



G.M.HAGUE
A PARANORMAL TALE

Sample

THE GIRL
IN THE BACK SEAT

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by

G.M.Hague

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These HORROR STORY Volumes are all standalone books with complete horror stories for the reader — real horror. Some releases will be long, but most will be shorter stories written in the traditional style of horror stories of the 20th century with ghosts, ghouls, evil spirits and people returning from the grave. Having said that, no setting or subject will be out-of-bounds. You might be taken way back in time or sent well into the future, perhaps under water or high in outer space. But more likely you'll find yourself in a dark room with all the doors and windows locked... and something standing in the shadows, waiting for you to turn your back.

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Author's Introduction: The Girl in the Back Seat.

A long time ago when I first started writing horror I came across a library book called “350 Famous Ghost Photographs” (or something like that). It was filled with—not surprisingly—pictures of ghosts, fairies, strange events involving sticky stuff called ectoplasm, the odd close encounter with a UFO and a couple of supposedly genuine circus freaks that justified the possibility of werewolves.

I say “supposedly” with a level of cynicism with which I figure most people would view the book, but the editors did point out something very interesting in their foreword. Every single picture was claimed to be *bona fide as far as the photographers who took them were concerned*. In other words, yes it was possible they were victims of a hoax, but no one contributing to the book had deliberately used trick photography or tried to fool anybody.

Which means that it only needed just *one* of those photographs to be genuine and suddenly our world is a different, spooky place—and at odds of 350 to 1 in *favour* of there being an authentic picture on those pages, guess who might end up with ectoplasm on their face?

One photo in particular was very thought-provoking (and therefore damned scary) and I was always going to write about it one day. I won't describe it here and spoil anything, although you can probably guess something from the story title. What was especially striking about the picture wasn't so much its content or what it showed—of which there was no doubt, by the way—but rather the completely random, unexceptional circumstances in which it was taken, very similar to the way I've portrayed things in this story.

That's the trouble with ghosts. Sure, you can sleep a night in the Tower of London and have any number of unhappy, headless spirits rattle chains under your nose. It goes with the territory. No, it's the ghosts you *don't* expect that you should worry about. The ones you don't see coming.

Like the ghost standing silently in the corner of your room right now.

The Girl in the Back Seat

ONE

Darren Madden turned the Ford into the highway and picked up speed. It was too late now to worry if they'd packed everything—if the cat was going to be fed, the mail would be picked up or he'd forwarded the phone. He wasn't turning back. Of course, Jean had found a bathroom window slightly cracked open justifying her paranoia and making him swallow his impatience as he sat waiting, the sun warming the car to the point of becoming uncomfortable.

Jean switched on the CD player and swore when Metallica thundered out. She hastily found the volume control and scowled at her husband's grin.

'You're frowning,' he said. 'Our holiday's about three minutes old and you're already frowning.'

'You know why,' she said. 'God, how can you listen to that stuff?'

'How can you listen to your shit?' he asked amiably, referring to her collection of what he considered mindless, commercial pop music.

'You won't be able to deafen everybody, when we have kids in the back.'

'*When* we have kids in the back I'll worry about it.'

Jean opened her mouth to say something more, but changed her mind. It could be a touchy subject with Darren because, body-clock be damned, she was only twenty eight and wanted to keep her trim figure a while longer. Her two older sisters had collapsed into motherly frumps after they had their first kids. It was a fate Jean preferred to avoid as long as she could, especially since Darren was *improving* with age. He was going to be a hard act to keep up with.

A hard man to keep, she thought, not for the first time. It had been a warning from her mother. *But mothers could be wrong, right?*

'Right,' Jean said, shaking her head to clear the sour thoughts as she reached to program the satellite navigator. 'How long do you reckon to get there?'

'Three hours, if the freeway's clear. The highway along the coast should be okay, too.'

‘Let’s see if you’re right, genius.’ Jean prodded at the navigator’s buttons. While she waited for a signal link she asked him, ‘Cory and Leanne will definitely beat us there?’

