

## Dragon at the Door

Stacey's feet swung inches above floor boards sprinkled with sawdust. They itched to be grounded; pub stools were always too high for her. The town was small, a rural meeting place with a few shops, a railway station and the hotel. In the shops, they expected her to buy, but she had no money, only a fifty-cent piece, not even enough for a bag of lollies. No-one seemed to mind her sitting in the corner at the pub. A ceiling fan lifted wisps of hair away from her neck. She leaned, weary, against the wooden bench. Years of grime, worn shiny black, was sticky against her arms. Her throat was cough-dry and her stomach made rumbling noises she hoped nobody noticed. She listened intently to the bar-room banter.

It had just gone noon, the hottest part of the day. There were few others in the pub. Waiting by the window, a woman in her mid-twenties, rocked her baby in a pram. She and Stacey had arrived on the morning train. An older woman in sensible shoes and a shapeless dress of cafe-curtain florals sat alone at a small table, working her way through a jug of beer. An man, in a sweat-stained hat, and trousers with patches upon patches, played a game of chess with himself. At the bar, two men with sun leathered skin, in Levi jeans and Blundstone boots, shared a drink and talked in comfortable staggered intervals. A wall mounted television played previews of Farmer Wants a Wife.

“You should go on Farmer Wants a Wife,” the older man said, and if he smiled it got lost in the craggy landscape of his face.

“C’mon Mate, you can’t believe that rubbish. What city woman is really going to fall in love with the likes of me and live happily ever after stuck out on the farm?” answered the younger. He frowned a little, sighed, and shook his head.

“No, I’m serious, it’s not good for a man to be out there on his own all the time.”

“I’m happy enough.”

“Bulldust!”

“If you think it’s such a good idea, you go on the damn show.”

“Reckon I wouldn’t mind.”

“Is that right? Then you’d better make sure Nicole doesn’t get near those girls and start telling them some home truths about you or it’ll be the shortest show in history.”

“Speaking of Nicole, I’d better be going. I told her I’d head straight back after I picked up the stuff from the train.”

“Good to see you’re your own man.” The younger turned the talk around and seemed the happier for it.

“Laugh all you like Mate; it won’t be me climbing into a cold bed tonight with nothing for company but my own thoughts.” He landed a couple of heavy thumps on his friend’s back and strode out the door.

For a while, the younger man did not move. He studied his drink as if it held a message too important to look away from. Then his whole body sighed, his shoulders rising and falling, swallowing his neck and spitting it out again.

Stacey saw an opportunity that not so long ago would have been abhorrent to her. She slid from her stool in the corner and climbed onto the one next to the young man.

“Hi, I’m Stacey.”

He turned his head, looked at her. She was beautiful; small of stature with fine blond hair, skin like sun warmed apricots and aquamarine eyes that glistened transparent, and drew him into her gaze.

“I’m Stacey,” she said again, quickly, before she lost her nerve.

“Ian. Ian Mallenson.” He reached across to shake hands and almost toppled his glass. “I’m Ian.”

Stacey put her hand in his. She barely touched him and he cradled her rather than held her. He felt the brush of her fingers like the wings of a butterfly, so delicate the smallest of pressure might crush them. They regarded each other for seconds that turned on a slower world clock.

“It’s thirsty weather,” said Stacey. She waited a moment. “I’d sure like a drink.”

“Oh right, right. Bill. Bill,” he called too loud, “can you give the lady a drink.”

The bartender pushed himself away from the sports page of the newspaper and galumphed to the bar. He lifted a porcupine eyebrow at Stacey.

“Lemon squash, thanks,” she said, ignoring the big man’s scoff of derision, and to Ian, “Thank you.”

The drink was her first since the night before, when she’d filled her cupped hands from wash room taps and slurped what hadn’t run through her fingers. Only the assault of the bubbles

stopped her from gulping it down. She wrapped both hands around the glass and savoured the cold. Ian watched her, ignored his own drink.

“Do they serve lunch here?” she asked.

The bartender scoffed again, or it might have been a muffled laugh, but he turned back to the sports page under Ian’s stern stare.

“Just crisps,” said Ian. He watched Stacey finish her drink. “They have burgers and pies and stuff at the road house.”

Stacey forced a smile and turned to the bar.

“I was going to stop there. Have lunch with me if you’d like.”

“That would be great.”

At the road house Stacey finished a burger with the lot before Ian managed even half of his.

“Hungry?”

