



Kate Grenville

Kate Grenville was runner-up in 1983 for the Vogel Australia Award with *Dreamhouse* and in 1984 she won the award for *Lillian's Story*. She has published in magazines and anthologies in Europe, USA and Australia and her own collection *Bearded Ladies* has been highly praised. She has just completed a novel commissioned by the Bi-centennial Authority entitled *Joan's History of Australia* — a *Romance*.

The Test Is, If They Drown

Miss Spear in number forty-two is a witch. From the street we can see her sometimes on her verandah, spreading her hair over a towel on her shoulders to dry in the sun. We gather at a safe distance and whisper across the sunny air — Witch! The hiss fades before it reaches her. She never looks around at us.

Behind her house, up on The Rock, my gang and Mick's gang meet. From high above we can look down into her garden, where the cat stalks among great clumps of vine-smothered rose bushes, and sometimes Miss Spear herself comes out and drags ineffectually at the consuming creepers.

Miss Spear is what happens to you if the orange peel doesn't make a letter when you drop it on the ground. It nearly always makes an S. That means you'll marry Steven or Sam or Stan. Sometimes it makes a C and you take a second look at Carl and Conrad. Miss Spear's what happens to you if you don't step on all the cracks in the foot-path between the school gate and Spencer's shop. Miss Spear's what happens to you if the numbers on the bottom of the bus ticket don't add up to an even number. She's what happens when you lose a game of Old Maid.

When she leaves the house to shop, she wears a skirt that reaches her ankles, and sandals. She's never been seen without the unravelling straw hat with the feathers stuck in the band. The cat comes to the gate with her and sits with its front paws tidily together and its eyes narrowed waiting for her to come home.

Mum calls her *Poor Miss Spear*, and says there's a sad story there somewhere. Dad says that Miss Spear wasn't ever anything to write home about. Mum shakes her head and mashes the spuds with a great rattle, punishing them, her lips gone thin. She thumps the saucepan down on the

table and says that it's a good thing Miss Spear's got her house and a bit of independence at least. Dad laughs as he pulls the potatoes towards him and says he reckons she's got a bob or two stashed away in there.

At the shops she buys fish and milk and according to Mr Spencer the grocer, more eggs than you'd believe. The butcher skilfully rolls the corned beef and ties it with string, living proof that no-one needs more than two fingers on each hand. He tells Mum that Miss Spear comes in once a month for a piece of best fillet. He doesn't see hide nor hair, he says, then regular as clockwork there she is wanting a bit of best fillet. The butcher says he supposes Old Spear's harmless, and Mum agrees with a sigh as she puts the corned beef in the basket.

Of course Miss Spear isn't really just an old maid whose dad left her the house when he died, like they say. She can't really be just an old stick whose cat gets fish every day while she makes do with eggs except for a treat once a month. An old lady wearing funny clothes living in a big house with a cat must be a witch. No way she can be anything else. A witch a murderer a gobbler of children a creature from another planet. An alien.

Up on The Rock we watch her cat stalking a butterfly through the long grass, sliding on its belly, ears flattened to its skull. My gang has just beaten Mick's gang at spitting. All us girls got it further than the boys. And in spite of her ladylike pucker, Sonia got it furthest of all.

Mick shifts round restlessly, looking for a way to impress us.

'Betchas don't know what she did, the Witch,' he says. 'Betchas can't guess.'

I lean back and pick a scab on my knee. I'm not worried, I can beat him at anything except Indian wrestling and even then I can usually trick him into losing. I'm better at nearly everything than the boys. Pam and Sonia are hopeless the way they're always worried about getting dirty or being home late for tea. But they're my gang and I'm the only girl that's got one.

Mick hasn't done too well with the suspense so he hurries to the punch line.

'She murdered her mum. Got this carving knife see and chopped her in little bits.'

Stewart and Ross are impressed. Ross wipes a fleck of saliva from the corner of his mouth and says avidly:

'Geez what she done with the bis eh Mick?' Mick hasn't thought that far.

'That's, um, a secret.'

He purses his lips and pretends to be very interested in the way a bird is flying past above us.

'Aw come on Mick tell us, tell us.'

Pam and Sonia won't let him off the hook.

'Betcha don't know, come on tell us or that means you don't know.'

