he did not want to know about it. And to speak of it – he would sooner have his tongue cut out!

“Leave me now. I need time alone to prepare” she said. Still nodding, the prime minister backed away and, turning almost fell over in his haste to escape from the room.

The earl rode into the castle and he and his men were welcomed by the excited inhabitants. It had been seven long months since their king and all the fighting men of the castle had gone to war. The earl’s arrival meant a banquet in the great hall. Servants rushed off to quickly prepare for the festivities. Kegs of mead were rolled out. Pigs and sheep were slaughtered and readied for the spit.

There was immense ribaldry and boisterousness in the great hall that night. Everyone was laughing and merry making as they gorged on the feast and got drunk on tankards of mead. Beatrice looked around. Everything was just as it had been shown. Everything, she corrected, except for the small, jewelled casket on the table in front of her. Each time the earl asked what it contained Beatrice just smiled and answered “A surprise, my lord. All will be revealed before the cock crows midnight.”

It was now nearing midnight and Beatrice was tense. If she failed all would die. She gently stroked her stomach and sighed.

Suddenly Earl Doroff stood up. He had lost patience with the queen’s promises of a surprise, but before he could raise his hand to signal his men, Beatrice spoke.

“Be seated my lord” she said. “It is now time for your promised surprise.” Leaning forward the queen opened the small casket in front of her. Earl Doroff leaned over to peer inside.

“No, my lord, you will see nothing within but a fine powder” Beatrice said. “But to someone with the knowledge of how to activate it, it offers great power. Look” she said and, lifting a candle closer, sprinkled some of the powder onto the flame before whispering an incantation. The flame spluttered and flared as multicolored vibrant sparks of purple, red, green, blue and gold disgorged into the room and floated to the ceiling. Everyone gasped at this sudden unexpected display. More powder onto the flame brought forth stronger colours, illuminating the vast hall.

Earl Doroff tried to move but found himself immobilised, held captive by some unseen force. Only his eyes moved and his look of swaggering assurance was now replaced with a look of apprehension as he saw that his men were also held fast. His gaze slid around to the castle inhabitants. They seemed to have fallen into a deep sleep or some state of unconsciousness. Fearful, his gaze slid back to Beatrice.

“My lord,” she said, and her voice was cold. “You and your men came to us in the guise of friendship and we welcomed you, but in your black heart you sought to conquer and take this castle as your own.”

Beatrice slipped a gold locket from around her neck and flicked it open. Earl Doroff’s gaze followed her every movement. Carefully she extracted a good-sized pinch of a red powder.

“Behold!” she said throwing the powder onto the flame. It flared and belched forth a dark smoky haze that quickly spread to the ceiling where it separated into indistinct silhouettes that quickly dropped toward the floor and began forming into solid shapes. A stricken gurgle sounded in Earl Doroff’s throat as the shapes became clear and he was confronted with hordes of fierce looking warriors.

“As you see my lord, we are not defenceless. Observe who protects our castle” Beatrice said pointing toward the warriors. “And tonight you and your men will swell their ranks.”

Silently the apparitions swept around the room completely enveloping the earl and his terrified men. Then, as one, they rose up and disappeared back into the castle stonework taking the interlopers with them.

Beatrice whispered another incantation as she sprinkled more powder onto the flame. All traces that their enemy was ever at the castle were obliterated - all except for the gargoyle statues guarding the palace walls. Each misshapen effigy now contained one of the earl's men, trapped forever in stone, while the larger gargoyle over the drawbridge housed the earl.

Beatrice smiled. When everyone awakens, they will have no memory of the earl ever having been here, she thought. They will think we have been celebrating the news of the successes of our king and his armies over our enemy. Even Lord Godwin will have forgotten what transpired today.

Beatrice gently touched her swollen stomach. "We have won, my son" she said. "And all without a drop of blood being spilt. Now the rest of the prophecy can be fulfilled." Yawning, she stood up. "But first, we need to rest. It has been a long, successful day."



The Fog.



This story was a reminiscence of the fogs that often hung low on the mountains between the city and the country area where I used to live. At these times traveling between the two areas in the dark was a nightmare as the road and all the familiar landmarks were blanketed in a thick, white fog.

oOo

Jo rested her head against the window while she waited. The car in front had stopped to let the bus into the slow-moving traffic, forcing the line of cars behind to stop too. The earlier heavy downpour had cleared and Jo glanced out of the car, her gaze wandering to the patterns made by the oncoming headlights on the still wet roadway. She sighed. It's been a long day, and I'll be glad to get home, she thought.