Stacey nodded; she was close to tears.

“Can I drop you somewhere?” asked Ian. “Where were you headed?”

“Nowhere.”

“You must have been headed somewhere; nobody just gets off the train here.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I bought a ticket. This was as far as I could afford.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I could use a job.”

“No jobs around here.”

“On your farm?”

“Times are tough Stacey. I can’t afford to pay for farm workers and anyway, what would you do.”

“I can keep house for you, cook and clean. I’m good at that and I’d be company, you’d have someone to talk to.”

“I can’t afford it.”

“I’d come for room and board, that’s all I need. It’s not much.”

Her tear-filled eyes glimmered like a lake in the moonlight. She held herself still, held her breath, and waited for Ian to speak.

“I don’t get it. Are the cops after you or something?”

“No. No, I haven’t done anything wrong, I swear. I just needed a change of scenery, that’s all.”

Ian’s farm was more than an hour’s drive from town. Stacey didn’t utter a word on the trip; she sat her hands in her lap, her backpack pressed between her legs and stared at the road ahead. Ian glanced across a couple of times. She was small in the seat, but her presence filled the cabin of his Ford truck and he breathed deep and heavy.

“You OK?” he asked, and she looked up and nodded, bit her bottom lip.

He'd met the train for supplies and come home with a girl. He turned it over in his mind, tried to make sense of it. He hadn't really agreed to her proposal, but he couldn't leave her stranded either. What sort of man drives off with a girl he doesn't know? What sort of girl drives off with a man she doesn't know?

~

The farm house was old, early 1900s, a weatherboard with fifteen-foot ceilings, long narrow windows and a hallway down the centre. If the front and back doors were both open, you would see right through. The window blinds were aged translucent and large mats in the middle of the rooms almost covered the unpolished floors. In the kitchen, inset beneath the chimney, sat a slow-combustion wood stove. It was remarkably similar to Stacey's grandparent's place, before they moved to the retirement village.

"It's not much," said Ian, "but it does me."

There were empty vases and the occasional dusty ornament on the mantle and at the windows, side curtains of floral lace. A woman had lived here once.

"Was this your parent's home?" Stacey asked.

"My parents?" He furrowed his brow. "No, I bought the place at auction; the farm, the house, everything." Ian waved his arm across the room. "It'd belonged to an old couple with no family. Most of their stuff is still here. I never got around to moving anything."

Stacey stood in the middle of the kitchen; her backpack balanced on her feet. Pushed up to the wall below the window, was a rectangular table with two wooden chairs made from mismatched pieces of wood, worn at the edges and covered with the pockmarks of time. Ian stood an arm's length away. At six foot two he was a full foot taller than Stacey, whose habit of

hunching her shoulders forward made her appear shorter still. She was thin, with a tiny pot belly. Her tee-shirt hung loose and her jeans looked to be a size too big. Ian wondered how often she had a decent meal.

“Your room is at the end of the hall,” he said, inclining his head toward the door. There were only four rooms in the house. On one side of the hall, were the two bedrooms. On the other side the kitchen and lounge, each of which had their own doorway, despite there being no dividing wall between them. One side of the back verandah housed a copper laundry boiler and wash troughs and the other had been built in to make a rudimentary bathroom. The outdoor toilet was around twenty paces away.

“Why don’t you settle in and I’ll start the fire.” Ian moved to the stove before he finished speaking.

Stacey’s room had a double bed, a wardrobe with a door in the centre, a dressing table with a mirror on top, a small bedside cupboard and a lamp with a threadbare shade. The power cord for the lamp reached down from an empty light socket in the ceiling. Cobwebs had been woven unchecked, and a film of dust covered the furniture. She squealed when she pulled back the bed sheets.

“What’s wrong?” Ian swung around the door jamb and into the room.

“The bed’s full of mouse dirt.”

“Sorry, it hasn’t been touched for years.” Ian helped her strip the bed. After they checked the mattress and thankfully found it to be vermin free, he gave her his sleeping bag for the night. She would wash the sheets and blankets tomorrow.

Ian made tea the first night. They washed the dishes with water heated on the stove and watched television for a while, the diesel generator humming gently in the background. Miles from the city; in a place trapped in a time long gone, Stacey felt safe. When she went to bed, before she worried about mice and spiders, before exhaustion claimed her, she dared to imagine a better life.

