

# Bait

Runner-up, Scarlet Stiletto Prize 2000, Short Crime Story

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*We are mad, not only individually, but nationally. We check manslaughter and isolated murders, but what of war and the much vaunted crimes of slaughtering whole peoples?*

Seneca: Ad Lucilium XCV

*But the old men know when an old man dies*

Ogden Nash: Old Men

## **Extract from the personal war memoirs of Milly Levell Scott. Sumatra, 1945**

It was the heat that killed her. She had a heart condition and was already ill. Some of the more outspoken Sisters complained, trying to tell the guards about her medical history, but they refused to listen. We wore no hats and the sun's heat soaked us with rivulets of perspiration. Streams ran down our necks and legs. Occasionally the guards would come by and slap our faces or prod us with their machine guns. Some of the nurses sobbed quietly as they stood under that cruel sun, but most were silent, eyes wary, as we waited in fearful expectation of those guns to open fire. Sister Raymont was having a tough time. She almost stumbled a few times, causing the guards to pounce on her, shouting incoherently.

Dear God, please give Raymont your strength to endure this punishment. Please keep us safe and our chins up. Protect our boys who are fighting, and bring an end to this war.

It was the heat that killed her. We had no hats and sunscreen was unheard of back then. We stood there for hours. Some of the nurses claimed it was seven hours, others said no, it was only three. To me it felt like we stood in that courtyard for seven years. All the time my eyes stayed fixed upon the red cross embroidered upon Sister Raymont's sleeve, that symbol that we drew upon so often for our strength. Two guards walked past us, inspecting us closely. They stopped before me, and I smelt their fetid breath. They looked me up and down and said something in Japanese to each other, and laughed. Fear tiptoed in frantic waves through every cell of my body. I guessed they were assessing my potential as a prostitute for their officers. I looked them steadily in the eye. I remembered the words of a young Australian soldier. Never turn your back on 'em or show fear if you're captured. Always look the buggers in the eye. They don't like to shoot you in cold blood if you're looking them in the eye. The guards moved on and I breathed out again.

Safe for now. As I stood under that biting, burning sun I composed letters to my family. I am well and in reasonably good spirits, so please don't worry! One of the few advantages of being a prisoner of war is that I have lost so much weight! You would no doubt be shocked if you saw your porky little Millicent now.

I weigh only six stone. Some of the nurses are down to five. Keep smiling, I long to see you. I also composed letters to my friend Betty Clancy, with whom I had trained with in Melbourne; she had also been shipped to Singapore. Dear Clancy, I hope you are safe. I am praying for you, with any luck you're back in Australia. Why did we ever enlist for this damned war? Remember how we laughed about our sense of duty? But Clancy, how could we have foreseen that things would get this revolting, this miserable? Nurses are dropping like flies here of malaria, TB and beriberi. Remember Sister James? She said the only heavy work we have to do here is digging graves. The other day a group of us were so famished that we cooked and ate our supply glue. Rats are providing the bulk of our protein at the moment, but are proving difficult to catch. Don't you just long for a lamb roast? Even a nice cold water would be heaven. I pray you are safe. Your Scottie. PS The administration of the camp has changed from civilian to military. Captain Saki is the new commanding officer. He gave us a welcoming speech where he said he had the power if he so desired to condemn us to death for breach of discipline. That's why we're out under this blazing sun today, because one of the Sisters forgot to bow to a guard. Chin up, keep smiling.

It was the heat that killed her. Others died of bombs, machine guns and bayonets, tropical diseases and inadequate diets. In Sister Raymond's case, it was the sun. We were all shattered by her death, which was officially 'malaria'. But those of us who stood next to her, perspiring and enduring together, knew the truth. It was the sun that killed her.

### **Sydney, 2000**

"Well. I never... Kathleen." Milly spoke aloud, although the only occupants of her courtyard garden were a couple of doves and the neighbours' overweight ginger cat. Blinking hard as she adjusted her spectacles, Milly scanned the lurid tabloid article again.

GRANNY RIPPER KILLS AGAIN! The serial killer who has been preying on the inner city's elderly claimed his third victim yesterday evening. Mrs Kathleen Groves, 83, of St Augustines Terrace, was brutally murdered in her unit at approximately 11pm...Police are appealing to the public for any information. Dubbed the Granny Ripper, the killer has created fear and panic amongst the elderly across inner city suburbs..."We're too frightened to sleep at night," sobbed Alice Green, 73, Mrs Groves' next door neighbour. "What sort

of coward preys on the elderly? What's the world come to?"