Fish and Chips – the neon lights flashed red and green patterns around the sign above the take-away. Nearby, two boys dressed in black jeans and T-shirts wrestled on the footpath in front of the shop. They laughed and scuffled, each trying to topple the other. One boy managed to hook a leg between the feet of the other, causing him to lose his balance, dragging his mate over with him.

Jo watched as both boys crashed against a round, white plastic table in front of the take-away. The shopkeeper inside glared at them and banged on the glass as a warning. They gave him the two-finger sign and ran off laughing.

Jo eased her car through the inner-city streets in the line of slow-moving traffic. I shouldn't have stayed so late with Kathy, she thought. It's so hard to know what to say when someone has suffered a bereavement. We try to do and say all the right things but we wrap an emotional cocoon around ourselves for protection – as if death is some contagious disease and we might catch it. At least Mum's illness prepared us all for when she wouldn't be here and we had a chance to say our good-byes to her.

Jo grimaced. Poor Kathy. One morning she was kissing Tony as he left for work. The next thing the police were at her front door telling her about his fatal car crash. The shock and the suddenness of it all really got to her and she admitted today that she felt guilty because she had never told him how much he really meant to her. She said if she could have just one wish in life it would be to somehow let Tony know how she felt about him. Jo sighed. Fat chance of that now. Once you're gone, you're gone. It's better to accept it, like we did with Mum and get on with life.

The bus in front of Jo pulled into the kerb and Jo flicked an indicator to signal her intention to pass. Nope, she thought as she saw the line of oncoming headlights. I'm stuck here until the bus moves. A few seconds later, the bus flashed its indicator and pulled out into the traffic.

Jo's mind wandered to home. Thank heavens Frank had been so understanding when I rang and said I'd be late, she thought. He said he'd take care of tea and put the kids to bed.

Jo sighed. Frank and the kids; my anchors to sanity. I'd be lost without them. Poor Kathy. What will she do? She has no family. Tony was her life.

I know! I'll invite her up to have a holiday with us. A change of scenery might help a bit – and enable her to get a clearer idea on what she wants to do.

The traffic thinned the further Jo drove out of the built-up areas until, one by one, the houses and streetlights disappeared. She flicked the high beam on, lighting up the road. Tall trees at the side of the road appeared to her as dark, brooding shapes, silhouetted by the moon. Uneasy, she wound the driver's window up and pressed the central locking switch, sealing herself in. I'll be glad to get home. I don't like driving alone in the bush at night, she thought.

The car beams cutting through the darkness, the constant hum of the engine and the monotony of the driving had a hypnotic effect. Her mind started to wander and she yawned and tried to concentrate on the drive. This is the most boring bit of the whole trip. The flat heath land on top of the escarpment with nothing to break the monotony, she thought. Jo glanced out the side windows. Boy, I'd hate to get car trouble here. There isn't a house for miles.

She flicked the radio on and pressed the buttons, searching for a talkback program. "Sorry, Dean. I'm not in the mood for singing. Another time, perhaps," she said as she tried a few more stations. Just my luck; it's all music, she thought and flicked the radio off.

Suddenly Jo stiffened. What was that? Someone just squeezed the side of my seat! Jo quickly flicked her gaze toward the seat, then toward the rear-view mirror. Her mouth had gone dry and her heart was thumping so hard it felt as if it was going to bang its way out of her chest. There's someone here with me and whoever it is must be hiding on the floor behind me. What'll I do? she thought.

Waves of fear shot up her spine, threatening to overwhelm her. Don't panic, she told herself as she fought for control of her emotions. You've got to think your way out of this.

Jo took a deep breath. Okay, this is what I'll do. If I'm grabbed, I'll pound the accelerator as hard as I can and aim for a tree. I'm the only one with a seat belt on and hopefully I'll be able to get out okay and I'll take to the bush and hide until someone comes along, sees the smashed car and calls the police.

Well then, let's force the issue and see who is hiding here she thought and swung her left arm back. Her left hand groped into the void behind the seat and felt –nothing!

Pent up tension exploded out of Jo with her exhaling breath and she gave a feeble laugh. Driving alone in the bush has really given you the heebie-jeebies she chided herself.

Jo hadn't noticed how icy cold the interior of the car had become. Shivering, she turned the heater on. She waited a few minutes and when the temperature didn't change, she turned to heater up to full. Still the interior stayed icy.

Without warning, tentacles of mist appeared, swirling around the car, the vaporous gases thickening, obliterating everything outside. The road vanished and, with it, the white roadside markers and the landscape.

Jo peered into the fog trying to see. Her car's high beam reflected back, blinding her so she quickly dimmed them and the glare softened.

