

Hayden Williams

The Damned

The money appeared in my bank account unexpectedly. I did not know where it had come from, but withdrew the entire amount before the machine could change its mind. My wallet was fat with it, and I whistled my way down the street. The plan was to pay off all my bills and debts and then invite my sponsor out for a meal. We could drink Coca-cola till the wee small hours, and talk about childhood trauma and ingrained emotional patterns, abandonment issues and the psychological dynamics of our numerous, miserable, fucked-up co-dependencies. It would be great! It had been six months this time, so I felt I deserved a celebration . . . of sorts. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, they say.

I saw a phone box, but kept on walking. The cell-phone was in my pocket too, but I conveniently forgot. I knew all this was a bad sign but there had been a constant guilt and sense of moral inadequacy, gnawing away at me, which I was trying my best to ignore. It kept on, like a stone in my shoe; and lately there had been thoughts of my own country also, the family and friends left behind and the little village by the grey sea, so many miles from now it had seemed like another existence altogether. So there I was, haunted by this obscure condemnation and the thought of the lonely flat I would eventually have to return to at some point; roving about in the earth and walking about in it. I somehow managed to convince myself that one drink couldn't hurt.

That was Thursday morning. I met Mona on Saturday night.

She had a back room separate from the lounge and kitchen, like a second lounge or a dining room, or maybe a back porch. It had a square bare-wood table against the roughly plastered wall, with a chair either side. She lit the room with a kerosene lamp, which was hanging from the centre of the square ceiling.

"Power's been cut off," she said, reminding me again. Flashing me a smile.

I saw there was a step down into the room then, and congratulated myself on not falling prey to it, not stumbling and falling into the single glass-pane window or splitting my head open against the lintel of the back-door.

The back door was open. It opened out to reveal some firewood stacked against a punga fence, and a concrete path that went

off into the overgrown garden. It was all darkness beyond that; beyond the circle of light which slowly grew as the flame, sputtered up. There wasn't much else to take note of. It was a simple place she lived in, but a cool inviting place in the hot night, to sit and talk and forget a while. I relaxed a little.

She told me she liked to call the room her 'parlour'. I managed to focus my vision enough to see that she smiled to herself upon saying this. I realised then that this was a habit of hers. I remembered that even in the bar earlier she had smiled to herself in this same way several times—as if at some private joke. I was not concerned with her private jokes. I was antsy after the long car ride. Surely she had enough cunning to see beyond all the pretence and flattery, the smooth words by which I had won her interest? She knew, surely, that there was only one part of her invitation which had really interested me, which had drawn me into following her here.

I began to doubt then, thinking perhaps that she had gulled me; that she was only a lonely soul in need of human company—that she had been unable to bear another night alone, braving the dimensions of this empty house, this quiet room through early sleepless hours when the truth of her aloneness could no longer be avoided and must be squarely faced . . .

I felt compassion for her then. I determined not to bring up her original promise. To sit and be able to talk with someone would be enough.

"Come in," she said, grinning. "Don't be shy." She wore a black sarong and black T-shirt, a purple head-scarf. She beckoned me, the charred matchstick still in her hand.

I forgot about the step. I stumbled forward upsetting one of the chairs and stopping myself hard against the table. The table grated harshly over the floor—through my head like a bread-knife. My heart quickened with the surprise of it and my stomach tightened. Red in the face and awkward, I straightened myself up quickly; felt dizzy and sat down before I made things worse.

"Fool," she laughed. She raised one dark eyebrow quite impressively and asked: "Are you sure you really *want* another beer?"

"Look," I said irritably, "I told you—I've got money, loads of it. I can go to the liquor store if you haven't actually got any. I told you that. We could have stopped on the way and . . ."

