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THE GHOSTLY STRINGYBARK

GHOST GUM

— LEWELLYN HORGAN

You lie awake in the middle of the night. You are thirsty, but don't want to get out of bed to walk to the kitchen. Even though the nightmare appears to have ended, a fear has followed you back to your bedroom. In the dream you'd felt something pressing down on you, cutting off your air supply, but other than that you cannot remember specifics. You've had a bad feeling ever since your dad cut down the ghost gum in the backyard, just a week ago.

You stare at the roof, watching swirling patterns form in the dark, and listen to the gasping wind outside. Just when you are beginning to calm down and drift back to sleep, you hear a scream. You leap out of your bed. The scream has come from your little brother's room. You pad quickly across your room in your pyjamas. You reach for your light switch but cannot find it. You spend a moment confused, wondering where it has gone, but give up and go stumbling through the hallway.

You nearly walk into your brother. He is standing in the middle of his room, at the foot of his bed. He swings around and you see the startled whites of his eyes through the dark. He relaxes slightly when he realises that it's you.

“What is it?” you say.

“I went to the bathroom, and when I got back...”

“What?”

He points to the bed. And in the bed there is your little brother, sleeping. Or at least it looks like your little brother. Strange. You both crouch by the bed.

“It's you,” you say.

“It sure looks like it,” your brother answers.

You both stare at the sleeping boy. You lift a finger and go to poke the sleeping figure in the head. Your brother, the awake brother, grabs your hand. Stops you.

“No,” he says, “don't touch him.”

You would go to get your parents but parents don't exist in nightmares.

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Your little brother whispers to you in the dark. “I know what this is.”

“Really? What?”

“I think it’s a ghoul. It’s trying to take my place. It’s exhausted from transforming, but soon it will wake up and kill us both. We have to... we have to destroy it.”

“How do you know this?”

“Granddad told me. A week before he died. He said I’d have to remember it if —”

“If the ghost gum was ever cut down?”

“Yeah.”

You feel a nervous bubble of nausea in your stomach. Your mouth is dry. You *knew* that the gum tree should have been left where it was. Your grandfather had told you and your brother the story of the tree a hundred times. You can almost see him here now, eyes bulging like a frog being squeezed, telling the story.

“A ghoul lives under that gum tree. If the tree is ever knocked down, the creature will be free. It can change forms, get into your dreams. It will hurt you. If it gets free...” He’d always pause at this point — no matter how many times he told the story, he’d always tell it the same way. You remember the wrinkles curling in his face like question marks, building up for the big finish. He’d had a face that would have only been improved by an eye-patch, or scars, or second degree burns. They would have only added to his brooding personality. He’d point a finger warningly at you. “It,” he’d say, “will not be good.”

Your mum and dad only ever laughed at this story, telling him off for scaring you and your brother. Your father had told you that most things that your grandfather said were not worth taking seriously. You’d always been unsure whether to believe your grandfather, until about six months ago, when your grandfather, going for a walk, had been struck by a falling branch from the gum tree. His skull had been crushed. It had seemed more than just an accident — no other branches had fallen that day. When your father decided to cut the ghost gum down, calling it a safety hazard, you and your brother had panicked, had begged him not to. But he had not listened.

“We have to be quick,” your little brother says, “It will tears off our skin and eat it like roll-ups, it will bite off our fingers one by one. It will suck and rip the tongues out of our mouths.”

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“Yes,” you answer, your heart is beating faster, keeping tempo with his words.

Your brother looks at you. “You need to do it.”

Your voice comes out scratchy like the branches that claw at your brother’s window in the wind, as you ask, “What do I do?”

“The neck.”

“What?” You look at him.

“Strangle him,” he says impatiently,

Taking a deep breath, you put your hands around your sleeping brother’s neck.

The body disappears into the bed like melting candle-wax when you have finished. The house is silent, other than the branches still flicking at your brother’s window, and the sound of your heavy breathing.