Where do I go? I can't see a thing. Gripping the wheel tightly, she stared into the fog. I don't have a clue where I am, or where the road is. She turned on the windscreen wipers. They squeaked a sluggish protest as they moved across the dry glass. Useless, she thought disgusted, and switched them off.

Jo eased her foot off the accelerator to slow the car to a crawl. What'll I do now? If I stop any other cars coming along could run into me, but if I keep going – the wheels crunched on the gravel at the side of the road and Jo panicked, swinging the wheel to the right until she found the road again. Her heart pounded and there was tension pressure in her ears.

Steering with one hand at a time, Jo wiped her moist hands down the side of her skirt. Car don't fail me now, she pleaded.

The world outside was eerie – frightening – alien. She was driving by sound alone along the flat surface. Her eyes ached as she focussed; trying to tune her body to every nuance to help her get through the thick cloud that engulfed her car.

Her thoughts flashed to her family. I wish I was home with them. The kids will be in bed by now and Frank will be sitting in front of the tellie, the loose pages of the Sunday papers spread all around him while he watches a movie. He won't know about the fog here.

The tyres crunched on the gravel and Jo adjusted the steering until she felt the smooth surface of the bitumen under the car once more. I'm scared, she admitted. Truly scared. I've never felt so alone in my life, and there's no one who can help me.

“There are lights ahead. Follow them and you will be alright.” Jo blinked; her concentration broken. Somebody just spoke! But before she had time to think about it her attention shifted to where she could just see two pinpricks of red light in the fog.

Hah, another car! Jo breathed a sigh of relief and accelerated as much as she dared, to catch up. Both cars kept at a steady seventy kilometres an hour and after the slow speed she had been doing Jo felt uneasy. We're going too fast for the conditions, but I daren't lose sight of those tail-lights. Those lights and the bonnet of my car are all I can see in the fog.

Overwrought, Jo giggled. I hope that driver knows the road well. If he goes off the road, I'll automatically follow him off.

She tried to cheer herself up. Hey, the light at the end of the tunnel isn't supposed to keep moving away. I wonder what sort of car it is? When we're out of this fog, I'm going to signal the driver over and thank him. Jo smiled. Why do I keep saying 'he'! The driver might be a 'she'.

The car started to go downhill and Jo eased off the accelerator. We're leaving the mountain. Hurrah! The fog will lift soon.

Almost on cue, the fog cleared. The moon was out and the forest of gum-trees stood as dark sentinels on the landscape. Jo breathed a sigh of relief. Trees, you have never looked so wonderful to me she thought as she flashed past them.

Hey, wait a moment. Where's the other car? Jo leaned forward and stared in disbelief at the empty road. She looked in the rear vision mirror. No car behind me – and no side roads to turn into. This is spooky, she thought. It's just not possible to disappear into thin air.

Then Jo's heart started a slow hard pounding as she felt the back of the passenger's seat move. “Who are you? What do you want?” she whispered.

Her car radio suddenly switched itself on. “Whenever I feel afraid, I hold my head erect”. Jo listened in amazement. Mum used to sing me that song she thought.

"And whistle a happy tune ..."

No, it can't be. The song grew louder, insistent.

“Is ... is that you, Mum”?

“So no one will suspect I’m afraid”.

“Oh, Mum, it is you, isn’t it?” Jo whispered. The tune finished and the radio became silent.

Frank was waiting when Jo pulled into their drive. “Everything okay, love? he asked. “There was a news report saying the fog was bad on the mountain and I was worried about you”.

Laughing, Jo answered. “There was no need to worry. I had my guardian angel with me and on the drive home she showed me how I can help Kathy find peace and get on with her life. You don’t mind if she comes to visit, do you?”

“Who, your guardian angel?” Frank asked bemused.

“No, silly, my friend Kathy. Come on. Let’s go inside and have some coffee and over coffee I’m going to tell you just how much you and our kids mean to me.”



The Bad Seed.



This story was inspired by reading a Sunday paper. Two of its topics mentioned were problems taxi drivers spoke of experiencing with some of their customers. The other topic referred to was on incest.

oOo

He sat alone in the car, waiting. The slow, repetitive green and red flashing of the neon sign outside the twenty four hour convenience store across the street had a somnambulistic effect. Yawning, he peered at his digital watch. 3.50 a.m. Only fifteen minutes since the last time I looked and an hour since my last fare, he thought. God, it's been a slow night and I've got to hang around for another two hours before this shift is over and I can go home. He yawned again and wound the window down a bit more to let in some fresh air.

