

Still Dead

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THERE HAD TO be more to this.

The town of Fyrewood was eerily quiet. Melvin couldn't tell if the scrape of the ground was his boots underfoot or the creak of a gate opening. A kookaburra cackling overhead startled him. An older gentleman sat on the bench outside the pub, fidgeting in his pockets like he was scrounging change for the pokies. He had a scraggly beard, eyes that drooped down and a brow beaten into submission.

Melvin glanced at his watch, which read 12.15PM. He stood against a pillar for what seemed like half an hour and still nobody passed by (so much for the lunchtime rush). There was not a car or an animal in sight.

Melvin retrieved an envelope from his waistcoat and carefully opened it. The letter read: *If you want to know the truth, go to The Fyrewood Inn, Fyrewood.*

This was the second mysterious letter he had received in the past three weeks. The previous one had led him to a doctor in Hattlefield who had information about his biological parents. He had last seen them when he was two years old. According to the doctor, they had lived in Fyrewood for the past ten years.

Melvin saw a fog drift from out west; it lingered through the forest and headed toward the main street. The sky turned a darkened grey and the wind began to pick up. Melvin put the letter away and gripped his jacket tightly, the zipper digging into his hands.

Suddenly, an animalistic scream pierced the empty town. Melvin hyperventilated and wrung his hands together. He closed his eyes

and focused on slowing his breathing. Melvin kept his eyes closed as the breeze whipped past his face. The cold numbed his nose and ears.

He bit down onto his tongue to feel something; it barely made an indent and couldn't make him feel anything. Melvin slapped himself across the cheek a couple of times to gather his wits.

The fog thickened, swallowing objects in its path. Melvin wiped away dirt from his face and walked ahead against the cold. Houses stood on weathered supports. Windows were either smashed, dirty or boarded up. Nothing could make this place feel deader.

A mangy, ginger cat staggered as it crossed the road. It favoured one side of its body. Melvin made eye contact with the cat and it halted. The stare-down felt intense and overbearing, he could feel goosebumps rise on his skin. Its eyes glowed an intense green, amplifying the fresh scar across its cheek.

He shook his head, doubting himself and the town around him. Melvin looked back up at the road but the cat was gone.

The gravel was coarse with stones that stuck into his boots. He tried to dig them out by dragging his boot on the ground but it only pushed them in further. He stopped against a pole and rested on it as he pulled the stones out with his fingers. Melvin dropped a stone he extracted into his shirt pocket and walked toward the pub, the one building that stood out amongst the whole town.

Melvin entered the dingy pub and braced himself for anything. God knows the town had already offered plenty of surprises. The bar was relatively busy, with ten patrons inside, most of them seated in the booths.

Melvin strode to the bar and placed his backpack by his feet. He stared at the drinks and meals on the specials board but pub grub wasn't appealing. The bartender walked over with a gait, leaning onto the bar as he approached.

'What can I get you, stranger?'

'I'm actually staying here for a few days. The name is Fishlock.'

'Ah yes, Melvin Fishlock. Glad you chose to stay here. Although you didn't really have much choice, did you?' The bartender chuckled to himself.

'I am sure it will do just fine.'

'Well, here's your key. Your room is the second last on the left.'

‘Thanks.’ Melvin grabbed the key from the bartender. ‘By any chance do you know where the Driscolls live in Fyrewood?’

‘Driscolls, Driscolls?’ The bartender repeated as he grabbed a glass and dried it with a tea towel.

‘Terry and Lisa Driscoll. They have lived here for the past few years.’

‘Oh yes, Terry and Lisa were here for a while. Good people. But they moved a year ago. Didn’t say where and why. Just up and left.’

‘Do you have a phone number or email address for either of them?’

‘No, we’re a small community here, we just visit each other when we want to talk.’ The bartender grabbed another washed glass.

‘Thanks anyway. Please let me know if you remember anything.’ Melvin threw his backpack onto his shoulder and headed up the stairs.

His room was a simple motel set-up: bed, bedside table and a box of tissues. There was no TV, telephone or Wi-Fi. Melvin placed his bag onto the bed and took off his waistcoat. He took the letter from his coat pocket and headed back downstairs to the bar.