“Good work,” your little brother says, as he gets back into his now empty bed. You stare at him for a moment, then turn to go back to your own room. Just as you reach the doorway, your brother squeaks at you, “Oh, wait!”

You turn around and look at him. From this distance, you can see little in the dark, other than the outline of his fuzzy hair.

“What?” you ask.

“There could be more than one. If there’s...you in your bed, do the same thing. We’ll be fine. As long as you do it.”

You pad quickly down the hallway, back to your room. You hate your dad for putting you in this situation, for not listening to your grandfather. You don’t want to see *you* in your bed, don’t want to have to force your little hands around your neck. You don’t want to see your eyes suddenly bulge open, the gurgle of saliva, and the waving of frantic limbs. You don’t want to feel the muscles relax as it gives up, don’t want to see the eyes roll back and the tongue lull out, as your copy, the creature, melts away. The house is dark yet still somehow full of shifting shadows and the wind moans. You tiptoe along the hall.

In your room you find yourself. Sleeping. You look so relaxed. Your soft mouth hangs open; your hands are splayed above your head. Drool in the corner of your mouth shines in the moonlight that leaks through

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the blinds. You turn away. But your little brother has followed you. He is standing in your doorway, his pillow tucked under his right arm.

“Do it,” he says.

“I can’t...”

“You need to,” he says. “If you don’t, it’ll wake up. If it wakes up, you’ve killed us both. You’ve killed me. You don’t want that, do you?”

You don’t want this, but you’re nervous. You ask, “What if he overpowers me?”

This one, after all, is bigger than your little brother’s copy. It is the same size as you.

Your brother thinks about this for a moment, and then says, “Use this pillow. Put your whole weight on top of it. It’ll make it easy.”

Having run out of arguments, you take the pillow from him and turn back to the bed.

“Don’t let it talk, don’t let it get a word out, it’ll only try to stop you,” your brother says.

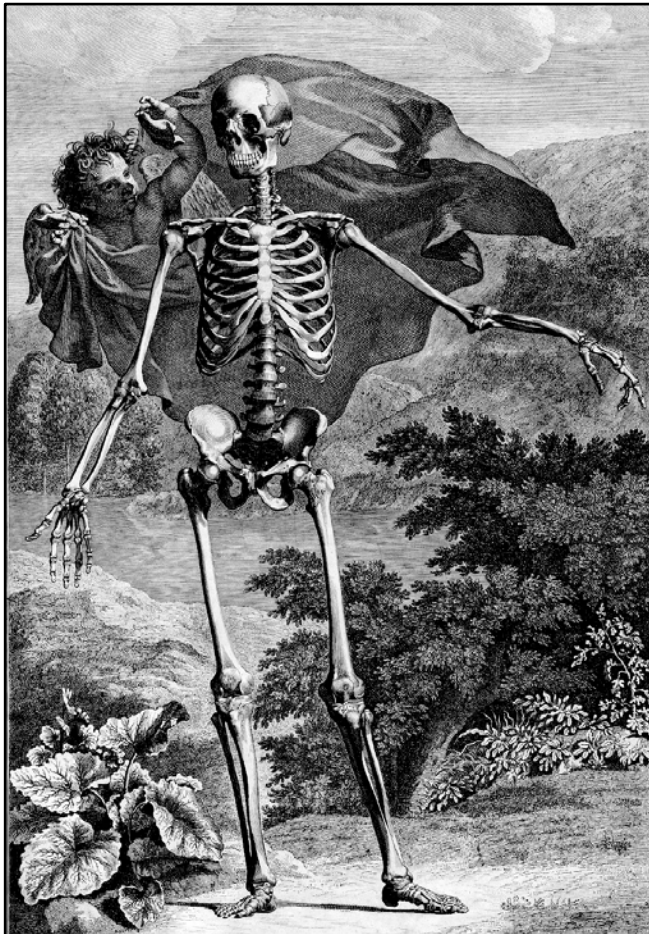
You place the pillow over your own sleeping face. After a last moment of hesitation, you take a deep breath, and with all your weight you press the pillow down...