Movement ahead caught his attention and he squinted through the windscreen. A laughing, drunken couple staggered, arms entwined, along the pavement and lurched toward the cab parked first in line at the rank.

He watched them, glad of the diversion. The young male struggled with the door and, stepping aside swept his arm back in a chivalrous gesture. His giggling partner curtsied and struggled into the back seat. Laughing, her male companion fell in on top of her and the door was barely slammed shut before their cab sped off.

David laughed quietly. Bet they don't make it to their destination without puking, he thought. I'm glad they're in old Bill's cab. It couldn't happen to a nicer guy. Chuckling, he switched the motor on and eased his cab forward before switching the motor off again.

Flicking the radio on, he fiddled with the knob, changing stations until 'String of Pearls' blared from the speakers. This should wake me up, he thought. Turning the volume down David started humming, his fingers tapping on the steering wheel in time with the music.

The back door of his cab opened and surprised, he turned to see who was getting in. A male, about forty slid onto the back seat. "Austin St Yeronga" the man said in an unmistakable Australian accent.

David nodded and, turning the radio off, eased his cab onto the roadway. Glancing in the rear vision mirror he saw his passenger leaning forward and staring at the identification photo above the driver's sun visor. "Yeah, a real mug shot" David said. Nodding, his passenger slid back in the recess of the cab.

David's attempts at conversation were met with silence. He shrugged. Some people are like that he thought. At least he's sober.

The cab turned into Austin Street and slowed down. "Which house, mate?" David asked peering at the row of old houses.

"Here will do" his passenger said gesturing to a small park on the left.

David stopped his cab and glanced at the meter. “That’ll be fifteen dollars thanks” he said.

Suddenly the man leaned forward and David felt something prick his neck. “What the hell ...” David gasped and struggled but the passenger’s arm was clamped firmly around his throat.

“Remember Susan Flannery or, will it jog your memory better if I call her by her family nickname of ‘sweet Susan’?” the passenger whispered into David’s ear. David’s eyes widened and his passenger, watching his reaction in the cab’s mirror, nodded.

“Yes, I can see you do” he said. “Susan was my mother - but I’ve only just found out about you.”

“Found out what?” David said.

“What you did to her” his fare answered.

“What do you mean? I never touched her.”

“Yeah, right. Don’t move!” David felt the needle go deeper into his neck. He winced and tried to draw back but was held fast.

“Did you know Susan’s mother was raped – and her cousin was her real father? Just as I am the child of your incestuous raping of my mother, our sweet Susan.”

“I told you; I never touched your mother.”

“No? Take a good look at me then. Don’t move your head! Look in the mirror over the dashboard. Notice a family resemblance - father?” the man mocked.

David stared at the image staring back at him. He couldn’t deny the likeness between him and the man with his arm still clamped firmly around his throat.

He tried to turn his head and confront his passenger, but the grip tightened preventing him from moving. David’s gaze swung back to the mirror. “I don’t know what your game is but Susan didn’t have any children” he said. “She went interstate and never came back. If it hadn’t been for the letters every Christmas she sent to her mother, the family would have lost touch with her. ”

“Susan went interstate to hide her pregnancy and only her mother knew of my birth” the man answered. “Even though my conception was violent rape of a virgin, when I was born, Susan loved me. She didn’t want anyone else in the family beside her mother to know she had had a child. Because of you she ostracized herself from the family who she loved and who loved her.”

David remained silent.

“You knew my mother and what you did to her. I can see by your expression that no matter how much you want to deny that me being your son is probably true.”

The man laughed derisively at David. “Yes, I heard how you always wanted a son but instead had two daughters. Well, now you know you did father a son – dad – but don’t expect any weeping gratitude or congratulations from me.” The man became silent, deep in thought. The only sound in the cab was the slow tick, tick, tick of the fare meter that David had forgotten to switch off.

Rousing himself the man continued. “Further delving through family secrets unearthed the fact that incestuous rape of our womenfolk is well entrenched in our bloodline. It’s almost, in a way, as if you couldn’t help yourself. We’ve got a bad seed in our gene that passes down the male line.

Now, the way I see it, you have the family flaw but no sons to pass it to. There's no need to look like that. Yes, I have been watching your family and learning all about you all. Neighbors do like to gossip, you know.

You have two daughters, but no grandsons. That makes you the last remaining male in our bloodline apart from me capable of continuing with our bad seed. “

He laughed bitterly. “And I'll never father children and pass it on. But, back to Susan. She told me she was an orphan and I believed her. Well, why wouldn't I? Nobody visited us. I only found out about you lot by accident when I went through Susan's belongings after her death and saw the old correspondence from her mother.” David winced at the bitterness in the man's voice.

