

## WHAT BECKONING GHOST?

By Cathy Koning

The small, rectangular, slightly fuzzy photograph, taken in the lounge room of our old country farmhouse, is black and white. The back is stamped 'Ilford'. The year is 1961. I sit in an old wooden chair with square seat inserts of carpet-like moquette velvet. This is the same chair Mum used to nurse me when I came home from the hospital. There I am, a sweet little girl with thick blonde hair shaped into a somewhat ad hoc style by Mum; a semi-circle to frame my face. I wear a soft dressing gown which has an all-over spotted pattern and moccasin type slippers on my tiny feet. To my right is a precious item of home entertainment; an Astor television sitting on four tall wooden stick legs, its square shape confirms its description as 'The Box'. Underneath the screen are five buttons – on and off switch, and others which control the channel selection, volume, brightness and focus. The photograph has been taken while the television is on, but the strong light which emanates from the screen has washed out any details. On top of the television sits a table lamp which reminds me of a spaceship. It features three metal legs and soft plastic sections of alternating colours for the lamp shade. An indistinct floral arrangement sits next to the lamp. On the floor busy, multi-patterned linoleum is partly covered by a carpet square.

I look wistfully at the camera.

I watched many shows on the box that year including Graham Kennedy's *In Melbourne Tonight*, although I was far too young to appreciate the hilarious double entendres, Bob Dyer's quiz show *Pick a Box*, although I was far too young to know the answers, Tommy Hanlon Jr's *It Could Be You* to see people cry copious tears as they were unsuspectingly united and *Peter's Fun Fair* featuring weird-looking clowns Zig and Zag wearing their Peter's Ice Cream hats. Then there was *Rawhide*. The trail boss, Gil Favor, would call 'Head 'em up! Move 'em out!' as the cattle headed off. He and his sidekick Rowdy Yates (a very young Clint Eastwood) never reached town without dealing with a major drama. The drovers finally managed to make it to the stockyards following dried up waterholes, a stampede over a cliff, an outbreak of anthrax or the baddies attempting to rustle the herd for themselves. Rowdy never had a wash on the trail, so a long soak in a free-standing bath tub at the town's only hotel was a must, followed of course by a visit to his current girlfriend at the local saloon.

There was one show, however, which had a special impact on me, the television series *Thriller*. Master of horror, Boris Karloff, introduced each episode. The setting for *What Beckoning Ghost?* was a spooky gothic mansion, filmed in shadowy but crisp black and white and directed by Ida Lupino, a renowned actress and one of the few female directors in Hollywood at the time. Jerry Goldsmith composed the music. I first viewed this episode at my music teacher's house in 1962 and never forgot the coffin scenes.

I saw *What Beckoning Ghost?* recently on YouTube and the memories came flooding back; significant memories which were directly connected to a frightening real-life event.

My parents migrated from northern Holland in 1951. The depression, followed by the brutal German occupation of the country, had left its mark, especially on my father. In Dutch towns residents had been routinely shot down in the streets as revenge for sabotage or simply not obeying the curfew. Mum and Dad had taken part in the Dutch resistance or 'secret war' and knew injustice when they saw it. When my brother once asked Dad if he had killed anyone during the war he would not answer. I later found out he was involved in the shooting of the local policeman, a Nazi sympathiser. He only escaped being taken to Germany as forced labour because he was the sole provider for his family after his father died of tuberculosis. Mum had worked in an office where she knowingly worked with false documents. She even kept a cache of weapons meant for downed Allied airmen under her bed for a night.

They were typical migrants hoping for a fresh start in a country with lovely warm weather. Dad had worked as a horticulturalist so the immigration authorities thought it was a good idea to send him to a sheep station in Wellington, NSW where he repaired fences on horseback. I was born a year later. We moved around quite a bit as my father tried to improve his work situation. In 1961, when I was nine, he was working for an apple orchardist in a beautiful part of rural Victoria. We were living in our eighth house, a very basic old place with a corridor down the middle, an outhouse out the back and a copper to heat the water for our weekly shared baths. My younger brother and I slept in the same bedroom which was a comfort. The house felt a little scary at night.

My father was a burly six foot farmer used to hard physical work. He had courage. One night the son of the next door neighbour became very drunk and threatened his parents with a shotgun. Dad went straight up there and talked him down before he did something he would later regret. Dad actually hated guns. He could not bring himself to shoot our fox

terrier after it started to take down sheep. That was the first and last dog we owned. I remember at a previous house on a dairy farm, a snake bailed me and my brother up at the concrete water well in the backyard. We furiously yelled for help. Luckily Dad was in the kitchen having morning tea. As the reptile reared up at us he promptly dispatched it with a shovel.