Milly opened her pocketbook with lined hands that shook slightly, and took out a miniature black-bound diary. She wrote in a flowing, copperplate script: Kathleen Groves, 83, St Augustines Terrace. Above that addition were two other names: Geoffrey Denton, 74, Wattle Drive, Inglewood and Ruth Brown, 92, Princess Street, Surrey Park. After a pause, she added in brackets after Kathleen's name - friend. Milly meditated on the names. Three virtually identical killings, all without signs of forced entry or robbery. Each one involved mutilation of body parts, and in each case the victim's hands were tied behind their backs, execution style.

The slayings always occurred late at night, and neighbours never noticed suspicious noises or activity. Milly frowned, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. There had to be a connection somewhere. It was with sadness that Milly selected her grey David Jones suit to wear to her friend's service. Only last week she had joked with Kathleen about their lack of black funeral attire. Poor Kathleen. She had possessed one of the biggest hearts that Milly knew, until the Granny Ripper had elected to still it forever. There were rows and rows of outfits in Milly's wardrobe. They hung on hand made frilly coat hangers, collected at fetes.

She had tied lavender sachets to each coat hanger. Some outfits sported matching belts and scarves. Milly was always promising herself that she would cull her wardrobe, but every outfit had its own poem, spoke its own memory. So they remained, hanging in the wardrobe in plastic coverings, a silent living gallery of Milly's seven decades. The suit smelt sharply of mothballs. Milly hung it out to air.

The rain drizzled all through Kathleen's service. Milly recognized familiar faces from the Golden Olden Boot Team. Each lined face wore the same shock and disbelief that death brings when it claims someone close to you as its own. It could have been me. The soft patter of water drops fell in light waves on the roof above.

Trying to stop herself crying, Milly studied the prominent river of blue veins that contorted in her arthritic hands. How difficult was it to silence a beating heart?

He was watching her. No, Milly reassured herself, it was her imagination. She was just highly strung from Kathleen's service. She hated cremation, it seemed so final. Why didn't they bury them like seeds, so they at least had the chance to sprout and flower?

St Augustines railway station was crowded. The man watching her was young, with greasy black hair hanging to his shoulders. Prey, she was prey. He lit a cigarette. Milly was painfully aware of how she would

appear to him. Frail, pathetic, easily overpowered, and looking as if she had money somewhere in her David Jones suit or her smart crocodile-skin bag.

Infirm, easily broken.

A sea of people moved around her as a train pulled into the station and people disembarked. Now he was moving towards her. Milly fought back her panic. She was in broad daylight, secure in the belly of a crowd. She would be safe. He was level with her. Now he would walk past her. Then he lunged at her, grabbing her handbag. Confused commuters looked around as Milly screamed. The scene was like a nightmare in slow motion. Milly refused to let go of the bag, and felt herself wrenched bodily along with him. A woman screamed. People stood back, horrified but motionless. The man kicked at Milly, winding her in the stomach. She lay, crouched in pain, her stockings laddered, a rip in her David Jones suit.

"Cop a load of Super Gran." Constable Richard Moss, on duty at St Augustines Police Station, nodded towards the slight elderly woman seated with quiet dignity in the waiting area.

The young policewoman, Debbie King, rose to Milly's defence. "Don't be horrible," she said, "Poor old thing.

Imagine if she was your mum."

"My mum wouldn't be stupid enough to try to fight back," Richard retorted. "Old people give me the creeps anyway, they're so slow."

"Don't be a bastard. You'll be old one day."

"Maybe, but I'd shoot myself if I thought I would end up like her." He nodded towards Milly, who sat staring ahead vacantly, mourning the loss of her bag. "We ought to put Super Gran onto the Granny Ripper. She just might sort him out."

Then, with an exaggerated show of politeness he approached Milly. "Mrs Scott, we've finished with you now. I'll run you back to your home if you wish. "His voice, raised in assumption of Milly's deafness, ricocheted around the station. She sighed and got to her feet. Her cards, library tickets, photographs, diary, address book, few cosmetics, twenty dollars, bus ticket, Medicare, health care - Milly's mind continued to tick them off in a list. Gone, all gone.

Connections, there must be connections. Milly stared at her new list. Kathleen Groves, Geoffrey Denton, Ruth Brown. All elderly and living in neighbouring suburbs. All using the same public transport. They shared strands of the same web. My web. Milly suddenly felt old and drained, and so very vulnerable. Tomorrow she would have to get her locks changed.

