

Jane

Narrelle M Harris

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I wasn't intimidated by Morecombe Vyner and I'd be damned if I'd let a wafty little spook keep me away from Henry Kendall's diaries.

Morecombe Vyner's private library was not the kind of place I expected to be haunted. It was all jarrah wood floors and floor-to-ceiling smoked glass windows. One side of it concertinaed open onto a shaded veranda, where books could be studied at a sturdy redgum table and matching bench seat, surrounded by the scent of eucalyptus and strange birdcalls from the treetops.

If a library like that had to be haunted, I didn't expect the ghost to be a pensive woman in a nightie. She seemed very old-fashioned to be drifting inside this very modern box of elegance in the middle of the bush.

I saw her hovering by Vyner's collection of First Edition Australian poets.

At first I thought she was a fellow researcher, given dispensation to poke among Vyner's books with a government arts grant. I was curious, verging on the cranky, that we'd be sharing a space I thought was mine alone – and maybe sharing a thesis as well.

“Hey,” I said, not too graciously, “We haven’t met. When did you get here?”

She turned slowly, pivoting on the spot like she was standing on a lazy Susan, and every hair on my body stood on end, prickling me with her wrongness before my brain caught up with why.

She floated a foot above the floor, and her face was mainly a kind of fog. Her eyes were a piercing brown, though, and full of confusion.

“I’ve been here... a while,” she said in a whispery sort of voice. “I can’t remember.”

My first response to run screaming down the stainless steel stairway that linked the library to the main house was throttled almost at once by my Kryptonite. I’m a researcher. I’m *curious*.

“What can you remember?”

She closed her eyes and reached towards the books. Her fingers disappeared into the spines of the works of Adam Lindsay Gordon.

“Pain,” she said.

Adam Lindsay Gordon had experienced more than his fair share of that, but I didn’t think she meant his riding injuries, poverty and depression.

“Where did it hurt?” I tried to ask it kindly, but curiosity is the enemy of compassion.

Her brown eyes – the only non-foggy part of her face – pierced mine. “My skin is on fire. My hair burns

like a halo. My lungs are smoke and ash. He murdered me. He burned me.”

My own skin prickled with the intensity of her whispered despair. It was like I could feel the flames licking up my limbs, catching fire in my throat.

Her arms were wrapped around her ghostly torso. A shadowy *oh* of horror dented the fog where her mouth should have been. I reached towards her – compassion finally won – and as my fingers brushed against her translucent dress I felt a sudden, screaming agony along every nerve and then nothing else.



Morecombe Vyner found me. I woke up to him speaking my name and patting my face.

“Gilda? Gilda, are you all right?”

“Where is she?”

“Who?”

“The gh-” I swallowed the rest of it, myself enough again that I knew not to mention ghosts. “Sorry. I think I... fell asleep.”

My nerve endings still tingled. My brain felt disassociated from my body, the way it does after a migraine. I couldn’t conjure the pain in my memory, but I carried the knowledge in my skin of what it felt like to burn. I prickled all over with the knowledge.

“It is a little warm in here today,” said Morecombe. “Sit right there, I’ll get you some water.”

He went to the little unit at the back of the library, where one tank sent greywater to a toilet and another, filtered fresh rainwater to a tap. It was part of his grand design to keep the books, and anyone with them, safe during a bushfire. I’d done my research on this property, which had won awards for the architects. At a switch, flame-resistant louvres were meant to fold down from under the eaves, sealing the library off from the outside. A manual winding handle would bring the louvres down and tighten them if the generator failed. Even if the main house burned to the stumps, the library and its precious contents would be protected.

Morecombe splayed his hand unnecessarily across the middle of my back to help me drink. I wasn’t unsteady at all. His fingers moved against the thin cotton of my shirt, unpleasant and overly familiar, but I didn’t react. I knew what he was like. I did my research on him too.

