

THE WHITE HORSE

EERIE? Bloody oath it was eerie. Even now the hairs on the back of my neck prickle when I think about it.

Alone in the bush back of nowhere, I'd parked my car off the road and was sitting on a log sipping at a mug of billy tea and peering into the campfire flames. My nerves were twanging like guitar strings – the radio had just told me a road traveller and his wife had been shot dead by a crazed killer for no reason at all. They'd been sitting at a campfire, just as I was.

The only sounds to disturb the stillness of the black night were the snap-crackle-pop of flames and the rustling of leaves as if the trees were whispering dark secrets to one another. A nightbird's call was a funeral dirge. Otherwise it was as silent as the grave.

Suddenly a man came out of the shadows.

I jumped to my feet, spilling my tea.

So tall he was stooped he wore a soiled Akubra and bushman's clothes. I wouldn't guess at his age.

"Saw your campfire and thought you wouldn't mind company," he said.

The thumping of my heart told me to humour the stranger. I think I stuttered that I didn't mind his joining me. I filled a mug with tea as black as the night and gave it to him.

He sat beside me on the log, taking a sip now and then. After a long silence he pointed to my car. “Uses a lot of petrol, does she?”

“Laps it up like a thirsty dog.”

He nodded. “Got to be careful in the bush. Run out of petrol and you can be in a heap of trouble.” He stared at me long and hard. “I could tell you about running out of petrol, but you’d laugh at me. I don’t like people laughing at me.”

The look was strange. I gave a quick assurance I wouldn’t laugh.

This, in his own words, is what he told me:

“I scratch around abandoned gold diggings. Sometimes I find a few grains they’ve missed. One hot summer’s day I’m well off the beaten track when the fuel gauge tells me I’m running short of petrol. I had no emergency supply, a lack of cash had seen to that. I’m in trouble – what’s left in the tank won’t get me back to civilization. I’m past the point of no return. All I can do is carry on, hoping to find somebody who’ll help me with some juice. But out there you wouldn’t see anyone in months. When the tank ran dry, nobody would miss me and my body might never be found.”

He took another sip of tea. “That’s when I saw the white horse that saved me.”

He looked to see if I was laughing.

I wasn’t about to laugh, the man had a crazy look about him.

“A white horse saved you?” I said. “You rode it back to civilization, did you?”

He grew excited. “I didn’t ride it anywhere. It stood on the bush track and seemed to want me to follow it. I did. And it led me to a pub.”

I must have looked disbelieving because he repeated it: “A pub. In that godforsaken place, miles from anywhere.”

“Gee, a pub.” I was getting edgy with this loony’s ramblings.

His story grew even less believable: “There’s nobody in the pub bar so I go around the back. The kitchen door’s open. There’s a man cooking at the stove. With him is the white horse ...”

I must have cackled because the stranger gave me a sharp look. “I tell you the horse was in the kitchen with him. I didn’t ask why – blokes go troppo in the outback and don’t appreciate questions. When I told him about my ute’s dry tank he produced a drum of petrol. Then I had to tell him I couldn’t pay, a lack of cash was why I’d been travelling without an emergency supply in the first place. No worry, he said, I could fix up at the petrol depot in town.”

The stranger took a long swig of black tea and fixed deep-set eyes on me. “I got back to town and when I had the money to pay, the man at the petrol depot told me something that knocked me for six – said there was no pub where I’d been. The one that had been there disappeared years ago when the gold ran out and the diggers moved on. I wasn’t about to tell him about the white horse in the pub kitchen – he’d think I was off my rocker.”

I nodded at that. I’d endorse any opinion this bloke was a sandwich short of a picnic.

He seemed to read my mind: “I’m telling you that white horse led me to a pub they say wasn’t there and saved my life.”

He threw the dregs of his tea into the campfire.

“Make sure you don’t run out of petrol,” he said.

With that he disappeared into the night.

Days later I was heading for an out-of-the-way barramundi spot. I rounded a bend on the winding dirt road and braked fast – a car was nose-first into a tree, belongings strewn about, two bodies lying among them. I left the engine running and ran to help.

I hadn't taken two steps before the bodies stood up. One was a pimply youth in a t-shirt with a rock band's name on the front; the other much older man wore a black sleeveless singlet that showed off his muscles and tattoos. Both were brandishing tyre levers.