I'm easy prey.

Sleep refused to visit her that night. Instead she sat up, heart beating almost in alignment with the hall clock, eyes fastened on the doors of her unit. If she fell into a light doze, the image of the young man with the greasy hair would soon terrify her into wakefulness. She could picture her lock turning and the man entering her home, hate consuming his eyes. Earlier in the day the police had seemed to make light of her fears. She wasn't badly hurt, and besides, it was no secret that St Augustines was full of junkies and street kids. Come on old thing, Milly told herself, chin up. She clutched her old blanket tightly around her shoulders, and tried to forget the fears that plagued her present. Inevitably, her mind began to turn to the fears of the past.

#### **Extract from the war memoirs of Milly Levell Scott**

"Excuse me, Nurse. I'm sorry to trouble you, but have you got a light?" I turned to the wounded soldier in the bed. Was he seventeen? No, more like fifteen, another one who had lied about his age in search of adventure. His arms had been blown off, but there were many on the ward with limbs missing. Hands, arms, legs. Some men had even lost their faces, but they never complained, even with the inadequate pain relief that we had to give them. Their courage despite their great suffering gave me strength. All the nurses of our unit dreaded being sent home to Australia. How could we leave our men to fend for themselves? It was unthinkable. And so we moved in a world of constant operating, a universe of shrapnel wounds and hideous burns. But it was a world that we voluntarily elected to be a part of, to defend our country and to give support to our heroic boys.

He was looking up at me, lines of pain and fatigue on his face. He had accepted the loss of his limbs with the same stoicism that they all displayed, and if they did sob silently to themselves late at night as I often did, well, I never heard them. I glanced around the ward. It was a busy night. 900 patients, and only three nurses. Betty was bent over one of the beds giving pain relief to a wounded soldier. A lock of blonde hair had escaped from her veil. Her face was intent on the man she was nursing. I sighed, the others would have to wait. He needed his cigarette. I lit it a Camel and, perching on his camp bed, I placed it between his lips. "Thanks, Nurse," he exhaled gratefully. "You're an angel. Where would we be without you girls?" He winced as a ripple of pain ran through his body. I patted his head, thinking of his mother back in Australia, longing for news of her son.

"Do you have a fellow back home, Nurse? You're pretty enough."

I smiled. "His name is David. He's an officer. The last I heard he was at Tobruk."

There was a silence. Overhead the spine chilling sounds of guns in the air like thunder. How I hated and feared that sound. I knew the waste of life and the damage to flesh that it always brought. I yawned with exhaustion - there were hours left of this shift. I longed for dawn, so Betty and I could make our way back to the tent that we shared. As if sensing me thinking of her, she looked over and smiled briefly before moving onto her next patient.

"What's your name, Nurse?"

"Millicent. Milly."

"Millicent. That's a pretty name. I'm Steven, from Hobart." Now the patient had a name and a home town.

"How are the prisoners behaving, Millicent?"

"Oh, they're nothing to worry about, they've been model patients, very grateful and co-operative."

He was taking the last drags on his cigarette when it happened. All hell erupted. The doors of the hospital blew open and the glass shattered in the windows, showering the ward. I'll never forget the stunned look on Steven's face as he sat upright, killed instantly in a deadly spray of shrapnel and glass. Steven from Hobart, who had lost his hands, who had just smoked his last cigarette.

The Golden Olden Boot team were meeting at Mermaid Cove this week. The plan was a gentle half hour stroll along the cliff-face. A walking track had been assembled two years ago by the local council, and it was a comfortable outing for the less mobile members of the group. They would eat their sandwiches at the lookout which rewarded them with a glorious view of the heads. After lunch they would attend the local cinema; it was cut-price day.

Milly always looked forward to the cinema, anything to escape from the fear and the sleeplessness, and her desire to work out the identity of the Granny Ripper. It was becoming painfully obvious that she was no Jane Marple. In Miss Marple's world, St Marys Mead was a microcosm of the world - now, what would she make of the Golden Olden Boot team? Milly slitted her eyes, appraising the Goldies. They really were a depressing lot when seen from afar. Still mourning the death of Kathleen, still withdrawn. Not all members were present today, some being too afraid to leave their homes. Eight elderly, frail people who had known depression and war, and then the dizzying changes of a half-century of technological and social revolution. The great majority of them lived alone, life partners taken away by cancer or heart disease. Their bodies were wearing out quickly; nature was merciless, life so heartbreakingly short. They supported each other as they walked the gentle incline of the path. Milly became aware that John was talking to her. He was the

self elected leader of the Golden Oldies. With his wife Helen, John emigrated from London twelve years ago in search of the sunshine. Two years ago, Helen had died of a brain tumour.