Morecombe Vyner had a new research student at his library every year. It was always a woman under 30, whether they were researching poets, epistolary history or colonial literature. It was an open secret among the women at the university and the writers’ centre, so nobody came here uninformed. He’d never actually assaulted anyone. He was just like this: too familiar, a bit sleazy. In return for sexual favours, he would let you see the crowning glory of his collection. We all put up with it, were eager for the chance to come here, to put our

hands on these primary documents – diaries and letters and first editions from the great Colonial Australian writers. Gordon, Lawson and Paterson. CJ Dennis and Breaker Morant. Diaries of the uncelebrated too – explorers and farmers and bankers clerks who wrote up their daily lives, giving first-hand accounts of early White Australia.

So I put up with his hand caressing my back through my shirt for 20 seconds and then hauled my bum off that floor. I didn’t need his damned special collection and I wasn’t going to sleep with him to get at it even if I did.



I made myself go back to the library in the evening. She was there, floating about the works of Marie EJ Pitt.

“Go away,” I said. I think I startled her, because a book fell from the shelf. I was angrier that she might have harmed it than I was scared she would touch me again.

The book was open at a hand-written page in Pitt’s journal. Lines caught my eye.

*I loose the horses, the mad, red horses,
And terror is on the land.*

For a moment I saw these lines from ‘A Gallop of Fire’ not as roan horses fleeing Death, but as horses

made of flames. I snatched the book from the floor and clutched it protectively close.

“That’s enough!”

My ghost tilted her head at me. “I die,” she said.

“You’re a ghost. That’s hardly a spoiler.”

She frowned and her nightie drifted around her knees. I realised that she was so amorphous that she could have been any gender, any age, any nationality. Why did I think of her as female? As white? Her brown eyes could have been anyone’s.

“What’s your name?”

“Guilt.”

“Sucks to be you.” I was cruel because I was scared. But this was my library for the next month. I wasn’t going to give it over to a spectre any more than I was going to let Morecombe Vyner fuck me so I could see the colonial-era porn he had tucked away somewhere. “Do you have a name that’s not an expression of your existential angst?”

“I die.” She floated to the window, arms outstretched towards the smoky glass. Her fingers drifted past the glass and she snatched her hands back with a gasp. “Here, here, here. It burns.”

She curled in on herself, weeping, until she was only a ball of fog by the window, and then she went away.

I found that I was weeping too. Poor thing.

I wondered who she was.



The internet connection at Vyner’s place was as awesome as money could buy. Without direct recourse to the university’s records, I still managed to do a lot of research instead of sleeping that night. I looked up bushfires in the neighbourhood over the last two hundred years. I looked up related death notices in Trove. I logged into the university records, local library records and sent emails to the nearest historical society.

No houses had been in this part of the country until Vyner built his multi-million dollar architectural wonder here. No young woman was reported lost in her nightie in the last hundred years. No boys in nightshirts either. I needed more data from my primary source.



Vyner patted my shoulder at the breakfast table as he placed my coffee next to the scrambled eggs he’d made. He thought he was such a smooth operator.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Like a log,” I assured him. I was fairly certain I’d sufficiently hidden the circles under my eyes with foundation.

“What’s on your schedule for today?”

“I wanted to look at Marie EJ Pitt this morning, and some of the other women bush poets.”

“What are you researching, again?”

He either knew and was fishing for conversation, or he didn't, despite the three times I'd told him, because he didn't give a rats'.

“I'm examining Australian bush literature and lore, and how it reflected society at the time. I'm finding diaries and original drafts very useful. The changes a writer makes may reflect more than optimum word choice.” I explained it slightly differently each time, wondering if he'd notice. He was gazing at my breasts, so I assumed not.

“Tell me, Morecombe,” I said, “Have there ever been any fires on this property?”

His eyebrows shot up. “Why?”

“We're in the middle of the bush in peak fire season. Can't blame a girl for wondering.”

“One or two have come through, the last one six years ago, before I built Alexandria.” That's what he called his house, for the library of Alexandria. Which, as you might recall, was reputedly burned to the ground. Not the best association, if you were superstitious.

“Any fatalities?”

“A handful of possums, sundry wildlife, poor things. Are you worried about the fire over the ridge?”

“There's a fire?”

“The radio reports say it's under control. Don't worry, though. If we don't get time to evacuate, we can take refuge in the library.”

“Fireproof,” I said.

“Of course. I can't let anything happen to the books.”

At least he was a respecter of the books.

