

# At length I would be avenged

by **Blanche Clarke**

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Winner: 2019 Scarlet Stiletto

## **CONTENT WARNING:**

This short story contains coarse language,  
drug references and violence.

# At length I would be avenged

I am the body in the library. I have been here, under the floorboards, for two years now, enduring the scuttling and squeaking of rodents, the same ones that ate my flesh and left maggots to clean my bones. The students and bibliophiles who energised this room for more than 150 years are long gone.

Water leaks from the roof. Mould clings to the crumbling plasterwork. Exposed electrical cables twist around the rafters like wild vines.

The council decided people needed more space, light and warmth. Children needed to learn coding. Coding? The word library comes from the Latin word Liber for book. It does not mean software, applications and websites. It does not mean “snugs” where parents lounge around on beanbags with their pre-genius children reading picture books with as much grace as a garrulity of galahs.

The new library is a monstrosity. A monument to this vitiated world. The wooden beams, the so-called “ribs that protect the beating heart of the community” were probably plundered from an old growth forest.

I imagine my former assistant Mercedes is now running that show. I naively employed her, not realising her ambition was more ruthless than my own. Was she my killer? I always thought of her as the figurative backstabber rather than a crowbar-wielding criminal. I have no memory of the repeated blows that smashed my skull or even how my body was dumped in this storage room among forgotten maps and catalogues.

When my spirit disassociated from my corpse, I rose in time to see a balaclava-clad person unblocking the old fireplace, shoving the murder weapon up the chimney and replacing the cladding. They were deceptively bulked up with extra clothing and their hood made it hard to tell their height. This person may have assumed this condemned building would be demolished, but I had one posthumous win.

All the letters I wrote and the protests I made prior to my death persuaded someone in the Department of Environment to apply a Heritage Overlay, thwarting Mayor Gillian Sparrow’s plans to let that bovine bully Frank

Oberlin replace this 19th century treasure with a 300m luxury apartment tower.

I heard about my triumph when two building inspectors came to inspect the prematurely condemned library, as I lay half decomposed about two metres beneath their feet. They gagged and complained about the stench, but they did not ask themselves why a decaying building and a few wet books would smell so foul. They hastily walked around my precious space, criticised the heritage ruling, made wild estimations about how much it would cost to stabilise and waterproof the roof, and promptly left.

Perhaps it was Gillian who killed me? But surely I would have recognised her? We were lovers once, if you must know. She stayed with me when it was her ex-husband’s turn to look after their son. She was the one who knew about my trespassing, my retreats here after hellish days in the new library showing retirees how to use computers and processing email bookings for children’s robotics workshops. My key to the old service entrance still worked and I would walk up the two flights of stairs to my haven, sit on my old chair and reimagine my life while listening to Erik Satie’s *Gymnopédie* No.1.

Or was it Frank Oberlin who ordered my demise that night? He would have employed someone else to do his dirty

work, no doubt, someone agile and strong who could move quickly and wield a crowbar with killer force. Agile and strong. I could be describing Gillian, who would leave me in the mornings to run with her personal trainer, while I read the newspaper and enjoyed a strong cup of English Breakfast with a dash of milk.

I knew about Gillian's kickbacks. She wanted the money for a beach house and for a time I was complicit. What were a couple of extra skyscrapers in the city if I were 140km away happily ensconced in a beach-hut reading a book? But then it became personal when Oberlin's proposal to demolish the library and build the luxury apartment building was approved by the council. "Over my dead body." Those were my very words. Now look at me. I put all of Gillian's detritus out on my front veranda and refused to speak to her again. She came to the library a couple of times with other council officials, but I made Mercedes deal with them. Did I imagine that affectionate glance between Gillian and Mercedes the week before I was killed?

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Do you know that prickling feeling you get in cemeteries and old houses, that shiver associated with the phrase "someone just walked over my grave"? I've discovered ghosts experience a similar sensation when a living creature is near. Like now. Do you hear it, that noise? Bigger than a rat. Here she comes, seeking shelter from the rain.

They come and go these homeless youths, these Orphan Annies and Oliver Twists. This one is about 15 or 16. She's wearing filthy grey tracksuit pants and a black windcheater with a dragon logo plastered across the front. She's somehow loosened one of the boards that covers the windows. That's quite a feat. Smashed the glass, too, and, of course, cut her hand. That's all I need, blood dripping across the floor, interfering with any forensic evidence the police might find, if they ever deign to search this place.

She crawls over to my old desk, curls up on the floor next to a pile of mulched romances and slips into a drug-induced slumber. I watch to make sure she keeps breathing. Not that I can do anything if she dies, but it wouldn't be fair if the police investigated her death rather than my own. I find myself reciting one of my favourite short stories, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*. I begin: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could." But I got

no further than: "At length I would be avenged." Such plans I have should my killer ever return to this place.