‘No excuses, if they don’t. They’ve been on the road since yesterday. They’ll want to grab the best room in the hotel suite.’

‘I wish *we* could have left this morning.’

He shrugged and told her again, ‘Honey, it was an important meeting. We’ll get there in time to have dinner with the guys, don’t worry.’

Cory and Leanne had been their close friends for a long time. They were also young and recently married, childless and successful professionals. Every few years the four of them got together for a holiday. In the past they had been overseas, but this year was simpler, a road trip along the northern beaches in a rented BMW Roadster with the Madden’s station wagon as the support vehicle loaded with the boy’s surfboards and everyone’s luggage. While Darren and Cory surfed, the girls intended to make full use of the luxury resorts they were staying in. The week ahead was fully booked.

Late in the afternoon Darren pulled into a service station to fill up the car and grab some coffee. As he paid at the cashier’s desk the girl jerked her head at the surfboard on the car’s roof.

‘Going up north?’ she asked.

‘For a week’s break,’ he said, keying in his PIN number.

‘Then you won’t get much further,’ she said.

‘Oh? Why?’

‘A semi’s rolled over up ahead blocking all the lanes. The highway’s going to be closed for hours.’ She was enjoying delivering the unwelcome news, a highlight of her tedious day.

‘Really? Damn!’ Thinking, Darren tapped his fingers on the counter.

‘There’s a way around it, if you’ve got a map. I can show you,’ she told him.

‘I’ve got a sat-nav,’ he said.

She pulled a face. ‘Those things don’t know shit away from the freeways.’

Darren thought it was more likely she didn't have a clue how they worked, but he was grateful for her help and more than happy to pay the ten bucks for a fold-out map. He even tipped her another five.

'First time for everything,' she told him, laughing.

Darren gave her a smile and winked. She was pretty and he enjoyed the brief, intimate contact as she'd leaned close and explained directions.

Back at the car, he tossed the map on Jean's lap before handing her a coffee.

'We're taking a detour.'

She was annoyed he'd been so long. A man parked behind waiting for the petrol pump had been giving her murderous looks. 'A detour? Where, to her house? You were getting mighty friendly.'

He ignored that. 'There's been a big accident on the highway and we'll get caught up for hours. She was telling me how to dodge around it.'

'Will it take much longer?'

'Not as long as sitting in a traffic jam half the night or being turned back by the police anyway.'

'Are you sure?'

'The turn-off is just ahead. If we don't take it now we're stuck on this freeway. I don't care either way, it's your call...'

'No, okay—whatever. Let's take the scenic route.' Jean was still annoyed. Darren had been talking too long to an attractive young girl. But she knew it was the kind of silly thing that got under her skin too easily. With an effort she added in a more friendly tone, touching his leg, 'Hey, we're on holiday. It's a *good* thing to get off a freeway for a change.'

Jean wasn't so sure about that when the winding road closed in around them with the sunset. The sky had clouded over earlier and the night was utterly black. With every turn they seemed to be moving deeper into the middle of nowhere. Other cars were few and far between and the small towns they passed looked deserted.

'It's the freeway,' Darren told her. 'These used to be the main roads. Now nobody comes through.'

'It doesn't look like your girlfriend back there told too many other people about this way.' Jean stared unhappily at the gloomy woodland rushing past.

'I'm sure she has,' Darren murmured, glancing at the empty rearview mirror.

Five minutes later Jean groaned when the car's motor cut out and they were abruptly coasting along in an eerie silence.

'I knew it,' she said.

Darren swore loudly and said, 'You knew *what?*'

She shrugged, just upset.

The road was narrow, but the headlights were still working. Without the engine running the power steering was gone and he had to wrench at the wheel to ease the car onto the verge. He let them run as far as their momentum allowed until they gently crunched to a halt on the gravel.

'Shit,' he breathed and stared at the dead gauges.