Melvin got to the bottom of the stairs and looked across the room, taking in the layout. A couple of the locals were close to the TV which was showing the greyhound racing from the city. The bartender was talking to one of the patrons, who turned around and gave Melvin a look up and down. Melvin thought nothing of it and turned around when he noticed a mannequin, dressed in a suit presumably from the fifties, stood in the corner. Its arms and hands appeared to be cracked; the fingertips and knuckles worn. An indent in the knuckles bowed, making it seem warped. The eyeless, concave hollows fitted well into the lifeless vessel.

Melvin stood face-to-face with the life-size doll. This local also had a scar across its cheek. He thought he could hear a faint, repetitious thud consistent with that of a human heartbeat. The slow par-par, par-par convinced him something wasn’t right. No one else was near him. Melvin slowed his breathing but the other mysterious beat continued the same as before.

Melvin walked over to the bar and ordered a lager. He watched on as the patrons paid no attention to the mannequin. If anything, they deliberately avoided the figure. When going to the toilet, they walked on the other side of the room.

An older fellow coughed and spluttered at the bar and made Melvin jump. The bartender bellowed with laughter which boomed through the bar.

‘Here you go, Fishlock.’ The bartender placed the lager on the bench.

‘Cheers, I really need this.’

‘Nothing better than a beer to unwind.’ The bartender grabbed a photo from behind the counter and handed it to Melvin. ‘I found this amongst the local photos and newspapers. There’s a photo of the Driscolls.’

‘When was this taken?’

‘Must have been four years ago. Was taken at the local festival we have every year.’

Terry and Lisa appeared to be happy, with big teeth-flashing smiles and holding each other close. The sun beamed across them as though it was meant to be. Melvin looked closely at their faces and realised they too had scars on their cheeks.

Melvin’s palms were too slick from sweat to hold onto his glass properly, his brow dripped sweat on to the floor.

Melvin stared out the window and caught sight of the fog outside which made visibility extremely poor and seemingly grew thicker and edged closer by the second.

Melvin felt something slimy in his mouth. He looked down at his glass and spotted a slug. It crawled along the bottom of the glass, its slime mixing the lager. Melvin coughed up phlegm and spat it into the glass, covering the slug in the process.

‘Excuse me, bartender. But there is a slug in my glass.’ Melvin tilted the glass towards the barkeep, the liquid parting to one side for a clear view of the creature.

‘Never seen one of them in the bar before. Must’ve been a freak accident. Here, let me pour you another one for your troubles.’ The barkeep took the glass from Melvin and tipped the contents into the sink.

Another cough from the old fellow at the end of the bar startled Melvin. He couldn’t take any more of this nonsense. Melvin stood up and approached the pool table, its green upholstery torn, dust-covered and worn out. Some coin and grog stains added to the beaten appearance. Like this establishment, the table probably should have been torched thirty years ago.

Melvin rested his palms onto the side of the table and tried to compose himself. He drooped forward and lowered his forehead so that it rested on the table edge.

Melvin leaned over as he felt his heart pace erratically. His vision blurred as he fell face first to the ground.

Melvin woke up with a sharp pain in his nose. It hurt to breath and he couldn't quite open his eyes all the way. He tried to sit up but his head was too heavy. He noticed his posters and photos from overseas travels. He sighed, glad to be in his hotel room and away from the bar downstairs.

Melvin heard footsteps coming closer and closer to the bed. He could hear the beat again—par par, par par—and his own heart started to pump fast. He turned over and the mannequin stood before him, leaning forward with its arms outstretched.

The mannequin lurched forward stiffly and its hands gripped Melvin's neck. The thumbs pressed deeply into his windpipe. Melvin squirmed and batted at the plastic arms but they just clenched tighter, crushing the bones inside. Melvin's right eye popped out, blood spurted down his face and all over the plastic hands and arms. Melvin's body crumpled to the floor. His hand fell within reach of his eyeball.

The mannequin returned to its corner in the bar, the blood still dripping from its fingertips.