

Your Ghost

by **Brendan Campbell**

A queer as thing happened to me the other day. I swear I felt your ghost, hovering. The way you used to do in the kitchen, waiting for your tea. I'm sure I sensed you, in amongst the garlic fumed air and onion stung tears. You were looking for something to do, some reading, or work, at the kitchen table. Head down, nose up, waiting to be fed. When I turned round to face you though, there was nothing. You were long gone.

Sometimes I've fancied your ghost was slamming doors around the house. Not often, just on calm days when the weather was sticky and hot, and the air still, a door would unexpectedly slam shut. You letting me know you're there? But that couldn't be your ghost. You never slammed doors. You were gentle, always gentle. When you left, I barely heard the front door close. The softest of sounds, wood touching wood.

When the phone rings it's you too, but then it's not. I've stopped answering, but you're still there in the ringing. Barbarous bell, insensitive thing. You living in the wires? When it stops I gently, always, pick up the receiver to listen for your voice. I only ever hear my own breathing.

Night-times are haunted, but I don't mind. That's when I know, for sure, you are there. As the bed warms, I can feel your presence. On stifling evenings, with the windows open, I listen to the fruit bats chattering outside in the cocos palms. You always loved to hear their joyful noise, gorging themselves on sweet fruits, squabbling over the delicious nectar. 'It's not good for them', I would say, 'it must be rotting their teeth. We should cut those palms down'. But you'd always defend them, 'Let them live!'

When they fall silent, I rise from our bed and push back the linen curtains, looking. Nothing. Then I usually wander barefoot out to the back verandah, the floorboards beneath me creaking, so I can search for their winged shapes in the starry sky. Silent shadows, but for the soft swish of leathery wings.

Where's your ghost when I need you?

When the children down on the main street call out, 'Hey Mr! Where's your mate gone?' Their mother's pull them away, embarrassed, for them or me, I can't be sure.

'It's not right the way they live together.'

'I know!'

'They should be married. With kids. All that cooking in the kitchen, only for themselves.'

'For no one!'

Can't your ghost stride confidently past them like you used to? Giving me the strength to do the same. Can't your ghost whisper in my ear 'Ignore them, who are they to us anyway? Nothing.' But you're nowhere.

When the season turns and the sugar cane burns, the ash drifts down like black confetti, settling on the streets, the houses, our garden. Thunderless clouds of billowing smoke rise from beyond the nearby hills, their fiery source mysterious, except for the flushing sky, red-pink. What a beautiful sunset it makes. Gradually the evening air becomes tainted with sweet smoke. Little children come out to play, regardless. They joyously leap and grasp at the blackened flakes as they fall in swirling drifts, dirtying their hands and faces. Frustrated parents scold them from the shelter of their verandahs, 'Come back inside! Come back inside, you filthy things!' They are ignored. The children play on in the fading dusk light until it is too dark to see, eventually returning to the warm glow of their houses.

Lost in the moment, your ghost is quietened. For the first time I feel alone. Watching the children from the bay window at the front of our house, secure inside from the falling ash, I feel an urge to run out and join them. Instead, I silently walk about the house, gently, closing windows. I know you would have chided me for leaving them open, letting the smoke settle on our lives.

When dawn arrives the morning dew will meld with the cane ash, leaving dark droplets of charcoal grey on lawns and flower beds. Only the rain will wash away the stains.

A queer as thing happened to me the other day. I swear I saw two young men holding hands, down on the main street, just as they were leaving the pub. It was only for a moment, a furtive glance, a hidden smile, and then, they were gone.