'What's wrong?' Jean asked anxiously.

He bit back another retort. *How the hell should I know?* 'I haven't got a clue, but I suppose I'd better have a look.'

Darren turned the headlights off mindful of draining the battery too much. After popping the bonnet he got out, opened the rear door and rummaged through a bag on the back seat to find a small torch.

'You stay here,' he said.

'Don't worry, I'm not getting out,' Jean said fervently, eyeing the dark night beyond her window.

He went to look under the hood. The warmth and oily odour of the motor washed around him as he played the torch beam over everything. The car was only three years old and the gleaming pipes and cables resembled nothing like the old motors his father had tinkered with when Darren was a child. He might as well have been looking at the innards of some alien spacecraft, but he bent close and examined it all hoping to find something wrong.

Darren felt Jean's hand on his back and she pressed in beside him. His flare of irritation returned. *She couldn't stop herself. If he didn't have a clue about what to look for, Jean sure as hell wouldn't know.*

It wouldn't help to start a quarrel, so he contented himself with saying tightly, 'I thought you weren't going to get out?'

‘What?’ her muffled answer came from inside the car.

Startled, Darren jerked upright and bashed his head on bonnet. Dazed, he spun around and swept the torch in an arc. It was no match for the inky blackness of the night and hardly had an impact. He saw nothing. There was no noise, no sound of anyone running away. The surrounding bush was oddly silent.

Darren couldn’t decide whether he was scared or just confused. It didn’t make sense. Surely someone had been *right next to him*? That familiar touch in the small of his back—it had been so strong. So real.

‘Darren, are you *okay*?’

It was the second time Jean had asked and she sounded worried. ‘Yeah—yeah, I’m all right. I hit my head, that’s all.’

‘You don’t sound all right.’ The car shifted and he knew Jean was getting out.

‘No, stay where you are,’ he said quickly.

‘What? Why?’

‘I—I want you in the car. I need you there.’

There was a puzzled silence. ‘All right,’ she said in a small voice. ‘Are you sure everything’s okay?’

Darren held his torch high and shone it in a slow semi-circle. It still didn’t make an impression further than a few metres, but it satisfied Darren no one was close.

‘That was weird,’ he breathed. ‘Really fucking weird.’ His skin was crawling.

‘What are looking for?’ Jean called.

‘Nothing,’ he answered. ‘Just a thought, that’s all. Climb over to the driver’s side will you? I want you to try and start the car while I watch what happens. Maybe I’ll see something.’

Jean clambered awkwardly across the console to change seats. Normally that would have annoyed him, although when their romance was blossoming it would have made him laugh. Tonight he was just thankful she stayed inside the car.

Jean told him between grunts, as she contorted her body in the small space to get her legs under the steering wheel, ‘We can’t call roadside assistance either. There’s no cell phone service.’

‘Great,’ he said quietly. He turned reluctantly back towards the engine, his spine tingling and feeling exposed.

‘Try the car, honey. See if it’ll go.’

He bent close to the motor and watched. The engine cranked over briefly and burst into life so unexpectedly that Darren jerked back and nearly hit his head again. He heard Jean cheer.

Jean flicked on the headlights. They were on high beam and Darren whirled around to search ahead, the glow reaching far into the distance. The road and the verge were empty. His courage grew with the comforting glare and he did a circuit of the car, then ventured back down the road a little.

A small, white cross appeared out of the dark. It was nailed to a dead tree that had crooked limbs reaching across the sky. “Rachael” was written in black letters on the cross.

‘Okay, now I’m really spooked,’ Darren muttered, trying to convince himself he was only joking.

He hurried back to the Ford and played the torch beam over the motor again, but nothing told him what went wrong or why it had fixed itself. He slammed the bonnet, closed the rear passenger door and got in beside Jean. He breathed a sigh of relief as he pushed the central locking.

‘You may as well drive. Let’s get going,’ he said.