I could have kicked myself. I'd been caught by the oldest trick in the book – a fake accident staged on a lonely road to rob whoever fell for it.

“Let's see what sort of bankroll you have,” the tattooed one growled.

It's hard to argue when a couple of tyre levers are being waved under your nose. I gave him my wallet. He took out the money and credit cards and threw the empty wallet aside.

Then he drove my car and me into the bush where we couldn't be seen from the road. His mate followed in their vehicle. Well hidden, they syphoned every drop of juice from my tank into theirs.

“How do I get out of here without petrol?” I howled.

Black Singlet laughed. “Your problem.”

The two of them drove off, leaving me and my now useless car in the thick bush.

I know I should have stayed with it – that's what the safety people advise. But the car was hidden and might never be found in that remote place. I had to get back to the road and hope somebody came along.

I started walking. But I'm city-bred and the bush is a mystery to me. Everywhere looked the same. In no time I was hopelessly lost.

For two days I wandered under the scorching tropical sun, growing weaker and weaker. I was ready to find a place to lie down and take a permanent rest when through the mist clouding my eyes I saw it.

A white horse.

My mind was playing tricks – I wanted so much to be saved that I was remembering the horse the crazy stranger said had rescued him. I closed my eyes and re-opened them. The

white horse was still there. I knew it existed only in my mind but somehow I forced my shaky legs to stagger towards it.

Next thing I remembered I was lying on a farmhouse verandah. A sun-browned man was giving me a thick cheese sandwich and water. Nothing had ever tasted so good.

He said his name was Jack Warner. “You’re a surprise. How’d you get here?”

I told him what had happened. Risking having him think I’d escaped from the funny farm, I said I thought a white horse had led me to his place.

He laughed. “A white horse? You sure it wasn’t pink elephant? I don’t know how you got here, mate, but if you hadn’t made it you’d be pushing up daisies by now. This farm’s the only one between here and town, twenty miles away – you were at the end of your tether, you’d never have got there.”

I spent the night at Jack Warner’s farm. By next day I felt strong enough for him to drive me back to my car with a drum of his petrol. When we came across my empty wallet lying beside the road, my car wasn’t far away. We found it hidden in the nearby bush.

After we poured Jack’s petrol into the tank; the old bus started first try. Now I had to tell him I couldn’t pay for the petrol – the road thieves had taken everything I had. But I said I’d draw funds out of the bank in the next town and mail a money order to him.

He grinned. “You’d need a carrier pigeon. We don’t have a mail delivery this far out in the bush. Anyway I don’t want to be paid for doing someone a good turn.”

I insisted and finally he said he had an account at the town’s general store. If paying was so important to me, I could do it there.

It was only when I left him that it dawned on me that what had happened was close to a carbon copy of the loony’s story. I, too, had seen a white horse when I was in a dicey situation . It could only have been a vision that I’d filed away in my memory, but it had saved me – it kept me from giving up.

And I'd been provided with petrol for which I couldn't pay until I reached town. That was the other part of a weird coincidence.

But there the coincidence ended.

When I drew money out of the bank and went to pay for the petrol, I half-expected the man at the general store to tell me there was no farm and no Jack Warner. He didn't. He took the money and said I was lucky – if I hadn't found Warner's farm after being lost for days in that remote tropical country, I'd have been crow bait.

After paying for the petrol, my next stop was the police station to report the theft. The sergeant who took my name said, "That rings a bell. Come with me."

In a back room several credit cards were on a table. My name was on them.

"We found the cards on a big tattooed bloke in a black singlet," the sergeant said.

"This tattooed bloke – was he with a pimply-faced kid in a rock band t-shirt?"

"Well, yes, he was."

"You arrested them?"

"They were in no condition to be arrested. They were dead."

"*Dead* . . ! They couldn't be."

"Believe me, they were. We were called out to a road accident– a car had slammed into a tree. When we got there the young bloke was cactus, the other one had all but turned up his toes. With just about his last breath he told us they'd swerved to avoid an animal that refused to move from the middle of the road."

"This animal," I said. "Wouldn't be a white horse, would it?"

"How do you know that?" the sergeant asked, surprised.

"Just a guess."

"Not a bad guess. It was a white horse, all right. The bloke kept raving on about it – he seemed to think it wanted them to hit the tree."

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Years have passed since then and I'm no closer to understanding. But if anyone tells me there's a white horse in the bush helping travellers, I don't argue.

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