~

Stacey was quick to learn and easily mastered setting the fire in the stove. Only once did she fill the house with smoke. She'd tried to clear it before Ian returned from the paddocks, but it lingered like mountain fog.

"I didn't mean to. It won't happen again." She held her hands together and dragged at her fingers when he came in. As he opened doors and windows to create a flow through of air, she realised the wrath she dreaded was not going to come.

In the mornings, she cleaned the stove before lighting it and made breakfast while Ian went about the day's early jobs. She eventually got the hang of cooking with the slow combustion stove, but even when the meals were close to inedible Ian said nothing. She washed, scrubbed, dusted and polished until two weeks after arriving; the house and all within it were pristine. She found some old-fashioned irons, heated them on the stove top and for the first time since he left his mother's home, Ian wore pressed clothes.

The early misgivings Ian had about Stacey were dispelled as he became comfortable with the benefits of having her there. But he worried; she was always exhausted by day's end, often falling asleep in the lounge chair and more than once he had seen her rushing to the toilet. This morning, as he passed, he'd heard her vomiting.



“Are you sick?” he asked when she came to the breakfast table.

“No, I’m fine.”

“I heard you chucking.”

“It’s nothing, just a bit of heat stroke.”

“It’s too early for heat stroke and anyway, you spend hardly any time outside.”

“I guess it’s just the change in diet.”

Ian knew next to nothing about women. He expected them to be frail, but this was something way beyond that. He wasn’t buying her story.

“Maybe we should go into town today. See Doc. Hamilton.”

“No, I’m fine really.” Stacey spilled porridge onto her lap.

“Maybe I’ll make it a condition of employment,” he said and felt a little stupid since he didn’t pay her anything. Perhaps he should think about a small wage. If she had no money, how would she pay for anything.

“Look, it’s on me,” he said, “I’ll pay for the doctor.”

“I don’t need a doctor.”

“I think you do and since I’m responsible for you.”

“You are not responsible for me.” Stacey hissed the words from the back of her throat, and Ian leaned forward in his seat to hear her.

“C’mon Stacey, it’s no big deal and you haven’t been to town since you got here. I’ll take you to the shop afterwards and buy a new dress or something, and then we can have lunch at the road house.”

“It is a big deal. I’m not going.”

“Damn, why is this so hard? You’re sick, you need the doctor and I’m ringing for an appointment.”

“I’m not sick.” Stacey stood and knocked her chair to the floor as she got up. “I’m pregnant!”

“Right, right. Pregnant. Pregnant as in having a baby.”

“Yes, pregnant as in having a baby.”

“So, right, that’s it then, I’ll get the truck and take you to town.” Ian bounded out the door and then back again before it had time to close. “And there’ll be no more arguing.”

It had been good while it lasted. Stacey stuffed her few possessions into her backpack and climbed into the truck. She wondered how long she would have to wait for the train and if Ian would give her the money for a ticket.

Ian wondered why she’d brought the backpack.

~

No-one in town ever remember Ian having a girlfriend, so his arrival at the doctor with Stacey, already well on the way to having a baby, generated no small amount of interest. The misunderstanding was automatic and was compounded when Stacey refused to give her surname for the records and Ian offered up his own for the sake of expediency. Ian was astonished when

Stacey and Doctor Hamilton emerged with the verdict that it was just morning sickness and nothing to worry about.

“How can it be nothing to worry about? She’s chucking up every day.” Ian erupted from the waiting room chair.

Doctor Hamilton stepped backwards and bumped his head on the edge of his office door. Stacey stared at Ian with wonderment. The receptionist, Helen, could barely restrain herself from bursting into the street with this juicy news and the notion that Ian was the child’s father was framed, cemented, and set.

Doctor Hamilton pulled a ‘Becoming a Parent’ booklet from a display stand on the wall. He stepped behind Stacey and gently pushed her toward Ian. “Perhaps you’d better sit down at home and go through this with our dad to be.”

“But he’s not.” Stacey fixed her eyes on Ian. Before she could say another word, he took her by the arm, grabbed the booklet from her hand and marched her to the truck.

“Why didn’t you tell them you’re not the baby’s father?”

“It’s none of their business.”

“What happens now?” Stacey’s backpack weighed heavy against her.

Ian moved the truck from the doctor to the general store not two hundred metres away. “Just answer me one thing,” he said, staring out the front window, “are you done with this baby’s father? Are you completely finished with him?”

“Yes.”