"Heard about your bag being snatched. Hard luck, old cheese. Heard you fought him off like a tiger, though."

Milly smiled. "Hardly a tiger, I'm afraid. And did you know I earned the wrath of the St Augustines Police? Apparently, every schoolchild knows you're meant to let thugs take whatever they want from you. They thought I was a fool -'your money's not worth your life', the young constable told me!" She mimicked the disapproving tone of Constable Moss, who had driven her home and lectured her the whole way.

"Quite right he was, too," John agreed. His next words shocked her. "It's funny, you know, but poor Kathleen's bag was snatched only a month before her tragedy. Well, here we are at the lookout. Isn't that view grand?"

Milly surveyed the panoramic scene, thinking deeply. Connections. There were always connections.

"I'm not sure I can help you."

The young nurse was suspicious. She looked Milly up and down. "Are you a relative?"

"A close friend," Milly lied.

"Well, Mr Denton was mainly self-caring, you see the was no trouble. The only one who might know something is Joan. They were as thick as two thieves. She's in the unit next to him. Number 32. Just don't go upsetting her!" She yelled after Milly's departing back.

"Poor Geoffrey," Joan dabbed at her eyes again. "Such a lovely caring man, it's awful he had to have such a terrible end to his days! He served in Turkey, you know. What a lot of wickedness there is in the world!"

"Indeed." Milly replied, her eyes roamed the cheerful unit, which was filled with treasures and mementoes from Joan's long life.

"Do you happen to know if he had any trouble with bag snatchers or muggers? Anything at all of that nature?"

As Joan blew her nose, a beautiful Persian pushed against her legs, impatiently mewing to be picked up.

"Well, no, not recently," she said. "But he was mugged at St Augustines Plaza about a year ago. Geoffrey tried to fight back, but he had a weak heart, you know." Tears welled in her eyes again. Milly blinked. This was getting interesting.

Did he ever describe his assailant?"

Joan considered whilst she stroked the cat. "Long hair, scruffy. I think he was a drug addict. They all are, these days, aren't they?"

Milly's return visit to St Augustines Police Station wasn't very successful. The officers were polite, but

sceptical, and she could tell they would rather do without her help.

"I tell you, all the murderer's victims had their bags snatched beforehand," Milly persisted. "It's a connection.

This bag snatcher had all their vital information. He could easily have tracked them down."

"Look, thanks for coming to us with this information, Mrs Scott, but let me assure you that all possible leads have been examined by our expert teams. Including that one."

She stared at Constable Moss stonily, and he looked down. "Still, we appreciate any information from the general public, so let us know if there's anything else."

Even if it is total hogwash. Milly could almost see the policeman's unspoken words hanging in the air. She sighed, and turned to leave.

"Will you at least make sure that my information is recorded?"

"Yes, ma'am," Richard said, but Milly was already at the door.

"What's she on about?" asked Debbie from the enquiry counter.

Richard shrugged. "Oh, she's bored and wants to play detective. Pathetic, really. Now I have to type up her ravings."

Hours later, Milly's statement lay forgotten under a pile of notes and clutter on his desk.

He watched her as she left the station. She walked slowly down Applebee Street towards her home. He knew every step her arthritic body would take. Over the last few days, he had noted every detail of her little journey. Past the Lebanese fruit shop, the button shop, the 7-11. Once she glanced around, and he flattened himself against a wall, back turned to her, lighting a cigarette. Most of the wrinklies were senile, but in this line of work he had learnt never to underestimate anybody. This week he had carried out Phase Three, and had visited her in her own home. He had worn a light disguise, but there had been no recognition on her part. She had not let him in, of course. The wrinklies were less trusting now the Granny Ripper was in their midst. She had even refused to donate to the charity he was collecting for, and slammed the door in his face before he finished his spiel. It didn't matter, of course. There had been plenty of time to ascertain that she didn't own a dog, and that her lock was a standard type, easily picked.