The girl wakes hours later, cold and, no doubt, nauseated.

She uses her phone torch to illuminate the room and doesn't bother to stand up, instead crawling over to the desk. Another homeless person has already pulled the drawers out of the cabinets. She picks over the pens, paper clips, rubber bands and clumps of damp paper.

"You won't find anything of value to sell," I say. "The desk is bolted to the floor and the chair isn't ergonomic."

She freezes, then flashes her torch around.

"Who the fuck?"

Now I'm the one who is surprised. She can hear me, and I'm sure she's no longer high, either.

"Someone who can help you."

She stands up and pulls a knife out of her pocket and backs slowly until she reaches the wall where the large print books were once housed.

"Don't youse mess with me. Ya hear what I'm sayin', ya cunt?"

Such language offends my phantom mind, but I persevere.

"Listen," I say. "No weapon in the world can kill me. I'm already dead."

I find it comic the way her knife darts around trying to make contact with an invisible assailant.

I continue: "What is it, five hours since you last injected the heroin or whatever chemical it is you've bought off some ruthless drug dealer? You'll be experiencing withdrawal soon. You'll need money to buy more drugs. I don't condone your behaviour, but I can give you money if you do a couple of things for me."

"What do I look like, ya fuckin' slave? I don't give a fuck about youse, ya hear me, ya fuckin' cunt."

She brushes her long fringe back from her face and I recognise her. There's still enough of the child in her for me to see the long black plaits and the big brown eyes peeping over an open book. I laugh, such is my relief that this foul-mouthed feral child is a reader. There is hope in the world.

She used to come to the library when she was at primary school, but I remember now that those visits suddenly stopped. She must be in Year 9 or 10 now, surely.

"I remember you loved the Friday Barnes series," I say.

"You nos nothin' about me, cunt"

"You used to sit in the corner and read books, but you never took any books home."

"My brudda used to piss on library books," she says.

“You were always alone. I would ask you where your mother was, and you’d say she was in the toilet.”

“Yeah, well, that’s cos my brudda was fucked, like used to do fucked-up things when me Mum was at work. I come ’ere until she got home.”

She says that and I feel a sharp intake of breath at the horror of her situation. A phantom breath. I can’t explain these residual sensations. How is it possible that a spirit could have a nervous system? But this is sentimental gibberish.

“I’ll give you \$50 if you help me.”

“Help ya? In what fuckin’ way? I don’t do pussy.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, unless you want to suck bones, I’m in no state to warrant physical contact. Do you know where the new library is located?”

“Might.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. I want you to go to the information desk and say you want to say hello to Mary Bennet, who used to help you in the library when you were a child.”

“Ya never use-ta help me,” the little Goth says. “Youse was a bitch. It was always, ‘Shhh. Shhh. Keep the noise down. People are trying to re...’”

“Do you want the money or not?”

“What’s fifty dollars gunna get me? A couple of pills.”

“There’s more money if you help me. But first, do this simple thing. I want you to use your phone to record everything the person at the desk says about me. If they don’t know what happened to me, ask for Mercedes Rodriguez and we’ll see what she has to say. And come back and let me hear everything you’ve recorded.”

I direct her to the false drawer, which is under the desktop, a drawer undetected by those who ransacked the library in the first few months after its closure. It’s where I kept the kitty. She counts out the \$5 notes and change.

“\$53.55 cents.”

“At least you can still count. I’m assuming you haven’t been at school for a while. Do you have any clean clothes you can put on? Perhaps you could find something at Vinnies on the corner?”

“I’ll shower at the swimming pool and nick some stuff out of their charity bin.”

“Ingenious. A thief as well as a drug addict.”

“Like you’ve never done nothin’ dishonest in ya life.”

“I.I..” I start to protest and then I remember my complicity with Gillian.

“Lis’in,” she says, as though she has some authority. “I can fuck off, like, anytime and youse’ll be stuck here. I’ll find

out ya shit for ya, but only cos I want to. But there bedda be more fuckin' money."

I can't help but admire her feistiness. I want to ask her what happened, how she came to be on the streets, but all in good time.

"You'll find some keys in one of those drawers, that way you can come in the old service entrance instead of through the window. What's your name," I say.

"Traceey," she says. "Two 'e's and a 'y'."

I nearly say, "How uncouth." But I stop myself. This young woman isn't responsible for the bastardisation of the English language. I remember my manners.

"Thank you, Traceey" I say.

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Will she come back? I'm on tenterhooks. How is it you can suddenly feel more alive when you're dead? Now every second feels like a minute, although I have no real sense of time. There are no clocks and with the windows boarded up, it's dark even during the day, although slits of light cut through when it's sunny. I'm about to give up on her, when she returns in an addled state. I have to wait for the effects

of whatever drug she has taken to subside. I was never this tolerant in life, but my options are greatly reduced.