‘What did you do?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Oh... that’s not good, is it?’

‘Maybe not, but it’s all okay now so let’s make the most of it.’

Jean pulled out onto the road. ‘You sounded funny, when you bashed your head. I was really scared for a minute thinking you had seriously hurt yourself or something. Imagine me dealing with that out here on my own.’

Darren’s imagination was causing him enough trouble. He decided not to tell Jean what happened or about the white cross. He wasn’t sure himself. Perhaps it had been a muscular twinge in his back that felt like someone’s touch? And the heat rising from the engine, released by lifting the bonnet, was almost palpable enough to feel like a solid presence. Safe in the car again with everything back to normal, his fear seemed an over-reaction.

‘I burnt myself, nothing bad,’ he told her.

‘What do we do now?’

‘Cross our fingers and pray the car keeps going.’

Jean shivered and turned the heater on. That was something else that always bugged Darren—she didn’t ask if *he* was cold. He didn’t say anything, it *had* gotten chilly.

They were both relieved when, not long afterwards, they found themselves at the intersection of a highway with a stream of cars flowing past and the lights of a large town in the distance. It was like they had traveled from the depths of wild country to the centre of civilization within minutes.

Jean pulled up at a large service station. There was no proper mechanic on duty, but someone behind the counter offered to have a look at the Madden’s car. He did little more than Darren had at the side of the road, finally shaking his head at the smoothly running engine.

‘They’re all computer chips and software these days,’ he said ruefully. ‘You could hook it up to a machine and maybe find what’s wrong, but it’s going okay now...’ he finished with a shrug.

‘Will it happen again?’ Jean asked.

He answered her with another wry shrug. Darren thanked him and waited until he and Jean were alone. ‘What do you want to do?’ he asked her.

‘What choices do we have?’

‘We could stay the night somewhere here and get a mechanic to look at the car first thing in the morning. We’ll probably get exactly the same story, though. The damned thing’s running like clockwork now.’

‘Or what?’

‘Or we can keep going. We’re only an hour away from the guys and the highway’s good. Plenty of open roadhouses and towns, and we can be there by ten easy. I’d be happier tackling this shit together with Cory and Leanne tomorrow, if we can get there tonight. And the car *did* start again almost straight away,’ he added.

‘You’re sure the road is busy?’

‘I’m sure. Nothing like the backwoods we just drove through. I guess I don’t want to waste the first night of our holiday. We might not even *find* a room.’

Jean nodded slowly. ‘If we’re only an hour away and the worst happens, we could ask Cory to come get us.’

They looked at each other.

‘Let’s live dangerously,’ Darren said.

‘You call Cory and I’ll grab some more coffee.’

It was a tense drive despite their bravado, expecting the car to break down at any time. Getting close to the motel, Darren told Jean to call Cory again.

‘Ask them exactly where they are. Which room.’

Jean got instructions and guided Darren to a brightly lit row of holiday units next to a caravan park. There was a space directly in front of the entrance and as Darren wearily killed the motor, the motel door opened and Cory burst out. A camera flashed brightly and Darren heard Cory laughing.

‘The intrepid explorers finally arrive!’

Cory was a manic photographer whenever they were on holidays taking pictures of everything. He drove them crazy with it.

They greeted each other with enthusiastic hugs and kisses. As always, Cory hadn’t changed. He still had blonde curly hair to his shoulders and a broad suntanned face as if he’d just stepped off a beach. Leanne was a petite woman with a girlish, flat-chested figure and appealing pixie face.

They helped the Maddens’ unload a suitcase each. Inside the family unit were two large bedrooms and a living area. Cory had filled the fridge with beers and wine, but first they opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate.

‘So the car’s going to be all right?’ Cory asked as they all sat down.

‘Who knows?’ Darren said. ‘We can get it looked at tomorrow, but there’s not much we can do.’

‘Were you scared?’ Leanne asked Jean.

