

The Ghost of Hank Williams

For Ruby

Tony Birch

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Curtis played out front of the old Lido Ballroom on Saturday mornings, picking up a few dollars from the market shoppers. The guitar had been flattened by a speeding road-train somewhere up north, last time he'd been home. He'd fixed it with old twine and bits of tape. Would have killed any tune in the hands of another musician. But not Curtis. He got that old axe to cry like a woman who'd lost her baby, and growl like a demon poaching for souls.

He loved a drink, Curtis, but made a point of resting up on Friday nights and not touching a drop until the last shoppers had drifted away the next day. We'd meet behind the doughnut stand at the market, buy some cold beers and a bottle of wine from the licence across from the market and head up to the park and sit under one of them big Moreton Bays that the whitefellas planted a hundred years back. Did so to keep the sun of their pale-skinned ladies as they walked the gardens and put a claim on the place.

I give the drink up some time ago, after this young doctor, from Hong Kong she was, showed me a picture of my liver against a shiny glass wall. Didn't make much sense to me until she stuck another one up there on the wall next to it. All fat and well fed, it was.

'See, Mr Holt?' She said, pointing. 'That's a healthy liver.'
I stuck my nose against the glass, which didn't please her. 'You right there, Doc. That's as good a liver as I've ever seen.'
She screwed her face up looking at the picture of my liver. 'Now, take a good look at your's. What do you see?'

'Well ... looks a bit like a burned up lamb chop that's been left for dead.'

She sat me down and told me straight that if I didn't get off the grog I'd be dead in six months. The girl, all good intentions, was trying to scare me off the drink. But it didn't work. I met up with Curtis the next day and sat with him under the tree sharing a bottle. I didn't want to spoil a good afternoon so I said nothing about the visit to the

doctor. And anyway, I didn't want to be interrupting, seeing as Curtis was telling a story. He was always good for a story.

He took a swig of the bottle, wiped it on his sleeve and passed it to me.

'I hear about this Sis from up near home. She's been writin stories and books and tellin stories and gettin famous.'

I held the bottle in my hand and thought long and hard about a drink without taking one.

'What stories she tell?'

'My cousin, Mervyn, he says she's been talkin bout her life and her kids and what's happenin to blackfellas up there.'

I stopped wondering and took a long drink of warm syrupy wine.

'For blackfellas or whitefellas?'

'Both. But it's the whitefellas buyin her books. They the ones with the coin.'

Curtis and me drank all afternoon and on into the night, until I passed out on the grass. Don't remember getting to my feet, or taking off for anywhere, but when I woke the next morning, looking up at a hot sun lifting in the sky I was lying in a paddock in the middle of no place I'd been before, not as far as I could recognise, at least. My shoes and socks and my shirt was gone and I had bruises and cuts all over my arms like I'd had a good whacking. I got to my feet and walked across the paddock, trying to stay out of the way of the thistles and thorns, to a dirt road off in the distance, not knowing which way was which.

When I got to the road, and guessing it was morning, I headed away from the sun. Pretty soon a copper come along, driving on his own, and picked me up. Would have expected he would have locked me up. But he never. He took me back to the station, dug a nice flannelette shirt and some shoes from a lost property box, wrote me a rail pass, give me a twenty-dollar note out of his own wallet and dropped me at a station at the end of the rail line.

'Train will be here in around fifteen minutes. Take you right back into the city.'

I thanked him. And I meant it.

He laughed. 'How'd you end up out here anyway? Didn't see no car'

I looked out along the empty road. 'I dunno how I got here.'

Sitting on the train back into town, and watching the country disappear behind me I got the shakes and shivers real bad. Two teenager girls sitting across from me looked a little worried about me and jumped up and moved. When I got back to my room at the boarding house I was still thinking about how I'd ended up in that paddock and what might have happened to me. It was like a spaceship or something had dropped me. I'd never known such fear and couldn't shake it. That night I had a dream that I

was laying in that paddock again and the sky was full of thunder and scratches of lightning. I could hear someone yabbering above all the racket, and when I looked up there were two whitefellas looking down and chuckling at me. One of them was chewing on something. It was my worn-our old liver. I looked down at my guts and saw that it had been ripped open.

I stayed away from Curtis for a few months while I dried out. When I felt that I didn't miss the grog no more but still missed his company and good talk I tracked him back to the front steps of the old ballroom. Walking down the street, dodging the crowd with their shopping jeeps and baskets and howling kids in prams, I could hear Curtis wailing a Hank Williams number way before pegging him. If you didn't know Curtis was a wild blackfella from the dry lakebeds of the backcountry you'd have sworn it was Hank Williams himself come back from the dead.

Curtis was working the crowd with a few of his stories when he spotted me. He waved and told an old joke, just for me, I reckon.

'Hey folks, how do you know when you've knocked off a blackfella's jukebox? ... all the songs are by Charley Pride.

Later in the afternoon, sitting back under the tree, I told him the story about what had frightened me off the drink.

'Do ya remember what happened to me, Curtis? Where I went that night, after I left here?'

'Na. Would have been asleep by then, myself. Woke the next mornin. You were gone. Back to your crib, I thought.'

He looked me hard in the eye. 'An that's it? No more drink?'

'No more.'

