

the
stuff
of
tales



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A collection of short stories written by local and regional authors inspired by the collections of small museums in the New England North West, NSW.





The Stuff of Tales: Stories from Museums of the New England North West
was funded by Create NSW through its Regional Partnerships program

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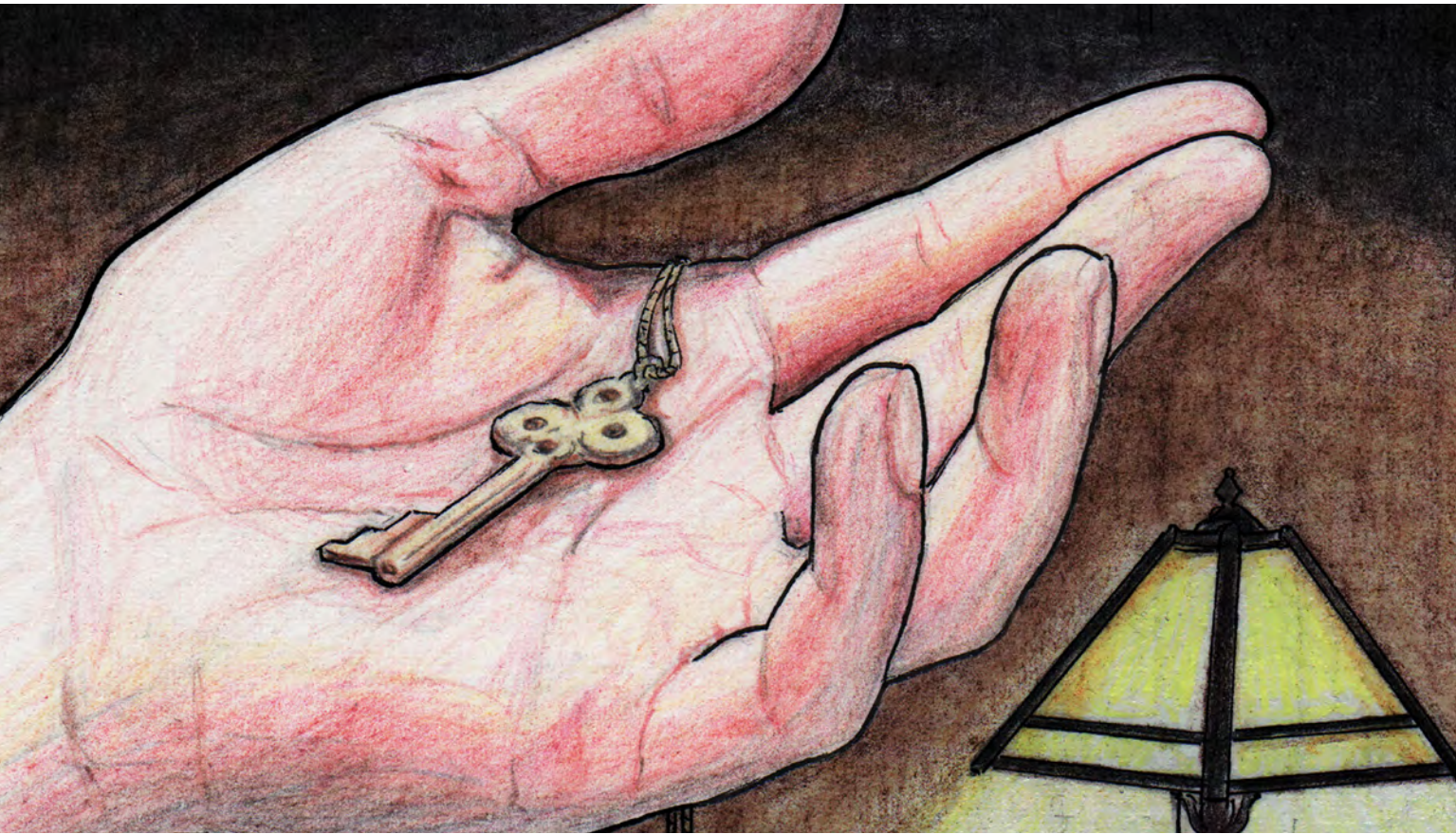
ISBN 978-0-6484069-0-7

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contents

- 5 Introduction
- 6 *An itchy affliction* by Beattie Alvarez
- 14 *The fettler's ghost (when objects have their say)* by John Heffernan
- 24 *The last, lost forever* by Ian Irvine
- 38 *Turning on the light* by Sophie Masson
- 46 *The music box* by Fiona McDonald
- 54 *Threads* by Bronwyn Parry
- 66 Biographies



introduction

I am delighted to introduce this collection of short stories, *The Stuff of Tales*, written by local and regional authors inspired by the collections of small museums in the New England North West.

There is a wealth of hidden treasures in the collections of small museums across NSW and these six authors have certainly mined them for some extraordinary and unique objects. Everything from a mundane nit comb to a beautiful music box, from a small gold key to a large sculptural figure of a railway worker. Each of these objects have been brought to life by our six authors - Beattie Alvarez, John Heffernan, Ian Irvine, Sophie Masson, Fiona McDonald, Bronwyn Parry and by our illustrator David Allan.

Arts North West is delighted to have partnered with the New England Writers Centre on this project, and would particularly like to thank the Chair, Sophie Masson for her assistance and support. We have also enjoyed working with the staff and volunteers in the six museums in the New England North West, all who have shown such great passion and commitment to their museum collections and history.

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Caroline Downer
Executive Director
Arts North West



an itchy affliction

BY BEATTIE ALVAREZ

When first looked at, it seemed a harmless rectangle of dull metal. But on closer examination — if one was unlucky enough to need a closer look at the offending object — it became obvious that the sharp metal teeth were in fact part of an ancient torture device.

The prongs could pull hair straight from one's scalp, without thought to the scalp owner's pain; the suffering would last long after the item had been replaced safely in its box. The faint scent of kerosene was still detectable, alerting the viewer to its original purpose in years gone by; shrivelled carcasses still clung to the tarnished metal, evidence of having met an untimely demise.

Persimmon Hargraves sat in her seat at the back of the classroom. As she was one of the oldest girls — as well as the richest and prettiest — nobody had argued when she'd claimed the best seat in the room. The classroom was much smaller than at her school in the city which had two storeys and lots of rooms for the different classes. She had been shocked to find that here all the students, from the little ones to the big ones, were all in one room and taught by only one teacher. Persimmon reminded herself that it wasn't for long. Mother said that they would move back to the city before the next winter.

She couldn't wait to leave Glen Innes and its thoroughly miserable weather. The summer had been immeasurably hot, the flies and mosquitoes abundant, the nights as still as the cloudless days. And right from the beginning of March to the end of October the morning frosts were so thick that it was nearly impossible to break the ice on the water pail. No matter how hard she pumped, she couldn't make water flow until the sun had been on the pump for at least two hours.

Not that anyone was to know that she did these menial chores. Oh no. She was a gentleman's daughter and this trip to the country was just one of Father's rather eccentric whims, she was sure. He would come to his senses soon, especially if Mother kept to her bed for much longer.

It had been a cold morning, but Persimmon now felt a tickle of perspiration on her head, beneath her bun. She longed to undo her long mane of hair and dig her fingernails into the skin to relieve the itch. Mother told Father that it was the 'stress of the whole situation' that was causing Persimmon's itchy ailments.

'Class rise please,' the teacher said, sweeping into the room, her skirts swirling on the dusty floor. The class rose dutifully. 'Good morning Miss Carter,' they chorused.

Miss Carter nodded at them to sit. All around skirts rustled and boots scuffed the bare wooden boards. All except one. A girl, around Persimmon's age, with a dress that was both too tight and too short, the cuffs of the sleeves patched, and wearing shoes with a

sole that flapped ever so slightly when she moved, stood next to Miss Carter. Her chin was tilted at a stubborn angle and her small mouth set in a firm line. If Persimmon had been a nicer child, she might have noticed the slight tremble of that lifted chin or the wide eyes with a hint of fear.

‘Mary Keyes has joined our class,’ Miss Carter said. ‘Please take a seat next to Persimmon Hargraves.’

Persimmon made a noise that was not at all ladylike.

‘Miss Carter,’ she protested ‘I’ve always had my own seat.’ Miss Carter smiled in a way that was not altogether pleasant.

‘And now, as it is the only seat free, you will share it.’ Her voice was firm. Reluctantly, Persimmon dropped her elbows to her side to make room for Mary.

‘Please study your spelling lessons. Miss Hargraves, please share your book with Miss Keyes, as she doesn’t have one.’

A titter went around the room. Everyone knew that Persimmon didn’t share.

Persimmon shoved her book to the middle of the desk and picked up her slate pencil. ‘I suppose you’ll need to share my slate as well,’ she said in a very ungracious manner. Mary pulled her own battered slate from her satchel.

‘No thank you,’ she murmured.

Mary’s head bent low as she studied the lessons. But Persimmon did not. She sat and fumed at the injustice of having to socialise with someone far below her own social standing. As the room grew warmer — it was going to be one of those silly country days that got very hot when the sun was up and very cold when it went down — Persimmon’s head grew itchier and itchier. Her thoughts were turned from Mary to the uncontrollable tickle in her hair.

At break she could bear it no longer. She ran to the outhouse and shivered with relief as she dragged her fingernails across her scalp.

Mary was already settled in their seat when afternoon lessons resumed. She refused to look at Persimmon, keeping her eyes on her work until a tiny brown bug landed on its back on the page of arithmetic they were studying.

Persimmon wrinkled her nose in disgust. She opened her desk to whisper to Mary.

‘How revolting! You have lice!’ she whispered furiously, edging as far away from Mary as she could.

‘I do not!’ Mary whispered back before dropping the lid down and slamming the book shut as Miss Carter approached.

‘Is there a problem, ladies?’ she inquired.

‘No Miss Carter,’ Mary answered hurriedly before Persimmon could protest.

‘Then you won’t mind staying late to wash the blackboard for me, since you have so much time for whispering.’

Persimmon frowned and opened the book again. Where the bug had been there was now a smear of drying blood. Her stomach churned and her head itched furiously. This was not good for her stress.

'This is all your fault,' Mary said as they cleaned the board with rags and water that afternoon.

'It is not!' Persimmon protested. 'You're the one who doesn't wash properly.'

Mary went red and stalked away.

That night Persimmon tossed and turned. Her head was so itchy that she drew blood when she scratched it. In the morning she awoke early and put the water on to heat for the washing. She needed to remove the stains from her pillow.

Father was hitching his horse as she broke the ice on the pail.

'I must go to the city. I'll be back in a few days,' he said, one foot in the stirrup.

'Please, may I come with you?' she asked him.

'Not this time, Persimmon. I need you to stay and look after Mother,' he said. 'Don't worry, everything is looking up for us!'

He mounted his horse and was gone.

Mother was making breakfast, for the first time in many weeks, when Persimmon came in.

'Good morning, Mother,' Persimmon said. Father must have agreed to move back to the city, she thought excitedly, that's why Mother is up and looking happy. She tried to curb her own enthusiasm, but it was difficult.

Persimmon hummed all the way to school, trying hard to ignore her itchy head. Not that it mattered. It would all go away once she was back in the city where she belonged.

Mary wasn't in school that day or the next. Persimmon began to regret her rude comments.

Miss Carter had been in a foul temper for days. She had banged her stick so hard that it snapped; kept the entire school in at break for being disruptive. Persimmon could see that she was suffering from a similar stress as hers, by the way Miss Carter scratched her head when she thought no one was looking.

The stress was contagious. The more Miss Carter scolded, the more students began to scratch their heads. Soon every single pupil — except for Persimmon — had been sent to the corner of the room for scratching.

'It is a very unbecoming habit!' Miss Carter lectured. 'One must never attend to personal comfort in the presence of others.'

The whole school was miserable. Not one pupil had been spared the wrath of Miss Carter and she had been forced to call the school inspector.

Everybody was on their best behaviour when the inspector came. He didn't say anything, but observed them quietly. At the end of the lesson he called Miss Carter into the cloak room.

Only the calls of the kookaburras in the trees outside broke the silence of the schoolroom. They were all straining to hear the whispered conversation between their teacher and the inspector.

They stood when Miss Carter returned alone.

'Please note that attendance is mandatory tomorrow,' she said. 'Dismissed.'

The next morning was clear and crisp. The frost encrusted grass crunched beneath her feet on the way to school. There hadn't been rain for weeks; everything was brown and dry. Persimmon could see that there was a certain beauty to the colourless landscape before her. Not that she would admit that to anyone, but since she was leaving she could afford to be generous about the town.

To her surprise Mary was already in their seat. She looked different from that first day, a little smug, and far better dressed. She turned her back to Persimmon.

For the first time since arriving in Glen Innes Persimmon felt shabby. Her dress had caught on a tree branch that morning and torn the hem. Mary, however, was in a new dress of crisp, fresh material, the colours bright instead of faded and she wore new boots that shone in the sunlight.

Miss Carter entered the room and the class stood.

'Please sit,' she said putting a small box on the edge of her table. The box was black and battered, its clasp loosely hanging on. 'Open your books to today's lesson and work quietly. The nurse will be here after break.'

A whisper ran around the room. Why was a nurse coming? What was in the box?

'Quiet please!' Miss Carter seemed to be in a much better temper. Overnight something had relieved her stress. She no longer scratched behind her ear or at the back of her neck and her hair looked soft and shiny, like corn silk.

At break Mary approached Persimmon.

'I didn't have lice, you know,' Mary said, her chin in the air again. 'My mother checked me and couldn't find anything. It hurt too with that comb.'

Persimmon paled. If the louse hadn't fallen from Mary, then...

'I won't tell anyone,' Mary said softening. 'Since our fathers are going into business together, we may as well be friends.'

'What do you mean about our fathers? My father is in the city; we're moving back there!' she said suddenly. Mary shook her head.

'Your father went to finalise the sale of your town house. My father is his solicitor handling the estate. When we moved here our luggage fell off the carriage, which is why I looked so terrible when I arrived,' she explained. 'Our fathers are trying to get a train service to Glen Innes, apparently there's money in that.'

'But I don't want to live here!' Persimmon protested. 'He promised Mother and she says that my stress and itchy head will stop when we return to the city!'

Mary looked at her in sympathy. 'It's not so bad here. It's very pretty and here we're important. In the city there's too much competition.'

Miss Carter rang the bell then calling them all back into the classroom.

'The nurse is here to check for lice,' Mary whispered to Persimmon, keeping her head well away from her friend's.

'But...' Persimmon didn't know what to say. She just knew that she would be humiliated beyond belief if it came out that it was she who started this.

The nurse, who was a stern looking woman with her grey hair pulled very tightly back began to call pupils one-by-one to the cloakroom. The box was gone. They could hear the cries of pain through the thin walls. Not one pupil returned to the room. Soon, there were only three students left. Persimmon's head felt like it was on fire it was so itchy. Mary raised her hand.

'Miss Carter,' she called. 'Persimmon is unwell. May I take her home?' Persimmon was about to interrupt and say that she was perfectly fine when she saw Mary wink. She dropped her head to her hand and tried to look ill.

'I suppose so,' Miss Carter said. 'You'll have to see the nurse on your own when you're feeling better.'

They walked slowly from the room, not breaking into a run until they were around the corner.

'I'm taking you to my mother. She'll be able to deal with you,' Mary said.

Mary's home was far larger than Persimmon's. And prettier.