An impressive pause from Mick. Stewart and Ross lean forward agog.

'She buried the bits in the garden. Right down there.'

He points dramatically down into the tangles below.

'S'that all?'

Pam and Sonia are openly contemptuous and even Ross and Stewart are disappointed. Mick's eyes dart around as he tries to come up with an embellishment. This is my moment.

'I 'fraid you've got it all wrong, I say casually.'

They all look at me expectantly. Girl or no girl they know I always deliver the goods.

'It was her dad. She killed her dad.'

Mick is beginning a shrug. Mum or dad, so what?

'With cyanide. One drop in his tea every day for six months. She mixed it with the sugar so when he put sugar in his tea he got the cyanide.'

The awed silence seems to demand some more details.

'And then when he was dead . . . she stuffed him. Like Phar Lap. He's in a glass case in her bedroom. To keep the dust off.'

Stewart's mouth is hanging open and he's breathing loudly through his nose as he always does when concentrating.

'Geez what a weirdo eh.'

Mick jabs him with a sharp elbow and shouts:

'Oh yeah, sez who. You gunna believe a girl, fellas?'

Stewart snaps his mouth shut like a carp and nods. But his eyes are still glassy with the idea of such a sweet and unsuspecting death.

Ross glances at Mick and mutters to me furtively:

'What did she stuff him with? She pulls his brains out his nose like them Egyptians did? What she done with the guts?'

I've got all the answers. But Mick's tired of having his thunder stolen.

'Shaddup stoopid, she doesn't know nuffin. What ja believe her for?'

He hawks and spits the same way I've seen his father do.

'C'mon, I can't be bothered hanging round these sissy girls any more. C'mon gang, I've had it.'

We sit in silence after they leave. Sonia blows a huge bubble with her gum and watches it cross-eyed before sucking it back in. She chews it and tucks it away in the corner of her mouth.

'That for real, she knocked off her dad? Howja know?'

Leadership means having no fear of the next lie. I say immediately:

'I looked in the window. He's sitting up there in this glass case.'

Pam stops sucking the end of her plait and tosses it back over her shoulder.

'He got clothes on? Or not?'

She's watching me closely.

'Course he's got clothes on. His pyjamas.'

'What colour, Sandy?'

'Blue and white stripes.'

Lies must always be switched truths. The glass case from the skeleton at the Museum. Dad's blue and white pyjamas. Sonia blows a great flecked bubble and we all watch as it trembles, threatening to burst over her face. She deflates it masterfully and gets up.

'Time for tea.'

Leadership is never being quite sure if they believe you. 'Oooaah Sandy you've got all moss on your shorts, your Mum'll kill you.'

Her smooth pink face expresses satisfaction at this. Sometimes I hate girls.

I plan my raid carefully, and alone of course. Pam and Sonia would giggle at the wrong moment or get panicky about spiders. And although I almost believe now in the body and the glass case, I want to be alone when I make sure.

I watch from behind the oleander until Miss Spear comes out to go to the shops. She sets off without seeing me, her hair showing through the hole in the top of her hat. The cat slips through the bars of the gate and sits blinking. It yawns once and begins washing its ears.

I watch Miss Spear until she turns the corner, and wonder what she is. Women don't wear hats like that, that you can see hair through. Women don't wear sandshoes and no socks so their ankles show red and sinewy. And women don't chop the heads off dandelions with a stick as she's doing now. If Mrs Longman at school with her smooth chignon and her dainty handkerchiefs is a woman, where does that leave Miss Spear?

When she's disappeared I cross the road and pull aside a loose paling in the fence. I glance up and down the street before sliding through the hole and dragging the plank back into place behind me.

Straight away everything becomes terribly quiet. I can still hear the billycarts rattling down Bent Street, and a dog barking across the road, but all these sounds are very far away, and seem to fade as I stand listening, until I can only hear silence ringing in my ears. Miss Spear's garden has locked me into its stillness. Behind the thick bushes and the fence, the street is invisible and belongs to some other world. It may not even exist any more. A leaf gives me a fright, planing down suddenly onto my shoulder, and my gasp seems deafening. The windows of Miss Spear's house stare at me and the verandah gapes open-mouthed. The shadow of one of the tall chimneys lies over my feet and I step aside quickly. It's a few minutes before I can make myself tiptoe down the overgrown path towards the back of the house. Damp hydrangea bushes, as tall as I am, crowd over the path, holding out dammy flowers like brains. The leaves are as smooth as skin as I push through and some are heavy with the weight of snails glued to them. Sonia and Pam would be squealing by now.

