

The White Feather

PERTH, AUSTRALIA 1928

No-one could understand why it so upset her. It was only a feather. It swept in, through the doors of the Windsor Hotel, one afternoon, landing on the bar, right in front of Liz, as if it wanted to order a drink. She wiped it away, but it came back. That feather, small as a ladies' palm, shiny as a six-pence, became the bar's centre of attention. Liz pinched it between fingers and walked it to the door. It waltzed back in. Her customers chuckled. Liz didn't. When she discovered it clinging, like a fluffy limpet, to her apron, she shrieked. She shouted at the Windsor's patrons to stop laughing. So, they watched, quietly, over the foam of their pints.

One of the four regulars at a corner table known as the Flanders Quartet, commented that Liz's sudden agitation was like 'shellshock'. But then, the Flanders Quartet's conversation always turned to shells and barbed-wire, howitzers and maxims. Each drinking session started with general chat but inevitably, irresistibly, conversation wound its way to their shared experiences in France.

"I saw it so many times," said Jack, one of the Quartet. "Shocked fellas would get hysterical over the oddest little things."

His mate, Alf frowned. "How would Liz get shell sho... bloody hell!"

Smash. Liz attacked the bottle shelf with a broom. Crash. Swinging at her fluffy persecutor. Flying shards. Gushing whiskey.

Everyone leapt from their stools. The landlord emerged to find his stock being demolished in glassy explosions while the customers crowded, trying to calm Liz. He grabbed his screaming barmaid, shook her, slapped her.

She went limp and sobbed. "It wasn't my fault."

The landlord took her to a back room to lie down and the customers returned to their tables muttering their bewilderment and pity. Consensus was: January heatstroke.

But Reg stuck to his diagnosis. "So like shellshock."

The customers tried to chat, again, but easy conviviality had vanished. Everyone noticed, but no-one mentioned that the feather was still there, somehow drifting around the bar though there was no breeze. Liz's breakdown brought to the fore something they had all been feeling since sunup: there was something ugly about this day. The atmosphere wasn't just hot: it felt rotten. Every pet owner was managing agitation. The noise from the zoo was tumultuous: an orchestra of gnashing and wailing played behind those bars.

The swirl of Mends Street gossip, from the baker's queue and post office, that meandered into the Windsor confirmed that the whole suburb was unsettled. Children, who had been playing at the tip of the peninsula, an unpopulated Arcadia of iridescent wildflowers, butterflies and birds ran home to their mothers, quaking and crying. A scary man lurked out there -- dressed like a soldier; mud splattered from his boots to his tin helmet; face hidden behind a rubber mask with a round snout shape. Constable Jenkins, stopping in for a pint, said he reckoned it was fantasy but he would investigate tomorrow. Today, he had to go with an ambulance to widow Simpson's farm. Neighbours reported her in a proper state: screaming and smashing things; claiming every other shadow was the ghost of her dead son.

Most Windsor patrons expressed surprise that the usually staid widow could need carting to the asylum. But the Flanders Quartet understood. Jack reckoned she'd never got over the telegram about her son, Reginald

Reginald joined late -- and hadn't lasted long. He'd never shown a bit of the war-enthusiasm that swept Perth. He had tried to turn away, to put his back to that madness that swept the world. Said he would be happy to stay at home forever, fishing and butterfly chasing. There'd been a rumour his mother hid him in the hen shed when a recruiting sergeant visited. He never explained what changed his mind.

"No one ever told Mrs Simpson how Reg went out did they? That'd be enough to send anyone barmy," said Jack.

"Of course not. How could you even explain it? The strangest way to go I ever saw. The water in that shell whole was just *that* deep." Alf held his thumb and finger an inch apart.

"Died of fright."

At closing time, the sun was setting behind Mount Eliza and hammering Mends Street with harsh, orange rays. No soft pinks. The river shone like gun-metal.

The Quartet watched the landlord help Liz out onto the last tram to Angelo Street.

"Talking of Reg. I think he died without a sweetheart. But I know he admired Liz like billio. Couldn't say her name without blushing."

They all looked at the profile of the Windsor's barmaid, framed by the tram's window: once the belle of South Perth, now a wife and mother. Her still attractive features were writhed with terror -- mixed with a small but unmistakable dash of guilt.

Then, with a clang and a grind of metal, she was gone.

Liz never got home. The tram driver reported later that she had a screaming fit. Frightened by something so small for the driver to see -- an insect, maybe - she kept swiping and screaming at it to leave her alone. She jumped from the moving tram shouting -- "It wasn't my fault. Everyone was doing it." -- and fled into the darkness.

South Perth's strange day turned into a freakish night. It charged the air like approaching storm, except there wasn't any sense that if whatever was brewing happened that the atmosphere would clear. Thermometer mercury stayed at forty passed midnight. Children were tearful. Dogs howled. The ruckus from the zoo turned to cacophony. Those who looked outside in the early hours, saw a strange fog creep over the peak of Mount Eliza. It crossed the river in a muscular sweep, smothering the tip of the peninsula. By moonlight the fog appeared almost rock-like in its thickness and its hue was yellow, sickly -- mustard coloured.

They found Liz, in the morning, near the ruined shell of the old mill. January had turned Miller's pool into a pitiful puddle but its inch-depth had proven horribly potent. Coroners verdict -- drowning. Liz was entangled in barbed wire. How the reel of wire got there was anyone's guess. Dumped by a farmer? But after investigation it was decided that Liz in the dark, the fog and in poor mental state panicked when caught in it. Struggling entangled her worse, until she couldn't move at all -- face down in water. No other injuries. She drowned in terror. Frightened to death.

Some thought that scenario impossible but the Flanders Quartet knew better.

“I’ve saw it before.”

“Too bloody right.”

When Liz’s body was discovered, one detail was noticed by many but mentioned by no-one. One barb of the wire dug in close to Liz’s heart and trapped beneath it was a white feather. It fluttered though there was no breeze.