“I'm curious though,” I said – gathering data sometimes requires that you look a little stupid – “Are there any ghost stories around this place? Unsolved mysteries?”

“Getting spooked being in the middle of the bush with nothing but a crusty old bibliophile and a weekly mail delivery?”

Fishing for compliments again. I just smiled. “It is a bit spooky in the library at night, looking out at all those eyes looking back in.”

“Possums, Gilda. Owls. The occasional bunyip. That's all.”

I smiled, playing nice at his teasing, and the way he patted my hand again.



My ghost was floating by the window, looking out at the trees like she longed for escape, or for protection. Maybe she was looking for bunyips.

She was easier to see today. Not so much more solid as less opaque. She had wrists above her hands. Sooty streaks above her brown eyes that were or had been eyebrows. Her nose was a fuzzy shape above her distressed mouth.

“What happened to you?”

“I die.”

“I need something else. When did you die?”

“Too soon.”

“If we’re actually having a conversation,” I said, “you need to give a bit more. I can’t help put you to rest if I don’t know anything about you.”

I hadn’t realised I meant to help her. I hadn’t the first idea how. But I’m a researcher. I’d gather as many facts as possible and then I’d hit the books.

She lazy-Susan pivoted again, her nightie flaring out around her knees, and I saw it was less a nightie than a moth-eaten summer dress. Smudges of blue and white on it, along with smears of sooty grey. She looked briefly like a smoke-smear bushfire sky was wrapped around her body.

If it was a knee-length summer dress, then she wasn’t as old as I’d first imagined. This wasn’t a colonial ghost. Post-Edwardian at least.

“Who’s the king?” I asked.

She drifted across the room. “There is no king.”

The full cut of the dress dated from the Sixties, perhaps? It was too damaged to be sure. I added online searches for summer dress fashions by decade to tonight’s research-before-sleep list.



After dresses – I didn’t find anything helpful – I remembered the blue summer dress I’d packed and laid it out for later wearing. Then I stayed up doing more research on Vyner. No scandals were associated with him. He was a bit of a creeper, but not a dangerous creeper, as far as I could tell. No missing women attached to him. Some missing women attached to this part of the world (there are always missing women) but none who seemed at all like my ghost.

My ghost. I’d taken possession of her sometime in the preceding days. I felt responsible for her. She felt almost familiar to me. Her brown eyes, maybe, the most distinctive part of her. Seeing her eyes was like looking in a mirror.

We can all be lost girls, if luck is against us.

I fell asleep in the small hours, and dreamed of Morecombe Vyner’s hand on my shoulder, on my wrist, on my back. Too familiar.



At breakfast, he put his hand on my shoulder again. Patted my hand as he asked after my progress. I curled my fingers into my palm.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” I said.

“Wouldn’t what?”

“Please stop touching me. It makes me uncomfortable.”

He looked hurt. “You haven’t minded until now.”

“I didn’t want to be rude. But I’m not comfortable. Please don’t.”

“I’m not hurting you. What are you accusing me of?”

“Nothing. Why do you think it’s an accusation?”

He scowled. “If I make you so uncomfortable, you’re perfectly welcome to leave.”

I took in a breath. Exhaled slowly. “Mr Vyner. Morecombe. I appreciate this opportunity to study your wonderful library. I’m very grateful and I mean no disrespect.”

He smiled, brittle and creptastic. “I’m glad you appreciate it. It’s a rare and excellent opportunity for you. It would be a terrible shame to waste it.”

He placed his hand on my wrist again. I made myself not glare. I made myself not stab his hand with the fork. “I don’t intend to waste it.”

“Are we friends still?”

“Of course.”

He took his damned hand back and smiled again. Smug bastard.

“Perhaps tomorrow I’ll let you into the sealed section.” He laughed like that was an excellent joke.

“Perhaps tomorrow I’ll want to see it. Where do you keep it, by the way?” In the library, surely, where precious books could be sealed against the threat of fire if necessary.

“Maybe you’ll find out tomorrow,” he said.



That night I researched the house. The architect who designed it and the builders. I looked for the blueprints submitted for approval. I learned about every inch of Alexandria. I didn’t find the secret library.