You find yourself awake in your bed. You’d been dreaming that – wait- you can’t breathe. Something is pushing down on your face, smothering you. Your nose and teeth are being crushed from the pressure. You try to yell for help and only manage to force out a muffled moan, quickly drowned out by the wind that has begun to howl outside. You try and thrash your body around, try to unbalance your attacker but the pillow remains clamped on tight. You ball your hands into fists and throw out your arms, you try and tear the pillow from your face but your body feels weightless and soon your arms fall uselessly to your sides. Fireworks of blooded reds and bruised purples flash and spark in your vision as your brain screams for oxygen. Your last thought is this: the creature has escaped and it has tricked you. You do not have much time to feel regret. You listen as the wind’s moans and your own muffled gurgles become quieter and quieter, before fading completely away.

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THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW

— KATHY CHILDS

I see her when I shut my eyes at night. She haunts me, follows me, will not let me rest. Her palms press against the window as if she is trying to push through but her forehead leans on the glass in a gesture of defeat. She conveys resignation; the weariness of a soul lost to time.

The woman in the window. I have searched the archives, delved into the history of this place to find her name, to ferret out details of her past. The Abbotsford Convent, built in the 1860s, has a complex past and many of the records have been lost. At 11 am on the morning following each full moon she appears at the window and looks out with dull, blank eyes. Her pale, stricken face blurs in photographs regardless of the quality of my lens so today my sister Shirley has come with me. She is a portrait artist and an ally with a spiritual bent. If photographs do not give me clarity perhaps a sketch will. I hunger to know who she is. We sit on the lawn and wait. Watching. The gardens in front of the building are in full bloom — red, yellow and luscious shades of green. The facade of the building sits in shadow, gloomy and dim. The contrast is unnerving. The windows stand out in the dark grey walls, like bloodshot eyes edged in red brick. I look away and focus on the warmth of the sun on my shoulders. A butterfly settles on the lavender and I watch entranced at its dance on this fine autumn morning.

She has arrived. The chill of her stare draws my gaze. Shirley pulls out her sketchbook and her pencil skims over the page.

“Stay here.” I jump up and move quickly towards the building, my eyes glued to the window. I sprint up the outside stairs, push open the door and stop. The entrance hall, usually well lit, is dark and shadowy. The bright modern art that decorates the walls is gone and in its place are woven wall hangings. I run my fingers along the coarse wool, tracing the embroidered pictures with my fingertips. The tapestries are magnificent, nuns and priests scurrying, eyes to the ground. Each wall hanging leads to another, telling a story, and as I climb the stairs to the landing I follow the narrative. I sense movement — the echo of a shuffle and I stop. Wait.

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“Hello, is anyone there?” Silence. Just dust and memories. I glance back to the tapestry and stifle a scream. Eyes — malevolent, evil, boring into me. I shiver, rubbing my arms against the chill. My eyes remain on the tapestry, bound to it. The picture is gruesome, nuns and the priests, their faces grotesque with horror, shrink before the creature. The need to bow, to acquiesce is strong. I resist. I climb the stairs and walk trance-like along the landing until I am standing at a door. Her door. I reach out to turn the handle, hesitate, and shake my head to clear the fog. My gaze falls on one last tapestry, a picture of a woman, and for the first time I see her face. My face.

Fear dispels the fog. I turn to run. The door stays with me, always in front of me as I spin. I tumble to the floor, tears coursing down my cheeks, my hands grasping my hair, pulling it; willing the pain to bring back reality.

“Help me.” Soft, beseeching.

Hunkered on the musty carpet, I hold my breath, listen.

“Help me.” A whisper. A plea.

I free my hands from my hair, push myself upright. All I have to do is to grasp the old brass knob, turn it and open the door. The need to help her is overwhelming.

“I have waited so long. You are the only one who can free me.”

I stand on trembling legs and reach for the doorknob. The metal is surprisingly warm, comforting. I turn the knob and push the door in, but remain in the hallway. She stands at the window, her back to me.

“You came. Thank you.”

“What can I do?”