A maid answered the door. 'Good afternoon, Miss Keyes,' the maid said taking their satchels.

'Thank you Sarah,' Mary answered. 'I need to take Persimmon to see Mother.'

'She's in the parlour, Miss.'

'Please go to Miss Hargraves' house and tell her mother that she will be dining with us this evening,' Mary said.

The parlour was beautifully decorated with fresh wallpaper. Persimmon was even more ashamed of her torn dress and dusty shoes.

But she needn't have worried. Mrs. Keyes was a small, round woman with a sweet warm smile and contagious laugh.

As Mary explained the situation to her mother Persimmon's face burned with shame — at first. By the time Mary got to the part about the louse's demise between the leaves of a book everybody was laughing.

'Oh dear,' said Mary's mother, 'I didn't mean to laugh. I sympathise, I really do. It reminds me of a time I had in school and something very similar happened. It was awful, three lice seeming to dance on the desk in front of me. I swept them up in my handkerchief, which never did come truly clean again. How my mother pulled at my hair! I thought I would be bald before it was over!'

There is no nice way to be deloused. Despite Mrs Keyes best efforts Persimmon's eyes filled with tears as the fine comb pulled relentlessly at her hair. Mary winced in sympathy.

When the bell rang for supper Persimmon's hair was so soft that it crackled as it floated around her shoulders. Mrs Keyes deftly tied it back and added a ribbon with a flourish.

Persimmon and Mary linked arms as they made their way to the dining room. Perhaps, thought Persimmon, it might not be too bad staying in Glen Innes after all.

The comb sat quietly in its box in the corner gathering dust.



The Land of the Beardies History House Museum and Research Centre

Cnr West Ave and Ferguson Street, Glen Innes NSW 2370

The Land of the Beardies History House is a folk museum which was established in 1970 in the building of the original Glen Innes Hospital.

The Museum's collection is displayed in twenty-five rooms and showcases the history of families, businesses, properties, public utilities and churches of the Glen Innes district. The collection includes a century-old slab cottage re-erected and furnished as in the 1870s; a gracious Victorian dining room, parlour, colonial kitchen and bedroom; farm machinery and implements from an age when the horse or the farmer himself supplied the power. Set in extensive grounds, there is also the Services Memorial Room, a hospital kitchen and medical wing, diorama displays and the Celtic room.

A foot-powered dentist drill, hand-drawn ambulance and fire engine and an early hand-powered Wolseley shearing machine all show how far science has progressed in less than 150 years. There are miscellaneous displays of everything from typewriters to telephones, photographs to phonographs, costumes to clocks and hand-turned washing machines to massive mangles.



Sacker's Hygienic Comb

The comb was made in the 1940s or 1950s by a company founded by John Sacker with the purpose of removing nits from the hair of people. It is an example of an object based on an early patent first developed in the 1920s in London. Until this time nit combs had been made of flexible materials such as wood or bone which had the disadvantage that the teeth were flexible. A second patent detailing improvements to the design of the comb teeth to give a greater efficiency of nit removal from the hair was granted in 1943. This simple comb revolutionised the treatment of head lice, an ever-prevalent problem in institutions such as hospitals and schools.

This nit comb is one of the many objects from the original Glen Innes Hospital and linked to its everyday life. The first ward for the hospital, a male ward of six beds was opened in 1877. Funds had been raised by the community and special appeals had brought money in from the miners and shearing teams. At intervals over the next 50 years or so, further sections were added until the hospital's doors finally closed in 1956. As a hospital which was conceived, funded, built and operated by the community, it has immense significance for the history of the town and district.



the fettler's ghost (when objects have their say)

BY JOHN HEFFERNAN

introductory note

I was inspired to write this story while visiting the Werris Creek Railway Museum in June 2017. I thoroughly enjoyed being in the museum, moving among the many artefacts and exhibits, searching for my special story. As I did this I overheard someone in the museum say something that triggered the train of thought (no pun intended) which ultimately led to the story I've written here.

'If only these objects could talk,' the person remarked. 'Imagine the stories they'd tell.'

At once I began toying with the notion that objects from the past *can* talk, and that in fact they *do* talk, sometimes vociferously, so bulging with stories as they must be. It's as though these objects have somehow absorbed events from their past and are able to tell us about them. We just have to know *how* to listen.

That's the trick, knowing how to listen. Most of us don't have this special gift, and so museums are simply warehouses of the past to us, essentially filled with mute objects. For those who are sensitive enough, however, museums become much more engaging – veritable treasure troves of excitement beyond the wildest imaginings.

With those thoughts in mind, I had huge fun creating *The Fettler's Ghost*.

*

The voluntary staff at the museum were fantastic in the way they helped me gather material for the story. The museum was a very relaxed and enjoyable place to be, and I felt completely at home.

I'd like to extend a special thanks to three people in particular:

- Chris Holley for being such an easily approachable font of information and ideas;
- Gwen Hohnke for the files she directed me to and the information she so readily supplied; and
- Pat Porter for partly pointing me towards the story idea I eventually embraced (whether she realises this or not).

‘Listen very carefully you lot.’

The teacher yelled at the rabble of high school students as the bus drew up outside the Werris Creek Railway Museum.

‘Make the most of this excursion. Make sure you ask lots of questions, and make sure you take lots of notes. But most of all, make sure you’re on your best behaviour. I’ll pounce on anyone who steps out of line. And I mean it!’

A chorus of “Yes Mr Jamison” droned around the bus, and its door opened.

‘Wait for me at the entrance to the museum. Off you go, then. Jump to it. Chop, chop.’

Eddie heard old Fig Jam shouting like a gruff sergeant major, but that was all. He was somewhere else, and to him the booming voice was just background noise.

Eddie was staring out the window at the park they’d pulled up beside. Around its perimeter stood six metal statues, maybe fifteen metres high. Made from heaps of small silver cylinders welded together, the figures were like long thin warriors, futuristic yet ancient at the same time. One held a pick, another a shovel, one a lamp. Eddie wasn’t sure about the others. But what he was sure of was that these metallic giants gave off a definite aura. Indeed the whole park did.

‘That includes you, Ward.’

Eddie didn’t budge. He knew Mr Jamison had him marked as a trouble-maker, and he reckoned it sucked. Sure, he wasn’t focused or studious like Jammo’s pets, but he was no trouble-maker either. He just wasn’t there half the time, in the classroom that is. He was a dreamer, his mind wandering like a dog off its leash. But so what? That didn’t make him bad. It just made him Eddie. What was the guy’s problem?

‘I said that means you!’ Mr Jamison’s voice grew even louder.

‘Yes Sir!’ Eddie stood, grabbed his backpack, pushed past the teacher without even looking up, and stepped off the bus.

He followed the other students. But before he’d gone far, he stopped and gazed back at the park. Yeah, he decided, it definitely had an aura.

‘Keep going,’ Mr Jamison snapped. Eddie ignored the order. ‘What’s all that about?’ he said, pointing at the park.

‘You’d know if you’d read the notes I gave out. It’s a memorial, to railway workers who’ve lost their lives in the line of duty since the mid-1800s. Those walls are full of names, thousands.’ Mr Jamison kept walking. ‘Come on, we’re meant to be in the museum.’

‘What are the statues of?’

‘They’re different types of railway workers, okay? Station Master, Fireman, Fettler.’

‘Fettler? What’s that?’

‘Oh for goodness sake! Tell you what: you hang onto that question, and if you get a chance ask it when we’re in the museum. Who knows, you might actually learn something for a change. Now get a move on!’

Mr Jamison marched off. Eddie gazed at the park for a moment longer, then followed.

*

'So that pretty well sums up the Controller's job.'

The tour guide, an elderly man called Mr Blake, had a gentle face. He was softly spoken, his words unhurried but with an air of authority that kept his young audience engaged. All eyes were on him, for he not only knew his subject but clearly cared about it as well.

Even Eddie was engaged. The tour had been going for an hour, and he'd listened for much of it, despite the fact that his mind had been simmering all that time with thoughts of the memorial park and the silver statues circling it like guardians of some sort. Especially prominent in his mind had been the figure with the pick. What did Jammo call him? A Fettler?

'As you can see,' Mr Blake continued, 'the Controller had huge responsibility - not just to make sure trains ran on time, but particularly to make sure lives were never at risk.' He paused and smiled at the young faces gathered around him. 'Any questions before we move on?'

There were many questions, to Mr Jamison's delight. This excursion was proving much more of a success than he expected. The students were taking notes and firing questions. Even Eddie Ward had come down to Earth for a bit; he wasn't taking notes, but he seemed to be listening.

And then, completely to Mr Jamison surprise, Eddie actually put up his hand.

'Last question,' the guide said, and pointed to Eddie.

'What's a Fettler?'

The man laughed. 'You must be a mind-reader. That's exactly where we're heading next.'

Mr Blake led the group to another part of the museum. He stopped in front of a bright red vehicle about two and a half metres long. "FETTLER'S TRIKE", the sign read. The vehicle was set up on a short section of railway lines and had three wheels, two on one line, one on the other like an outrigger. The trike could carry one man with tools and materials, and was manually operated by pumping a propulsion lever back and forth using hands and feet.

'The men who used this machine did quite different work to the Controller,' Mr Blake explained. 'Theirs was hard, often back-breaking work - and yet the safety of rail travellers depended as much on them as on anyone in the railways - some would say even more. I'm talking about the Fettlers.'

Eddie stared at the trike, intrigued by the tough-looking little machine.

'Fettlers, Hairy Legs, Snakies, Navvies,' Mr Blake continued. 'They were called many names, these rugged railway men. Working with picks and shovels, axes, hammers and cross-cut saws, they cleared trees and scrub, levelled the land, dug and exploded through rock, built bridges and embankments, cut sleepers and laid tracks. Make no mistake, these men made the railways. Made them! And then they maintained the railways - sometimes at the expense of their own lives - keeping them safe for all who travelled the iron way. They were hidden heroes.'

Although Eddie was trying to listen, something else was happening that he simply could not ignore. His attention had been kidnapped by the red vehicle in front of him, not just visually, but in a much deeper, visceral sense, way down in his guts. He was drawn to the trike, as though it had a magnetic pull, a gravity all its own.

Almost against his will he edged closer, and noticed that a low hum emanated from the vehicle. He reached out and touched it, at which the hum grew louder, and an unmistakable throb surged up into his fingers, spreading through his whole body. He tried to pull his hand away but couldn't; it was stuck to the trike. Glued. The throbbing grew, and as it did so, everything around him began to change.

Mr Jamison and the other students were the first to fade, followed by the rest of the museum; all the exhibits simply gone. The guide went next, his voice hovering in the air for a while longer, increasingly muffled until it too was no more. Soon only the trike was left, shrouded in mist.

Eddie glanced down to find that he was no longer standing on the museum floor, but on dirt and gravel, a pile of broken rocks to one side, some sleepers next to them, a crowbar, sledgehammer, picks and shovels. A whiff of smoke drifted by and he glimpsed a campfire in the distance, vague shadowy figures flickering at its edge.

Dizzy, uneasy on his feet, Eddie clutched at the trike to steady himself, and immediately noticed his hands - except they weren't his hands; they couldn't be. They were filthy, ingrained with dirt and grime, palms gnarled and calloused. What the hell was happening?

A strangled cry struggled from his lips and he stumbled against the trike. Someone grabbed him. *'What's up? What's the matter?'* He shoved them off - *'Get away!'* - and clambered onto the trike, a voice now shouting in his head. His voice? *'Got to warn them! Landslide! Got to stop the Eighty-Nine.'* He grabbed the propulsion lever on the trike and tried pumping it back and forth. The lever was locked in place and wouldn't budge, but he kept tugging and shoving at it with all his might, shouting all the while. *'Got to warn them. Make them stop.'*

A cacophony erupted in Eddie's head - a mighty explosion of sounds, noises, voices. Squeals and screams, roars and growls, shrieks, hollers and howls, from animal to metallic. Louder they grew, unbearably loud yet louder still until Eddie felt as if his head would explode.

'Stop!' he yelled. 'Got to stop them!' He pressed his hands against his ears and slumped forward.

*

Eddie sat on the railway platform staring at the tracks. He wasn't alone - a smattering of travellers waited for the afternoon train from Sydney. But he sure felt alone. And stupid. And angry with himself. And confused. More than anything he felt confused. Almost two hours had passed since the incident with the Fettler's Trike, but he was still shaky. He stared down at his hands - they were definitely his this time - and saw that they were trembling slightly.

He was in trouble of course. But then that was nothing new; his mental meandering often landed him in trouble. This was worse than usual, though, quite a bit worse.

'That was totally out of order,' Mr Jamison had snapped as he led Eddie from the museum onto the platform after the trike incident. 'You sit right here for the rest of the excursion - I'll send out your lunch - and you think long and hard. I want you to prepare a proper apology to that guide in there, Mr Blake. And make it good. We don't want him complaining to the school. Understood?'

Yeah, old Fig Jam was furious alright, and Eddie knew he'd cop it from the Principal later. But all that was nothing compared to his run-in with that trike. Weird shit, that was. Freaky shit! Unnerving stuff that left him feeling deeply disturbed.

Eddie nibbled at his lunch, not really hungry, and wondered what he would say to the museum guide. Such a nice man, he didn't deserve the crap that been thrown at him. And yet it wasn't really Eddie's fault. Like, he hadn't done it on purpose. It had just happened. He so wished there was some way he could explain. But he couldn't even begin making sense of it to himself, so how could he explain it to Mr Blake? If he told the truth, the man would simply stare at him as if he was a freak.

Maybe that's what he was. A freak.

There was nothing for it, Eddie decided in the end. He'd say a great big sorry, bow and scrape and hope it was accepted.

The doors of the museum burst open and the other students spilled onto the platform, followed by Mr Jamison. He headed straight for Eddie.

'The bus is leaving in five minutes,' he said. 'Get in there and apologise. Hurry up.'

Mr Blake was in a small room at the back of the museum, sitting at a table with a pot of tea. The other museum volunteers were at the table as well, chatting together. Eddie hung in the doorway for a moment, then cleared his throat.

'Ah, it's the mind-reader himself.' The guide smiled that friendly smile of his. 'Eddie, I believe. I was told to expect a visit from you. Care for a cuppa?'

Eddie shook his head. 'No thanks. Um, I've come to apologise.'

'Apologise?' The man frowned. 'Whatever for?'

'For what happened out there.' Eddie pointed to the main room of the museum. 'On the trike. You know, like how I carried on and stuff, what I did.'

Mr Blake chuckled. 'Aw no, mate. You didn't do anything. Any doing was done to you, not by you.'

'Eh?'

'I saw what happened. I knew what was going on the moment you scrambled onto that trike.'

'Really?'

'You bet. You were under the influence of something far stronger than you when all that happened. You weren't responsible for your actions at all. The trike was.'

'Are you for real?'

'One hundred percent.'

Eddie gulped. 'What are you saying?'

Before the guide could reply, Eddie's bus blew its horn.

'Oh dear, you have to go.' Mr Blake frowned. 'What a pity. I'll be brief.'

He rose from the table and stepped towards Eddie.

'When people pass through this museum, they often say: If only these objects could talk, imagine the stories they'd tell. Well, let me make it crystal clear, objects from the past can talk. And they do. It's just that most people don't know how to listen. Only a few of us are gifted with those skills. And you are one of them.'

'Aw, no.' Eddie backed away. 'I don't believe this.'

