

## **The Girl Who Wasn't There**

*The Poetical Works of Alfred Tennyson* had been squeezed away on my bookshelves for years, hardly opened: a beautiful volume, lavishly gilt-edged, and I could see why I had stolen it. Even after decades, the memories were still crystal clear, ferried up by the book's whispered pages.

That day, I had been walking to the goat woman's place, shocked to see her clothes and private keepsakes tossed on the grass, and smashed furniture everywhere. My shoes were wet with dew from the long grass. And outside her vandalised house, there it was: a beautiful book just tossed there, along with so many other cherished things.

When I took it home and showed him, Dad had hardly shrugged— it was just an old book. But Mum looked impressed. “Finders keepers,” she said.

Terry Monks pushed over the old wheelbarrow we had borrowed, so acorns spilled everywhere, rolling down the footpath. “That's what you get, little dicks, from the Dragon King!”

We were on our way to Old Ma's, with three hessian bags full of acorns balanced on the top; we couldn't stop running downhill... because that was ‘momentum’, as Phil liked to say.

Monthly, we wheeled our barrow load to Old Ma's place – Phil and me gripping the handles, keeping the barrow steady. It took all day to find so many acorns, then bag up and deliver them.

But Terry swerved across on his new bike, and pushed everything over.

“Look at this,” Terry demanded, as acorns bounced and dribbled onto the road, crunched by passing cars, detonating everywhere and spitting white pulp.

“See! I drew this myself, with a knife and blue ink.” And Terry rolled up his sleeve to show us his arm.

Phil Tench, who was my best friend, and always thought he knew about everything, but was much shorter than me – just a little twerp really, even though he was two years older – took his glasses off and rubbed them on his shirt.

So Terry grew impatient, and thrust his arm at me.

A lizard slid around his right wrist, climbing his inner forearm. It was a home-made tattoo, badly done, with scabs and flecks of dried blood, the skin all around a nasty red.

“You’ll get blood poisoning,” said Phil, in the know-all voice that made people like Terry hate him.

“Crap, you little fart” said Terry. “It’s an initiation, for my gang. We have to do one each!” Then looked at me, while rubbing black fuzz on his lip.

“A lizard?” I said.

“No, it’s a dragon, dickhead!”

Terry ran his hand over it, as more ink smeared.

Yes, I thought, there *was* something *lizardy* about Terry. Seeing me smirking now, he kicked our barrow over again – then pedalled off quickly, while we gathered up spilt acorns from the road.

Old Ma Johnson whacked her axe down, on the goat she had just slaughtered, the grass splattered with blood, gobs of thick gore. "Have to do it kids," she said, after she saw us staring.

Phil moved closer to the chopping block, but she motioned him back. "Do you *eat* your goats?" Phil asked. "Do people eat goats? Because Dad sometimes kills chooks for Christmas, but we don't eat goats." But Old Ma ignored Phil, and just kept chopping.

Ma's place overlooked a small creek, atop a bony hillside. A huge vegie patch was set behind chicken-wire. There were fruit trees around her weatherboard house – and rusty tins everywhere, bits of string, glass falling from wooden frames, more old stuff in her half-collapsed shed.

Someone said Old Ma was a witch – it was Terry Monks, probably – just because of her long grey hair, but that was stupid. Ma was always friendly. She bought acorns, and we liked her.

"Got to feed me dogs, boys" she explained. "And meself. Can't just live on eggs and onions. I gotta have some meat to keep me strong. See, fit as a fiddle!"

*Whack!*

"See... Ha!" She pulled up a sleeve then and made a muscle, her stringy arm swelling, as we also made muscles, to compare.

Phil stretched up to his piddling height and asked, "How old are you, Ma?" He paused, almost losing his nerve, then continued: "Some people say... well Terry Monks says, he says you're 110."

"Terry!?" she guffawed with disdain. "Terry Monks is a bleeding idiot, I can tell you that, boys. Actually, I'm just a wee girl of 73 sun-burnt and homespun years!"

*Whack!*

“And if you see Terry, tell him that if he ever comes around here again – creeping about, and throwing stones at me chooks – I’ll kick his arse to the moon and back! Just tell him that!”

Goats nibbled nearby; and chooks scratched and kicked up dust.

She calmed down: “No – just keep away from him lads; that bit of pond scum, Terry. He’ll get you into trouble. And trouble is like your shadow, no need to look for it.”

She glanced sidelong at the shadow that followed her, then wiped her hands and suddenly brightened: “So boys, can you sell me some acorns?”

“Three bags full,” Phil said. “Best quality!”

“Me goats love acorns,” she said. “Really fattens them up!”

Old Ma paid us with coins from her pocket, as her goats roamed nearby on chains. They ate anything growing, and were shifted from one blackberry bush to the next. She also kept chooks, and sold eggs.

“Yes, a dozen eggs please,” Phil said, handing back most of his coins.

I also bought a dozen.

“Don’t break them boys!”

“Yeah, or the yokes on you,” I said to ‘Phil the dill’, and he sniggered.

She looked steadily at us. “You give my best regards to your mum, Ray!”

Old Ma took the bulk of the uncut carcass, hooking it back on a chain hanging from a plum tree, pulling fat from a rib, and began talking to herself.

