

Taya Reid

Leta

We lived in a caravan behind the camp kitchen. In the evening the block rattled to life with holiday makers, moth-infested fluoros spluttering, suntanned women shoulder to shoulder, bursting supermarket packages of coleslaw, running the taps to boil pasta or microwaving baby bottles and baked beans. The men would carry in sloppy foil trays of sausages and onions and grubby kids gathered to split buns, knives sticking out of the butter like fence posts.

Later, dark now, they'd return with their greasy dishes, squirting diluted soap liquid into the long troughs, arguing happily about the tasks, encouraging each other to chuck away scraps or leftovers.

“Just bin it, no one will eat it.”

“Can we have the chocolate now?”

“Where are your boots? Stop walking around in slippers.”

“Have you kids seen Uncle Eric?”

I'd linger in the corner, hoping to catch the eye of someone my age, to be dealt into a hand of Uno or asked who I was.

“Do you live here?” She waved a mosquito out of her face and slapped a damp tea towel on the Formica table where I sat, wriggling to hitch up her trackies. She had more freckles on her left cheek than her right, and a blooming, plummy bruise on her arm.

“Yeah, my mum’s the caretaker. We live out back.”

“Are there really ghosts here?”

“They reckon.”

“Have you seen one?”

“Dunno, sometimes weird stuff happens.”

Weird stuff was the muffled crying and gurgling around the Nurses’ Cottage before dawn and the biting blast of wind that rushed through the cemetery, even in summer. The lights fizzing in the windows of the ward rooms, green and soft, or the stilted piano music sometimes faintly audible at the crematorium. Weird stuff was probably my mum, her long hair and slow-motion speech, the way she swept around people as if they weren’t there at all. The stroke had dulled her, taken her corners off, blurred her edges.

“Oh cool, you should tell us some stories.” She looked unsure, fingering the fray of her tea towel again. “I’m Leta. My sister is Angela, she’s the tall one. Want to play spotlight with us?”

“Sure. I’m Sam.”

The torch was a heavy Maglite, owned by Leta’s father. She went first. On her count, we sprinted out across the clearing in front of the kitchen. Most kids ran behind the volleyball net and dove for the bushes, but I went left toward the buildings. I stayed low to the ground until I was safely behind the stairs, melting into the shadows of the veranda and behind the alcove where the fire hose was coiled.

A brass plaque showed an evacuation map of the entire Quarantine Station, every building marked, including the one I was nestled against. *Isolation Hospital*. Inside, some of the rooms were still set up like in 1901, ready for school tours. Pale mannequins posed in

scenes of feverish suffering, bubonic plague, smallpox. The ill-fitting hospital gowns fell off their smooth, artificial shoulders. Cots were dressed in cream sheets and grey blankets, pitchers of water, thermometers and stethoscopes strewn on the bedside tables. Sometimes drunk tourists would re-position the dummies into compromising positions, the stone-faced docents finding them the next day, untangling limbs from their plastic sexual encounters.

It was quiet but not silent. Leta had followed the bulk of the players the scrub. I could hear the ocean, gulls squawking around a dead crab. Occasionally there was a shriek from the game, Leta flashing her beam on a hiding cousin. Adult laughter bubbled around the tent sites and the fire pit outside the ward rooms. A four-wheel drive edged its way into a nearby bay, ticking and groaning. The sounds of fun from the game slowed. Still, no one came. I counted the stars.

“I won’t give up,” I heard her voice approaching. “Ange, come with me!”

“Leta, it’s haunted, don’t go over there.”

“He *lives* here. He’s not scared.”

“You’re going to get the plague.”

“Shut up Connor.”

The circle of light crawled up the wall above my head and across the face of the hospital entrance. Leta painted the front doors in its blaze before something crunched the gravel to the right of where she was standing.

“Aha!” She flashed the spot, but nothing was there. “Sam?” I coughed deliberately, seeing she was spooked and wanting to put her out of her misery. “Got you!” The torchlight slapped my eyes. “Come on, we’re going to do marshmallows.” She waited for me to emerge, walking close to my side all the way back to the fire pit.

“Are you stupid, girl? We paid for three nights; the deal says the fourth is free.”

“Sir, please, I’m just checking the website to see if that offer still stands.”

I recognised Leta’s father, owner of the Maglite. He was hunched over the desk, trying to look at the screen. The receptionist was new, her orange polo shirt fresh and bright. I continued on my mission of pinching a can of Coke from the reception fridge and left via the sliding door. Leta and Angela were turning cartwheels on the lawn.

“Hey,” I said. “Your dad is pretty angry in there.”

“He gets like that.” Leta’s face was flushed, her palms printed with grass. “Can you show us some ghost stuff?”

“Not me!” Angela shook her head.

“Fine, I’ll take Connor.”

“He’s fishing.”

Leta looked at me and I shrugged. She tightened her jumper around her waist.

“Just us then. Come on.”

We walked up the steep pathway to the cemetery, breath ragged from the climb.

“Is this it?” Leta said, disappointed. I nodded. It was just a smattering of gravesites on the rocky hillside, marked with chipped wooden crosses and basic, lopsided headstones. Low, scraggy dune plants crawled over the markers and made them difficult to discern. Leta tread carefully around the graves, reading each one in turn. “Plague, plague, plague. Oh, Spanish Flu. She was only thirteen, like us.”