'Suit yourself. But it's true. You're sensitive to vibes from the past, the sort that old objects give off. It's like they've absorbed stuff from what's happened around them in the past, and they pulse with an ancient energy. A receptive person like you can pick up the vibes.' Mr Blake stared straight at Eddie. 'And sometimes - as happened to you - the vibes themselves will actually pick up that person and take control of them.'

Eddie shook his head. 'No way. That's impossible.'

'Really? And what makes you so sure?'

'It just sounds . . .'

'Crazy? I know. Totally crazy. But that doesn't make it impossible. Don't try to tell me you haven't felt the vibes around this place, and I don't just mean what happened with the trike. This whole area is pumping with energy from the past. This museum is the core of it all, but that energy seeps out into the railway station, the platform, even up into the memorial park.'

Eddie's eyes widened. 'You mean where the big silver dudes are?'

'Aha! You've felt it up there too, haven't you? I thought as much.'

'Well, yeah, but . . .'

'No buts, mate. That is how powerful the force is, at least for those who are receptive. Look, most people wouldn't have a clue, and so remain blissfully unaware. But people like you, and us,' Mr Blake indicated the others around the table, 'We know all about it.' The volunteers nodded in mute agreement.

Eddie peered at Mr Blake and his helpers. Until now he'd considered them nothing more than a bunch of old people wiling away their time in a place full of musty stuff from the past. Suddenly he had a whole new perspective.

The bus beeped its horn again.

Mr Blake shrugged. 'Better go, son, or you'll be left here with a bunch of ratty old silver tops.' He slapped Eddie on the shoulder. 'Just make sure you come back, eh.'

'Come back? How?'

'How do you think? By train, of course! This is a real railway station, you know. You could catch the morning train tomorrow, the 10.27 from Tamworth. You'd be here in forty minutes. You'd then take the afternoon train home, at 2.57. That'd give you nearly four hours, plenty of time to get acquainted with the past. Whaddya reckon?'

Maybe, Eddie muttered, a young smile kicking at the edge of his lips.

'Maybe?' The man stared incredulously. 'There are treasure chests here just waiting to be opened. And you've got the keys. It's a no-brainer.'

The bus horn blared long and hard this time.

'Off you go, mate. We'll be waiting.'

'Thanks,' Eddie said, suddenly not really wanting to leave. 'Thanks heaps.'

He turned and walked through the museum, glancing sideways at the trike. The smile grew. He pushed through the doors and ran to the bus. By the time he got there the smile had become a fully-grown grin.

'About time,' Mr Jamison growled as Eddie climbed aboard. 'And wipe that silly look off your face?' Eddie did his best to swallow the grin. 'So you apologised to Mr Blake, I take it?'

'Yes sir.'

'And what did he say? Gave you a good dressing down, I hope.'

'Not really, Sir.'

'What do you mean? What did he say, then?'

'He asked me to come back, actually. Any time, he said. Tomorrow, if I want.'

Eddie didn't dare look at Mr Jamison. He knew that grin would burst into laughter if he did. So he simply turned and headed towards the back of the bus, aware of the silent cheer brewing among the other students. He fell into his seat and gazed out the window.

As the bus pulled away from the memorial park, Eddie picked out the tall silver figure of the Fettler.

'See you soon', he whispered.



The Rail Journeys Museum

Werris Creek Railway Station, Single Street, Werris Creek NSW 2341

The town of Werris Creek is the first and last town to be built in NSW for the railway and is strategically placed for the junctions of the Main Northern, Mungindi and Binnaway–Werris Creek lines, required in the busy days of the railway. For approximately 70 years Werris Creek was the largest railway centre in northern New South Wales, the depot alone employing 800 people.



The Werris Creek railway station is a heritage-listed railway station, with the museum housed in the Werris Creek Station building. The main part of the museum is in the former refreshment room where hundreds of hungry people would arrive late in the night for the famous pies and coffee. The Museum features displays and exhibitions which tell the story of the railways in Australia. There are electric staff instruments, lamps, telegraph gear, photographs, memorabilia, communication equipment, signage and even a HO model train layout based on the local tracks.

The station also houses The Australian Rail Monument which commemorates railway men and women who have lost their lives in railway accidents since 1850. The landscaped monument area features six three metre stainless steel sculptures of railway workers created by Australian artist Dominique Sutton and over 2,400 names on walls of remembrance.



the last, lost forever

BY IAN IRVINE

I've failed again!

I bolt from the classroom and down the long corridor, the jeers of the other cadets, their catcalls and mocking laughter, following me all the way. Everyone loathes me and I don't have the faintest idea why – though the manacle scars around my ankles hint that I once did something terrible. Something I've blocked from memory... or someone else did.

Out the armoured back door of Ayoliand Academy, fighting the urge to slam it. No one cares. I close it quietly and dash out into icy rain blasted all the way from Antarctica. Within seconds my blouse and pants are soaked.

Down the path between the black tower and the red spire, then on, swerving to avoid the quagmire around the Gothic Revival pig pens. Along a chain of stepping stones winding across the cushion-moss lawn, and down the steep slope beyond.

Halfway down I stop, panting. A neat yellow stone arch spans the cataract at the foot of the slope, beyond which is the forest: dense, ancient, untouched since the last Ice Age. Being complete in itself, it must be indifferent to everything around it, especially puny humans. And that calls to me – after such unrelenting hatred I yearn more for indifference than for love.

It's late afternoon, late autumn. I burst in and the light fades to a green gloom; I can barely see ten yards. The huge old trees are gnarled and nodular and coated in moss, and the ground is inches deep in it. It sinks under my slight weight then springs back as if I've never passed this way. As if I don't exist.

I double over, pressing my fists into the cold carpet, and choke back a sob. Who am I? What terrible thing did I do before I was robbed of my memories? Here, at the end of the world, I don't even know where to begin.

Self-pity won't get me anywhere. I snap upright and reach for the sky. Damn them! I'm going to find out. And then I'm going to take them on – and beat them.

I scramble over the trunks of fallen giants and around unnaturally shaped rocks, heading ever deeper into the forest. My heart has stopped pounding and my feet make no sound. All is silent save for the gale menacing the roof of the forest far above, and the trees' creaking defiance.

Darkness sneaks up on me; I can only see a few feet ahead now. I turn around, swallowing, and the reckless fury that has driven me all this way evaporates. Every direction looks the same and I've left no tracks; I'm lost.

I slap a mosquito on my arm, leaving a red smear. It's going to be a miserable night, and there's bound to be leeches here. I rub my calves, imagining the blood-bloated, pulpy creatures clustering there.

Gingerly, sure the forest floor is swarming with spiders and centipedes, I feel around for dead wood, but my fingers sink into every piece. It's so rotten it's like a wet sponge. Besides – a longer shiver – I'm not sure the forest would care for a fire. I think it knows I'm here.

I stumble on, arms out in front of me, going nowhere but not game to stop. If a Tasmanian Devil happened on a small, sleeping girl –

Could that be wood smoke? I sniff the air. Yes, though when I go left I lose the scent. I turn back and catch it again, and by trial and error track it until it disappears at a rock face. Or is it? Beneath the moss the surface has parallel ridges, as if there are boards underneath. I feel my way along, strike a vertical crack and three feet from it another crack. And in the middle, the smooth curve of a handle.

I turn it and pull, and a door opens into scented darkness: the pungency of rosemary, the herbal smell of parsley, an underlay of mould, then the faint, enticing hint of soup.

I'm salivating. 'Hello?' I say thickly.

No answer. I edge forwards, hands sweeping out in front of me. Chair, table, the cracked leather surface of a settee. My fingers glide across a polished stone and it glows in yellow streaks. It's a lightstone, and they don't work in the mundane world. This cottage belongs to someone who knows magic.

Instinctively, I scan the room for threats. A threadbare blue blanket folded over the back of the solitary chair. A fireplace to my left, made from small rectangular stones laid in a basketweave pattern, like a parquet floor. Inside the fireplace, a black iron pot hangs from a bar by an S-shaped hook; lines of charcoal are surrounded by snowdrifts of white ash. I lift the lid of the pot. A thick, meaty stew, lukewarm.

A hand-carved sideboard contains two more pots, a pan, half a dozen wooden storage containers and bundles of fresh and dried herbs. Beside it is a water bucket made from a hollowed-out block of white wood. I scoop out a dipper full, drink, wipe my mouth and turn around. And then I see it, on the far wall.

A large silk banner, green with a wide red border, suspended from a dark wooden rod. A thinner rod at the base holds it taut. Painted in an ornate Victorian-era style, the banner must have been striking once, but it's torn, frayed, and so smoke stained and dirty that parts of it are indistinguishable. And yet, I sense a power in it.

On a painted ribbon at the top it says, FORESTERS COURT. I can't make out the rest of the words, only part of a number at the end, - 15. Below the ribbon is an all-seeing eye, the head of a creature with antlers, possibly a stag, and two people in Robin Hood outfits with a large shield between them. Writing on a smaller ribbon at the bottom is indecipherable.

Yet I feel an inexplicable surge of hope – not an emotion I've experienced much lately. It stirs me, this relic of a more honourable age, a happier time before the Depression the

world's been trapped in for more than seventy years. I touch the all-seeing eye but the ancient fabric gives and I draw back, afraid I'll tear it.

But as I turn away I sense a troubling aura, of something lost, neglected, or abandoned. Like me.

I'm too exhausted to think about it, or wonder who lives here. I tear off my sopping shoes and socks and toss them onto the hearth, wrap the blue blanket around me and lie down on the settee, shivering. The all-seeing eye appears to be weighing me up – but for what? What's the banner doing here, anyway?

The light from the oval stone slowly fades, and my mind empties with it ...

'Aaarrgghh!'

Wrenched out of sleep by a cry of outrage, I jerk upright, gasping. Someone big is looming over me and my feet and ankles feel as if they've been sat on, then light bursts out of the oval stone, bright as lightning. I cry out and scrunch up at the end of the settee, hands out to protect myself, feeling the old panic rising.

He's extremely tall, with a broad chest but skinny arms, hazel eyes embedded in crevasse-like wrinkles, and a bristly beard that sticks out in all directions like an exploding straw broom. Dripping oilskin coat, bony brown legs protruding from baggy shorts, kneecaps like twin tortoises, and enormous boots. His neck is long and wrinkled, and as his small head sways this way and that, it too reminds me of an ancient, leathery tortoise.

'Spy!' His voice is hoarse, dried-up. 'Sneak! Trespasser! Out, out!'

I slide sideways, desperate to get away.

'Go!' he roars.

I come to my feet and try to duck past him. He grabs my left wrist, drags me towards the door, then recoils, shaking his hand as if he's had an electric shock. Blue smoke wisps up from his fingers.

I'm not waiting to find out why. Better the Tasmanian Devils than this maniac. I spring for the door and heave on the handle but he takes three long strides and slams a hand against it, holding it shut.

He glares down at me, head, shoulders and half a chest taller than I am. 'Who are you, girl?'

'Halley,' I croak. My mouth has dried up.

A frown knits V-shapes into his corrugated forehead. 'Halley who?'

'Don't know. My memories – gone.'

Oddly, he doesn't question this. He gestures to the settee. 'Sit.'

I creep back and sit down, heart thumping like a mad drummer. He crouches in front of me, the tortoise kneecaps making popping sounds. What's he going to do to me?

'Where did you get that bangle?' he says.

I rotate it on my left wrist. 'Godmother. When I was three.'

'If you've got no memories, how do you know?'

'It's inscribed.'

'Give it here.'

I feel a stab of alarm. It's a cheap little thing made of white metal, but it's the only link I have to my family and who I really am. 'It's not worth anything.'

'Now!'

I've lost so much weight that it slips off easily. He takes it in a scrap of cloth and reads the inscription inside. 'To my precious goddaughter Halley, 3rd birthday, 16/8/1992.' He holds it up, his fierce eye glaring through the circle. 'Where did it come from?'

I shrug. 'I don't remember anything before I was sent to the academy. Who are you, anyway?'

'I'm the forester,' he says quietly. 'I'm Jac.' A long pause, as if he's struggling to remember more. 'Jac Toona.'

'You chop down trees,' I say.

Another long pause. He doesn't seem comfortable with words. Or maybe it's me – I have that effect on people. I prefer to keep them at a distance; open up and you're bound to get hurt.

'True foresters look after the forest,' he says hoarsely. 'For every tree harvested, another is planted. That bangle –'

When you have no defence, attack. I point to the silk banner, remembering how it made me feel: lost, neglected, abandoned. 'What's that all about?'

Jac's larynx bobs up and down. 'None of your damned business.'

I struggle to understand the look on his face. Guilt? Or is it shame?

He rises, knees pop-popping, and goes to the fireplace, where he weaves kindling together under the stew pot, as carefully as if making a bird's nest. He lights it and feeds the fire until it roars, avoiding my eye.

'This forest has been here forever,' I say. 'Why does it need a forester?'

He doesn't answer.

I follow a hunch. 'You're here because you need it. That's why you haven't taken care of the banner. It reminds you of what you're hiding from.'

A flush creeps up his weathered face. He hunches on a three-legged stool, staring at his battered boots.

'We used to look after the trees,' he says quietly. 'And each other too – that's what the Foresters Court was really about. As an apprentice I swore to defend the forest – to harvest, yes, but also to plant, tend and protect.' He looks up and the firelight touches his amber eyes. The pupils are like round black wells. 'And to take care of my fellow foresters, especially the small, the weak, the mistreated and oppressed.'

He gives me a meaningful look. I rub my manacle scars, scowling. I don't need taking care of. I don't need anyone.

‘What happened?’

Jac speaks slowly, reluctantly. ‘When the Endless Depression began, giant companies bought up the forests, and all they cared about was quick money.’ He pauses for a long time. ‘It was much more profitable to mine the woods – to chop the lot down and move on, no matter that it killed every living creature there – than nurture them.’ An even longer pause – a good couple of minutes. ‘I – I should have made a stand. But, faithless wretch that I am, I was too afraid! I broke my oath!’ he cries. ‘I helped them to mine the forests of my native land until they were gone. No need for foresters evermore.’

If he hopes for sympathy, he’s confessed to the wrong girl. ‘And then you ran away,’ I sneer. I’m judgemental – one of my many character flaws.

He meets my eyes now, and the anger has given way to a terrible sadness. ‘Yes, I’m hiding here, paying lip service to the code I swore to uphold, defending what doesn’t need to be defended.’

The stew pot is bubbling, its rich aroma filling the cottage. My stomach rumbles.

He takes a round brown loaf from the sideboard, hacks a pair of two-inch-thick slices from the centre, ladles a heap of steaming stew onto one slice and a few teaspoons onto the other, and hands me the big helping.

‘What’s in this?’ I say, taking a bite. Stew runs down my hand. I lick it off.

‘Beans and potatoes I grow. Herbs and roots I harvest. Animals I hunt.’

I stop chewing. ‘What kind of animals?’

‘Rabbit and deer mostly. Animals that don’t belong here. I’m not totally morally bankrupt.’

The stew is bland but I’m so hungry I gobble every skerrick and suck my sticky fingers. He eats half his slice then puts the rest on the hearth – I gain the impression that he eats only to stay alive.

‘The banner,’ I say.

He freezes, then turns the stool so he’s side-on to me and stares into the flames.

‘I felt some kind of power in it,’ I add.

‘Power?’ he croaks. He draws his arms and legs closer to his broad torso, looking more tortoise-like than ever.

‘Magic!’

He leaps up as if he’s had an electric shock, opens the door halfway and squints out into the darkness, closes it again.