I was a gangly looking kid who enjoyed school, although not necessarily the harshness of some teachers. The local state primary school was my third in as many years. I had made friends but did not have the social ties of the other students, whose parents had lived in the district for generations. Derwent pencils were a symbol of status and class. At that time my family could not afford to buy me the twelve pencil sets, but the well-heeled kids had the thirty-six pencil boxes. I also had some accidents pushing the limits on play equipment. A botched attempt to swing standing up, no hands, comes to mind. I must have been a circus performer in another life. I inevitably lost my balance, fell flat on my face and my teeth went right through my bottom lip. I certainly was the focus of attention at school the next day. Concussion after slipping trying to do a forward flip on our rickety back steps railing comes to mind too.

My brother and I made billy carts, played board games and made huts in the fallen down pine trees. We messed about the place and down by the creek. Spending time in the bush opposite our house was great fun too, especially rummaging around the little rubbish tip. Finding an old saddle, I propped it on a tree branch, asked mum for some string for the reins and hey presto, I was Velvet Brown winning the Grand National once again.

I was totally innocent of all things of an intimate physical nature. When mum told me it was time to stop going around without a top at home in summer I asked her why. She pointed out that my breasts were just starting to emerge so it was time to cover up.

The music teacher at my local school, I'll call him Mr R, took an interest in me. I have an indistinct memory of him being slim with a moustache. He sat me down beside him at the piano for private lessons after school. It was fascinating to learn what the black squiggles and bobbles on the five parallel lines actually meant. They were used to make music. It was very exciting, like cracking a code, but I remember feeling uneasy. This music teacher had picked me out for some special attention. A little bit of grooming.

Mr R's daughter was my friend. The family were provided with a two story house on the school grounds. It was a much nicer house than mine. An invitation was made to stay at her place for the weekend. That night we viewed the *What Beckoning Ghost?* episode on their television. It was very frightening for a nine year old to watch. Mildred, a wealthy concert pianist who had a weak heart, makes her way downstairs where she hears an organ playing funeral music. She is horrified to see her own closed coffin laid out in the drawing room. The second time she sees the coffin the lid is open, complete a body with a death mask of her face. For some reason she does not touch the coffin. If she had she would have discovered it was made of paper mache; a set-up, a ruse. Her ne'er-do-well husband and scheming sister tell her they had not seen or heard anything out of the ordinary themselves, but the plan is of course to permanently remove her from the scene. After Mildred dies, she comes back to haunt them. The coffin reappears; the black and white piano keys on Mildred's grand piano move up and down on their own accord and play a waltz. The by now terrified husband jumps out a window and the sister is headed for some serious time in a straitjacket.

I went to bed feeling somewhat discombobulated by the night's viewing. The next morning, in the upstairs bedroom where I had spent the night, I was about to experience a very real fright. Mr R came in, talked with me for a short time, then suddenly exposed himself, and asked me to touch him. I knew it was wrong. With great presence of mind and no little courage, I went straight out the door and walked all the way home, five long miles up and down dusty roads and hills. Normally going along that road was a lovely experience, with distant sea views and small farms dotted around each bend. That day my mind was in turmoil. Why had he done this? Mr R did not follow me. I'm sure he thought I wouldn't be believed by my parents. I wonder how he explained my sudden absence to his wife and daughter. Mum was very surprised to see me. She asked 'What are you doing back here so early?' I answered 'Mr R showed me his thing.' She believed me without question, as did my father.

As migrants whose main family ties were on the other side of the world my parents had few community connections or much influence but Mr R had chosen the wrong target that day. Dad drove straight to his house declaring 'I'll kill you if you ever come near my daughter again.' I think Mr R would have received the message loud and clear. I don't know if Dad physically manhandled him.

One fact stands out when I read the stories from the website of the Royal Commission into Institutionalised Child Abuse. It was a failure of duty of care on a massive scale. Sometimes if the parents made a complaint it was to another abuser higher up the hierarchy. Their claims would be dismissed as utter nonsense or a demand would be made for their child to be disciplined. Many of the children who suffered never told anyone because of shame and embarrassment or because there was no-one to tell. The Royal Commission is riddled with stories of children who had nowhere to turn. Others who did tell were often either not believed or were believed and still made to suffer when they spoke out. One student confided the abuse to a school friend but they decided they would not be believed and ran the risk of being expelled. Without any support these many victims internalised the abuse, taking the blame and punishing themselves over and over again through self-harming, drug addiction, depression or ultimately suicide. Many children ended up feeling like the bad ones. That is often the strange thing about human nature; the victims beat themselves up and not the perpetrators.