Eventually she sobers up and plays the recording for me. I didn't expect Mercedes' voice to affect me so much. I feel weighed down and teary, earthly feelings I can't explain.

"Miss Bennet," Mercedes says. "She's not here anymore, I'm afraid. She retired. I think she lives in Italy now. A small town. I can't remember the name. Sangi. San Gimignano, that's it."

"What treachery. What travesty," I splutter. "That's why the police haven't been here. No one even knows I'm dead. How is that possible? How the hell could they create that illusion? To what end? Mercedes has my job. She could have acquired that without killing me. What is her motive for making it seem as though I am alive?"

"I need more cash," Traceey says. I admire her single-mindedness.

"If they think I'm alive, then nothing will have been done with the house. I need you to go to my house and find out if someone is living there. You have the key, it's on the keyring. You can take anything from the house to sell. I don't care."

"What if they've, like, fuckin' pulled down the house or, like, changed the lock," Traceey says.

“They won’t have pulled the house down. It’s a Victorian terrace, heritage listed. You can enter through the laneway at the back, that way no one will see you.”

“No fuckin’ way. I’ll get done for breakin’ n. Just give me cash.”

“I can give you jewellery, but you’ll have to come down here and get it.”

“Fine.”

I direct her to the trapdoor. She lifts it up and climbs down the ladder into the basement. She shines her phone touch and squeals like a child when she sees my skeleton and splintered skull. My spine and legs are twisted from my fall.

“Jesus, fuckin’, Christ.” She shudders and thumps back up the ladder. “Not fuckin’ touchin’ that thing.”

“The diamond ring, that was my mother’s. It’s probably worth \$5000 or so. The pearl necklace could be worth \$5000, too, I have no idea. You’ll have to take them to a pawnbroker. Say they belonged to your grandmother. Obviously, my killer wasn’t a robber.”

Traceey slowly climbs back down. She stands beside my skeleton for a long time.

“First time I’ve seen a skeleton. It’s creepy. Different from a dead body.”

She bends down and prises the ring off my finger bone. I can see there’s a hint of deformity in the bone, though arthritis is obviously the least of my worries.

“What dead body?” I ask.

“Brudda. Necked himself cos he knew he’d get banged up in jail. Fuckin’ pedo. I’m glad he’s dead.” She sniffs and adds: “This’ll do for now. I’ll come back ’n’ get the beads.”

“Is that why you ran away?”

“What would you like fuckin’ know? My brudda was a prick. But Rick, he’s a dirty arsed cunt. Guess what, I don’t give a fuck now.”

“Who is Rick?”

“Just another dirty arsed cunt. I told’im he could shove his fuckin’ cock in a blender. Mum wos screamin’ and carrin’ on, taking his side. Fuck her, too, she can go to hell.”

“I’m sorry to hear you would treated that way.”

“Like youse would know.”

“Well, of course, I don’t know. But I know you like books. I think that’s why you came back here. Books will never hurt you, books ...”

“Whatever gets you off, Mary. What’s the address?”

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Her absence this time is agonising. I need to know what is happening. All the anger and frustration that keeps me here, keeps me tethered to this building feels like it is loosening. I'm floating, rising above my body. I no longer recognise the skeleton as my own. I have no sense of time. Traceey comes back but curls up into fetal position and I can't get any sense out of her. I have to wait until she is clear-headed again.

She has letters from the letterbox. They are addressed to me. The world thinks I'm still alive. But who is orchestrating this?

"I got a pic of the guy living in ya house," she says. She shows me the photo on her phone. There is something familiar about his face, but I can't place him.

"He could be any number of people who came to the library," I say.

"What if he's, like, the killa, not the fuckwits you keep bangin' on about?" Traceey suggests.

"I can't think of anyone else who would benefit from my death. All my money was going to this library, specifically to this building."

"Maybe we should let the cops sort it out," Traceey says.

"No! Your fingerprints are everywhere, your DNA, you'll get all mixed up in it. No, I want my killer to come here. I

want the chance to confront them. There will be no justice any other way. In the words of Edgar Allan Poe: 'At length I would be avenged'."

"Poe, schmoe. We should see if this S.O.B is using your social media accounts."

"I didn't have any social media accounts."

Traceey rolls her eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me. I wasn't a complete luddite. What about my email? We could see if he is using that?"

"We can create an account, like use a fake name, and send an email pretendin' to be, like, an old friend," Traceey says.

"Jane Hall. She's was a friend at primary school. Use her name."

Traceey sets up an account on her phone and we send an email saying Jane is going to be in town next week and would love to catch up.

Two hours later we get a reply.

Traceey reads it out in a tone that proves she had an education at some stage in her life: "Dear Jane, How lovely to hear from you. I'm afraid I'll be out of town next week attending a library conference in Vancouver. I travel a lot these days and never seem to get time to catch up with anyone. Do tell me everything you've been up to. At least we

can stay in contact via email. Kind regards, Mary.”

