

# Fight or Flight



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- Skeptical — a handbook of pseudoscience and the paranormal*, (ed, with Laycock, Brown and Groves), 1989
- Having a Great Birth in Australia*, (ed) 2005
- Men at Birth*, (ed) 2006
- With Women: midwives' experiences — from shiftwork to caseload* (ed), 2007
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# Fight or Flight

twenty  
award-winning stories  
from the  
Stringybark Young Adult Short  
Fiction Awards

Edited by  
David Vernon

Selected by  
Georgia Crocker, Kerry Johnstone, Michael Vernon  
and David Vernon

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Adult Short Fiction Awards*

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These are works of fiction and unless otherwise made clear, those mentioned in these stories are fictional characters and do not relate to anyone living or dead.

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## **Introduction**

— David Vernon

Young Adult fiction is defined as fiction suitable for children between the ages of twelve and seventeen. Immediately a problem can be seen. A story suitable for a twelve year-old is not necessarily of interest to a seventeen year old. As a father of two teenagers, it is very clear to me that an inordinate amount of intellectual and social development goes on during these years and so it is a huge challenge for authors to write stories that resonate with children over such a wide age range. And yet I think the judges have succeeded in selecting stories that do resonate with this group of young people.

Joining the adults on the judging panel we were lucky enough to have two young adults, Georgia Crocker and Michael Vernon (yes, my son) who are smack bang in the middle of the YA age range. They, and the other two judges, read over one hundred entries in order to pick these twenty stories showcased here that so well fit the YA genre.

Adults find it tempting to choose stories that have a moral and provide ‘an education’ to young people. Young adults are not averse to this, providing that the moral is neither sugar-coated nor patronizing and has a level of gritty realism that appeals to them.

While these stories are written for the YA audience, they are also engaging for adults. They give an insight into the YA world and exemplify the trials, challenges, victories and triumphs of young people. Have a read and be impressed with the scope and quality of stories written by these Australian and international authors.

David Vernon  
Judge and Editor  
“Stringybark Stories”  
April 2013

## **Teeth Marks**

— Aleesah Darlison

Tilby curled her toes in the hot sand of Avalon Beach, studying the waves as they looped towards the shore. She hitched her surfboard higher under her arm and flicked her hair, tossing her black ringlets off her eyes. It had been twelve months since she'd stepped onto the sand. A year since she'd had the courage to face the water.

What if it happens again? What if I have to kick and scream and fight to save my life once more? I don't know if I can do it.

Tilby dropped her surfboard and plonked onto the sand, thrusting her head between her knees and forcing air into her lungs. She didn't care who saw her and what looks they threw at her. Slowly, her mind settled and her hands steadied.

Life hadn't been the same since *The Taking*. She hadn't been the same. Funny, how one moment can change your life.

Wobbling to her feet, Tilby snatched her surfboard up. She reminded herself this was her idea as she plodded towards the waves. She passed the terracotta-coloured surf club, weaving in and out of sunbakers sprawled on their towels, before splashing into the frothy surf.

Welcome back, it said. Glad you came.

“Mummy, what's wrong with that girl?”

A boy and his mother paddled in the shallows. “Shush!” The mother hissed at him.

Tilby forced herself to step over the dying waves until the ocean licked her knees. Her heart danced faster. Tilby had been surfing since she was ten. Half her lifetime. It should come easily to her now. Second nature. Second skin.

Skin.

Well, that was the thing. Her skin had changed these last few months. Once, she'd taken it for granted. Now she realised how precious skin was — even as scarred and puckered as hers was. Tilby slapped her chest on her board and paddled. It was impossible at first, but she soon worked up a rhythm.

Panting, she scooted behind the waves where other riders hung on

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the water. She spun her board around to face the shore and sat up, her legs hanging in the water. Somehow, she resisted the temptation to draw them up on top of the board.

There's nothing there, she told herself. Just like when she was a little kid and thought monsters lurked beneath her bed.

Tilby let her eyes savour the scene of the salt-and-pepper beach, the ocean pool, the towering Norfolk Island Pines. Her eyes shifted north to the headland with its cliff-top houses perched in rows, their window-eyes flashing in the sunlight.

Her parents' house was up there. It stuck out because Mum had insisted on painting it pink. Tilby had moved back there after *The Taking*.

Mum hadn't wanted her to come this morning. "Don't go, Til. Please."