She stepped closer and placed a finger on my lips to silence me, in a way that she probably thought was seductive. It only made me angrier still, but then she said:

“Shh, baby. I promised you a beer and that’s what you’ll have.” She smiled. “I’ve got heaps, in the cupboard – like I told you.” And with that she sauntered off and left me to that room and the silence. I listened to the hush of it, almost like a hissing if I listened hard enough, and the sound of the moths purring sporadically around the lantern, and tapping against the pane. A weta croaked, somewhere in the wood pile; or perhaps it was a goat, out in one of the paddocks. I heard her opening and closing cupboards, cursing as she rummaged in a drawer. Then her feet returning over the kitchen linoleum, which I saw through the threshold was oily-looking and sticky, like flypaper. Then she was back, offering a kindly look and a warm stubbie which she had opened ready. I was grateful.

She sat, on the opposite side of the table, and pulled her chair up closer. She put her own beer down in front of her and placed the bottle-opener carefully beside it. The sounds of her movements were amplified strangely—I heard even the fabric of her T-shirt, each fibre, I imagined. It was a trick of the night, of the unusual quiet and the uncanny room itself. I was clairaudient, listening to the stars crackle outside and the moon’s face itching, and the soundless bubbles rising endlessly in my beer.

“What?” she said, smiling. She tilted her head and tossed her hair, thick and long and black, which gleamed in the light of the lamp; I watched the shine slide over it as she moved. Her dark skin was made darker by the gentle glow. The whites of her eyes appeared grey, but her black eyes themselves reflected the solitary flame and all its heat and colour. For the light was not harsh and stark, but soft and buttery, and the room was like a square of amber, congealing around us, like an embrace. “*What?!*” she said again.

I grinned wider, and shook my head. I had been staring at her, imagining, maybe a little mesmerised. “Nothing,” I said, still grinning.

She rolled her eyes and drank. Then she settled her chin in her hands; rested her elbows on the table and gazed across at me intently. It was her turn now. We were like lovers already.

“What goes on in that head of yours, Mister Welshman?” she asked, as if to herself. But I only kept smiling, and shook my head again, and drank deeply from the amber bottle.

The truth of it was, I felt some weird breed of joy rising up inside me now. It was only just short of excitement. It was the intimacy I was suddenly sharing with her, I think, in spite of our being strangers. Or it was something in the closeness of the night, or the light from the lamp, or the room itself perhaps, vibrating with

stillness, pregnant with a seductive kind of mystery. There was an expectation that something good might occur.

Or maybe it was just that everything was arranged and done at last. We had arrived after the drought of the car journey, negotiated the twisting, treacherous path that led up to the house from the carport below, managed our way through the darkness of the house, giggling and bumping into things and touching each other freely with the excuse of keeping our balance. And now we were here; the beer was delivered as she had promised, and there was more in the cupboard, or so she said. There was light, and a pretty woman to talk with, and a table and chairs to sit at. We could relax. I could be melted into a kind of peace: talking and drinking and having plenty to smoke, and at the same time feeling the stillness of this peculiar little room wash about me, like sepia, making the hard blacks and the harsh whites of life go gentle.

“Well,” I said, forgetting her name. “Tell me all about yourself.”

She told me all about herself. She was thirty-five; she had two sisters—one in Marsterton that she rarely saw, and one in Napier, which was where her family were all originally from—and one brother in Auckland. She had two sons, the eldest staying with his uncle in Auckland and working as a panel-beater and car-painter, and the younger son, her ‘baby’, living with his aunt in Napier. She said that the eldest was twenty-four and the youngest twenty-one.

“Didn’t you say you had a daughter, too?” I asked, interrupting.

“Oh,” she said, “did I?” She paused to take another sip of her beer and then said: “Well yes of course I have a little daughter too, but she’s from my second marriage—I was getting to that.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“That’s okay,” she said, smiling again; and then she told me all about her little daughter who lived down the road at an auntie’s farm because it was closer for her to go to school. The daughter’s name was Pania, she said, after the heroine of some legend, which she then began to explain to me at length.