‘It was a bit freaky,’ Jean admitted. ‘I mean, it was black as pitch and there wasn’t a soul around. No farms or passing cars. We might as well have been on the moon.’

‘I would have been frightened to death.’ Leanne shuddered.

‘It wasn’t that bad,’ Jean laughed, but it sounded brittle.

‘It was pretty spooky, if you ask me,’ Darren said, too heart-felt.

‘Why? Did you see something?’ Jean asked, frowning. ‘Is that why you sounded funny and told me to stay in the car? Why didn’t you tell me?’

Darren held up his hands. 'No, I didn't *see* anything. I'm only agreeing it was dark and in the middle of nowhere.' It was easy to say, because it was true. He had only *felt* something and he didn't want to share that with anyone yet.

They all looked at him and Darren stared innocently back. Jean glanced slyly at the others and circled the side of her head with a finger suggesting Darren was going mad.

'He bashed his head on the bonnet,' she explained in a whisper. 'Knocked a few brain cells loose, I think.'

They went to bed at midnight, exhausted from their journeys and the last few hours of excited reunion.

'God, this bedroom is freezing!' Jean said, closing the door. 'Turn the air conditioner off.'

Darren peered at the unit on the wall. 'It's not on,' he told her.

'It must be.'

'It's not, look for yourself. Maybe it just turned itself off?'

Tired, Jean couldn't be bothered. 'Make sure it doesn't come back on then.'

Darren found the remote control, decided he couldn't be damned figuring it out and pretended to press some buttons. 'There you go,' he told her.

They raced to get undressed, brush their teeth and snuggle into bed. The loser had to turn out the light. Darren lost, flicked off the bedside lamps and curled up on his side waiting for the sheets to warm up with his body heat. The room was spinning a little from the alcohol and it kept him awake for a while, making his stomach uneasy. He felt Jean's cold breath on his face and she placed a lingering kiss on his cheek, before pulling away.

On holidays their sex life improved dramatically, but Darren was still surprised Jean was making a move tonight. They were both tired. He wasn't sure he could muster the enthusiasm and waited for her do something more.

After a minute when nothing else happened Darren felt guilty, and worried Jean was upset that he hadn't responded to her kiss. He rolled over and said lovingly, 'Goodnight, honey. Sleep tight.'

He was answered with a soft snore, her back towards him. Jean was already asleep.

Darren rolled back to his side thinking it was odd he hadn't felt the mattress shift as Jean leaned over him to kiss his cheek—or when she moved away to fall asleep for that matter.

He drifted off deciding he was more drunk than he knew.

TWO

The next day, early in the morning, Cory had checked the weather on his laptop. He told them that the surf at their next town was going to be excellent in the afternoon. It prompted a mad scramble to get packed and on the road, but first they had to pick up the BMW coupe and arrange storage for the Renner's car. It stopped any thoughts of getting the Madden's Ford checked out. As a compromise the men agreed that Jean and Leanne could have the first leg in the BMW. If the Ford broke down, Darren and Cory were better equipped to deal with it.

'Because you're men,' Jean insisted, after Darren reminded her he knew nothing about cars.

Darren drove. Up ahead the bright yellow BMW kept a sedate pace, Leanne at the wheel. With the top down and the sun shining he could see them talking animatedly.

'So, how is everything?' Cory asked Darren. Without their wives around it was an entirely different question.

'Everything's good,' Darren said blandly. 'What about you?'

'Hell, I'm never home enough to get into trouble.'

'And I'm a happily married man, too.'

Cory laughed. 'This is the guy with a little black book the size of a telephone directory and hysterical women throwing themselves in front of the bridal limo?'

'Hardly,' Darren said, but he was smiling.

'You've been a good boy?'

'I just told you.'

'Okay, what if Angelina Jolie walked naked into your bedroom?'

'Here we go...'

'Come on, seriously.'

'Jean would have a fit,' Darren said.