"I have to." Tilby had trotted out the door lugging her surfboard. "I'll be fine. Don't worry." The wind tapped impatiently on Tilby's spine, reminding her where she was. She glanced at the other surfers, all guys. Then she spotted Rhys and her blood trickled to a stop in her veins. He paddled over, a grin splitting his face.

"Hey, why didn't you tell me you were coming? I'd have organised a welcoming committee to help out."

"I didn't want to make a big deal of it." Tilby traced her finger around the mermaid painting on her board. "And I don't need help, by the way."

Rhys pulled a face. "I didn't mean anything by it. So, you're feeling okay?"

"Good as expected." A wave curling behind them caught her eye. "Here comes one. You'd better take it."

"Trying to get rid of me?"

"Never."

Rhys grinned as he paddled away to catch the wave. He makes it look easy. It used to be like that for me, too. Rhys rode the wave until it petered out then jogged halfway up the beach and threw the board and himself down beside a girl in a blue bikini. That used to be me, Tilby thought. Not any more.

The next wave that rolled in, Tilby attacked it. When she leapt onto the board the first time, she wobbled and shook. The wave dumped her.



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She had a moment of panic when she was underwater, when her ears filled with her heartbeat and the swirling, churning sea, but she managed to pull herself out of it. She surfaced with her lungs bursting and her lips slick with salt.

“Know what you’re doing, love?” A grey-haired surfer paddled over to her. “Fine,” she snapped.

“Just don’t want to see you kill yourself,” the old guy snorted, then disappeared on a wave.

Hot with anger, Tilby threw herself at the next big one. Again, she was dumped. Maybe this was a bad idea. She spat sand and seaweed out of her mouth. Maybe I never will get this balance thing back.

Tilby kept trying. Finally, she rode a wave all the way in. Exhilarated, she turned and paddled straight back out again. Tilby surfed for ages. Being in the water was more healing than any operation, any doctor’s appointments or therapy sessions.

She was still bursting with the joy of being back when a shadow in the water made her seize up. She was a kid again, terrified of the monster under her bed. But this one was real, wasn’t it? This one could eat her. Isn’t that why they called them ‘monsters of the deep’?

What am I going to do? her panicked mind screamed. Then he was beside her again. Like he’d always been. Like he’d never be again.

“You okay?”

“Ah, yeah,” Tilby panted, “why wouldn’t I be?” She tried to sound tough, but it didn’t work. Not when she looked and felt like a piece of soggy lettuce, clinging to her board with tears dribbling down her cheeks. Salt on salt.

“Oh, gee, I don’t know.” Rhys frowned, eyeing her knowingly.

“Sorry,” Tilby said. “I thought I could do this.”

“You can, but probably not alone.”

“I was doing okay.”

“Yeah, I saw. But those pelican shadows can be kind of scary.” Rhys pointed at the bird flying overhead. “That’s what freaked you out, isn’t it?”

Tilby nodded, ashamed. “I’m an idiot.”

“No you’re not. You’re gutsy.”

Rhys didn’t have to be nice to her. He didn’t owe her anything. In the

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midst of her shame and misery, she had one clear thought. He's still as cute as ever with those jade-and-ice eyes. How was he ever mine? Tilby licked her salt-crusted lips. Those thoughts were useless now.

Rhys stayed with her, picking off waves to surf then paddling behind the breakers, talking and laughing. Tilby didn't mean to, but she opened up to him.

"The psychologist thinks I've blocked most of it out," she said. "Post traumatic stress she calls it. She's always at me to talk about it. But, I don't want to."

"Sometimes talking helps."

"Thanks, Dr Rhys." Tilby laughed then grew serious again. "It was a stupid prank. Stealing that boat. I don't know what Nat and I were thinking. Sometimes, I wish I was the one who drowned. It'd be better than living like this."

"Being alive has got to count for something."

"But it was my stupid idea to take the boat and Nat paid the price."

"You paid something, too."

"I guess." Tilby looked where her left arm used to be. She lifted her rashie to reveal the curved row of puncture wounds where the shark's teeth had sliced her stomach and punctured her rib cage.

Rhys didn't even flinch. "That's wicked, Til," was all he said.

She lowered her rashie. "Nat should have come back. Not me."

"It was an accident."

"Is that what you call it?"

"What do you call it?"

"Justice." Tilby caught the look on Rhys's face. "But, enough about me. What are you up to?"

"Same as usual."

Tilby nodded towards the beach. "Who's the girl?"

"She's from Melbourne. Met her at the Newport Arms ... Oh, sorry."