By my family's combined actions we took away the music teacher's power to further harm me. I was now protected from his perversity. I have no doubt that if my parents had thought I was lying my relationship with them would have been permanently damaged. My parents did not take matters further. They made the decision not to report Mr R and I can understand why. It would have been difficult in the 1960s to decide what, if any, action to take and which authorities to contact. It was a time when child abuse was not even spoken about openly. If my parents had gone to the school authorities, they probably would have just moved the teacher on. They are not here anymore to ask, but maybe they did not want to ruin Mr R's career and ability to support his (innocent) family members. I do wonder how many other children he preyed on, and if he did anything to his own children. And if his wife knew about his proclivities.

Thankfully I was believed but that did not mean the event had no effect. With this act the music teacher did take something from me. For one thing it feels like it ended my chance to learn how to read music and possibly to play a musical instrument, although it did not take away my love of music. It was quite a revelation when I viewed the *Thriller* episode as an adult. It had implanted itself on my sub-conscious because of its scenes involving the piano as well as its scary atmosphere. Considering how the teacher used the piano to seduce me it was a weird coincidence.

I cannot say I consciously felt shame or guilt but I started acting inappropriately; I remember flashing my new frilly nylon petticoat on the monkey bars in front of the boys. I kept a packet of raspberry jelly crystals behind the couch which I would secretly eat after school. I could be cruel. A classmate's father had just died and she talked about it continuously. I didn't want to hear any more about it. 'Your father's dead and I'm glad!' I angrily declared. Well, that got me into trouble; including being hauled into the science teacher's room at lunchtime to write some lines I cannot remember one hundred times. Probably 'I must not say bad things or be a nasty girl.' I do remember the sign stuck on the door of the room. 'Keep out. That means you!' That was not the end of it. My family were Catholics. That Sunday at the local church the science teacher shirt-fronted my parents. He told them, in front of me, what an evil girl I was. Their response was fabulous. They would not have a bar of this and told him not to be so stupid and ridiculous as I was just a child.

Luckily Mr R's actions did not inflict any significant long-term damage on me or my love of learning, although it did change my attitude to teachers and their authority. My family moved to an orchard in northern Victoria when I was ten. The primary teacher at my next school was young and a little crazy. When a cat wandered into class he put it in the desk with the lid down and would not let us rescue it no matter how much it meowed. He also pushed a kid into the rubbish bin and bullied another student. She had to stay at the back of the classroom, wailing while we were forced to ignore her.

In the first three years of secondary education I attended a local convent school, a compromise decided on by my father who did not want me to be sent away to a country boarding school on a scholarship to become a 'bloody nun'. One nun regularly gave me the strap for 'talking' while she was trying to control the class. It really, really stung but was useless as a disciplinary device. I just thought it was sadistic. Looking back, that poor nun, who was also the principal, had a huge class of over thirty kids to take care of. We did not get past 'agricola' and 'amo, amas, amat' in the Latin workbook because she was so overloaded.

My introduction to sexuality had been frightening and confusing yet as the years rolled on I developed the self-confidence to reject unwanted advances and enjoy the welcome ones. During the university holidays I scored a job I really loved working front of house at the local cinema. One afternoon my middle aged boss called me up to his office, insisting I sit on his knee for a sloppy kiss. I quickly grabbed the scissors on his desk and surprised him by cutting his expensive tie in half. He may have had some trouble explaining that to his wife. I

imagine he just told her he lost it somewhere. I never saw the interior of his office again after that but I did keep my job.

I occasionally thought about Mr R and wondered if I should have made a report to the authorities even though it was long after the event. One night my mother, brother and mother-in-law were travelling to a hotel on the New South Wales side of the border for dinner and a play on the one armed bandits. The confined space of a car often seems to stimulate intimate conversation. I'm not sure what led up to this but mum asked 'Remember when that school teacher flashed himself at you when you were a kid?' No new details emerged but somehow I felt comforted that she confirmed what had happened. But I did nothing to bring Mr R to account and there is regret attached to this. A Google search did not reveal any information regarding him. However, he had a common surname and the online world has its limitations, so who knows? There is a very small chance that he stopped his destructive behaviour once confronted by my dad, but I doubt it. He is now either an extremely old man or most likely deceased.

I am forever grateful that my parents instantly accepted that I was telling the truth about Mr R and quickly stepped in to protect me. I feel certain that the assurance I showed as an adult, as indicated by cutting my employer's tie, was related to my earlier experience of being believed and supported. I look back at that brave little girl and am so proud of her for leaving him standing there, walking out of that house and putting the beckoning ghost to rest.

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