'Well, obviously Jean isn't *there*. In fact, she's away shagging Brad Pitt. Angelina's come to see you to square things up.'

Darren was shaking his head, but he said, 'Nope, she's got too many tattoos.'

‘All right, Jennifer Anniston?’

‘Ten years ago maybe. Now she’s old enough to be my mother.’

‘Christ, I wish *my* mother looked like that! I’d have never left home. What about Natalie Portman?’

‘Now you’re talking.’

‘Ah! See? Your morals are still in the gutter. For you it’s just a matter of quality and opportunity, not fidelity.’

‘You should take up marriage counseling,’ Darren said drily.

‘Probably. Hey, have you got the air conditioner on? It’s still bloody cold in here.’

Both of them had their windows down and the warm, spring air was rushing noisily through the car.

‘No, of course not.’

Waving his hand in front of the air vents Cory couldn’t make up his mind. ‘Maybe it’s stuck on?’

‘Maybe.’ Darren wasn’t too concerned.

Cory snorted, ‘The motor stops any time it wants and your air conditioner won’t turn off. This car’s fucked. You need a new one.’

In the BMW Jean and Leanne were having a similar conversation.

‘He’s not home much, so it’s kind of fun when Cory does come back,’ Leanne explained when Jean asked about their relationship.

‘No toy-boys in the cupboard for you? To keep you happy while Cory’s away?’ Jean was only half-joking.

‘God no, are you mad? In our little suburb it would be all over town in a few days—not that I would do anything anyway,’ Leanne added hastily with a grin.

‘Are you and Darren still rock-solid?’

‘Like concrete.’

‘That’s good to hear, really. It makes me glad.’

After such a long friendship and so many years, it troubled Jean that these kinds of comments still surfaced when it came to her marriage. It was like Cory and Leanne, who had known Darren since school, harboured some sort of knowledge they’d never told Jean. There were even times when Jean

suspected that Leanne had slept with Darren in the past, but she couldn't bring herself to ask either of them.

Leanne sensed her irritation and decided to change the subject. 'Is that a new perfume I smelled this morning?'

'No, I'm still using the same old thing. Darren buys me a litre of the stuff duty-free every time he goes overseas. I wish he wouldn't. I wouldn't *mind* a change.'

'Oh? I thought it was definitely something different...' Leanne shrugged. 'It was probably the toilet cleaner. *That* smells like your scent, too.'

'Ooh, bitch!'

'Cow. Be nice to me or I won't let you drive the car.'

They had moved into their new hotel, this time with separate luxury rooms in a shoreline resort, and made it to the beach by four o'clock. The heat had gone out of the sun enough that Jean and Leanne wouldn't go for a swim, but they felt duty-bound to watch their husbands have their first surf of the holiday and went along to sit on the sand.

Wearing wetsuits with ankle straps attached to their boards, Darren and Cory braved the ocean. It was hard work and worse for Darren, who wasn't in as good a shape as Cory and soon felt it. He hadn't been surfing for months and he was out of practice. Every time he got dumped Darren floated in the maelstrom of foam a little longer, letting his protesting body recover until his lungs forced him to the surface.

Watching from the beach Leanne said, 'Darren needs to start going to a gym or get a personal trainer. He looks like he needs to come out already.'

'Christ, don't let him hear you say that,' Jean said absently. 'He'll be mortified.'

Jean's attention had been caught by a girl who looked out of place. Her pale skin hadn't been near the sun for a long time, while her faded jeans and lumberjack shirt with hanging tails was a strange choice for the beach. She was too far away for Jean to make out her features clearly, but the pallid face was striking over the distance. The girl was standing at the edge of the sand as if unwilling to go further.

Homeless or she's off her head with drugs, Jean thought.

Bare-foot, the girl walked down towards the water, her stride becoming more purposeful as she moved. Before Jean realised what was happening the girl entered the surf and kept going, pushing her way deeper into the sea, the waves surging around her.