‘Don’t say that word aloud!’ he whispers.

‘Why not?’

‘We’re outside the barrier here, and the Prohibition on Magic still holds.’

‘What barrier? What prohibition?’

‘If you used magic you could be detected. Hunted down. Taken!’

‘I only said the word,’ I mutter, feeling falsely accused.

‘Recklessly!’

‘What makes you think I could use mag— it, anyway?’

‘Girl, you reek of it.’

I’m astonished. ‘How do you know? Are you – an adept?’

‘I was ... though it’s decades since I’ve used it.’

‘What did you use it for?’

‘To defend my forest ...’ He flushes.

‘The banner looks too fragile to hold much magic.’

‘It’s a symbol. The real power lies elsewhere.’

He lifts the banner down, lays it across the table and carefully pulls the dark, carved rod from the top. Now, as he stands tall, staff in hand, I see a hint of the power he once had.

‘You’ve got to use it,’ I say. ‘You have to make a stand.’

‘It’s too late. When we foresters were united and kept our oath, our magic was strong. Once we were corrupted and broke our oath, we also lost most of our power.’

‘I don’t think all the magic is gone. I sensed something here.’

‘Stupid girl! What would you know?’

He slams the butt of the staff down on the floor, there’s a crack and a boom, and one of the wooden storage jars on the sideboard splits, sending yellow peas bouncing across the floor.

‘Anyone with a grain of talent can make bangs and break things,’ I snap. ‘You’re a coward.’

Jac flushes and I expect him to throw me out, but he sits down on the stool, breathing hard.

‘You had everything, and you threw it away,’ I add. ‘All those beautiful forests, gone!’

I feel the loss as a physical pain in my bones. And perhaps because I’ve got nothing, I feel I’ve nothing to lose. Acting on reckless impulse, I snatch the staff from his hand and shout, ‘If you won’t do something, I will!’

We stare at each other for a second, then he comes to his feet. ‘Put that down!’

I bolt for the door, wrench it open and leap out into the darkness. Light, I think, and the tip of the staff emits a narrow yellow beam through the misty air. I spy an opening in the wall of trunks, and run.

The beam touches a faint track I hadn’t seen on the way here. I pound along it for half a mile then stop, panting. I don’t hear anything, but Jac’s a woodsman – he’ll move through the forest in silence.

I run on, and even after several more miles my anger remains white-hot. I have no idea where I’m going but I’ve got to act. The land rises steeply now and becomes rocky, then the forest thins. There’s no mist here and cold stars glitter between the treetops. The last

quarter-mile is a scramble up a cone-shaped peak, the ground frosty under my bare feet. Suddenly I'm out of the forest, climbing steep outcrops and weaving between broken boulders.

I reach the top of the peak, a rocky knob no wider than a cottage. My feet hurt and there's a stitch in my side; I'm panting and sweating, though the hissing wind strips the warmth away. Above, a horned moon silvers the treetops. Below me the forest runs for miles in every direction and there's not a light to be seen. I'm truly at the end of the world.

I choke. Is this ancient forest doomed to go the way of all the others? Not if I can help it! I'm going to stand up for the things I care about – even if I'm the only one to hear. I raise Jac's staff in my left hand, high as I can reach; I aim it at the Southern Cross, a traditional symbol of defiance, and I think about all that's been done to me, and all I've lost.

'Damn you!' I shout, directing all my pent-up fury up through the staff. 'I'm going to bring you down!'

The glow from the tip goes out and I feel a stinging pain around my left wrist, under the bangle. The staff begins to shake and shudder, then a thousand rays of white light burst from the tip and climb the sky. But they're not true light because the rays overturn to form a fountain above and all around me, like a mile-wide fibre-optic lamp.

The staff shudders ever more wildly and my wrist burns. But then – and this is not of my doing – an ebony beam sizzles up, sharp as a dagger, shiny as a polished black helmet.

BOOOOOM!

The staff explodes, embedding splinters in my hand and arm, and a length of wood whacks me on the forehead, bringing blinding tears to my eyes. I wipe them away and the fountain of white rays is gone; I can't see the crescent moon either. Even the stars have gone out. But the shiny black dagger persists, rising higher than a mountain, cold as a dead sun, bathing the forest in its baleful radiance.

I'm shaking all over and there's no strength in my arms and legs. I fall to my knees, teeter and topple onto my back, every nerve in my body stinging. I'm crippled by aftersickness: the magic I used was far too much for me.

Eyes watering, I stare up at the great black dagger hovering on high, and an awful fear creeps over me. Abruptly it flips, the tip pointing directly at me as if it's a signal beacon. Then it falls, faster and faster, directly towards me, and there's nothing I can do. I can't move.

I don't understand what I've done, but I know I've been incredibly stupid and now I'm going to pay. I watch the black dagger hurting down, down –

Someone scrabbles across the rocks and I'm swept up by a bony, shell-backed madman. He runs to the edge of the peak with me and leaps off. There's a shattering crack behind us and glittering tongues of black fire sear out in all directions, one catching him on the right arm in mid-air. He throws me from him and I land in a hollow on the slope, on soft, icy moss. He falls some distance away, crying out.

'Jac?' I say hoarsely.

No answer, but shortly I hear him lurching towards me, panting. 'Get up!'

'Can't,' I say. 'Aftersickness.'

‘Why did you come up here?’

‘Someone had to make a stand.’

His eyes seem to smoke. ‘Why the black dagger, of all things?’

‘That wasn’t me – it came of its own accord.’

He pounds a bony fist into his open palm. ‘You stupid little fool! You used a power you didn’t understand, and now you’ve woken –’

He breaks off, picks me up, wincing, and staggers down into the forest. I’m getting colder by the second; the stew in my stomach seems to be freezing into icy shards. The splinters peppering my hand and arm burn like acid but give no warmth.

‘What ... have I woken?’ I ask.

He ignores me. After an eternity we reach the cottage. He dumps me on the settee, bars the door and awkwardly puts wood on the fire. He’s keeping his back to me again.

‘What’s the matter with your arm?’ I say.

‘Doesn’t matter now.’

I feel a little stronger. I lurch across – then freeze. Where the black fire touched his right forearm, and all the way down to his fingertips, the skin is covered in shiny black flakes, like pitch scraped from the flue of a wood stove.

I recoil, shuddering. ‘Is there ... anything I can do?’

‘No.’ He seems calmer now, almost at peace with himself. ‘Halley, why did you do such a stupid thing?’

I pull my trouser legs up to mid-calf so he can see the red manacle scars. ‘I don’t know how I got these.’

Jac glances at them and his eyes darken in fury.

‘I’m fifteen,’ I add, ‘yet I’ve got no memories of my family or anything that happened to me before a fortnight ago, when I was sent to the academy. And ... all the other cadets hate me. They believe I did something terrible and deserve what I got. Did I?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘I’ve got to know where I come from and who I am. And what happened to my family. That’s why I used your staff up there, and I’m not sorry. But I am sorry about your arm. Will it heal?’

‘No – the forearm will have to come off.’

‘Oh!’ I feel that pain too, and now I truly regret my stupidity. ‘I’m really sorry, Jac.’

‘I’m not. In a way, you’ve done me a favour.’

‘How?’

He doesn’t answer.

‘What have I woken?’ I repeat.

‘I don’t know...’

‘But?’ I prompt.

‘For hundreds of years now, there’s been war between those who lack the capacity for magic, and therefore fear it, and those of us who have it. Back in the 1930s they utterly defeated us. We lost everything, and the survivors fled to the ends of the earth and hid behind magical barriers. But the enemy still fear us. They’re still searching for us, and they won’t stop until every gifted child, woman and man is dead – or severed.’

My scalp crawls. ‘And I’ve just revealed that we’re here.’

‘That’s the least of what you’ve done.’

‘Then tell me the rest!’ I cry.

‘You breached the barrier that conceals a whole magical community from the enemy. Worse, you issued a challenge – you dared them to come after us, and they will. Worst of all, up on Shatterstone Peak you revealed a deadly power they can’t have been aware of. A threat they’ll have to eradicate.’

I feel terrified, numb. ‘But I haven’t got the faintest idea how I did it. I don’t understand my gift, I can’t control it and it only ever comes when I’m furious.’

‘If you hope to survive, you’d better learn fast.’

The shakes are back and I feel like throwing up. How could I have been so stupid? I drag myself to my feet.

‘Sit down,’ he says, gently now.

‘I caused the problem; the least I can do is own up, and warn everyone.’

With one finger Jac pushes me back onto the settee. I’m as weak as a toddler.

‘By our inaction, and our cowardice, we all caused the problem,’ he says.

‘Then what am I supposed to do?’

‘Find out who you really are. You can’t master your gift, or put right the disaster you’ve helped to create, until you know yourself.’

‘Assuming we survive that long,’ I say bitterly.

Jac goes to the table, no longer bothering to hide his injured arm, and draws the bottom rod from the Foresters Court banner. It’s made from pale yellow, fine-grained Huon Pine, which I know to be a most magical wood. He passes a length of cord through the upper loops of the banner and hangs it back on the wall.

‘Is that rod also a staff?’ I say.

‘It will be, once I’ve drawn power into it.’

He touches the staff to the all-seeing eye, to the stag’s heart, and to the hands of the foresters on either side of the shield. As he does so he whispers words I barely hear, renewing his broken oath. When he’s finished the staff looks no different, but the banner is just fabric and paint now – the inner magic I sensed in it the first time is gone.

Jac stands before it, head bowed as if paying homage. Then he puts the tip of his staff to my forehead and I feel a dull ache behind my eyes.

He observes me for a minute or two. 'Remember anything?'

'No.'

He taps my forehead again, then the left side of my head, and the right. My head is really throbbing now.

'Still nothing,' I say.

'No point trying again. Your memories have been blocked at a deeper level than I can reach.'

'Is that it, then?' My small hope fades. 'Are we done for?'

'Not yet.'

He opens a drawer in the sideboard, rifles around and extracts a gold ring set with a large pink diamond. He gazes at the ring, shoulders slumped, then prises at the diamond with a darning needle.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

'I bought this ring for the one I loved, long decades ago, but she knew me better than I did myself. She ... didn't find me worthy.'

'And now?'

The diamond pops out of its setting and skids across the floor towards the fire. I let out a squawk and go after it.

Jac calmly picks it out of the ashes. 'Diamonds won't burn in an ordinary fire.'

He takes my bangle, touches the inside with the tip of his staff, and a hidden compartment pops open. He puts the diamond in and closes the lid.

'How did you know that was there?' I ask.

'Foresters are trained to read the true nature of things.' He hands me the bangle. 'Pink diamonds have a power that aids understanding. It may help you discover your magic. And control it.'

'Thank you,' I say numbly. It's a mighty gift. 'But I don't deserve it.'

'Did you deserve to be robbed of your family and your memories?'

'Or you to be rejected by the one you loved?' I murmur.

'I'm not going down that path again. Besides, all gifts have a price.'

I rub the bangle. 'W-what's yours?' I say, suddenly afraid.

'To work hard and master your talent.'

'I was going to do that anyway.'

'And then do what's right with it.'

'I thought I was doing the right thing up on Shatterstone Peak,' I say. 'How can I know what is right?'

'A lesson we all have to learn – in old age if not in youth. Come on.'

'Where are we going?'

'You're going back where you came from. It's not safe here.'

'Is it safe at the academy?'

'It's safer, for the moment. Go and find out who you are – then fight for all you hold dear.'

Back to that nest of vipers. Back to the hatred and the mockery. But I'm stronger now. They won't defeat me a second time.

'I will,' I say. My memories must have been blocked for a reason and I'm going to uncover it. No matter how bad it is, no matter what I've done, knowledge is better than ignorance. 'What about you, Jac?'

'I've got a job to do.'

'What's that?'

He looks me in the eye. He still reminds me of a tortoise though he no longer seems ridiculous. He's strong, age-old and utterly determined now.

'You have many failings,' he says. 'You're rude and judgemental, far too quick to anger, and unforgivably reckless. But you sense to the heart of things, and you're strong and brave.' He smiles for the first time. 'And kind.'

'Kind!' I snort.

'I, as you rightly point out, have been a moral coward, and you've woken me to my responsibilities. Get your shoes.'

My shoes and socks have dried by the fire. I put them on.

'Come,' he says.

'Where are you taking me?'

He doesn't answer. I follow him to the edge of the forest, where dawn is breaking.

'The academy is three miles that way.' He points north. 'It's up to you now. You're on your own.'

'What about you?'

'I've always been on my own.' He says it matter-of-factly, without a trace of self-pity.

I'm not a demonstrative person. Not at all, but we've been through a lot this night and he's touched something I didn't know was in me. My eyes sting for him, then I give him a quick, fierce hug and pull away.

'Not any more,' I say, and walk away without looking back.



McCrossins Mill Museum

Salisbury Street, Uralla NSW 2358

McCrossins Mill is a superbly restored three storey flour mill building which houses a variety of unusual, sensitive, compelling, even humorous exhibitions.

The ground floor and the gardens are available for functions, while the upper two floors house exhibitions about Uralla's local history, focusing on bushrangers, the wool industry and gold mining, including a replica Chinese joss house. Recent additions feature Corporal Cecil Stokes and the sportsmen Jim Mackay and Edward Tricket. A highlight of the museum are the nine Thunderbolt paintings by Phillip Pomney, depicting the events leading to the bushranger's death at the hands of Police Sergeant Walker.



Banner of The Juvenile Foresters Court New England No 6515 Uralla

This is a double-sided hand painted silk banner dating from between 1849 and 1898 made by George Tutill of London.

The banner was discovered by the Mailfert family, still rolled in its original timber box, under the verandah of a house in Uralla. The banner had apparently been stored, unknown to the owners, for an estimated fifty years.

Originating in England around 1790, the Ancient Order of Foresters was first established in Australia in 1834. Friendly Society 'Courts' were formed by their members under various names and were located in cities, towns and even the most isolated areas of Australia. The members of these Courts were bound together by a code of ethics and as such were recognised individually as people of good character. Friendly Society Courts were often the focal point of most social activities in their area and they established the foundation of our current welfare and social security system. They provided financial and social benefits as well as support to members and their families in times of unemployment, sickness, death, disability and old age.

The New England Court had been established by 1889 when a newspaper article in the Sydney Morning Herald made mention of the Uralla Foresters Court. Henry Goddard of Uralla is considered the founding father of the Ancient Order of Foresters in the New England.



turning on the light

BY SOPHIE MASSON

‘This is an age of miracles and wonders, Electra, and don’t you forget it!’

How could I forget it, Electra thought, as she half-listened to her father explaining his latest invention to a captive audience of family and friends. Her very name came not out of Greek myth as might have been the case in any other family, but from her father’s preoccupation with that force of nature which had finally been tamed by humans.

Electra knew well the story of how her father, as a boy of thirteen—Electra’s own present age—had been at the switching on of the street lights in Tamworth; he never tired of recounting how, wide-eyed, he’d watched as Mrs Piper the Mayoress turned a little golden key, and look! There the dark street was suddenly bathed in bright electric light, the first time ever, anywhere in the whole of Australia, much brighter than the gaslight that had lit the streets before.

‘It changed my life,’ he’d say. ‘It changed my life forever. I knew this was real magic, not the silly kind you read about in books, but magic that would transform everyone’s lives, always.’ He’d laugh about how some people had been against the coming of the electricity, warning about all kinds of dire consequences, from hens not laying to effects on human health and sanity and even ladies’ complexions. ‘But then they were probably in the pay of the gas company,’ he said, ‘who were most annoyed that we’d chosen electricity—because their lights were so unreliable! Most people, thankfully, didn’t listen to the doomsayers—they knew we were about to enter a most marvellous age!’