At the general store he bought a large T-shirt for Stacey and left a deposit for an order of maternity clothes. The news beat them to the road house. Ian had to give his order twice to fifteen-year-old Jenny Henry who wouldn't stop giggling. Stacey was near tears with embarrassment.

"He's not," she said.

"Going to put up with any more rudeness," Ian finished for her. He paid, wrapped an arm around her shoulder and ushered Stacey to a table, with as much ceremony as he could muster.

"Why are you doing this? They all think you're the father." Stacey leant across the table towards Ian, drawing another spurt of giggling from Jenny Henry.

"They can think anything they like, as long as it's not about you."

~

A 1935 Allis-Chalmers tractor had come along with the farm when Ian bought it. He sold that and a bevy of old farm equipment and tools to collectors and used the money for materials to close the back verandah. The laundry and bathroom would be inside the house. He fit sliding glass doors between them to make a sunroom, and paid a small fortune for a septic system so they had an inside toilet. In the back shed, he was restoring a rocking chair he had found there. For hours he knelt, hand sanding off old paint, restoring it to natural wood.

"You're doing too much," Stacey said.

"I want everything done in time for the baby." Ian sipped a tea she had brought him, wrapped both hands around the cup, let the heat work its way into his fingers.

Stacey leant against his back and ran her hand through his hair.

He'd stopped trying to remember what the farm had been like before Stacey, what he had been like. It had been a month since he had first kissed her, only a month, and the world had changed forever.

Jayden Tyler Mallenson took his first peek at the world just after two o'clock in the bitter cold of a winter's night. Nobody noticed the chill in the air, except perhaps Jayden, who quickly made his discontent known. Stacey, who had been in labour for nearly thirty hours; was exhausted and ecstatic. Ian was struck stupid by Jayden's arrival and as Doctor Hamilton watched him cradle the baby, any doubt that Ian was the father dissolved.

Jayden was three days old when they took him home to the farm. The Henry's from the road house had given them a crib; young Jenny had stuck sheets of cellophane together to wrap it and giggled her way to a severe case of the hiccups. Ian had finished the rocking chair. Polished to a shine, it sat in the corner of Stacey's room beside a second-hand cot from the bartender and his wife. They had been given baby clothes, blankets, and stuffed toys.

It had only been a few short months since Stacey had closed the door on a much darker world. She laid Jayden in his crib and pretended she had never been anywhere else.

~

Jayden turned four a week before the van came. He was sitting on the front stair drawing lines in the dirt when he saw it, too big to be a car but too small to be a truck. It was shiny and full of colour. He watched it coming up their road until he saw the dragon and, frightened, ran inside. Stacey was wrist deep in bread dough, a light dusting of flour covering her arms.

"Mummy there's a dragon."

"Is there Darling, and is he breathing fire?"

“He’s driving up the road.” Jayden pointed to the front door; his leg was shaking and his lip quivered.

Stacey walked to the lounge window and looked out at the painted van, a fearsome dragon stretching its full length, ‘Fire and Brimstone Art Design’ written along its neck. She knelt in front of Jayden and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Mummy’s got a very important job for you Darling. I want you to go out the back door, run over to the shed. OK?”

Jayden nodded.

“Then Mummy wants you to go behind the shed and over to the pine trees. Then go to the end of the trees. Don’t come out of the trees until you get to the end. OK?”

A tear slipped from Jayden’s eye and got stuck in the dust on his face.

“OK, when you get to the end of the trees, you’ll see Daddy on the tractor out in the paddock. You run to Daddy.”

There was a thumping on the front door.

“Go now Jayden, run to Daddy.”

Stacey held the back door open and watched Jayden until he disappeared behind the shed. She saw the visitor walk by the front window and ran out the back to halt him at the side of the house. He was a tall man, with footballer’s shoulders and a face chiselled deep with the furrows of a lifetime’s anger. Stacey clenched her fists. Jayden should be in the pine plantation by now.

“What do you want?”

“I’ve come for my kid.”

“I didn’t have the baby. I miscarried.”

“Yeah, then who was that kid I saw out the front.”

Stacey’s fingernails cut crescents in her palms. She said nothing.

“Where’s my kid?”

“You should leave now.”

“I am leaving. With my kid.” He walked toward Stacey and for every step he took forward she stumbled three backwards. Then he quickened his pace, lunged and grabbed Stacey’s wrist.

“Get your hands off me and get out of here.” If Jayden was running, he should be at the paddock by now.