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My ghost had hair the next day, or some of it. Most had been burned away.

Part of me, from when I’d touched her, remembered it burning.

Her summer dress wasn’t moth-eaten, I realised, but pocked with scorch marks. The library was sealed and air-conditioned, but I could still smell the eucalyptus trees and with them the smoke from over the ridge.

My ghost and I looked through the glass at the Armageddon sky in that direction. A tower of dark grey coils slowly stained the sky grey. The extreme fire danger warning had been broadcast again over the radio. Morecombe insisted the fire was not coming in our direction, was kilometres away, that he'd called the Country Fire Authority but been told there was no need to evacuate yet.

I checked the CFA app to see if he was lying. He wasn't.

"Your name?" I asked.

"Guilt."

"You're an unreliable primary source, Guilt."

She pressed her insubstantial hand to the window and gazed at the plumes of thickening smoke.

"When did you die?"

"Too soon."

"How did you die?"

"Murdered. Burned."

"You are very annoying. How am I supposed to lay your spirit to rest if you don't give me anything to work on?"

She pushed scorched hair that had no colour but see-through-pearl behind one ear. Her ear was pierced but no earring hung from it. I fingered the gold stud I had in my own left ear. An 18th birthday gift, four years ago, from my older sister, Silvia. She'd taken me to see our shared love, Calamity J, in concert.

I suddenly missed my sister with a heart-yearning that hollowed me out. I longed to sit cross-legged on her bed while she played the latest song she was trying to write. Wanting my opinion or to make me laugh. Help with a word, a phrase, an idea or two. Teaching me the harmonies so I could sing on her demos.

"Do you know any songs?" I asked my ghost.

She tilted her head at me, brown eyes sharp in her opaque face. She seemed so suddenly and bizarrely familiar, as though it were Silvia looking to me for help.

Dread crawled up my spine, but when it reached my brain it reminded me that music was one of the deepest memories many of us had. People can remember tunes before they can recall words.

"Sing me a song, ghost. Help me to help you. Give me a sign. Anything. Do you know this?" I sang a line from the latest Calamity J song to her.

*Rocket fuel love setting the sky on fire
You and me exploding in a funeral pyre*

I thought too late that this was an insensitive song to sing to someone who'd burned to death, but my ghost only formed her white lips into an 'O'. Her voice wormed into my ear. Whispy. Slightly flat. Just like mine.

*We shouldn't have tried so hard to reach for the moon
We were launching heart-first to doom.*

The 'O' of her lips matched my saucer eyes.

“How do you know that song? It’s just come out. I downloaded it last week. How the hell do you know it?”

Her voice wriggled into me.

“Future and past. Confusing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Has it happened? Is it yet to happen? When am I?”

“What’s your name?” I asked. Sobbed. I was so afraid of her. For her.

She didn’t answer. She only raised her hand to the window. “The sky was burning. Is burning. Will be burning,” she whispered.

The smoke beyond the ridge was filling up the sky, the sun glowering behind it, turning the smoke orange. It looked like the song. Like it was burning.



Sometimes we know things without knowing what we know. It’s one reason that primary documents are so important. A chance notation, a turn of phrase, a word altered by a typesetter, can suddenly link known but previously unconnected things and pivot understanding on a pin.

Her hair gained colour in the afternoon. Her mouth was pinker. The sundress swirled around her like smoke, giving off ghostly embers, but the colour was clearer. Her eyes. Her eyes. Her *eyes*.

All the interviews gave Morecombe Vyner’s job as retired financier, current philanthropist. He still dabbled in stocks and shares. He used his money to build this house, build this library, pay for scholarships and this research grant. He collected Australian literature. His first wife had died, and he’d inherited her fortune. His second wife had died too.

This was all unconnected to my ghost. To me. Just bad luck, for the wives, for Morecombe.

My research in the afternoon was more hands-on while Morecombe Vyner worked in the house.

I snuck in while he was in his library, talking to his accountant or the university, so I could scrub the dirt of my efforts down the drain. The grey water would be recycled in the toilets and for his little garden that even now was withering under the heat of the sun; desiccating in the hot air coming from over the ridge.