I enjoyed watching her as she told it, shyly lowering her eyes to the table-top and gesturing with her hands; laughing at some amusing thing along the way, or thinking, with her brow furrowed, trying to remember how the next bit went or if she’d got the details right. The thick shadows cast by the lantern made the lines on her face more obvious. There were laughter lines each side of her mouth and creases at the bridge of her nose. I could see how the crow’s-feet at the corners of her eyes fanned out. But she was still an attractive

woman, none-the-less, and perhaps the years had made her more appealing. She looked the type of woman who might have been spidery in the past. Having kids had put some meat on her curves, enhancing her figure all the more. Certainly she looked great in that sarong . . .

I watched her hair shake and spill as she talked on. Her eyes were both sad and alluring, but her lashes cast a strange criss-cross of shadows onto her face; they were long and thick with mascara and they put me in mind of the spines on a Venus flytrap. It troubled me only for a moment and I closed my eyes and listened instead; to the music of her voice, and the night's coiled waiting, and the breathing of the house. I slid into the warm silence that was still there behind it all, and heard her laugh.

I opened my eyes suddenly, and started from my chair. Had I fallen asleep? Her chair was empty, as though she had vanished. My beer was empty too, and hers was gone from the table. There was only I and the moths, and the silence, in that strange room, that strange house in the middle of I didn't know where. There might have been only that island of amber light for all I knew, adrift in the blackness of space or lost in the depths, sinking further and further beyond reach, to impossible fathoms.

There was no sound of her.

I had the panicked feeling of a man overboard; there were sharks in the shadows now. What if she had not been real all along? What then? A mad man drunk and talking to phantoms, in the back room of a house he had stumbled upon or been lured to by a ghost.

Then there was a loud resounding bang. My nerves quivered and my stomach leapt inside me. It felt as though all the blood drained from my head in an instant, falling into my bowels like a hanged man quickly falling through a trap door.

She appeared in the weak wash of light that spilled into the kitchen over the step. I froze for a moment and my heart paused, until I knew for sure. She was laughing then, bending over with her hands on her knees.

"Sorry, bro," she laughed, "I couldn't resist." She wiped a tear from her eye and her laughter slowly dissipated. Then she became concerned. "Aww," she said in her mother's voice: "look, babe—you're shaking! I'm sorry, dude—I didn't mean to scare you *that* bad." She sat on my knee and took one of my hands in hers, which I then saw was indeed trembling, very pale and beaded with cold sweat. I tried to regain my wits but it was as she had said—I had been badly scared and was in some kind of shock or something.

When she kissed me I began to reel. Her lips were gentle but persistent. I needed her to stop.

It was as if she read my mind. She drew away, letting her hand, her fingertips, linger against my jaw. I focused on her face just as her eyes opened fully. I looked directly into them; saw the brown and amber wisps, as though they moved slightly, like a kind of waving. The fawn flecks were like flakes in a snow globe. I was drawn into the exquisite blackness of those pupils, where the flame still played, reflected along with my own ghostly face looking back; it seemed I was imprisoned there, in a well of Indian ink. The flame was consuming me slowly.

I concentrated; squinted and focused my eyes on the face I saw reflected there: *My* face. I suppose I must have stared for some time, but she only smiled and gazed back calmly. I was not concerned with her then, or anyone else, but concerned only with my own reflection. My *self*, in this peculiar prison. I saw that my lips seemed to be moving, and my face seemed to contort. I tried to see what the lips were saying but couldn't make it out. I thought I might have heard the voice, but it was stifled and far away. I saw the great effort to speak, the writhing of the features and the opening and closing of the mouth like a fish. But it was more of a choking, or dry retching, the words being brought up stillborn with only the faintest groan or gargle or hissing. The words were like the bubbles in the beer, ending with only a poignant silence.

She broke away from me. She took a cigarette from her packet on the table and stood in the back doorway, blowing the smoke out into the night. Her back was against me; it was hard to discern the outline of her body. The weta croaked again as the moon cleared from behind a cloud. When she blew out the smoke I saw rainbows in it.