He continued to shadow her, sniffing the air. He flattered himself that he could detect a faint, musty smell of decay draped delicately over her aged body. The pain in her hip when she limped down the street fascinated him. The fear he sensed radiating from her as she glanced warily up and down the street was exciting. She was so vulnerable and exposed. It was arousing to think how easy it would be to release her from that ugly old body. Soon Millicent, he promised her. Soon I will release you, and you will be free. He loved this power, loved being on the hunt. He followed his prey.



## **Extract from the war memoirs of Milly Levell Scott**

When the war ended I returned to Australia, sick and weary of heart. But I no longer felt part of the world I had wanted to serve - it appeared to be completely changed. All my thoughts and dreams were of the destruction I had witnessed. The waste of life. The futility of it all and the agony. I no longer wanted to nurse. I had seen enough blood to last me for a hundred lifetimes.

I married David, but he had returned from his years of service a different man. Now he drank heavily, and there were many nights when he used his fists, his belt and the fire poker on me. Neither of us ever spoke about our wartime experiences. I doubt the words had been invented that could describe them.

Shortly after returning, I had the first of several breakdowns. My hands were always red raw with eczema. I read that Saki was tried for war crimes and sentenced to fifteen years. Betty never returned from foreign soil. Money was always tight, and I took a job selling stockings from door to door. There was very little work I could cope with. I was too proud and ashamed to apply for welfare. David would disappear for nights at a time. I had long ceased caring where he was disappearing to. One night he never returned. I began selling cleaning fluids. He waited, smoking cigarettes in the street until her lights went out. Then he waited some more, reciting a favourite prayer. I'm coming for you, Millicent.

Finally, hours after her light had been extinguished, he crept towards the door. Softly, at one with the night, he picked her lock. Too easy. He waited, closing the door softly, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Something moved, what was it? He strained to see. A strobe light went on, and a sudden burst of loud music made him jump. He threw his hands up to protect his ears. The light dazed him and the music, garish and orchestral, pounded his eardrums. Behind him, clothed in a black robe, was Millicent. A knife fell in an arc, shaking in her unsteady grip, and pierced his back. Blood spurted, and red hot pain screamed through his torso. He fell to the floor, fainting, dying, in grotesque accompaniment to Puccini's glorious crescendo.

Milly was sitting in the hallway, still guarding his body, when the police arrived. Nobody spoke, although some of them seemed taken aback by the amount of blood splashed across the walls and carpet. Milly was wrapped in a lavender shawl, and her hands shook as she lifted a cup of Bushells to her lips. Her eyes were trancelike. It hardly seemed possible that one so fragile, so old could have inflicted this sort of damage.

A young policewoman gasped and hurried from the room. Milly surveyed them all with patient kindness through pale, cloudy eyes. At her feet lay the decapitated body of Constable Richard Moss. She spoke to nobody in particular. "I knew when I saw him in the police station. That look in his eye. I knew there was a connection. They had all reported muggings to him. And I remember the same look in Saki's eyes."

### **Extract from the war memoirs of Milly Levell Scott**

I can too easily imagine Betty standing in a group of twenty-one women on the beach at Banka Island. Their arms would be linked as they faced the Japanese officers they had surrendered to. I can see the large Red Cross symbol they hurriedly drew on the sand to signify their peaceful intentions. The sounds and smells of Banka still beat in my temples and waft through my mind at odd moments. I reflect on how Betty must have felt when she witnessed the ship's officers being led down the beach towards a bluff, and when she saw the Japanese return shortly afterwards with blooded bayonets, which they cleaned in front of the captured nurses. Don't turn your back on them, look them in the eye. How I wish I had had the chance to tell them. At night I see Betty's face in my mind. In my dreams she is always laughing, innocent and young, like a young Australia that I knew once and loved. Her face so sweet and sincere, filled with the freckles that she hated. Her skin would never sag and stretch like mine. Did she cry out? Scream? No, from all accounts she went bravely - they all did. They knew what was about to happen and they accepted it, chins up. Nobody panicked, they walked with dignity towards the sea, waiting for the bullets to spray them from behind. I know it is fanciful, but in my weaker moments I imagine Betty, her long white veil softly draped around her. A sea breeze lifts its lightly, so that from a bird's eye view she looks the angel that she was. She is up to her waist in the water, and still the bullets have not hit her. The water is red with the blood and gore of her friends and work colleagues. Then I see her as she turns slowly, slowly her face young, beautiful, calm, Madonna-like. Now she has turned completely to the shore, and the bullets fly around her. She faces them.

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