In the back garden, the grass has not been cut for a long time, and blows in the breeze like wheat. I creep towards one of the windows on hands and knees, moving twigs out of the way so they won't snap noisily. I'm doing well, being very silent. I am feeling better about all this when a mild voice behind me says hello.

For a few mad seconds I think that if I stay quite still I won't be seen. My green sweater against the green grass, the famous chameleon girl.

'I thought you were a little dog at first.'

Since the earth does not seem about to open and swallow me, I stand up. Miss Spear is holding a carton of eggs and a bottle of milk. I see her teeth as she smiles, and her eyes under the shadow of her hat. I can see freckles across the bridge of her nose and a small dark mole beside her mouth. I've never been so close to her before.

'Exploring?'

I stand numbly, waiting for a miracle. No miracle occurs and she moves closer and says:

'You live down the street don't you? I've seen you around.'

She watches me in a friendly way while I wonder if I could pretend to be deaf and dumb. The cat comes and winds itself around her ankles, smoothing its tail along her shins.

'You want some milk, don't you. This is Augustus,' she explains to me. 'He's greedy but he's good at catching mice. Augustus, say hello to our visitor.'

She pushes her hat further back on her head so that I can see her whole face. It is a perfectly ordinary old face with wrinkles in all the usual places.

'I don't know your name,' she says, and smiles so that the wrinkles deepen.

'Sandy,' I hear myself say, and become hot in the face.

It is too late now to pretend to be deaf and dumb.

'Sandy, that's a boy's name,' she says. 'I've got a boy's name too.'

She looks at my hat.

'Your hat's a bit like mine,' she says. And we both collect feathers.

I pull the hat off my head and crush it between my hands. My hat is nothing like hers.

'I've got something you might like,' she says. 'I never use it, but someone should have it. Won't you come in for a moment?'

Even Mrs Longman would not be able to be more genteel.

'Perhaps you'd like a glass of milk.'

Anyone would think it's quite normal to be a mad spinster in sandshoes. I follow her into a kitchen more or less like most kitchens and watch as she pours some milk into a saucer and gives it to Augustus. She pours a glass for me and I sit down and drink it while she rummages in a drawer. I glance around between sips, feeling congested by this situation. But in this kitchen there's a stove and a lino floor and a broom in the corner. Just the usual things.

'Here we are.'

She hands me a penknife and I open all the blades and look at it. It's a very good one. It even has a tiny pair of scissors. When I've inspected it I become aware of her watching me. I hand it back to her, but she won't take it.

'No,' she says, 'it's for you. It used to be mine when I was a tomboy like you.'

I turn the knife over in my hands, feeling clumsy. My hands seem to be a few sizes too big and I feel that I'm breathing noisily. Here I am, sitting talking to Miss Spear the alien, drinking the milk of Miss Spear the poisoner, accepting a gift from the witch.

She takes the knife and attaches it to my belt.

'Look, you can clip it on here,' she says. 'Then it won't get lost.'

She sits across the table and with both hands carefully lifts her hat off her head. When she sees me watching, she wrinkles up her eyes at me.

'Sometimes I forget I've got it on,' she says.

Augustus jumps into her lap and whisks her cheeks with his tail. She brushes the tail away as if it's tickling her, sneezes, and says:

'He's very affectionate. As you can see.'

She strokes the cat and smiles through the swishing tail at me. I can hear a tap dripping in a sink. The sound is

peaceful and I find myself relaxing. I unclip the knife and while I'm having another look at it, I try to frame some impossible question. How come you're so normal? I could ask, or: What's it like being a witch?

'It's great,' I bring out at last. 'Thanks a lot Miss Spear.'

She goes on stroking Augustus and smiling. 'I can't think of anything else to say. I want to go, yet I like it here. I want to find the others and tell them all about it, and yet I don't want to say anything to anyone about it. Miss Spear puts the cat down and gets up.

'Drop in any time. Next time I'll show you the tree house.'