Rhys stared at her, horrified.

Tilby laughed. "It's okay. I'm not that touchy."

"Phew!" Rhys pretended to wipe sweat from his forehead. "She's a nice girl, Til. You'd like her."

"Looks good in a bikini."

"You dumped me, remember? You told me to stop calling."

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Tilby blushed. She had acted weird. Losing an arm did that to a person.

“But I won’t hold it against you. Hey, you up for a party at Matt’s tonight?”

An image of herself flashed into her mind. Somehow, she didn’t think a one-armed girl in a dress belonged at a party. “I’m not ready.”

“If you can ride these waves, you can face a few friends.”

Tilby thought about it a bit more. Maybe catching up with her friends wasn’t a bad idea. Maybe instead of a dress she could wear jeans and a T-shirt. Go casual. “What time?”

“Seven.”

“Okay,” Tilby said. “I’ll be there. But right now, there’s an awesome set heading this way. Let’s go!”

*Aleesah Darlison is a multi-published children’s author. Her picture books include Bearly There, Puggle’s Problem and Warambi (Shortlisted: 2012 CBCA Eve Pownall Award and 2012 Wilderness Society Award for Children’s Literature). Her other books and series include Fangs, Little Good Wolf, I Dare You, Totally Twins and Unicorn Riders. Aleesah’s short stories have appeared in the black dog books Short and Scary Anthology, Chicken Soup for the Soul and The School Magazine. [www.aleesahdarlison.com](http://www.aleesahdarlison.com).*



## Short Cut

— Jacqui Halpin

“Josh, you can’t make me go in there,” cried Alex, as she clung to the cold, iron gate of the city cemetery.

“Come on! Don’t be such a *girl*,” Josh said as he tried to prise her hands free. “It’s not like you haven’t walked through the cemetery before.”

“Yes, but that was in the daytime.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you. *I’ll* protect you from ghosts and goblins.” Josh gave up on her hands and seizing her around the waist tried pulling her off the gate. He succeeded. They fell into the cemetery grounds in a tangle of limbs. “See, you’re in here now, may as well take the short cut.” Josh stood, dusted off the seat of his jeans, then reached out a hand and helped Alex to her feet.

Alex was still undecided. “What time is it?”

Josh glanced at his watch. “Quarter to midnight.”

Alex peered into the darkness. Row after row of headstones stood silhouetted against the ink sky. “I don’t know, Josh...”

“Look, you can walk through the cemetery with me, and be home in like fifteen, twenty minutes,” Josh said, “or walk the long way home around it, in the dark, all by yourself... *alone*.” He stood with his arms folded, and tapped his foot in mock impatience.

“Okay! Okay! I’ll come with you,” sighed Alex. She’d barely be home in time for curfew as it was. “But no funny stuff. No trying to scare me or anything. Okay, Josh?”

“As if I would?” said Josh trying his best to sound offended. Alex laughed but she still had a knot in her stomach as Josh fumbled in his pocket for the torch on his key ring.

The feeble ray of light was nowhere near enough to calm Alex’s nerves as they walked up the main pathway. The cemetery was huge but, thankfully, they were only cutting across a corner of it.

Their footsteps on the bitumen echoed loudly in the still night air. All round them the headstones cast dark shadows across their path. The

cemetery didn't usually bother Alex. She'd lived near it her whole life. When walking through it in the daytime it seemed a peaceful, restful place. But the cemetery wore a different shroud at night.

"It's too quiet," she whispered to Josh.

"Why are you whispering," he laughed. "It's not like you're going to wake them."

"Shh! Don't say things like that." Josh laughed again and draped a strong arm around her shoulders.

"You're such a scaredy cat."

Alex jumped as something rustled the dead leaves at the side of the path. Josh swung the torch light on the spot. "It's just a cane toad. Gee, will you relax, already?"

"I hate toads." Alex pushed closer to Josh.

"If that's the worst thing we encounter in here then we're doing all right," Josh teased.

"It's not toads I'm worried about. I've heard stories about this place."

"Like what?" Josh sounded interested.

"People have seen ghosts walking around in here."

"People always say stuff like that. Remember last holidays Mel was convinced she had a poltergeist in her house?" Josh chuckled. "It turned out to be a rat in her bedroom wall."

Alex laughed. "Yeah, but old Mrs Holcroft, our neighbour, told Mum she saw that statue of Mr Worthington getting back on top of his headstone one morning when she was walking her dog, just on dawn." Alex shuddered.