“Susan passed away to-day five years ago. It's taken me this long to piece the story together and track you down. I wanted to meet up with you on the anniversary of my mother's death. More symbolic for what is to come, don't you think?

Oh, that's right. I haven't told you. You don't know what is to come, do you?” David started to sweat at the sound in the man's voice.

“Sweet Susan suffered a lot for your sins but, like her, I am a compassionate human being. Your ending will be swifter than hers. This syringe is full of a virulent form of HIV and while we've been talking I've been slowly injecting you with it. There is no cure. I know. I'm told I have three months to live.”

David felt the syringe withdrawn as the arm uncoiled from around his neck but he was too stunned to move. He heard the back passenger door click open and close again.

Somewhere in the quiet suburban street a dog barked and sleepy voice called out for it to be quiet. David roused himself and glanced out along the street. The faint pink and gold rays of the rising sun filtered through the trees, hinting at another warm Queensland day. A green garbage truck swung into the street and stopped while a man dressed in a blue singlet and khaki shorts jumped out, ran around the back and tipped the contents of a silver bin into the truck. The noise he was making started the dog barking again, setting off other dogs along the street.

David's fingers reached up and touched the tender spot on his neck. He winced. What was that old Biblical saying? He cast his memory back to when he used to attend church with his family as a child. Ah, yes, he thought, ‘the sins of the fathers.’

Slowly David reached over and switched on the taxi's ignition. He had never felt so helpless or alone.



Other Books.

Nature Spirits and Earth Elementals.

This book begins with my communications with a group of spirit beings who are concerned at what they see is humanity's wanton disregard of the nature kingdom. They offer salient environmental advice on redressing the problem and offer solutions from their point of view. As they say, *'a sinking boat is a sinking boat whoever is on board'*.

The book also discusses contact and communication with the nature world of fairies, pixies, gnomes and others. We learn how and why these earth elemental energies assist nature and how they live their lives going about their daily activities.

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Psychic and Séances.

Recounts my story of a lifetime of psychic experiences. Born an involuntary psychic, I began at an early age to question why I saw and heard spirit people and had nocturnal visitations by different species of extraterrestrials.

My quest for understanding led to attending psychic development classes and along the way learned that I am a spiritual teacher. I am a graduate of Griffith University, Queensland and the NSW School of Hypnotic Sciences, taught spiritual development classes privately and was employed for several years by the Queensland Government in their enrichment program teaching the theory 'We Are More Than a Physical Body'.

My main interests now are gaining further knowledge by communicating with a group of spirit teachers from multitudinous dimensions and sharing the knowledge learned with those also on their spiritual journey.

o0o

We Are Not Alone.

That Earth has been visited for eons by various species of aliens is recorded by many cultures. This poses the question for readers to ponder: have I had an encounter that has been blocked from memory? This book offers clues, ways to find out.

Alien implants, nocturnal visitations by different species of extraterrestrials were part of my life from early childhood. There are early memories of a tall praying mantis, the aliens called 'the Grays', the frightening men in black and a terrifying encounter with a reptilian.

However, not all experiences were frightening. A friendly ET took me to two unknown planets; one without life and another that was home to a different species whose identity remains unknown, two visits to an alien base somewhere on Earth where they watched humans, soldiers, colluding with aliens.

o0o

The Earth Energy Connection.

This book discusses why the physical body that you have always thought of as 'you' is not you. The image seen reflected back from the mirror is collusion, a work in progress between the earth elementals, their controller and you.

In this book the spirit communicators explain that for any soul, being, to function here on this dimension they need to be anchored here. This anchoring is achieved by us inhabiting a denser, physical body created from the earth elemental

energies .Part of our function whilst here on Earth is to learn to work in harmony with the earth elementals and to control our thoughts and personal excesses that impact on our physical body.

This book offers suggestions on how we can also communicate with the earth elementals and the advantages to us by doing so.

o0o

Book One, In Search of Reality.

Advances in the field of quantum mechanics have opened our eyes to the understanding of what we see as our reality is, in fact, illusion. My teacher guides agree as we learn of infinite possibilities, perhaps most notably that there are unseen, inhabited multiple realms presently unknown to us as we all go about our everyday lives.

In Search of Reality is a compilation of automatic writing, guidance from a teaching group of spirit beings, extraterrestrials and their students. The teachers explain the implications and changes happening now to us, our body and our world by the incoming energies.

This book, the first in the series makes clear the part we play in our consciousness reality and the opportunities presented for growth.

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