That momentous childhood experience was now twenty-three years into the past, and all across Australia and the whole world, lights burned all night and day and mighty machines whirled powered by electricity, which from being a marvel had become a thing absolutely taken for granted. Not by Electra’s father, though; he might have left Tamworth for Sydney but he had never lost his love for all things electrical. The boy he’d been had spent all his time dreaming up plans for all kinds of wonderful electric gadgets; the man he’d become still came up with bright ideas. He’d built an electric egg hatcher, electric candles, an electric broom, an electric heater, an electric toothbrush and an electric lamp whose shade featured a painting by Electra’s mother. And then there were Electra’s favourites, the electric toys he’d made just for her: a jumping grasshopper; a little doll whose eyes lit up; a toy baker’s cart that moved a few jerky paces. Only one of his inventions had netted him any money—the heater—but not as much as might have been hoped, for he’d signed a contract with the manufacturer that had effectively given

him just a flat fee and no royalties. The manufacturer had gone on to sell thousands of heaters over the years with no profit to Electra's father. His brother James, who was a solicitor, never tired of telling him how he could have got him a much better deal; his widowed mother, who disapproved of what she called his 'tinkering' told him he should grow up; his friends shook their heads and told him he was unworldly; and his wife, Electra's mother Clare, merely sighed and went on with painting the next portrait which helped to supplement the family income. But Ross Elkins, Electra's father, was uncrushable. He'd already moved on to the next thing. And he didn't mind his day job, working as a clerk in the main telegraph office. 'You hear so many things, in my work,' he said. 'And it's all powered by electricity. Isn't it marvellous!'

Electra's attention snapped back to the present. Her father was looking at her expectantly, waiting for an answer to something he'd just said. But what was it? Electra hadn't been listening. But she didn't want to say so. 'Oh yes, Papa,' she hazarded, hoping that might work. It seemed to. Papa's face broke into a delighted smile. 'That's my girl!' he exclaimed, leaving Electra none the wiser. 'Then we are all agreed, and Mother will be coming.'

Electra shot a horrified look at her mother. 'Grandmother is coming to stay with us?'

'To live with us,' her mother corrected, quietly.

Grandmother Elkins—Papa's mother—was a woman who found fault with everything. She disapproved not only of her son's 'tinkering', but of his choice of wife—artists being of unstable temperament, according to her—and of his daughter's 'free and easy ways'. 'Young girls should mind their manners, stay quiet, and learn from their elders,' she'd say, tartly, if Electra dared to join in the conversation at the dinner table. Grandmother disapproved, too, of the fact that Ross had not completed his law degree at Sydney University and blamed it on Electra's mother who, she claimed, had 'lured' him away from his studies and stymied what should have been his rightful career, to carry on his late father's tradition of being in the law. The fact that he had never been interested in the law, unlike his brother, was of no relevance. As the eldest son, it was his duty to follow on in his father's footsteps, she had said more than once, clearly implying he had failed. Uncle James was now upholding the honour of the family, as far as Grandmother was concerned—so why wasn't he taking her in instead, Electra thought. But of course Uncle James would have made all kinds of excuses. He was good at those. Mind you, Electra didn't blame him, when it came to Grandmother.

Grandmother had been a widow for years; her husband had died when Ross was twenty and still at university. Electra had never known her grandfather, of course. She'd only seen him in pictures. But from what Papa said, he had been a kind soul who didn't speak much but spent a lot of time with his books, and his beloved science experiments. (Papa's interests hadn't come out of nowhere!) But perhaps inside, Electra thought, Grandfather had been seething with anger and frustration and that had hastened him to an early grave. Or that's what she'd overheard her mother say, one day, the only time she'd ever heard her parents having anything that seemed like a quarrel. Wasn't it typical that despite everything it was Papa who had offered his mother a home, Electra thought. An incurable optimist, Mama calls him, though she always adds she doesn't want to cure him.

Two days later, Grandmother Elkins arrived, with a majestic amount of luggage that had to be handled just right. She took over Electra's bedroom—Electra having to move to a much smaller room—but didn't seem grateful, commenting only that she had expected that she'd have her own sitting-room as well. 'That will come, Mother, I promise,' said her son, though in truth the only possibility for a second sitting-room would be if either

his wife's studio or his own study were converted. Electra thought he rather hoped something would come up, or that he'd think of something in the meantime. Though it was a damp miserable winter's day outside, Grandmother was not impressed by the electric comforts of Electra's well-lit, warm room, observing only that it would do for now but would look cosier with her own furniture in there. It was infuriating. And that was only the start.

Over the next few days and weeks, Grandmother settled into what she clearly thought her new role as organiser of the household. Claiming her daughter-in-law was 'much too busy' to attend to such details, she contacted butchers and bakers and greengrocers, sat down with a rather surprised Cook and planned 'healthful' menus, had a draftsman draw up plans for modernisation of the house, had visiting-cards made up and called on neighbours, and generally, as she put it, 'made herself useful.' Or as Electra's mother put it, 'interfered in everything.' The old ways of the family might have seemed haphazard and disorganised to an outsider, but they had worked for them. Now everyone was uncomfortable, on edge—except, of course, for Grandmother, who blithely assumed she was doing them all a great favour.

Electra's mother might be resentful, though she was too polite to express it openly (except for making it clear there was to be no interference with her own work), and Electra herself might be annoyed at the loss of her room and her grandmother's constant 'improving' comments, but it was Electra's father who seemed most affected. Usually, he spent happy hours in his study thinking up and constructing the next gadget, but whistled as he worked and kept the door open so he could let the family know of his progress. Now, the study door was closed and there was no sound behind it, even when he was in it. And often the study door stayed closed because he had been roped in by his mother to take part in some new scheme of hers for home and family improvement. 'Surely more important than your tinkering, Ross,' she'd say, with a little laugh. There was another thing. Her plans for 'modernisation' included taking out all the electric fittings her son had created and replacing them with brand-new ones straight from what she called 'reputable manufacturers.' She'd say, 'Very clever, dear, I'm sure, but a little eccentric in this day and age, and best left to the professionals, wouldn't you say?' Electra could see her father go quiet, his shoulders sag, the light in his eyes go out as she spoke, but he said nothing. He no longer spoke of an age of miracles and wonders and he had hardly taken out his ideas notebook in weeks. What was more, there was an electrical fair coming up soon and he hadn't even suggested going. Electra was worried. Something had to be done; but what could it be? She couldn't just tell her grandmother to go or tell her to stop interfering or tell her to be kinder. Not only would she get into serious trouble but also it would do no good. Grandmother was like a steamroller, unstoppable and crushing everything in her path to making, as she thought, a better way of life for them all. Because that was the other thing. She genuinely thought that's what she was doing. Her way had always been right for her. So why wouldn't it be right for them?

Then one day, Electra came home from school to find her father clearing out his study. Into a bag went his earlier inventions, things that might have worked but didn't. 'Time to get rid of these,' he said, shovelling the electric toothbrush and egg hatcher into the bag. 'And these,' he added, throwing in a 'wireless speaker' that had never worked, and an ice-block maker that had leaked, and many other experimental bits and pieces.

'But why, Papa?' Electra cried. 'They're your inventions. You can't just throw them away. Not now!'

Her father looked at her sadly. 'My dear, I should have done this long ago. They were never any good. I was never any good.'

‘That’s not true! You’re so clever, Papa! You’ve made amazing things! I love what you’ve made!’

‘Nobody else does,’ said her father. ‘They just pretend to.’

‘That’s not true!’ Electra repeated.

‘The only useful thing I’ve ever made,’ sighed her father, pulling another gadget into the bag, ‘I gave away like a fool. Mother’s right. I’ve wasted my time, playing with toys. It’s time I grew up.’

‘If being grown up means being mean and unkind and bossy,’ said Electra, fiercely, ‘then I hope I never grow up!’

Her father shook his head. ‘Don’t talk like that, Electra.’

‘But, Papa! I can’t stand it! Everything was good until Grandmother came! This is her fault! I hate her!’

‘Of course you don’t, Electra,’ said her father, sadly. ‘Everything she’s done, she’s done for us. She cares very much for all of us.’

‘No she doesn’t! She only cares about herself!’

‘That will do, Electra,’ said her father, sternly.

But Electra hadn’t finished. ‘You know when you were a boy in Tamworth and you went to see the lights turned on in the streets for the very first time—Grandfather went with you, didn’t he?’

‘Why yes,’ said her father, surprised for a moment out of his sadness.

‘And Grandmother?’

‘She came too. You know that. I’ve told you.’

‘Yes, but what did she say?’

Her father looked at her. ‘She was excited. We all were. When the lights came on, she clapped. We all did.’

‘What did her face look like then, do you remember?’

‘Happy,’ her father said, quietly. ‘And full of light.’

‘Not now,’ said Electra. ‘Now, it’s not only like her light’s gone out, but she’s trying to put out everyone else’s as well. Especially yours, Papa. And I can’t stand it!’

A choked sound behind them made them both jump. Grandmother Elkins stood in the doorway. She was pale, with two red spots in her cheeks, her lips drawn tight.

‘Mother...’ began Electra’s father, dismayed, but before he could continue, Grandmother Elkins said, softly, ‘Is that what you really think, Electra?’

Electra’s heart pounded, her hands felt sweaty. She didn’t want to answer but she knew she must. ‘Yes. It is. I’m sorry, Grandmother.’

‘Well. I see. There it is.’ And without another word, she turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Electra and her father to stare helplessly after her.

Electra felt bad all the rest of that afternoon. Her grandmother had taken to her room and not come out; her father looked miserable; her mother was anxious. Even Cook was out of sorts and snapped at Electra when she asked for a biscuit from the new batch. I tried to help, Electra thought, and I've only made it worse.

Dinner time came. Electra rather dreaded it and delayed going for as long as she dared. Either Grandmother would be there and give them the silent treatment, or she would ask for a tray in her room to underline the fact she'd been gravely insulted by her granddaughter, a child with no manners at all. But when Electra came into the dining room, there was her grandmother. And there were her parents. They were talking. And smiling. Smiling! That facial phenomenon had disappeared from the house in recent weeks. And certainly Electra couldn't remember seeing a smile on her grandmother's face in all the time she'd been here.

'Ah, Electra.' Her father turned to her as she came in. 'There you are.' His voice was light.

'We were just about to send out a search party,' joked her mother. Electra stared. Her mother never joked.

'Come and sit by me, Electra,' said her grandmother, startling Electra even more. She looked quickly at her parents, who nodded. Somewhat reluctantly, she went over to her grandmother and sat down.

'Close your eyes, Electra,' said her grandmother, 'and hold out your hands.'

Puzzled, Electra did as she was told, and felt something drop into her hand. 'Open your eyes,' said her grandmother and Electra did so, to find a little golden pendant on a chain, nestling in the palm of her hand. It was in the shape of a key.

'Your grandfather gave that to me, on the occasion of the turning on of the lights in Tamworth,' her grandmother said. Electra had never seen it before, and her face must have shown her thoughts, for her grandmother added, 'I put it away when he died. I never took it out again.' She paused. 'Until today.'

Electra swallowed. 'I—I'm sorry—' she whispered, bending her head.

'Don't be, Electra.' Grandmother's voice was soft. 'You have given me something precious. You have given me back that day. Those memories. The feeling of standing with my husband and my children, waiting excitedly. The gasps from the crowd as light filled the streets. Watching the sports on the oval under arc lights... the feeling that anything was possible, and that we were fortunate indeed to be living in such a wonderful age.' She stopped. Her eyes grew bright, as though with unshed tears. 'Those memories were locked inside me for so long. But today, Electra—today you turned the key. You let the light come in. You made me remember. And so—so I want you to have this.'

'Oh Grandmother!' Electra cried. 'I—I—I don't know what to say.'

'You don't have to say anything, my dear,' said her grandmother, smiling, and taking the chain and pendant from Electra's hand, she clasped it around her grand-daughter's neck. 'There! It suits her perfectly, don't you think, Ross and Clare?'

'Oh, absolutely!' exclaimed Electra's parents, smiling broadly, as Electra, turning, hugged her grandmother willingly for the first time in her life. 'Thank you, dear Grandmother, thank you,' she said, while inside she thought, happily, Papa was so right, so right—this is indeed an age of miracles and wonders!



Tamworth Powerstation Museum

216 Peel St, Tamworth NSW 2340

The Tamworth Powerstation Museum opened in 1988; the first all electrical museum in Australia. It features displays recording the history of electricity and items reflecting the impact of the development of electricity on modern society.

The Museum includes a replica of the first power station building which was constructed on the site in 1888. The original 1907 Showroom building has been refurbished to display a range of unique exhibits including a pictorial display about the early development of electricity.

The Tamworth Powerstation Museum Collection contains approximately 9,500 objects of historical, cultural, and social significance. The Museum's displays chronicle the use of electricity in Australia and showcase innovations in electrical science and design from around the world. The diverse collection ranges from important objects and machinery spanning Australia's industrialisation, as well as common household appliances from the twentieth century.

In 2010 the Museum was awarded National Significant Status for its collection and contribution to the history of electricity in Australia.

**Key used to switch on Tamworth electric street lighting**

At 8pm on 9th November 1888, Mayoress Elizabeth Piper used a small, gold key to switch on 21½ kilometres of electric street lighting in Tamworth, New South Wales. This was an extremely momentous occasion for this small country town. Tamworth was the first town in Australia and the Southern Hemisphere to install and operate municipal, electric street lighting.

This key is of great significance to the Piper family. When Elizabeth's Piper's daughter turned twenty one years old, her mother passed the gold key to her daughter for safekeeping. The tradition of passing the key from mother to daughter has continued for 130 years. The key is currently being held for Lia Reeve-Parker in a bank safe deposit box.

The gold key was loaned to the Tamworth PowerStation Museum in 1989. At this time a replica key was created by Bruce and Walsh Jewellers in Sydney. The replica is now displayed at the Tamworth PowerStation Museum. It is the focal point of the museum's display on the 9th November 1888 switching-on event.



the music box

BY FIONA MCDONALD

Between close-growing trees, the air is thick and heavy. Moisture hangs in the branches and drips into the dark pond below. Something swims beneath the tea-brown surface; a shadow beside the rock and under it, moves, halts, waits. A small white hand grasps at weeds that wave in the underwater breeze of another world. A storm is gathering under the mirrored surface. The water swirls and bubbles with tinkling, childish laughter.

Every night, as she lies in bed, Christabel listens to the old music box play through its repertoire of tunes; the music getting softer and slower until it stops and Christabel's eyes are closed tight and her breathing is light and even in the depths of sleep. In her dreams Christabel finds herself standing in the garden of the old house where her great grandmother lives, an old, old lady who smells of peppermint and lavender, sits in a chair by the window and dozes the day away.

It was in the holidays, in one of the rooms right at the top of the house, that Christabel found the music box. The little bells tucked inside vibrated with each tinkling note; it was not like any other music box she had seen, no ballerinas twirling in front of a mirror, no pretty colours just polished wood, a bit scratched and rubbed with age.

The box is old, maybe as old as Gran, or older. The tunes are not any she has heard before.