She smoked her cigarette in silence. I saw her look at her watch. The silence was lapping in around us again and I knew it would seduce me if I didn't make an effort. She had brought more beers in from the kitchen: I opened a fresh one and asked:

"Do you lift weights?"

She answered sort of hostile:

"Do I *look* like I lift weights?"

I said nothing more but swigged at my beer and wondered about the weights-bench I had noticed at the back of the carport. It was hard to say but it looked like the bar was loaded with at least fifty or sixty kilograms at both ends. There had been a punch bag too, hanging from one of the beams.

"They're my husband's," she said, blowing out another thread of silvery smoke, still with her back to me.

"Oh," I said stupidly.

"Yeah—that's right." She was talking in a hard way now, as though I had offended her.

"I thought you were single," I said.

She blew out smoke in a kind of laugh then.

"Might as fucken well be," she said. She flicked the butt of her cigarette out into the dark and when she turned into the room I saw that she was smiling again. "Fuck that prick anyway. I don't want to talk about him. Don't worry," she assured me. "He won't come here. Not tonight. Or the next night, or the next . . ." She sat down and popped open another beer, and raised her stubbie for a cheers. "To company," she said.

"To *good* company," I corrected, but was surprised when she pulled her bottle back and shook her head.

"No," she said squarely. "Just to company."

I shrugged and our bottles clinked together. The sound was familiar and comforting, and I was amused by the way it rang briefly from the walls of that cell-sized room and was just as quickly gone. Still, I could not help feeling a little offended.

"Am I not good company then?" I asked.

The hardness came back into her voice:

"You're just a fuck-en *man*, Wales," she mocked. But I was relieved when she laughed aloud after saying it; not in a mocking way but as though she were genuinely only teasing. I laughed with her. I finished off another bottle and opened another—hinted that we were running out. She brought the whole box in this time.

"Happy *now*?" she asked.

"You're an angel," I told her, patting her backside and letting my hand remain there. She giggled, then smiled one of her private-joke smiles. I squirmed at that, sensing she had found me out. I reached for my beer again but she stopped me—took my face in her hands and moved closer.

"You're not really like other men though, are you Mister Wales?"

She sighed. Her sigh filled up the silence.

"Look at those beautiful eyes," she purred, "those lashes . . . your beautiful wavy hair." She stroked my hair, my face; she stepped in closer still. "You're gentle," she said.

She began to rock her hips as I held them, and her breasts bobbed parallel with my face. I looked up at her, trying to appear cool but no longer able to escape her eyes. She raised one eyebrow;

one corner of her mouth went up. The next thing I knew I was out of my chair and kissing her hard on the mouth, pressing her against the table's edge. I felt our teeth clash. She leaned back and yanked at my belt. She leaned back, and beckoned me. Her arms coiled about me and drew me down. I sank into her, and her teeth bore with pleasure, as the silence was broken all around us, as the table yelped at the floor beneath us and thudded at the wall.

When it was over I collapsed on top of her. She cradled me, and I felt that peace at last. I forgot everything; until she was patting me on the shoulder, until our intimate sounds became loud in the quiet again. I got up and stumbled about, trying to hoist up my jeans. She giggled.

"Wooh!" she exclaimed, getting up off the table and straightening her headscarf. She re-wrapped her sarong and drew another cigarette from her packet, which was now squashed. The cigarette was curved and crinkled. She straightened it out and jabbed it into her mouth, flicked her lighter and stood in the doorway again, gazing up at the moon. I returned to my chair; there was beer spilt on it but I was past caring. I opened another and guzzled it down.

"Wow," she said. "Did that just happen?"

I watched a moth creep over the rim of the lantern's glass. There was a fizzing sound and it fell to the bottom with a plop.