He’d seen me anyway. He said so as I walked in, freshly showered, for dinner.

“Oh good, you’re looking lovely again. What a pretty dress! Much better. You came in looking like such a grub!”

Where had he been standing to watch me walk inside, knees and hands and face all covered in dirt and dust? The kitchen had the best view, and was right next to his office. He’d watched and then hidden in the office, faking a call to pretend he hadn’t been staring at me. Did he know where I’d been? He couldn’t see that from the kitchen. I’d checked.

“I went for a walk. I fell.”

“In this weather?”

“I needed a stretch.”

“Don’t stray too far, Gilda. The fire reports indicate the wind might change direction. Fires move fast. If you’re caught outside, you may not get back to the library before I seal it.” He put his hand on my shoulder. Squeezed it. Rubbed his thumb against the edge of my collar bone.

“I’ll be careful if you will,” I said. I jerked my shoulder away from his hand.

“Don’t be like that.”

“I asked you not to touch me.”

“We’re friends. Friends touch.”

I snatched up a butter knife that he’d set at the dinner table and clutched it in front of me. “Friends listen when their friends ask not to be touched.”

“You’d better leave,” he said.

“Yes, I had.”

I threw everything into my case. I threw the case into my little Honda. As the smouldering smoke-hazed sun sank towards the west, over the ridge, I drove away from Morecombe Vyner, that beautiful library, and my ghost.

I knew who she was now.

I felt awful leaving her behind. It would be worse to stay, probably. I didn’t know what would become of

her, leaving like this. I didn’t know what would become of me if I stayed.

The choice was taken from me. Fate, like understanding, turns on a pin. Or, in my case, on the wind changing direction and the stink of burning eucalyptus in the air, and fire so hot and high on either side of the road that the air was sucked away. My hands were burning on the wheel. I thought the tyres might be melting.

I turned back to Alexandria, terrified of burning to death.

The shutters were down on the library as I ran up into the main house, up the stairs that connected the two buildings – my shoes grew tacky as the soles began to soften.

I smashed on the shutters with my fists.

“Let me in! Morecombe! We’re trapped by the fire! Let me in!”

I knocked and screamed and if he heard me, he made no reply.

But I’d been ready for this. I’d tried to outrun fate one way and couldn’t. I’d outsmart it another.

I ran back through the house and outside, up the hill to the back of the library, my sundress flaring around my knees.

The smoke made me cough. Embers filled the red smoke sky.

I held onto the edge of my dress to pull open the latch on the little door that led under the library, to stop the hot metal from burning my fingers.

I crawled on hands and knees in the dirt to where the plumbing from the external water tanks joined the workings of the little bathroom. I'd spent hours here this morning, in this belly-crawling gap, squirming over hard-packed dirt and through spider webs (and I wouldn't think about the actual spiders, or any snakes; they'd wriggle off at the sound of me coming, and I knew they weren't the danger now).

The underside of the library was sealed in fire-retardant coating. Except for where the greywater and the rainwater pipes rose up through a gap, twenty centimetres square, beneath the basin in the bathroom.

I'd spent two hours prising the tiles further open around the gap, from above as well as below. I pushed up against the tiles I'd replaced, their grouting gone. I heaved them out of the way and shoved my head through the gap. I pulled myself through it with my hands, pushed up with my knees, my feet. I grit my teeth against making any sound.

Had he heard? Was he listening? Was he sitting in the darkness that smelled of ash and eucalyptus, wondering how secure he had made his fireproof library?

The dress tore as I emerged through the me-sized hole I'd made. My skin tore too, scraped on my arms and hands, on my legs.

I didn't bother washing in the sink. Instead, I opened the bathroom door.

Morecombe was on the other side of it, eyes wide and staring, a heavy wooden bookend in his fist. He swung it at me.

I ducked back into the bathroom. The bookend hit the wall and splintered the wood.

"You were outside," Morecombe snarled. "How did you get in?"

"You were going to leave me out there?"

"You made your choice."

"You were going to leave me out there to burn instead of letting me into the library?"

"Can't risk the fire getting in. The books are more important than you are."

Well, I understood that in principle, though it's different if you are the special one-off edition human being about to burn.