"She's probably making it up so she has a story worth telling," scoffed Josh.

"Maybe, but ever since that day she's walked her dog at lunch time."

"Perhaps she *is* telling the truth. Maybe he does walk around the cemetery at night seeking people he can devour."

"Stop it, Josh! You're scaring me shirtless. That statue is freaky enough to walk past in daylight."

"Now what's scary about a life-sized statue sitting on a headstone?" Josh asked sarcastically.

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“It’s not the size of it... it’s the fact that he looks so real. He looks as though he could spring to life at any moment. Like... like he’s waiting ...”

“Waiting for what?” Josh said as he flashed the torch light over the graves.

“I don’t know. Just waiting...” Alex spun around and peered into the darkness.

“What’s wrong?”

“I thought I heard something.” She clung tightly to Josh’s arm.

“It’s probably Mr Worthington coming to get us,” Josh teased.

Alex thumped him hard on the arm. “Stop that! It’s not funny. We’re about level with his grave right now.”

Josh moved the torch light slowly over the headstones on their left. “Are you sure? I don’t see any statues.”

“Yes... yes, I’m sure. That’s his grave right there.” Alex’s voice sounded strangled. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. The torch light wavered as Josh’s hand began to tremble.

Suddenly, they heard footsteps on the path behind them. Josh dropped the torch as they both gasped and jumped in unison. They watched in horror as the small torch rolled down the path behind them, its weak light bouncing off the base of the headstones. It came to rest by a pair of grey boots.

Alex screamed. Josh grabbed Alex by the hand and together they sprinted up the path. The sound of heavy footsteps followed.

A wind came from nowhere and rustled the leaves along the path as though it were trying to hurry them. “Quick, this way,” said Alex as she darted to the right. They tore between two rows of graves, stumbling a little on the uneven ground. Alex could feel her legs trembling and hoped they would keep her upright until they got out of the cemetery. It couldn’t be much further now.

The footsteps that followed them thudded as they left the bitumen and pounded on the grass. Josh risked a backward glance. “Faster, Alex! He’s gaining on us.” Josh took the lead and pulled Alex along behind him.

Just keep running, Alex told herself, as her lungs felt like they would

explode. Don't stop. Don't look back. If they could just make it over the cemetery fence they'd be safe. She had never heard any stories of Mr Worthington being sighted outside the cemetery grounds. And seeing as now she knew the stories to be true she was sure she would have heard about it if he did ever cross the boundary.

"There straight ahead. The fence," Alex panted. Josh leapt over the fallen railing of an old grave, bringing Alex with him, and raced towards the stone wall. The loud thud of boots told them Mr Worthington had just cleared the railing, too. Josh grabbed Alex around the waist and hoisted her onto the wall. She jumped down onto the footpath as Josh hauled himself up and swung one leg over. In the pale glow of a distant street light Alex watched in terror as a hand reached above the wall and fastened around Josh's wrist.

Hurrying forward she grabbed Josh's other arm and pulled with all her might, bracing a foot against the cemetery wall. Josh yelled as the stone hand tightened around his wrist and pressed his watch into the skin. He wriggled his hand frantically and finally his watch slipped off, freeing him. He shot down from the wall and raced up the street with Alex in tow. No footsteps followed.

They shut and locked the front door of Alex's house behind them and collapsed on the floor, too exhausted and shocked even to make it to the lounge. Alex's mother appeared in the doorway making them both scream. "Alex, it's five minutes after midnight. You're grounded."

"That's okay, Mum. I don't think I'll want to leave the house for a while anyway."

The following morning, a council ute drove slowly into the grounds of the city cemetery and pulled up in the middle of the main path. Two council workers sprang from the cab.

"You can whipper-snipper the left hand side of the road and I'll do the right," said Bill, as he grabbed some gear from the back of the ute.

"Oh, give me the harder side why don't you?" said Ross. "Just cos I'm the new bloke."

"That's not why at all, Mate," Bill said, as he took a swig from his water bottle. "I don't like that statue over there."

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Ross followed Bill's gaze to the statue of Mr Worthington. "Why? What's wrong with it?"

"Well, for one thing, he's never worn a watch before."

*Jacqui Halpin is a Brisbane writer of children's fiction and short stories. She shares her home with her husband, two of their three adult children, and a cat called Loki. She wishes she spent more time writing but children (even adult ones), and cats can be very distracting. Jacqui also has a story published in the Stringybark anthology, Behind The Wattles.*