It was then that I heard the judgement upon me. An aggressive, hateful sound that grated on the air. Motorbikes, distant at first on the road then powerfully all too present, revving on the driveway below, slashing the night with their headlights. The loudness of their arrival was so incredible it seemed the stillness could never recover. Every flick of the riders' wrists made the engines pop like shotguns firing. Then the engines stopped. I heard the taps and clicks of the metal cooling, the jingling of keys, the crunch of heavy boots on gravel and the voices of men jeering and calling to one another.

It was her face that terrified me most of all. The light from the lantern shone fully upon her and our eyes locked together in mutual alarm.

"My God," she hissed. "I don't believe it. It's *him*!"

I was paralysed, frozen in my chair. There was no blood at all left in me now it seemed, and time itself had come to a grinding halt.

"Quickly!" she whispered frantically, shaking me and pulling at my clothes, pulling me up out of the chair and pushing me through the back door. "You've got to get out of here; go, man—just run for it. Hide—whatever. Just don't let them catch you. He'll kill you. I'm serious, man—he'll fucken kill us both!"

I ran blindly, stumbling through the overgrown garden and colliding with the pole of a washing line. As I picked myself up I heard the sounds of their boots already clumping on the suspended floor of the house. Their voices were loud and close; I ran on, down into a dark-clogged gulley, through trees and bushes, the branches cutting and preventing me, cobwebs clinging to my face. I heard him shouting, interrogating her. I heard her cries and protests, her first scream making me almost faint. There was a thunk, the sound of the table scraping and the sound of all our empties clinking and rolling about. There was another scream, and then she pleaded and sobbed; but the sounds of his beating her did not seem to end. Until at last I heard him roar:

“In *my fuck-en house! My fuck-en beers!* In front of my fuck-en *bros!* You dirty *fuck-en haw!* You’re the biggest slut I ever *fuck-en met!*” There was only her wailing then. Her wailing filled up everything. Then I heard him say to the others: “Take her—fucken *block* the bitch.”

On the other side of the gulley I stopped, my conscience begging me to return, to save her. But I became frozen again. On my own I was helpless against them, and surely they *would* kill me. I would only be delivering myself into their hands, a lamb going wilfully to the slaughter. How admirable; how stupid. They could bury me here in this gully, and no-one would ever know.

I looked across at that lit room: I could see part of the glass pane and the whole of the back-doorway. He was standing in it, the silhouette of a muscular giant, hands on hips, patiently waiting for the sound of my breathing to give me away. The moon appeared, showing me the features of the house itself. There were candles, or a fire was lit – I could not tell which – in one of the other rooms, and the indistinct shapes of the other men began to writhe, projected onto the drawn curtains by the flickering flames. Only a low, sustained keening came from her now, punctuated by sudden exclamations of pain. I could barely hear, but it was impossible, impossible to ignore. The giant stood stock still throughout it all.

I don’t know how long I watched him. There was an almost comforting suspicion that the world was in fact too hellish to be real. But the moon disappeared again, and the chirruping of the crickets cautiously resumed; the earth span on, and smelt rotten and humid beneath me, and every accusing thought was a burning coal. Finally he cried out:

“Yeah—you’d better run; but I’ll find you, cunt—don’t think I won’t! I know you’re out there—I’ll fucken find you sooner or

later . . . I'm going to cut your fucken *raho* off when I catch up with you, cunt! I'll torture the bitch 'till she tells me who you are!"

I climbed out of the gulley as quietly as I could; through more bush and eventually out into open paddocks. I spewed uncontrollably in one of them, as soon as I felt myself removed from immediate danger. There were horses grazing in another paddock, the sound of their movements making me hide—terror struck again—until I could discern what they were. There was a farmhouse I didn't stop at, and finally a road which led me to the top of a rise. From there I saw the lights from the town, far off to my left.

I walked for hours, roving about in the darkness and wandering about in it, fleeing the ferocious shadows. A numbing, nauseating horror soaked me, as tangible as a heavy stone in the pit of my stomach. By the time I reached my flat there was a thin, watery light slowly surfacing. It took me over five minutes to get the key in the door, my hands trembled so badly; cold sweat saturated my clothes and I began to hear the whispering voices pester me. I knew what would come, now that the alcohol was leaving me. In my room, nothing moved but the clock's infernal ticking; the unmade bed waited for me like a crocodile. I traded one hell for another, and lay down and closed my eyes to sleep.