“What on earth is going on? Why would anyone pretend to be me? Show me that photo again.”

Traceey magnifies the photo on her phone, and I stare at the man, but to no avail, I don’t know who he is.

“There’s only one other thing I can think to do. The murder weapon was a crowbar. It’s hidden in the old chimney.

“What’s the fuckin’ deal with the chimney?”

“It was used in the 19th century to heat the building. It was blocked off long before I started here as head librarian. Let me think. Over in one of the drawers on the floor you should be able to find some old white gloves, the ones we used for handling old books.”

Traceey picks up a damp pair of grey gloves.

“Fuckin’ gross,” she says.

“Stop fussing. You slept on mouldy books for weeks, before you dragged that old mattress up here.”

“I need a fix.”

“Just do this for me first. Please. Pretty please, with sugar on top.”

“I don’t like suga’, you bony bitch.”

“Good for you. Your teeth are rotten enough as it is.

See those old boards in front of the chimney. They’re easy enough to pull off. I know you’re good at doing that.”

“Oh, ha ha. You’re fuckin’ lucky I’m even here.”

Traceey gives a few tugs, but the boards don’t give. She looks around for something to act as a lever and finds an old divider from one of the metal bookshelves. She manages to prise a couple of nails loose and then she gets enough traction to pull one board off. She finds the crowbar wrapped in a towel.

“Wow.” She swings the crowbar. “It’s fuckin’ heavy. Someone really wanted you dead.”

“And I want to know why. Take a photo of it and send it to that email address and let’s see what happens.”

“It’s too fuckin’ dark in here. I’ll do it outside.”

She gets to the service door and turns back. “I might be gone a bit.”

She’s disappears before I can protest. Now I don’t even know if she’s going to send the photo. Bloody junkies. What am I doing? I’ve become complicit again, like I was with Gillian.

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It's night-time when I hear noises, the sounds of a board being prised off one of the windows and someone overexerting themselves. It feels like I'm going to pop, that all the energy that defines me is expanding and filling the room. She's wearing black clothing, runners and a beanie. She's put on weight since I last held her body close to mine.

I watch her go over to the chimney, feel around for the crowbar. When she doesn't find it, she goes over to the trapdoor and lifts it up, shines a torch down into the cavity and illuminates my bones.

"Why did you do it?" Traceey's voice is loud and steady. I didn't realise how much I loved this child until this moment.

"What the hell? Who are you?" Gillian says.

"I sent ya the fuckin' email. Mary wants to know why ya did it, bitch. She can hear ya; ya know."

"I don't know what game you think you're playing, but you're in way over your head," Gillian says.

"Ask her if she knows the person living in my house," I shout.

"Who's the guy living in Mary's house?" Traceey relays.

Gillian laughs. "Well, you obviously don't know everything. That is my son, Aidan. He's looking after the house for Mary."

"Bullshit," I shout. "Your son is a teenager. That's a man in that photo."

"Mary sez that guy's too old to be ya son," Traceey tells her.

"Aidan is 22 years old."

"Twenty-two? How can that be? He was what, 14? How have eight years gone by?"

"Mary, if you really can hear me, then I'll tell you why," Gillian says. "Do you think I don't know who tipped off the press about the kick-backs. You fucked everything up. So, let's call it karma, shall we? I wasn't going to let your money go to this old library. It was easy to hack into your accounts. You use the same password for everything: Proust1871."

"Ask her if Mercedes and Frank were in on it." Traceey relays the question.

"Fuck no," Gillian says. "They were as gullible as everyone else. As far as they know you're still alive and living in Italy. You might have saved this building, but it's as unloved and as dead as you. Nobody liked you and nobody has missed you."

"That's where ya wrong," Traceey says. She runs at Gillian and shoves her in the back. Gillian falls into the cavity and lands on my bones. One last embrace.

Traceey closes the trapdoor and turns the lock.

"Youse are so fuckin' wrong. Like someone did like Mary."

I've got all your bullshit on my phone, cunt, and I'm going to the cops." She pauses, then addresses me: "Promise me ya won't, like, you know, kill her, Mary."

I sigh. "At length I would be avenged," I whisper, and then loudly: "Only if you promise me you'll get clean and go back to school, do something with your life, write about this, become a bestselling crime wri..."

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"Sure, Mary, like whatever turns you on. As long as you fuck off to the afterlife and let us all rest in peace."

## Blanche Clarke

Blanche Clark is a Melbourne writer and editor. A former Books Editor for the *Herald Sun*, she has a deep love of literature and is a champion of Australian fiction. Her short story was inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado* and a photo of the abandoned Mark Twain branch of the Detroit Public Library, before it was demolished in 2011.