He held the bottle up and toasted me. 'Well, here's to you. All the more for me,' he laughed, and drained the bottle.

He pointed the neck of the bottle at me. 'You know that happened to Hank plenty of times.'

'What?'

'Well, he'd be playin in one town, in some western state, and he'd wake up across the other side of the country, or find hisself backstage at some other show with not a clue how he got there.'

'Cause of the grog?'

'Oh, bit of that. But mostly the other stuff. Miss Emma.'

'Miss Emma? What's that?'

'Morphine. Old Hank took it for pain, mostly. And a bit of a kick, you'd have ta think. Kept him goin when he had a show on. But fucked him up, too. Killed him in the end. Doctors made a blue and shot him up three times in one day, double, triple dosin. Hank felt himself dyin right there in the backseat of a car he was ridin in and lifted hisself right out of his own body before the devil could latch him and ship him off to hell.'

'How'd you know that story? Where'd you hear it.'

'From Hank hisself. Come and told me one night when I was sittin right here enjoyin a cask.' Curtis shrugged like it was nothing to be visited by the ghost of Hank Williams. He looked across the park to a tram drumming by. 'He's still out there some place, a lost soul.' He turned to me. 'Ya sure you don't wanna share with me?'

'Yeah. I'm sure.'

'You really been frightened off, yeah?'

'Yeah. A bit. But I've come up with this plan too. My daughter, Jillian, my youngest, she sent me a letter couple of weeks gone, with a picture in it. This beautiful kid. A baby girl. She's my own flesh and blood, my granddaughter. I stuck it on the mirror there in my room with some tape and all. She wouldn't give me the address. I don't know what town she's living in, but she has the telephone on there and sent me the number and I can call her anytime, she wrote. I think about calling her up every time I look at that picture of the baby. I even got this crazy idea about going to see them. That's my plan.'

Curtis's eyes were getting all full up with tears, so I stopped my story. He put the can of beer down and touched my arm.

'Go on, Bruz. Go on for me. I love hearin about a mob getting back together.'

'Mad idea, ain't it? I look at the smiling face of that kid, and then look at my own face in the mirror, all smashed up and ruined, and smell my own shit on me and I know I can't go visiting anyone. But now,' I stopped and coughed some tar from my lungs, 'now I feel maybe I could. But I got to stay away from the drink.'

Curtis snatched his can of beer from the ground and held it away from me.

'Well, you shouldn't be hangin with me. I don't want to do you harm, Bruz.'

'Don't worry yourself about that, Curtis. Only I been doing that.'

'And this baby girl, what's her name?'

'I dunno.'

'Well that's a good reason to call your daughter. You call and ask her.'

I had dialled my daughter's number in the phone-box out front of the boarding house and hung up on her plenty of times before I got up the courage to stay on the line. It was a bit like talking with a stranger at first and I could feel in her voice all the times I'd told her I was going to pick myself up and never did. I called her twice a week for more than a month, maybe six weeks, and could feel her listening more closely to me

each time, wondering when I was going to slip up, I suppose. And then one day she says, out of nowhere, 'Dad, why don't you come and see us? We'd like that.'

I couldn't sleep the night before I was to catch the train and see her for the first time in ten years. I got out of bed early, shaved, had a shower and put on a clean shirt and pants and jumper I picked up from the Salvation Army. The priest from the church where I'd been having a feed during the day gave me a pair of his own shiny black shoes to wear. They were a little big. I stuck an old sock in the toe of each of them and they were fine. I walked into town, bought my ticket and had a cup of tea and some toast at a café near the station. I still had two hours to kill before the train took off, so I walked down to the market and found Curtis playing at his usual spot outside the ballroom. He'd just finished a set of Johnny Cash, Freddie Fender, and Slim Dusty and finished off with Hank Williams, off course.

He looked me up and down and whistled. 'Hey, Bruz, you're dressed up like a pox doctor's clerk. Where you off to?'

I stuck my chest out. 'To see my daughter and the baby, on the train.'

Curtis smiled so big I could see his tonsils.

'Fuck, that's the news for the day. You've cracked a winner.'

He dropped his head and his smile.

'I've had some crook news myself. That sis I told you about, the one who got all famous tellin her stories and writin them and gettin round talkin to people. She passed on, the poor girl.'

Curtis looked sadder than I'd ever seen him. I took hold of him and shook him a little. 'Hey, I'm sorry for that. I know you talked good of her. I'm real sorry, Curtis.'

He smiled again, just a little bit, trying as hard as he could.

'Well, she was a mighty woman, done a lot of good, an we'll not forget her.' He picked up his guitar and held it to his body. 'Don't you worry about that, Bruz. You got your daughter to see, and your grandkid. This is a good day for the two of us. A mob gettin back together. You wait here. I'm gonna do one more song and then call it a day. And then I'm gonna walk you to the station and put you on the train myself. So you don't miss it. I reckon that maybe you won't be comin back. So Curtis is gonna see you off.'

He went back to his spot and strummed the guitar, talking the crowd up.

'I got a song here for all you. And for an Aboriginal lady back home in her country and in my country, and for a little girl who is gonna come on like a flower. Come on for her Pop.'

Curtis looked over and me and winked and danced with that battered guitar.

'I got a girl and Ruby is her name ...'

Ruby, Ruby, Ruby ... Ruby will you be mine.'

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