

CARLETON CHINNER

Barren House

It was the Winter wind that woke her, not the hammering of her heart against her chest like a frightened bird clamouring to be free. Suzanne waited for the panic to pass as the sea-wind sobbed and moaned around the old house. Breathe Suzanne, breathe. It's just the wind. Slow. In at the diaphragm, out through the mouth. Slow. Breathe in calm, breathe out fear.

The dreams were getting worse. No, not the dreams, that dream. The dream in which she fled down dark corridors while the canvas man chased her. She never saw his face, only ever the sound of his uneven boots thumping on the cold wooden floorboards. Ker thump – ka thump. Closer, always closer. She ran, and her fear ran with her pushing her through the viscous air thick like water, slow to part and cold, so cold.

The house breathed its tired life through the walls, creaking and rattling in the wind. Suzanne wrapped the doona tighter around her scrawny frame. Mamma was always telling her to get more meat on her bones.

Sleep did not come. She lay there until morning crept into the room, cold and slow like the sea at the end of the yard. Suzanne stretched and went in search of coffee, her bare feet cold on the rough wooden floor boards. The kitchen faced East, the poor side of the house. The side for servants and tradesmen, not the glorious West view of Sydney for the last century rich.

Dark trees crowded the window. Suzanne felt rather than saw a commotion in the branches. A bird or something.

She hugged herself feeling the shivers through her frail slip. Look at this place. Mamma would be so proud. Suzanne had been so lucky to get the place on the cheap. An old house in an older suburb. So what if it had a graveyard next door? Waverley graveyard was famous. The suburb seemed nice, even if the neighbours didn't speak to her yet. The house was a treasure, with its columns and the upper

deck she hadn't explored yet. A rich Jewish businessman had built it, and it had been all kinds of things in its day. A brothel, a drugstore, an orphanage for young girls. She couldn't quite remember its name. Maybe Mamma would know.

The sun called her out as it warmed the garden. Outside, the morning helped to evaporate her anxiety. Doctor Arvenkian said gardening was good for her. He was encouraging when Suzanne said she had found the old house. She had felt so sure in his office, on the warm, soft couch.

She wandered the yard, touching old trees, their bark blackened with the sooty mould of coastal air. In a decrepit tree near the wall she saw a rainbow lorikeet, its feathers a bright splash against the black branches. Poor thing, it was waiting for the Spring, for lush green to fill the old garden with new life.

Warmth rose beneath her bare feet. Her toes spread out on the worn flagstones reading a century of walks down the garden path. Happy families lived here and old contented lives. She stood arms akimbo looking at the ruin of the garden. Yes. She could be happy here. She would make the garden over, plan it now so green shoots would flood the yard in Spring. Suzanne pattered from bed to bed imagining a garden of life and colour.

The day burned and too soon the sea fell into darkness. Suzanne watched Sydney's lights push back the velvet dark. Behind her the sea reflected nothing. She should eat something. Mamma would be cross, but Mamma wasn't watching now, so she took herself to bed.

The wind was worse tonight. Shaking the eroded tin on the roof. Whistling around the bare frame of the house. It wormed its way into Suzanne's bones leaving her cold and breathless in the dark.

Below the keening wind a persistent low dragging thump echoed, almost like someone walking across the floorboards.

Midnight came and still no sleep. She rose. Outside the room, moonlight cast pools of shadow down the corridor. Just the dark, Suzanne, nothing to be afraid of. The thump came again from the end of the corridor. She peered into the shadows

and they rewarded her with imagined terrors. Looming, ominous shapes, perhaps even the shape of a man in the alcove at the end.

Not that way then. To the other side the stairs hung pale in the moonlight. Upstairs, she should go upstairs. Dr Arvenkian said the stairs would help her overcome her fear, it wasn't so far up the stairs. No! Not tonight. She chose the safety of the kitchen.

Shadows clothed the kitchen. The dark branches outside cast skeletal fingers across the floor. In the corner near the door, the shadows held the shape of a man. The thump came again. She fled back towards her room. The footsteps followed.

Get hold of yourself, it's just shadows. She turned to face her fear. The canvas man stood in the corridor. He dragged heavy boots towards her.

I'm dreaming, she told herself. She turned to run. The canvas man thumped after her. She ran to her room and his boots followed. The room held no salvation. She knew that when she looked back and saw him standing in the doorway, dull moonlight reflecting off the worn brass of his helmet. Suzanne fell backwards onto the bed. She shuddered as wrinkled canvas arms scooped her up in a delicate embrace.

He walked into the yard holding her face tight to his chest. Suzanne fluttered, weak against the iron of his arms. She smelled salt, and man, and under it all the bitter tang of things long dead. Moonlight broke through the scudding cloud casting pale light onto the grey waves crashing onto the rock. Suzanne fought to be free and looked down, so far down. She clung to the bony thing inside the canvas, desperate to be away from the cliff at the end of the yard.

A dull voice echoed from the helmet. "You are mine as I am yours. Together we will return to the sea."

Suzanne forgot to scream as one lead-lined boot took the next step into vacant air.

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Pete Jones parked the patrol car at the edge of the cliff and picked up the steaming cappuccino. Giordino's made the best coffee. The long night of wrestling

druggies around the Cross was over. Waverley was the final stop before he knocked off. Some random nutter had been walking around the ruins of the old house next to the graveyard. Concerned neighbours reported seeing an old woman in her nightie. She wasn't here now.

He sat sipping the coffee as the sun rose through storm-wracked clouds. The wind rose pouring salt-cold air over Officer Jones. He shrugged and drove away. Behind him, high on the clifftop an old scrap of canvas fluttered in the breeze.