Out on the street, the proper standards resume their places. Miss Spear is loony. I take the knife off my belt and put it in my pocket. I keep it in my hand, but out of sight. Mick has decided he wants to hear about the brains being pulled down the nostrils, after all. But now I don't want to tell him.

Stewart glows with righteous indignation.

'We oughter tell the cops about her. She oughter be locked up I reckon. Them shoes she wears and that old hat like a . . . bunch of weeds.'

Ross nods energetically, and his eyes bulge more than usual as he says:

'She's not normal my mum says. Oughter be locked up in the loony bin.'

Mick says loudly:

'My dad says what she needs is a good fuck.'

We all stare, shocked and admiring. Sonia giggles behind her hand. Mick takes courage from this and calls down into Miss Spear's backyard: What you need is a good fuck. The hydrangea bushes shift in the breeze and I feel the knife in my pocket. Sonia beside me shrills out: Silly old witch, and Pam joins in: Witchy witchy ugly old witchy. Ross takes up the idea: Witchetty grub witchetty grub. Mick stares at me.

'What's up Sandy, you scared or summing?'

I want to push him over the cliff, ram moss into his mouth, stab him to the heart.

'She's just an old bird. Leave her alone.'

Sonia stares at me making her blue eyes very wide and surprised.

'Oh yeah? Since when? You gone potty or summing?'

Pam grabs my hat.

'They'd make a good pair, look at this dirty old thing, just like hers.'

She stares, pretending to be frightened.

'She's turning into a witch, quick Sonia, look.'

Sonia stares at me, her mouth in an artificial smile like the one Mrs Longman uses when she explains silkily how girls don't shout like that Sandra dear. Pam is staring at me too. I see them ready to tear me limb from limb. I look at the boys and see them too, waiting to pounce, waiting for me to go further and step out of line. Their eyes are like knives, like packs of snapping dogs, like slow poison, like sharp weapons raised to kill.

Miss Spear comes into her backyard and pulls at a few tendrils creeping over a rose bush. Mick nudges me:

'Go on, say something. I dare you.'

They're all watching me and waiting. Leadership means falling into line. Miss Spear is directly underneath, her hair poking through the hole in her hat, Augustus following a few yards behind as she walks among the roses. I want to stab Mick and Sonia and Pam and rip the smiles off their faces. Or is it Miss Spear I want to stamp on and destroy? Below us, she looks small, weak, hateful. I want to crush her like an ant, to be part of the pack and hunt her down as she runs alone.

'Silly old witch, silly old witch,' I yell.

My voice is carried away on the breeze. She doesn't look up. Behind me the others are chanting:

'Ugly old witch, silly old witch.'

Sonia uses some imagination.

'Red white and blue, the boys love you.'

She laughs so hard she begins to dribble. We take up the chant, laughing at Sonia's dribble and the way Miss Spear can't hear us. Mick yells:

'Come on beautiful, give us a kiss!'

I'm laughing, or something, so hard the tears are running down my face and I can hardly breathe. I hear myself screaming:

'Nasty old witch, nasty old witch, I hate you!'

The last words carry and she looks up at last. We all stare in silence across the air. I seem to be staring straight into her flecked hazel eyes. Mick nudges me.

'I dare you, tell her she needs a good fuck.'

The tears rise in my throat and run down my cheeks and across the silent air I hear myself yell, yell straight into her eyes, see her face on a level with mine and see the freckles across her nose like mine and her smile as she says I was a tomboy like you are, I hear myself yell and see her face change across the distance as I screech, You need a good fuck, fucking witch, until my voice cracks, I see her look down and turn away and walk into the house.

It's very quiet. I look around for the others but they've already turned away. Sonia picks her way down the first part of the rocks and turns back to look up at me.

'You've got all dirt on your face,' she says. 'You look real silly.'

She turns away again and climbs down out of sight. Without looking at me, Pam follows her. Mick and his gang have already gone down the other way.

The hydrangeas, the house, the sky shudder and fracture and I stand with my hands in my pockets holding Miss Spear's knife and whispering, witch, ugly fucking old witch, until at last the tears clear and I see the garden again, and watch Augustus as he darts out from under a bush. He glances up and seems to meet my gaze for an accusing second before he slips across the grass to the verandah. The house closes smoothly behind him like water.