Several times I awoke screaming. The nightmares had been cluttered with hideous fish-like creatures; blind and spine-toothed, sloughing skin and gnawing incessantly in those depths. I frantically tried to wipe their cold ooze from my skin, and gasped in the fetid air of my room. Demons jeered and called, and charged at me from the corners. Closing my eyes was no defence, nor putting my hands over my ears. Oddly, I heard again the sound of the weta; and the next time I awoke my bed was infested with them. They cackled and clicked, and crackled as flames began to burn them up. The flames spread, and the weta leapt about in their agony. Running to the sink, I returned with the kettle filled with water, and threw the water all about in desperation. But then there was only the bed, and the same grey sheets unscorched.

I hadn't thought it possible, but this time was more terrifying than the last. I wondered if my heart could stand it, or if my sanity would ever recover. There was no alternative but to endure it, no way to escape . . . Unless . . .

I searched my wallet for whatever money was left, but found that all the money had vanished. It was then that my mobile rang. I very nearly passed out from the sheer sudden sound of it. But I found it on the floor, and fumbled until I managed to silence its brain-searing noise.

It was Moana. Had I really been so stupid as to give her my number? I couldn't remember.

"My God," I croaked. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

She snorted. Of course they had; why did I ask such foolish questions? Because I was a fool, obviously. A perfect fool.

"I'm okay," she said. "He's gone now. He won't be coming back."

There was a silence. Then I asked awkwardly:

"Did you . . . tell him anything? About me?"

She snorted again. It sounded as if she had been crying. Of course she had been crying!

"Don't worry about it," she told me.

Then there was another long silence. I waited, with the phone pressed to my ear. I heard the rustle of static, then suddenly her voice again, making me jump.

"I know it looks bad," she said. "I know *I* look bad, like the kind of fucked-up person you'd never want to be with . . ."

. . .

"But I'm not like all this *take*. This isn't the life I wanted. He was good once, so I stayed, even when he went badly. And one day it was too late . . ."

. . .

"It wasn't the life I wanted but it was my life, and I had a kid, and I couldn't get out, you know? . . ."

I heard her sniff, then blow her nose.

"I'm sorry," I said. And I was. I *was* truly sorry for her.

"I don't expect you'll ever want to see me again . . . But I could really use a friend right now. I was hoping you'd come over . . . You could help me pack . . . I'm leaving, me and baby's gonna start a whole new life without him. I could pick you up. I promise you he won't be here—I wouldn't ask you otherwise . . ."

. . .

"Please, Wales?"

I did not reply. I heard her squeak. It was the sound of the most vulnerable, emotionally fragile creature ever, trying to hold back an ocean of grief and disappointment. Would she disintegrate—now, this instant—if I told her no? But how could I say yes? It would be madness to go there again. Even to see her again. Her life was filled with trouble, and it was not my responsibility. If I could only find the courage and strength of will to abandon her to her private despair.

I knew there would be new temptations to lure me into forgetting her quickly. Other possible lovers to come, and other hells

to go on to discover with them. They would be filled with torments also; but at first, at least, they would be effective distractions from torment itself.

“I’ve got some beers left,” she said. “We could have a drink,” she suggested, “and there’s whiskey too—do you like whiskey, Mister Wales? Or is that just Scotsmen?”

I tried to imagine the three of us: me and her, and her little daughter in the back seat, surrounded by boxes and carrier bags full of clothes. There would be the road, and some bright new destination full of promises and the expectation of good things to come.

Perhaps I could be her salvation.

Hayden Williams has published fiction in *Takahe*, the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly*, and more recently the *Southern Ocean Review*. He has also written non-fiction for various publications.