

TWISTED TALES



Annette de Jonge

Acknowledgments.

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

Thank you, Pat.

Annette de Jonge

Introduction.

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

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

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

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

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Amma Alcheringa.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kelly froze, hardly breathing. What was that?

The voice repeated “Enter and be lost forever.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

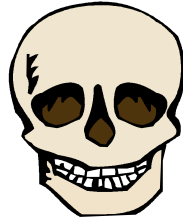
“I don’t want to die ...” Her voice reverberated, trailing away.

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

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

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

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



Craters.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



The One Horse Town.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Collette smiled, encouraging the woman to continue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Once Is More Than Enough.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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