Morecombe hadn't finished. "I'll get a new grant student next year. A grateful one, maybe. So how *did* you get in?"

"A little birdie told me that you'd lock me out in the fire."

"What?"

"A little ghost. A shadow. An echo that got louder as we got nearer the source. She disappeared this

afternoon. Have you ever wondered where your reflection goes when you're not looking in the mirror?"

"I don't know what you're saying."

"I still don't know. Research to be done, I suppose."

"Gilda..."

"Guilt. Gilt. Gilda. Understanding turns on the smallest point. Her eyes are my eyes. Her hair's like mine. This pretty sundress," I looked down. My sundress wasn't pretty any more. Moth-eaten. Charred with ember holes. Embers had fallen on my head too, and the stench of burnt hair wasn't just a future memory. "Is her sundress. Once I recognised her, I understood, so I did my research. I *prepared*."

"You'll tell them I locked you outside."

"You bet I will, you sleazy bastard."

Morecombe Vyner raised his fist. He still held the bookend in it, scraped and splintered all down one wooden side.

I slammed the bathroom door shut in his face and watched the timber shake as his weapon smashed a dent in the other side of it.

I opened my mouth and screamed and I felt cold as she came rushing out of me. I felt warm again, hot, sticky hot, scorched-air hot, as she melted through the closed door.

Beyond the walls, I heard the spitting gunshot bang of the oils in the eucalyptus trees exploding.

I would have been caught in that. A firing squad of burning trees.

Beyond the bathroom door, I heard Morecombe Vyner scream.

I heard a second, more terrified than the first.

The third scream had more pain mingled in it.

I opened the bathroom door and saw them. My ghost, my echo, my future-past self, standing over Morecombe as he lay sprawled on the floorboards.

She was on fire. And then she wasn't, and her head was caved in. And then it wasn't and she was just hovering over him, mouth open in an 'O', bright brown eyes full of rage.

The legions of death lean low

Vyner was still screaming, though half his face was frozen slack. Then red foam flecked his lips and his eyes rolled back and he stopped moving.

"Well, you," I said to my ghost. "What do we do now?"

She-me-I pressed her hands to the shutters that kept us safe as the fire crackled passed us – above and around but not below – and said nothing.



I used the hand crank in the morning to open the shutters. The house beyond the stairs was a skeleton of burnt timber and twisted metal. The trees, which had been cut back ten metres from Alexandria on all sides, were blackened. Embers still glowed among them.

I drank rainwater from the tap. I waited.

Emergency services came for me. Too late for Vyner. Stroke, they said after.

My ghost drifted above my head as they took me home. I closed my eyes and slept.



I suppose that I'm the murderer now, not Vyner. The body in the library wasn't after all mine, even if the angry ghost was.

Is it still a ghost when the primary source isn't actually dead?

Vyner left his collection – including the secret one housed under the floorboards – to the university. Since it survived the fire intact when neither the house nor Morecombe Vyner did, it's been moved to storage here while the new section is built for it with part of the bequest money. It will be all natural bush timbers. I don't know if I'm the only one who thinks that's poor taste.

I walk to 133.9 in the university library shelves to seek another book on astral projection. Jane floats beside me, her

fingers drifting through their spines. She chooses books like this, sometime, suddenly flinging them to the floor.

I call my ghost Jane. Calamity Jane. Short also for Janus. She sees backwards and forwards in time and stands for justice.

How did my spirit and I come to be separated? I haven't the faintest idea.

We have some research ahead of us.

Narrelle M Harris

Narrelle M Harris writes crime, horror, fantasy, romance and erotica. Her 30+ novels and short stories have been published in Australia, the US and the UK. Award nominations include *Fly by Night* (nominated for a Ned Kelly Award), *Witch Honour and Witch Faith* (both short-listed for the George Turner Prize) and *Walking Shadows* (nominated for the Chronos Awards and shortlisted for the Davitt Awards for crime writing).

Her work includes vampire novels, erotic spy adventures, queer romance, traditional Holmesian mysteries, and the Holmes/Watson romance *The Adventure of the Colonial Boy*. Queer paranormal thriller-romance *Ravenfall* was released in 2017.