“Touch the window. The curse will be broken and I will be free.”

“Curse?”

“He tricked me. Gained my trust, ensnared me. I can only be released by one of my blood.”

“What happens when I touch the window?”

“I am released.”

“That’s all I need to do?”

“That is all. Blood drawn to blood through time.”

I move into the room. Wary. Through the window I see Shirley crouched on the lawn in the sun, her pencil busy on the paper. I watch

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as she looks at her sketch, then to the window and back to her sketch again. She jumps up, her pad and pencil tumbling from her lap. She races towards the building. I lean in to see what has caused her panic. Stumble. Put out my hand to stop myself falling. As my hand touches the icy window I know I have made an awful mistake.

“Thank you.” Her voice is kind. “You have saved me.”

“I can’t move. Why can’t I move?” As hard as I try I am unable to wrench my hand from the window.

“In time blood will be drawn to blood and you too will be freed.”

“No.” I try to peel off my hand, to lift a finger. “You can’t do this.” I strain to shift my feet, to pivot. No movement.

“You can’t leave me here. Not like this.”

“I am sorry but it has been so long.”

“How long?” I hold my breath, wondering if it is better not to know.

“103 years, 45 days.” She reaches out and brushes my hair back off my face. I feel nothing. “You get used to it after a while.” And then like an echo of the past she fades away and I am alone.

I try to move, to tear my hand from the window, anticipating the pain as the skin peels away, craving it. Nothing. I am a statue cast in flesh. I let loose a scream full of fury and hate.

“Charmaine?”

“Shirley. Help me.” My voice is high pitched, panicked.

In the reflection I see Shirley as she pauses outside the door. “Are you okay?”

“Look.” I call to Shirley. “Out the window. See.”

She leans on the glass as she peers to the garden below. “I can’t see anything.” I move back from the window, holding up my free hand, turning it over, marvelling at the movement that I have always taken for granted. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what.” She goes to turn and finds her hands are fixed firmly to the glass. “What have you done?”

“I’m sorry. Really I am.”

“My God. You traded places with her and now you’ve sacrificed me.” Her voice is incredulous. “I came to warn you. The face in the window changed, it was you.”

“And now it’s you.” I slump down on the floor and lean against the

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wall. “You have to understand Shirley, I couldn’t do it. Couldn’t stay here. Not for a whole month.”

“And what about me? My God, how long was she here?”

“It’s only for a short time. Blood calls to blood. We only need someone in the family to come to free you.”

Shirley looks confused and then her face clears. “Patsy. Can we pull it off?” She pauses. “But I’ll be here a whole month.”

“You won’t actually be here again until the third of June, after the next full moon.” I attempt a smile. Remembering the woman, recalling that she had counted each and every day; 103 years and 45 days.

“I’ll bring her up, we’ll make the switch.” I rise, anxious to be gone.

“Can you just brush the hair out of my eyes before you go, it’ll drive me mad.”

I reach over and gently brush her hair back behind her ear. I kiss her tenderly on the cheek. “Till June.”

But Shirley was not bound as I had been; she was my half sister, half bound by blood. She kicked the back of my knee and I stumbled, my hands reaching automatically for the glass to break my fall.

“Really. You fell for that. I would have thought better of you.”

I try to move, my hands once again glued to the glass but I am stuck, immobile.

“Sorry sis, but I don’t trust you. You would have left me here.”

“No I wouldn’t, I would have brought Patsy. I promise.”

“Your promises haven’t been worth much in the past so you’ll have to excuse me if I don’t take your word for it.”

“But you’ll bring Patsy.”

“Only time will tell.” Shirley turns to leave and I hear her shutting the door firmly behind her.



Kathy Childs spends every spare moment writing; to the detriment of her exercise program. She won the Stringybark Short Story Award 2014 with her story No Tea Tomorrow and won the local content prize in the Beryl Franklin Story Competition at the Ex Libris Festival of Words in 2015. When not writing Kathy loves to read and travel with family and friends, and even remembers to show up for work on an almost daily basis.