The first time Christabel wound up the box, she dozed off on the floor of the bedroom, a strange sleepiness overcoming her. In her dreams, she wandered right down the old garden to the stone wall which kept the wilderness out. Christabel, even in her dream, refused to give into temptation and climb the wall. She had been told not to, it was dangerous in the forest, everyone said so.

On the third or fourth time she played the box, Christabel heard the girl's voice calling her. She whirled around looking for the child who had called her name. Laughter had come floating out from the trees and Christabel had almost clambered the low stone wall and gone looking for it under the dense canopy of trees. However, just as one foot was on top of the wall, her eyes flew open and she was wide awake in her bed. Someone had called her name from outside the dream. It hadn't been her mother, it had been a child's voice, but different from the one calling her into the forest.

'Gran,' says Christabel, as she works on her embroidery, 'who is the girl who plays in the garden?'

'Hmm?' says Gran, her head nodding and her eyes opening slightly.

'The little girl who plays in the garden, do you know who she is?'

'There are no little girls in the garden, not any more,' says Gran, her eyes closing again, 'only you.'

'Did you play in the garden when you were a girl?'

'Hmm?' says Gran, not even opening her eyes this time.

'Did you play in the garden when you were a little girl?' Christabel raises her voice so it cannot be ignored.

Gran opens her eyes finally, fully. She looks down at her great granddaughter as if she is not sure who she is or why she is there. 'Yes,' she says, 'and once I found an injured bird. I remember now.' The old lady pulls herself into a better sitting position and looks out the window into the overgrown garden. She peers hard at the stone wall, behind the line of trees that form the border where the garden ends and the forest begins. It is as though she is looking down a tunnel into her distant childhood. Perhaps there had been a little girl in the garden? A little girl who was always urging her to go into the forest to play near the pond. But how could that have been? She'd always played with her governess in the garden, then she'd gone far away to school.

Great Gran stops trying to remember and begins to tell Christabel about the injured bird instead. But before the story is finished she has dozed off again.

Christabel often wishes she could have a friend to stay but Mother says it would be too much for Gran and her companion, Esther. Esther is old but not quite as old as Gran. She grew up in the house too.

'I came when my mother worked here,' she tells Christabel. 'She used to cook and clean and do for the old lady, only she weren't that old back then and she had children of her own. There was Sammy, your great uncle, he got killed in the war. It broke your Gran's heart and then she started to get old after that.'

'Esther,' Christabel asks, helping peg clothes on the line to dry, 'who is the little girl who comes to play with me in the garden?' Esther stops what she is doing, bends down and gently holds Christabel by the shoulders.

'When did you see a little girl?'

Christabel, surprised by Esther's grip, says 'At night, when the music box plays. I always have a dream about a little girl in the garden. It's always great fun but I don't know her name and I don't know where she lives in the daytime.' The hands holding her relax.

'A dream,' the woman says, 'you're talking about a dream. Thank goodness.' Then she takes Christabel inside and gives her a glass of milk and a biscuit.

'Promise me, that you won't go out of the garden without an adult, ever? And never to the pond. Promise?' Christabel nods, puzzled by the seriousness of it all. She only wanted someone her own age to play with, she wonders about the other little girl, the one who called her out of her dream and stopped her from going into the forest, she might play with her instead.

'Why don't you come and play with me in the forest?' asks the little girl that night. She is smaller than Christabel, her hair is fair where Christabel's is dark. She is lithe and quick in all her movements; her eyes are light blue and almost pupil-less. Christabel sometimes finds it disconcerting to look into them. Her name is Lucy.

'I'm not allowed in the forest,' says Christabel, not meeting the other's gaze, 'it's dangerous and I promised.'

'What is there to be afraid of?'

'The pond...' says Christabel.

'Yes, that is true,' says Lucy, serious for a moment, 'I know a little girl who drowned there.'

'Who? When?' Christabel is suddenly full of curiosity. Drowning is something from stories, and, anyway, Christabel can swim.

'There was a little girl who lived in the house. One day she fell in the pond and drowned.'

'Were you sad when she drowned?' Lucy doesn't answer, only laughs and runs off into the forest. 'Come and catch me!' she calls but Christabel turns and goes back up the garden.

Who was the girl who drowned? Christabel shakes her head. Probably Lucy was just making up the story to scare her. Christabel decides to be very good and not go and play with her friend in the garden anymore. It is hard always saying she can't go in to the forest when Lucy urges and teases her to do it, and, Christabel thinks, sometimes, Lucy isn't very nice really. She is a bit bossy even if she is only a dream.

A week goes by and Christabel hasn't gone beyond the kitchen garden, not once. She hasn't been playing the music box either.

'Esther,' Christabel says as she helps the old woman weed the parsley bed, 'did you ever hear of some girls drowning in the pond in the forest?'

Esther stops weeding. 'There were only one girl drowned, that were the sister of your Great Gran's father.'

'That must have been a long time ago,' says Christabel, helping a ladybird onto a basil leaf.

'Aye, it was,' says Esther, 'it were very sad. The little girl had been playing hide and seek with her sisters and brother. At four o'clock the children were called to their tea and they were one child short. Everyone, and there were a good number of people lived and worked here back in those days, got calling and searching for her. When it were dark they had to call off the search.' Christabel sits back on her haunches and looks down towards the forest.

'And what happened to the little girl who was missing, did they find her?'

'Oh,' says Esther, 'she were drowned right enough. They found her body in the pond the next day. It's her music box you've got beside your bed. It were the little girl's favourite thing. It's precious to the family so look after it.' Christabel nods, of course she'll look after it! It is her most treasured possession too. She is quiet and thoughtful for the rest of the afternoon. She feels a sadness. She feels so sorry for the little girl who drowned, all alone in the pond in the forest. Was she frightened? Was she cold? Was she lonely?

Christabel winds the music box before hopping in to bed. She wants to find Lucy in her dreams and tell her about her Great Gran's father's little sister.

'You came back then,' says Lucy, 'thought you were staying away.'

'I heard about the little girl who drowned,' says Christabel, 'it was a long time ago though. How could you know a little girl from so long ago?'

Lucy smiles, it is not a very nice smile, it seems to have some mischief about its corners.

'Don't worry about her,' says Lucy, 'she couldn't swim, not like you. She was a bit daft too, and she listened to the stories about the Nixies in the pond. She went to look but fell in over her head. Her hair spread out like water weed.' Christabel's not sure she believes Lucy nor is she sure that what she is saying is very nice.

'Her family would have missed her,' she says, 'and now I know she was my great, great aunty. Are you the little girl who drowned in the pond?'

Lucy only visits in dreams when the music box plays. Perhaps there is magic in the music and little dead Lucy comes when the music plays. All day this thought has been chasing itself in Christabel's brain. She isn't scared that Lucy might be a ghost.

Lucy laughs and laughs. 'You have a very good imagination,' she says. 'No, I'm not a ghost, I'm a dream. Come and play with me in the forest. Nothing can hurt you if it's just a dream.' Christabel's eyes are closed. She can see Lucy clearly, feel the summer breeze in the garden. But she knows, most definitely, she's asleep. How could it hurt to go to the forest in the dream?

It still feels naughty going across the wall and into the forest. Shadows dance with sunlight through the interlaced branches, altering reality on the mottled forest floor. What is real and what is illusion is impossible to tell until you are upon it. Mossy rocks become deep holes and the dark spaces under tree roots become surface shadows that betray you as your foot goes down. Christabel enjoys this play of light and dark, of the wood, and the teasing of the other world that lies upside down in the pond, a still mirror with deep reflections. It is denser, saturated with colour and desire. Christabel longs to go into the water and swim effortlessly amongst the trees.

Lucy is already in the water, her hair flowing out behind her like water weed. She swims across the pool with scarcely a ripple.

'Come on Christabel,' Lucy urges her, 'it's lovely in, come and play with me.' Christabel's feet are bare and she takes her nightie off, she'll go in her singlet and pants. The water is cool and delicious over her feet. The soft mud squishes between her toes. Further and further in she goes until the water is up to her neck. Her feet lift off the bottom and she is swimming. Suddenly, something grabs her from beneath. Two sharp sets of fingers dig into her legs and start to pull her under. Christabel thrashes and kicks out. What is happening? Who has got hold of her?

'Lucy! Lucy!' she calls, arms flailing. 'Help me!' Christabel goes down under the water, swallowing and choking on the brown tea water. Her eyes are open and she looks wildly around. There is Lucy. Lucy is grinning widely, showing her small sharp, pointed teeth. It is Lucy's hands that are holding fast to her and it is Lucy who is pulling her further and further into the pond.

'You can stay and be my friend,' says Lucy laughing wildly. 'I get so lonely here on my own.'

I'm asleep, says Christabel as she struggles to breathe, I will wake in a minute and I will be in bed. But she doesn't wake and her breath is leaving her. She feels light headed. Perhaps it doesn't really matter anyway, she thinks. Perhaps I'll just sink to the bottom of the pond and let the gentle mud cover me.

Then, another set of hands is clutching her. Christabel is pulled this way, then that. She can hear two voices arguing, her name called by both of them. Her head is spinning now and she doesn't know what is happening anymore, a great darkness is overwhelming her. Then something heavy splashes into the water and nearly hits her before sinking rapidly to the bottom. As it falls Christabel sees it is a box. The lid falls open and the sweet tinkling music fills the water. One set of hands lets Christabel go and the other drags her to the surface of the water where she coughs and splutters and gasps for air.

'We must get out,' says a voice. It is the one that woke her out of her previous dream; it is not Lucy's. Christabel lies on the mossy bank and vomits water. She sits up and looks at the child standing before her, a small dark-haired child, not unlike Christabel herself.

'Who are you?' Christabel finally says when her words can come without water bubbling out her mouth.

'My name is Christabel, just like yours,' the child answers. 'I lived in the big house once and I used to listen to the music box at night. I played with Lucy in the garden and one night I went with her into the forest. I didn't come back.' The living Christabel looks at her long dead great-great-great aunt Christabel and her eyes well with tears. Too much water, think both Christabels and one of them falls into a deep sleep while the other sings softly a sweet and haunting tune, but not one which came out of the music box.

When Christabel wakes to a sunny morning she is not surprised to see there is no longer an old music box sitting beside her bed. When she is asked about it she shrugs and mumbles something vague. And when she goes to sleep at night, she has a different child with which to play in Great Gran's garden, one who never suggests they go into the forest together.



Saumarez Homestead, National Trust

230 Saumarez Road, Armidale NSW 2350

Saumarez Homestead is a stunning historic country homestead with gardens, rooms, and farm buildings giving an insight into 19th century pastoral life.

This ten-hectare grazing property was first inhabited by British settlers led by Henry Dumaresq in the 1830s. Today it includes an elegant, extensive, fully furnished Edwardian homestead, built between 1888 and 1906, and fifteen farm and other buildings dating up to 1910, with their collections of early farm equipment.

Visitors can take a guided tour through the White family's thirty room Edwardian mansion complete with original furnishings, art and ceramics collection. Stroll through Mary White's garden, with its Jocelyn Brown-style cottage garden, the picking garden, the heritage rose garden and the lawns. Visit outbuildings complete with 19th century tools and equipment.

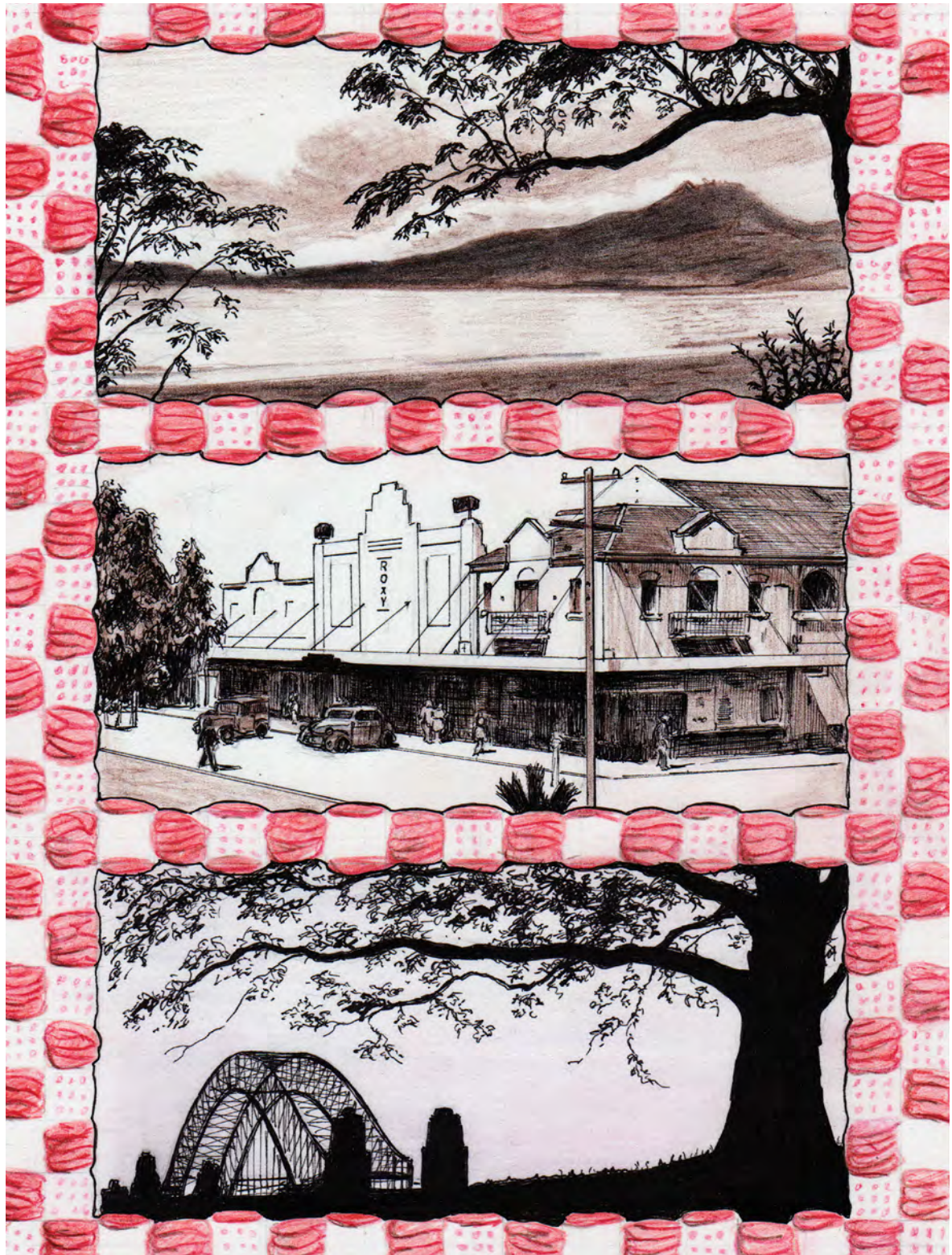


Cylinder music box with bells

The drawing room at Saumarez Homestead was the public part of the house where anyone wanting to speak with or visit a member of the White family was received. It was a formal room, with chairs to seat visitors and tables for serving morning and afternoon teas. There was also entertainment, including this cylinder music box.

Cylinder music boxes were a means of providing live music without performers. The sound produced was very much like a group of harpists or a hand bell choir. Music boxes were usually an object for the upper classes of society.

This music box dates from the late 1880s and has six engraved bells struck by honeybee strikers in an Australian timber wooden box. The mechanism is from Switzerland and can play six different tunes. It was a very popular item in the house and generations of the family remember it fondly.



threads

BY BRONWYN PARRY

Kythera, 1921
Efthalia

I will wrap my love in a blanket, spun of dreams, woven of hope . . .