“Bugger you Toby! Stop that, Dreadnaught! Down! – I’ll have you, you great boofhead mutt!”

She was dressed in her best clothes, with her dogs all yelping and leaping around her: then somehow secured them to a bench, ready to start shopping.

“Hello Ray,” she said.

I walked over and patted one, and we chatted while I waited for my mother.

The dogs soon became helplessly tangled together, and she was just about to give them a broadside when my mother emerged from a shop.

“Your Ray’s a good lad, Mrs Hooper.”

Mum chatted brightly to Old Ma, who smiled towards me.

“Were the eggs good?” she asked. “I included some double-yolkers.”

“Very good, yes, thank you, Mrs Johnson. We had them scrambled for breakfast, with bacon bits and fresh parsley.”

“I often talk to Enid,” Mum said, arranging things in our kitchen when we got back home. “I bump into her sometimes, mostly while shopping.”

“Do you like Old Ma?” I asked.

She nodded and said, “Actually, Ray, her real name is Enid Johnston. A really tough old bird – but nice. She lives alone, mostly on eggs. Like an old-time pioneer.”

Then Mum explained how our nearest shopping centre had been built in the middle of expanding post-war suburbs, which quickly sprawled into former farmland, leaving Old Ma’s place a remnant of earlier times.

“And goats, too,” I said. “Don’t forget her goats – she eats goats.”

I unwrapped some things as Mum made sandwiches.

“She lives alone,” I said.

Mum leant against the sink, thinking aloud: “Yes, after her husband died.” Then took up a fresh lettuce, breaking it into chunks.

“She also had a daughter, who died some years ago. Daisy, I think was the girl’s name. A drowning accident, people say. A clever girl, in her late thirties, Daisy. Now Enid lives alone. It’s quite sad really. Stuck all by herself, on that bony hillside. And apparently still talking to the girl, as if she were alive. Or talking to herself, more likely. Well, I suppose she needs some company.”

“She sees us, too,” I said. “She sees me and Phil, when we sell the acorns.”

“True, Ray.” Mum held up a hard-boiled egg, and smiled.

Phil had twisted his ankle while on a camping trip, but I couldn’t see Old Ma anywhere. When I reached her house, I thought she must be shopping, because all her dogs were gone.

I peered through one of the dust-streaked windows near her front door, but it was hard to see inside. Gradually, I made out books everywhere, stacked on the floor and around the walls.

I hardly pushed it, hardly touched it at all, but the door just swung open, all by itself – letting sunlight fall on her furniture, casting shelves full of shadows.

The sound of approaching dogs became frantic. They grew louder, upsetting a possum in the ceiling, which jumped from overhead, scrambling across the room – just as Mrs Johnson poked her head through the doorway. When she saw it knocking over things, she turned and yelled at her dogs: *Shut up, you mongrels!*

She tied them up, quickly returned, just as all time stopped.

The laundry was very small and cramped, where I hid and wondered what to do, standing very still and quiet, not moving an inch.

I heard a chair shuffle, then two voices speaking.

*I have a letter, Old Ma said.*

*A letter, someone echoed.*

*Yes. From your aunt Mary in Queensland. I'll read it to you. 'Dear Enid, I am so happy that Daisy is with you. Please remind her that she must never go near the water. Instead, she should go dancing...'*

A long pause.

*Your auntie says, 'Please wish Daisy all my love.'*

But Daisy didn't say anything.

*Are you happy now?* asked Mrs Johnston.

*Yes,* said the other voice.

*Will you always love me?*

The girl who wasn't there said she would. *Always.*

A sob, then silence.

*I had such hopes for you, Daisy.*

*I know...* the other voice broke off.

*Promise me.*

*I won't go near the water,* the girl who wasn't there didn't say. *I promise you,* she couldn't say. *I promise you,* she could never say again.

Then a door was banging, another mad explosion of dogs, before I slipped out unseen, and time stretched away into another long summer that seemed to last for years.

Months after Old Ma died, her animals were carted away in a big truck.

*For sale:* the sign leaned crookedly by her wintery gatepost, as jagged windows let in the wind. That was just before the house was completely ransacked, with all her things thrown everywhere, including that lovely book I found in the grass.

Phil said he saw Terry Monks creeping around and throwing rocks before it happened. That was just after Terry came back from hospital, cured of his blood poisoning.

Finally, in early summer, there were sirens, and I hurried back on my bike, towards the smoke, to find Phil already there, gawking and breathless. “The firemen think someone has been sleeping inside,” he said, pointing. “They think a derelict. Or someone was smoking, or left a lighted candle still burning.” But I was too upset to speak, watching her entire world being consumed as a few smoke wisps rose after they hosed everything down.

Even as I open its ornate pages, with its deep purple cover, green art nouveau flowers, gilt edges:

*I had such hopes for you, Daisy? Are you still there?*

I returned to that old house quite often, to secretly read by candlelight. Of course, I always tried to leave everything exactly as it was.

It would have been demolished anyway. But a child feels terrible, and imagines things. Impossible things. I know that blazing room was all that remained of her invisible daughter. That final afternoon, when the wind swirled through a smashed window, did I forget? Even after I close its pages, the faded gilt cover is still glowing like a candle, still bright in the gloom, still accusing.

*1991 words*