~

Jayden was squealing by the time he emerged from the plantation.

Ian didn’t hear him above the noise of the tractor, but he saw the boy stumble twice, then get up and run on, his arms flailing. Ian cut the engine, jumped from the tractor and bolted to Jayden, grabbing him by the shoulders as he knelt in front of him.

“Dragon! Dragon! Dragon!” Jayden squealed. His dusty face was tear streaked, his eyes wide, and his gasps high pitched.

Ian cupped the boy’s face in his hand, wiping tears with the edge of his thumb. “Slow down now, take a deep breath and tell me what’s happened.”

“Dragon.” He grabbed Ian’s sleeve and pointed in the direction of the house. “Mummy said go in the trees. Mummy said run.”

Ian lifted Jayden, held him tight to his chest and ran, his heavy Blundstone boots pounding ruthless over the ground. He rounded the shed and saw them, a block of a man with a vice like grip on Stacey's arm and her cowering beneath a raised fist.

"Hey," he yelled as the bastard landed a blow to Stacey's face and her scream shattered the air.

Still running, he whispered in Jayden's ear, "Get under the house," and lowered him to the ground near the back porch without skipping a step.

He lunged at the block, who lost his grip on Stacey and skidded along the dirt on his back. Ian, propelled by his own momentum, grabbed the block's shirt as he passed him, dragged him up and threw him against the house. Ian spun in a jump and delivered a lip splitting blow.

The block turned away from Ian and, scrambling to his feet, dived toward Stacey. She screamed, but Ian was on him before he could reach her. Ian struck a blow to the side of his head and another to his jaw as he stumbled backward.

"You can have the bitch," he screamed at Ian. "I just want my kid."

Ian had never asked Stacey about Jayden's father. He had kept his questions to himself and in that moment, that one moment that explained everything he felt a rage gnawing at his gut. Stacey had run from the dragon to save herself and her baby, and now the dragon was at their door.

"Get Jayden," Ian called to Stacey. "He's under the house. Lock yourselves in the bedroom and don't come out until I tell you."



Stacey was running before Ian had finished his sentence and all the while he kept his eyes on the block, his fist raised ready. When the door slammed, when he knew his family was safe, he pounded on the other man. One fist, then the other, again, and the other.

They covered by the bed, Stacey and her son, even after they heard the van drive off. When the knock came on the bedroom door, Stacey gripped Jayden even tighter, until she heard Ian's voice; then she was up and fumbling with the key. They threw themselves at him before the door was fully open and he scooped them into his arms.

"It's alright," he whispered. "He won't be back; he won't ever be back."

"He won't stop now he's found us. You don't know what he's like." Stacey burst into tears, and Ian pressed his face to her and kissed her head.

"He won't come back," he said. "I've sorted it out. You don't ever have to worry again."

~

She did worry, a lot at first and then less as the months and years passed. Ian was true to his word. The block never returned. They didn't speak of him and in time, Jayden forgot about the day the dragon came. Ian proposed when Jayden was five but love him as she did, Stacey could not marry him. She was wed to the block. It was enough for her that he had asked, and it was enough for him that she stayed.

Jayden never took to country life; he was creative, artistic. He left the farm for a city university and a career in graphic design. He came home on the holidays, sometimes.

After Ian died in his fifties, fighting bush fires, Jayden stopped coming home at all. Stacey visited him in the city instead, but she lived on at the farm, the only happy home she had ever known, until cancer claimed her six years later. Jayden returned for the funeral.

~

“Are you sure you want to sell up Jayden?” Rod from the local Real Estate asked.

They had been through the house and the sheds and were walking across paddocks that had been idle since Ian’s death. The drought was in its fifth year. Dust rose with every step they took and carried on a hot north wind.

“Yeah, farming was never my thing.” Jayden stopped and surveyed his parent’s land. He felt the sun burning the back of his neck and he spat as one of the flies assaulting his face found its way into his mouth. He was keen to return to his air-conditioned car.

“Let’s go back,” he said, “you know the place anyway.”

“Sure, no worries. I won’t be able to get you much for it, not in the middle of a drought.”

“I know,” Jayden said, “it doesn’t matter. Mum and Dad got to live out their lives here, that’s all that counts.”

The men turned and headed back to their cars. Had they walked on to the dam, drained dry by the drought, they’d have seen embedded there in sun baked mud, a van, the crackled remnants of a painted design on its side and on the seat, a skeleton, in tattered clothes.