I should not be so fanciful, Mama says.

As my feet work the treadles of the loom, my hands throw the shuttles, one red, one white, and I beat the wefts into place. Red, beat, white, beat, red, beat, white, beat. The steady rhythm allows my thoughts to wander. But despite Mama's chiding, I think of the future, as if I *could* weave my hopes and dreams into the threads of the blanket.

In five days I will leave my home, this beautiful island, and my family, and board a ship that will take me far away, to the other side of the world. I will not see my mother, my sisters, perhaps for years. Perhaps for ever. And in Australia everything will be different. The language, the customs, the land. Sometimes I am so afraid that I want to stay inside our house and hide and never leave it.

But I will not think of fear. I won't weave fear into this blanket.

Hundreds of women from Kythera have gone to Australia. I shall be as courageous as them. And Nikolaos is there, waiting for me. He is a good man and I will not be lonely. He asked for me two years ago, before he left Kythera, and my Uncle and Mama said yes, because Baba died in the wars and there is no man now to look after our family.

Australia is a new country with many opportunities, and Nikolaos is working hard, sending home money to his family, and saving money to be married. We will work hard together, and send money to both our families.

'Effie!' Sofia, my youngest sister runs in, waving an envelope. She's only four, and not yet at school. 'A letter for you! With a kangaroo on it!'

She has learned to recognise the kangaroo on the stamp, and what it means, although she has no concept of how far away Australia is. I'm not sure I really do, either. I have never even travelled as far as Athens, and it is so much closer than Sydney.

Sofia sits on my lap and I let her take the letter from Nikolaos out of the already open envelope. It is addressed to my uncle, of course, and I'm sure he has read it first, as is proper. A young man should not write to an unmarried woman, even if they are betrothed.

I hold Sofia close and she snuggles into me, her head against my shoulder. She is still too thin and small for her age. Mama worries about her but there is never enough good food, and no money to take her to the doctor on the mainland. And this is one of the reasons why I'm leaving. One less mouth to feed.

I screw my eyes shut to hold back tears. I wish I could promise Sofia that we will not be parted for long. I wish I could weave a blanket for her, to wrap her with my love until I see her again. But I have barely enough time to finish the one on the loom, and that must go with me. For my new home. For the family that Nikolaos and I will make together.

Sofia studies the open letter, her face crinkled up in concentration. 'What does it say, Effie?'

I turn it the right way around for her. 'He says that he hopes everyone is well. He has met another man from Kythera, from Kalamos – that's in the south, Sofia, on the coast – and they will be business partners in a new café.' I skim ahead, deciphering Nikolaos's untidy writing, his courteous words to my uncle. 'The café is a long way from Sydney, in a small town in the country. We will live in the rooms above it. He also says that his friend's sister will be coming from Kythera, and we may be on the same ship.'

A small thing, perhaps, but this news lightens my heart a little. A potential friend on the long journey. I have been trying not to think about it, the many weeks on the ship, with home and everything familiar slipping further and further away, and so many strangers confined together. I hope I like her.

Sofia, the letter forgotten already, traces the motifs of the cloth on the loom with her finger. 'It's pretty. Will you weave me one, Effie? But in blue? I like blue better than red.'

'You will weave one yourself, one day.' Do women in Australia spin wool and weave their blankets, I wonder? Do they grow flax and spin and weave their linen? I don't know. But Greek women always have, and the dowry I have worked on since childhood – bedlinen, table linen, blankets – is packed in a trunk, ready to take to the home I will make with my husband. And I must finish this last blanket, a fancy coverlet, before I leave.

I give Sofia a quick hug and then send her off to help Mama prepare our simple meal. I find my place in the pattern and start weaving again. There is still another foot of the warp to weave. Then I will take the long piece off the loom, cut it into three pieces, and stitch those together to make it wide enough for a bed. I fall in to the weaving rhythm again easily. Red, beat, white, beat, red, beat, white, beat. With each treadle, each throw of the shuttle, each press of the beater, I think of Sofia and my other sisters, and of Mama and her strength. Family is important.

Thread by thread, the squares and diamonds form in the cloth, the white threads the plain-weave ground holding it all together, the thicker red wool yarn making the interlacing pattern over it. I think of the white as being like family, the threads connecting all the parts of the pattern – the people – to each other.

This blanket will last a lifetime. It will provide warmth to the family to come for Nikolaos and me. Maybe Mama is right, and that it's silly to believe that what I'm thinking while I'm weaving it matters. But still I weave with my hands, my skills, my love, and all the courage and hope I can find within myself.

✱

Regional Australia, 1947
Sofia, Effie's daughter

The café is full of people, voices, laughter. I dodge around some newcomers, almost tipping the tray full of cups of coffee and milkshakes. You'd think that after all these years I'd know that I shouldn't carry so much at a time but with Baba and Mama away in Sydney to meet my Aunt Sofia, we're flat out dealing with tonight's crowd.

It's just as well my brother Nick knows how to make coffee the way Baba does, as it seems that everyone in town was at the cinema to see *The Overlanders*, and now they've come here to talk about it. I haven't seen it yet. They say it's the most expensive film ever made in Australia, but it's only showing for two nights and I'll be working in the café both nights.

The six men in the booth I'm taking the tray to are vigorously debating some aspect of the movie. I know most of them, returned servicemen, a few years older than me. Jack Pappas stands and takes the tray from me, setting it on the table. He's kind like that. He went to school with my husband and served with him, in the army. They were both at the Battle of Crete. But Jack came home, and my husband didn't. The war has been over for two years now but it's only a few months since the army confirmed and told me officially that Peter had died in 1941. I knew it, anyway. If he'd been alive, he would have found a way to send word, to me, or to his parents.

'A busy night tonight, Mrs Lekkas.'

Jack always calls me Mrs Lekkas, and not my given name. He's courteous as well as kind. But I sometimes wonder if it's because... No, that's silly to think like that. Maybe he just doesn't remember my name.

I concentrate on placing the correct drinks in front of each of the men. 'Yes. And my parents are away, so we're short-handed.'

'They are well, I hope.'

I almost muddle the orders. Coffee for man in the corner. Milkshake for the man on my right. 'They're in Sydney. My Aunt Sofia is arriving from Kythera. They're meeting the boat.' He smiles, and despite the scar on his face he's still handsome. 'Are you named after her?'

My cheeks are hot. I tuck the empty tray under my arm. 'After her and my grandmother. She's my mother's youngest sister.' She's not much older than me, but Mama hasn't seen her for twenty-six years. Jack's not smiling now. 'Was she still on Kythera, during the war?'

'Yes. She was going to come in 1939, but then the war happened.' And we didn't hear from any of Mama's or Baba's families until after it was over. I don't say that because almost every Greek family in Australia worried and fretted throughout the war. His family has been here longer than mine, but it was probably the same for them. 'She's a widow. Her husband died during the occupation.'

'There are a lot of Greek widows, now,' he says, and there's sympathy in his eyes, and pain, and I nod and turn away, not knowing what to say. He was there, fighting in Greece during the war, evacuated to Crete when the Germans overran the mainland, and then in the catastrophe of the battle for Crete. I can only imagine what he's experienced.

My sister is also waitressing so I clear some empty dishes and take them to the kitchen. Mrs Kokodis is at the table, cutting up apple pie to slide on to plates. She came from Greece on the boat with Mama, and they've been friends ever since. Almost like an aunt, because all our other aunts stayed in Greece and we've never met them.

Standing on a step-stool at the sink, with a huge apron wrapped around her nightdress, is my little girl, my Eleni, up to her elbows in soap suds as she washes dishes. My daughter who should be upstairs in bed asleep.

'I told her,' Mrs Kokodis says apologetically, 'that if she is out of bed she has to be helping.'

'I couldn't sleep, Mama.' Eleni's huge brown eyes are just like her Daddy's. 'It's too noisy.'

And because I've been thinking about her father, and it is noisy, I find I can't chide her much. We're staying here at the café because I'm working evenings while Mama and Baba are away, instead of days, when Eleni is at school. It just happens to be the busiest night in a long time.

'It will quieten down soon,' I tell her. 'I'll take you back to bed in a little while.'

In half an hour the last order is served, and people are finishing up their supper and queuing up to pay Nick at the counter. I leave my sister to finish clearing the tables, and take Eleni upstairs again.

'I hope Mrs Kokodis didn't give you too much pie,' I tell her. She shakes her head. 'She said I could only have some dried apple, because it was past bed time.'

She's a good girl, my Eleni. Almost eight years old, and bright and helpful. Peter would be so proud of her, this daughter he never met.

We're sleeping together in the big bed. Eleni finds it hard to sleep in strange places and Mama insists on us having the best bed. I tuck Eleni in under my Mama's red coverlet and sit beside her. She's wide awake, not ready to settle yet.

Although it's not cold she pulls the coverlet up to her chin and traces the pattern with her fingers. 'Did Yiayia really make this?'

'She did, *koritsi mou*.' I use the Greek endearment that Mama still uses sometimes for me. 'Yiayia looked after the sheep, and she spun their fleece into yarn, and then she wove this blanket. That was before she came to Australia to marry your pappouli.'

'But why? Didn't they have blankets in the shops there?'

'No, sweetie. The village was poor, and there was no money to spare to buy things that could be made.' Not that there's a lot of money here, in this town, especially during the war. But we have all the basics we need, and can save for special things. No-one goes hungry. 'All the women made blankets and sheets and clothes on the island. But, you know, there's something special about this blanket, that you can't get with a bought one.'

'What is it?'

I lean close and whisper, as my mother did when she told me long ago, 'It's made of love and dreams. Can you feel them?'

Eleni closes her eyes, her face screwed up in concentration. 'It feels like Yiayia is hugging me,' she says after a few moments.

The sensible part of me knows it's whimsy, of course. I know that there's nothing but wool and cotton in the blanket. But in the dark days as a child, when I was sick, and when my friend died, and later as an adult when the first telegram came to say Peter was missing in action, I cried my sorrow on Mama's bed, pulling that coverlet over me, hiding from the world. And in the weight of the coverlet it seemed as though I felt her strength, and her courage, and her unflinching love for us, her family.

Mama has always been our rock. She would deny it, and give credit to Baba, but as I've grown older and come to understand the circumstances of her life, my respect and love for her has grown. The struggle to simply survive on Kythera; her father's death in the first world war; the loss of family through illness, immigration, war; the hard work and long hours helping my father to establish and build this business, while raising a family of four. I am awed by her determination to make the best of everything, her undimmed hope, and the generosity of her feelings towards others.

Although I'm gently stroking my daughter's cheek, she isn't asleep yet, and she opens her eyes to ask, 'When will Yiayia be home?' 'In a few days. Aunt Sofia's ship should arrive tomorrow. They'll stay in Sydney for a day or two so that she can rest before Yiayioulia and Pappouli bring her home.'

And Mama will fuss over her sister and feed her and help her adapt to this new country and her new life. I hope, after all she has experienced, that she will find courage to hope and dream again. Maybe she has already found it, since she has survived the German occupation, and she has taken the brave step of boarding the ship to come to the other side of the world. They are stoic women, the women of Kythera, of Greece. They refuse to give up, to be defeated.

Eleni nods, closing her eyes again, and snuggles closer. But her breathing doesn't change, and I know she's still awake. I stay by her side.

'Can I see the picture?' she asks, after a minute or two.

I know which one she means. It's there, on Mama's dresser, a copy of the one I have at home on my dresser. My wedding photo, one of the few we have of Peter.

I fetch it down and give the framed photo to her. There's only the small lamp on in the room, but it's enough for her to study the picture.

The woman in the wedding dress seems so young to me now. Just eighteen, scarcely more than a girl. I was so proud and happy that Peter chose me, that he loved me and married me. Sometimes now I feel so much older than twenty-five; at other times, it seems strange that I'm older now than he was then. Than he was when he died.

Eleni touches her fingers to her father's face, very gently. 'He can't come back from Heaven, can he?'

Sorrow is a lump in my chest. 'No, koritsi mou.'

It's been so confusing for her, growing up without us knowing her father's fate, praying for his safe return after the war. And then the war ended and he didn't come home, and then came the terrible day not so long ago when I had to explain to her that he never would. That he'd died fighting with the resistance on Crete. I think a part of my heart broke forever that day – and hers, too. She still struggles to understand it.

'Remember that he can watch over you, sweetheart. I'm sure he's very proud of his brave girl.' I'm not sure if that's a comfort to a child who never saw her father. Pointless to wonder what our life would be like if there'd been no war. Nothing can change what has happened. We have to go on, without him. Despite Peter's death, on the whole my life has been blessed, compared to my mother's life, my aunt's, and to the experiences of so many of our family and friends.

I brush a loose strand of hair away from my daughter's lovely face. 'Don't forget you have me, and Yiayia and Pappouli, and Granny and Grandpa, and all your aunts and uncles and cousins. And we all love you.'

'I love you too, Mummy. And Daddy.' She bestows a kiss on his face under the glass, and sets the frame on the pillow beside her.

'Time for sleep now,' I tell her, kissing her on the forehead. 'I'll be back upstairs in a little while.' I straighten Mama's coverlet over her, move the photo slightly so that she won't jab her face on the corner of the frame.

When I've turned out the lamp and I'm at the door, she says, 'Mummy? Can I have another daddy one day? Millie at school is going to have another daddy.'

I'm glad she probably can't see my face. 'I don't know, sweetheart. Only if I meet a man who will love you as much as I do. I promise you that.'

And it is a promise I will hold to. Eleni comes first in my life.

Downstairs, Mrs Kokodis and my sister have done most of the washing up. There are only a handful of customers lingering in the café, most of them finished their supper. My brother Nick sits in a booth across from Jack Pappas, deep in conversation, their coffee cups pushed aside, empty.

I take a tray and start collecting the last of the dishes. When I approach Nick's table, he gives me a grin as he passes their cups to me. 'Jack's invited us all to a picnic on Sunday. He knows a great spot by the river where it's safe to swim.'

Jack stands courteously, as though I'm a lady and not a waitress. 'Do come and bring your daughter, Mrs Lekkas. My sisters and their families are coming, and there's a lovely open area for the children to play.'

'Thank you. I-' I hesitate. I know his sisters, of course. Lexie and Fran. All the women with a Greek background know each other in this town, and their children are at school with Eleni. But it's their grandparents who came to Australia, not their parents, and they're even more Australian than me. So I'm not as familiar with them as I am with some of the other women, and I'm not sure of the propriety of accepting an invitation from a man. Even with my brother's approval.

As if he can read my mind, Jack says, 'Lexie said she'll call in tomorrow to invite you.'

'Thank you,' I say again. 'It will be lovely to see her.' His smile is gentle, sincere.

The memory of it stays with me as I take my tray of cups to the kitchen and finish washing the dishes.

I leave Nick to lock up, say good night to my sister, and climb the stairs for the last time for the day. Eleni is sound asleep. I pick up the wedding photo from the pillow beside her to return it to the dresser. There's only a little light from the street lamp outside the window, but it catches Peter's face and for a moment it seems as though he's looking right at me. Smiling right at me.

Of course it was our wedding and he was as happy as I was. I shouldn't read anything more into that smile.

I remember his energy, his passion for life, his good sense and his sense of justice. It didn't surprise me to learn that the reason he missed his chance to be evacuated from Crete was because he'd stayed back to help injured comrades, and that he'd joined the resistance on the island rather than surrender and become a prisoner of war. That was Peter.