“I’m fourteen.”

“So which ones are the ghosts?”

“I’m not sure. But if you stand over here.” I reached for her elbow and she let me take it, stumbling with me to the slippery corridor at the centre of the site. “And look down there.” I pointed to the view below. The station spread out like a village beneath us, old white buildings spangled with modern additions, the brilliant blue of a basketball court, gas barbecues lined up by the ocean.

“And?”

“Wait.”

A moment ticked over, and another.

“There’s nothing...” She froze, the searing cold hitting us both in the back. It seemed to pierce my skin, moving through all the internal organs before escaping from the belly on the other side, a blast of icicle air knifing its way through our bodies. “What was that?!” Leta clutched at her middle.

“That’s the ghost.”

Her eyes shone, suddenly excited. “Show me more.”

We walked through the crematorium without incident. The Nurses’ Cottage was spooky in its dilapidated quaintness, but there was nothing to see or hear. Leta stopped and read the inscriptions on the walls, peered into glass cabinets housing artefacts and memorabilia.

“It’s so creepy.”

“I guess.” I hesitated. “There’s one more place.”

We returned to the Isolation Hospital via the caravan. Mum was on her rounds, but there were spare keys in the lock box under the sink. There were no tours on Mondays. The hospital was shut tight.

“Are you going to get into trouble?” Leta asked without concern. “Quick, someone’s coming.”

I finished unlatching the door and we hurried inside. Some of the hospital rooms had been stripped and painted, reborn as communal spaces for community groups and children, others were made into offices for the docents and researchers. In winter, a writer’s residency was awarded, one of the nicer rooms with natural light converted into a cosy space with a desk and armchair. We continued down the corridor until we reached the preserved rooms.

“Wow.” Leta reached out to touch the hand of a mannequin dressed as a nurse. “This is weird.”

“Yeah.” I said. “Some paranormal investigators did a whole documentary here once, and everyone who worked on it got sick or had an accident. They say if you come in here uninvited something bad will happen to you, but still they do tours and bring school kids here, so it’s probably just crap.” She moved to face the nurse, staring into the painted eyes. I worried that I was talking to much.

“You’re doing a good job,” Leta murmured.

A fist came knocking hard on the window, startling us both.

“Leta!” Her father, raging. “Get out here right fucking now!”

Leta dropped the nurse’s hand, which she’d still been holding. She looked at me with wet eyes and a tight smile, then ran.

The next morning Mum had a doctor's appointment, so I took up her rounds. I cleaned toilet bowls and cleared cigarette butts, replaced firewood and watered plants. At midday the sun was beating, and I was finally free to do something for myself. I changed into swimmers and set out to find Leta. Her cousins were engaged in a game of cricket and Angela sat with the loudmouth Connor on the side, sucking icy poles.

"Hey," I said, approaching.

"Hi," Angela acknowledged me flatly, but didn't say anything else, turning back to the game.

"Is Leta around?"

"No."

Connor scratched his leg and started at me long enough that I knew I should move on.

I walked alone to the beach and swam in the shallows. The long weekend crowd had dispersed, Tuesdays were always quiet and slow. Black tangles of seaweed sprawled in oily masses. I swam close to them, but never crossed, their shadows pulsing just beneath the surface.

I passed the Nurses' Cottage on the walk back. I was surprised to hear the crying, it usually only came in moonlight, when I trekked down to the fishing rocks before dawn. Listening hard, I realised this crying was close by, in this world, not another. Real and raw, not the tinny and disembodied sobs I'd heard trapped there. The door was open but the cottage seemed empty. *Do Not Touch*, read the signs.

Leta was curled in a ball by the fireplace. A deep red mark had begun to stain with violet edges on her cheek. Her eye was swollen, dried blood on the lash line. She looked up, she even smiled.

“What happened?”

“My dad. You shouldn’t be near me, he’ll get you too.”

“Why you?” I remembered the arm bruise.

“What do you mean?”

“Does he hurt Angela too?”

“Oh, no. I’m his *stepdaughter*.”

I didn’t know what to do or say.

“What do you need?”

She shrugged. “I’m just going to stay here for a bit. He’s scared of all this stuff. The ghosts. He won’t come in here.” She laughed at this.

“Aren’t you checking out tomorrow?”

“Meant to be.”

“What will he do?”

“Probably tell Mum he’s going to leave without me, and she’ll drag me out. I’ve practiced looking like a dummy if anyone comes. See?” She stilled her battered face and stared through me at the wall. Unblinking, she looked like a broken doll.

I took a neatly folded blanket from the Do Not Touch display, and spread it on her knees.

“I’ll go get you some noodles and stuff.”

“Really?”

“And a torch. Anything else?”



“Got any books?”

“I’ll get some from the rec room.”

Leta’s expression glimmered. She pulled the blanket tight across her legs and shimmed a cushion under her knees, ready to settle in and read.

“Maybe I’ll stay here forever,” she said. “Me and my mates.” The nurse mannequins seemed to nod. She tipped her head back to rest on the cold brick of the fireplace. Her eyes closed momentarily. A glossy tear settled on her cheek before the scabbing skin soaked it in.

“I won’t be long,” I said. “Don’t be scared.”

“Never,” she said.