Promise me you won't grieve forever, if I don't come back. You have your life to live.

The words fall into my mind, in Peter's voice, an echo of the promise he'd asked of me before he embarked. I'd assured him fervently back then, because it had been important to him, but the possibility had seemed so distant, so unimaginable.

I touch my finger to his face, one last time, and then put the photo back on the dresser.

A kind of peace settles in my heart as I slip under the covers beside our sleeping

daughter. I've lived for her, these past years. But the best thing I can do for her is to be, myself, the kind of woman I want her to become.

Strength. Courage. Loyalty. Love. Through all the ups and downs of life. My Mama is my inspiration.

I pull her coverlet up over my shoulders, and nestle under its warmth and comfort.

*

Sydney, Australia, 1986

Helen, Eleni's daughter

The traffic is slow. Maybe everyone is heading to the beach on this sunny Saturday morning. Yiayia sits in the passenger seat, her back rigidly straight, her hands tightly clasping her black purse on her lap, staring at the road ahead.

'I'm driving carefully, Yiayia, and I've never had an accident,' I say lightly. 'You can relax.'

I'm watching the cars ahead of me on the road, but on the edge of my vision I see her look across at me, her face softening into a smile.

She pats my leg. 'I am sorry. I know I am safe. I am just nervous about . . . I do not want to cry too much.'

I'm sure I'd be keyed-up, too, if I was about to meet two of my sisters for the first time in more than 60 years.

'Yiayia, you can cry as much as you want. No-one's going to mind. I expect we'll probably all howl with happiness. My purse is full of clean hankies and there's a box of tissues in the back we can take in with us.' Now I pat her hand. 'It's going to be all right, Yiayia. It's going to be a wonderful day.'

She smiles, but still a little nervously. 'Yes. You are a good girl, Helen.'

She's really my proyiayia, my great-grandmother, but we all call her Yiayia. Strange to think that she left her family when she was the same age as me, and travelled to the other side of the world to marry the man who'd grown up next door to her. And great-great-aunt Sofia – I always lose track of the 'greats' – the youngest of her sisters, was not quite thirty when she came out here after the second world war.

And yeah, maybe I and half my friends are planning to go to Europe for working holidays, but we'll only be twenty-four hours on a plane away, and we can easily phone home whenever we want to. Unlike Yiayia, who left her mother and sisters without knowing if she'd ever see them again.

You don't grow up in a Greek-Australian family without learning some history, and oh, boy, my family's country had a tough time of it during the wars. I'm glad my darling little great-grandmother came out here before some of the worst of it. Her sisters weren't so lucky. Three of the four survived the German occupation in the second world war. One didn't. And two of their husbands didn't, either. And then there was my own grandfather, born in Australia, who died on Crete fighting with the resistance.

I am so, so lucky to have been born in a time and place where I have never had to experience what the older generations of my family have lived through.

We're getting nearer my great-uncle Nick's house where the aunts are staying and Yiayia is fumbling in her handbag for a hankie. I can't imagine what she must be feeling.

I hope her sisters have had a good rest overnight after their long flight from Greece. The flight landed so late that we all agreed it would be better for Yiayia to come over in the morning, rather than last night.

My mum has collected Aunt Sofia from the train station and arrives just before we do, so I park up behind her car in the driveway. Yiayia is shaking as I help her out of the car. She embraces Aunt Sofia and with their arms linked together they go inside, to see their sisters.

‘Let’s give them a few minutes,’ Mum says. ‘Uncle Nick is there to look after them.’

Mum and I busy ourselves unpacking food from our cars. The rest of the family won’t descend until this afternoon, allowing the sisters some private time for their reunion. Uncle Nick’s house is large, across the road from a lovely park, and the perfect place for a gathering of the extended family. But although some of us are third-generation Aussies, our Greek background means any gathering involves food – and plenty of it.

When we carry the first load into the house, there are the sounds of tears, and laughter, and four women speaking rapid Greek in the living room. Uncle Nick comes out to help us bring in boxes and tins and bags, so it’s probably a good ten minutes or more before we meet the new arrivals.

Yiayia takes both Mum’s hand and mine as we enter and, tears still running down her smiling face, presents us to her sisters, Maria and Vassiliki, and Vassiliki’s daughter Hanna, who has come with them. Yiayia speaks in Greek, but I understand the general gist, and I’m crying too as I embrace these amazing women, not only because of the emotion of the moment, but because my Yiayia has said she’s so proud of me being the first of her female descendants to go to university.

There are so many moments in the day that make my heart fill with joy, and my eyes well with happy tears. I think most of them will stay in my memories for ever.

As many of the family who can make it arrive in the afternoon. Effie’s sons and daughters and their spouses. Her grandchildren with their husbands and wives and their children.

Four generations, including Effie. She’s outlived her beloved husband, but she has four children, seventeen grandchildren, sixty-one great-grandchildren, and many of them are here.

And that’s not counting great-great-aunt Sofia’s family. Not quite as many of them – she only had two sons after she remarried here in Australia – but they and their families are here, too. And Mrs Kokodis, Yiayia’s best friend, and her family.

Then there’s g-g-aunt Vassiliki’s grandson Alex – Hanna’s son – who’s been in Western Australia for a couple of years, a doctor doing specialist training. We haven’t met him yet, but he’s flown across specially to see his grandma and to meet us all.

It’s a warm day and with so many of us we spill out on to the terrace, and also to the park across the road. We’re a pretty multicultural family, these days, with assorted generations marrying Aussie, Irish, Chinese, Filipino, and Canadian spouses, but the Greek is still strong in us.

The family photographs take ages, but nobody minds. The four sisters sit together on chairs under the shade of a huge Moreton Bay fig tree in the park. In between photographs with various combinations of family, they clutch each other’s hands, talking in Greek, catching up on decades of their lives. The conversation flies faster than I can keep track, and I’m wishing that I’d worked harder at learning Greek.

My mother and grandmother and the other women keep up an endless supply of food, and the roast lamb on a spit Uncle Nick, Grandpa Jack and my dad have arranged gradually disappears down to the bones.

Someone has brought music, and there's some impromptu dancing. I find myself in a line beside cousin Alex dancing the Kalamatianos. I've always loved the dance, but it is even more fun dancing it with a gorgeous, very pleasant man than with the boys I learned it with at the Hellenic Club growing up. We're grinning, and laughing, and his hand grips mine firmly as we flow with the rhythm of the grapevine and rocking steps, and I'm a little sad when the dance ends.

Around eleven that night, I see that my great-grandmother is tiring. So, too, are the Greek aunts, who must be jet-lagged as well. 'I'll take you home, Yiayia-mou,' I tell her. 'I'll bring you back in the morning, so you can all go to church together.'

She smiles, and takes the arm I offer her, murmuring something in Greek. I think it's a prayer or a blessing.

I've been living with her for a couple of months, in the house she and Pappouli bought in Marrickville when they retired to Sydney. It works well for both of us – cheap accommodation for me within a bike-ride to uni, and company and help for her, now she's getting frailer.

She is too tired to talk in the car and when we get home I help her in to bed. Her eyes are already drifting closed as I kiss her on the cheek. She is pale, and I'm a little worried that the long, emotional day has been too much for her. When I've brushed my teeth and changed into my pyjamas, I go back to check on her.

Yiayia's hands are still, lying on the white cotton blanket. I've rarely seen them still, not moving. She is always making something, doing something. Cooking. Sewing. Tidying. Hugging. Touching.

Her breath rattles in and out, slowly. But it is even, and I'm reassured. It's just sleep, not... not the thing I can't contemplate. I'm so not ready to lose her yet. I'm only really getting to know her, now that I'm an adult, now that I can understand the significance of the woman she is. She'd laugh and say she's nobody, just an old Greek lady, but the more I learn about her life, the more in awe of her I am.

I leave her bedroom door open as usual so that I can hear her if she calls. But instead of going to my room at the back of the house, I go to the lounge room, just across the hall from her. The red and white blanket she spun and wove as a girl lies on the back of the couch. A few of the red threads have unravelled, but she's mended them, little batches of brighter red because she couldn't match the colour.

I curl up on the couch, drawing the blanket over me. I am tired, too. My brain buzzes with memories of the day, ideas for the future. Family, people, country, culture... I'm Australian, through and through, but I'm proud, too, of my Greek heritage.

My thoughts are drifting and I feel myself falling towards sleep. The weight of the blanket is just right. White threads spun from cotton, red wool pattern threads spun from the fleeces of sheep raised on the rugged terrain of Kythera.

Those threads connect me to an island I've never been to. I'll make sure I visit Kythera when I go to Europe next year. Not only my Yiayia, but some of who I am comes from there.



The Roxy Museum, Bingara

The Roxy Museum, 70 Maitland St, Bingara NSW 2404

The Roxy Theatre is situated in the main street of Bingara, a striking building with a history as colourful as its painted exterior. Built in 1936 by three Greeks, it operated as a cinema until 1958, after which it was closed and lay dormant and untouched for forty years.

In May 2004, The Roxy was faithfully restored to its original splendour and was re-opened to the public. The theatre embraces some of the most striking original Art Deco architecture in New South Wales and it still contains the original fixtures and fittings, including the ornate stucco plaster, paintwork and coloured lights from 1936.

The Roxy Museum documents the history of Greek settlement in Australia, with particular reference to the Greek involvement in cafés throughout New South Wales and Queensland. The collection of objects and images provides tangible evidence and reminders of the era of Greek cafes and cinemas.



Kytherian home spun blanket

This blanket belonged to Jim (Demetrios) Prineas and Katina (Ekaterini or Catherine) Feros who were from Mitata in the centre of the Greek island of Kythera. Katina was the daughter of Peter Feros who was one of the partners in Peters and Co. who built the Roxy at Bingara. Jim Prineas came to Australia in 1922 at the age of 17 and worked for a relative in a cafe in Holbrook NSW, and later, in partnership with his older brother Peter (Panagiotis), operated the 'Garden of Roses Cafe' in Canowindra and the 'Allies Cafe' in Junee. Jim returned to Kythera where he married Katina in 1937 with the intention of spending the rest of his life as a farmer on the island. However World War II intervened, and they emigrated back to Australia in 1947.

This home spun and dyed wool and cotton (or hemp) blanket is an example of the handiwork of the women of Kythera using traditional loom weaving. Domestic items such as these reminded immigrant families of their homeland and their cultural past.

David Allan

David Allan is an illustrator and artist whose first picture book, *Two Trickster Tales from Russia* (retold by Sophie Masson) was published by Christmas Press in 2013. His second picture book, *Two Tales of Twins from Ancient Greece and Rome* (retold by Ursula Dubosarsky) was listed in Good Reading Magazine's Best Books of 2014. He has also illustrated *Two Tengu Tales from Japan* (retold by Duncan Ball, 2015) and *Two Enchanted Tales from Old China* (retold by Gabrielle Wang, 2017), all published by Christmas Press. He has also illustrated for storybooks and anthologies. David's work is in private and public collections and he has exhibited artworks in both solo and group shows. He lives in the New England region of NSW.

davidallanart.com

Beattie Alvarez

Based in New England, Beattie is a writer and illustrator whose work has been featured in storybooks, anthologies and magazines. She has also curated and edited several books. In her spare time she makes dragons for her Armidale-based toyshop, Granny Fi's Toy Cupboard.

John Heffernan

For as long as he can remember, multi-award-winning New England author John Heffernan, has been fascinated by the power of the story. 'People are captured by stories,' he says. 'They live the characters, they enact the dramas, they feel the tension and the emotion. Stories are the very basis of what we are about.' John has written over thirty books under his own name for all ages from early readers to young adults. He's particularly passionate about the stories behind some of his award-winning books: the Spud series, *My Dog*, *The Island*, *A Horse Called Elvis*, *Where There's Smoke*, *Marty's Shadow*, and his latest novels, *Naveed* – the story of a young Afghan boy's struggle to keep his family together, and *Hotaka*, about a young Japanese boy who survives the devastation of a tsunami. He has written picture books, too, including, most recently, *Two Tales of Brothers from Ancient Mesopotamia*, illustrated by New England-based artist Kate Durack and published by Armidale-based publisher, Christmas Press (2016). John has also written a further twenty books as Charlie Carter. But that's another story.

spudplus.com

Ian Irvine

Ian Irvine, an Australian marine scientist, has also written 33 novels, an anthology of shorter stories, and various other short stories for children and adults. His novels include the 13-book *Three Worlds* fantasy sequence, which has been published in many countries and translations and has sold over a million copies, a trilogy of eco-thrillers in a world of catastrophic climate change, *Human Rites*, now in its third edition, and 13 novels for younger readers.

ian-irvine.com

Sophie Masson

Born in Indonesia of French parents, and brought up in Australia and France, but now living in New England, Sophie Masson is the award-winning, internationally-published author of more than 60 books for children, young adults and adults. Her books have won major awards, including the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the Aurealis Awards. Most recently, her 2017 picture book, *Two Rainbows*, illustrated by Michael McMahon, was a Notable Book in the 2018 CBCA Awards, and *Once Upon an ABC*, her picture book with illustrator Christopher Nielsen (Little Hare 2017), was shortlisted for the 2018 Crichton Award. Other recent titles include the YA historical mystery novel *Jack of Spades* (Eagle Books 2017), and two picture books, *Building Site Zoo* illustrated by Laura Wood (Hachette Australia, 2017) and *See Monkey* (illustrated by Kathy Creamer, Little Pink Dog Books, 2018). Seven of her poems have also been included in the children's poetry anthology, *A Boat of Stars* (ABC Books, 2018). Forthcoming is the picture book *On My Way* (illustrated by Simon Howe, Scholastic Australia) and an adult historical novel, *Black Wings* (Greystones Press, UK).

sophiemasson.org

Fiona McDonald

Fiona McDonald is an Australian illustrator, author and dollmaker. Based in Armidale, she has had eleven books published internationally, including an illustrated novel for children, *Ghost Doll and Jasper*, and a bestselling history of street art, *The Popular History of Graffiti: From the Ancient World to the Present*. Her most recent titles include illustrations for the acclaimed picture books *Two Fearsome Fairy Tales from France* (retold by award-winning British author Adele Geras) and *Two Selkie Stories from Scotland* (retold by popular Australian author Kate Forsyth), both books published by Christmas Press.

fionamcdonald.blogspot.com

Bronwyn Parry

International award winner Bronwyn Parry's romantic thrillers set in Australia's wild places have been published in Australia, the UK, Germany and the Czech Republic. The manuscript for her first novel, *As Darkness Falls*, won a prestigious Golden Heart Award from the Romance Writers of America, and both her second and third novels, *Dark Country* and *Dead Heat* were finalists in the Romance Writers of America RITA awards – the Oscars of romance writing – and in the Daphne du Maurier Award for romantic suspense. Both books also won the Australian Romance Readers Association award for Favourite Romantic Suspense in 2010 and 2012. Bronwyn's fourth book, *Darkening Skies*, and her fifth book, *Storm Clouds*, were also finalists in the ARRA Awards. Bronwyn's sixth novel, *Sunset Shadows*, was published by Hachette Australia in 2016, and she has also published a Christmas novella, *The North Wind* (Firetail Press, 2016). An occasional academic, Bronwyn's research interests are in fiction, its readership and contemporary publishing, and she is passionate about the richness, diversity, and value of popular fiction. Bronwyn lives on 100 acres of bushland in the New England tablelands of northern NSW, and travels extensively in rural and outback Australia.

bronwynparry.com





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