'Shit, Leanne—look,' Jean said half-heartedly, unsure what she was seeing.

'What? Where?'

'That girl! It's like she's trying to drown herself...' As the words came out Jean was reluctant to raise any alarm.

Already up to her neck now, the girl's dark hair was becoming indistinguishable from the other swimmers' bobbing heads and Jean wasn't sure she had her eye on the right person any more. And surely anybody close by would see a problem, if there was one?

'Where?' Leanne asked.

'Damn it, among those people over there,' Jean said hopelessly, pointing.

'Which one is she?'

'I can't tell now. I don't even know if I can still see her.'

'Shall we tell someone?' Leanne matched Jean's urgency even though she still couldn't see the girl.

'Oh... *shit!* I don't know. There are swimmers right next to her. Surely they can see her?' Jean bit her lip, thinking furiously. 'She had really pale skin. Maybe she just doesn't want to get sunburned?'

'Huh?'

'She was wearing jeans and a shirt. No one goes swimming dressed like *that.*' Jean was completely at a loss what to do.

'You did once,' Leanne told her.

Jean stared at her and the memory came back. A drunken pool party. 'Okay, but that was different.'

'Maybe she's one of those Goths? You know, those kids that like to look like Dracula?'

Jean looked back at the distant group. It was impossible to tell which of the swimmers was the girl now. No one appeared to be panicking. Guilt gnawed at her, but there was nothing she could do without risking an unnecessary panic.

'God, I hope so. I hope that's all it is.'

‘Relax, Jean. There’d be sirens going off and near-naked lifeguards running all over the place by now, if there was any trouble.’ Leanne gave her a wicked grin. ‘It might be worth raising a fuss, come to think of it.’

Darren had time for a groan before the board slipped under his feet yet again, his back slapped hard against the wave face and the crest thundered down on top of him pummeling Darren towards the bottom yet again. The ankle strap yanked painfully at his leg. He opened his eyes and saw the blur of ribbed sand below and streaks of sunlight piercing through the foam. With every muscle screaming he struck upwards, broke the surface and grabbed his board. He gulped in some air. Looking around he saw that Cory had caught the wave and was about to paddle back out.

Darren knew this was getting stupid. He needed a rest and to give it up for the day, before he drowned. They had a whole week for him to get his act together. He lay on the board and pushed himself beyond the breaking surf and waited for Cory.

‘One more, then I’d better quit,’ he panted as Cory came alongside. ‘I’m fucked.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ Cory said diplomatically. He wasn’t even out of breath. ‘Let’s make it a big one.’

They let a few decent waves pass, hoping for something better. Then Cory said, ‘Look out, here we go.’

An impressive roller had foam whipping off its peak. They had to be quick. Cory powered away with hard strokes while Darren tried to keep up with his aching arms. As the wave lifted the back of his board Darren knew he was too slow and the chance was gone. He yelled a curse as he dropped down into the trough behind, the wave moving massively in front of him and sweeping Cory towards the beach. He heard a high-pitched whoop of joy.

Darren gritted his teeth and was determined to get the next big wave. Many of the nearby surfers had ridden the last one with Cory. It was like he was the only one left on the ocean. There was nothing promising for a minute or so, time enough for Cory to be standing on the beach and waving encouragingly. Finally another roller appeared.

Darren paddled madly and felt the board pick up speed. He was too tired to be well co-ordinated, but he managed to drag his feet under him and stand. For one glorious moment everything felt right, his balance steady and the board sliding beautifully down the face of the wave. Then Darren made the mistake of looking to see if everyone was watching.

It was an instant of lapsed concentration that ruined everything. The board wobbled as his feet and body language desperately tried to recover, before Darren wiped out hard with the wave crashing down heavily onto him.

With a painful sigh of annoyance that came bubbling out of his lips, Darren let the wave punch him deep. It was peaceful down there under the boiling foam as he drifted along, the board tugging at his ankle. When his lungs started to protest he opened his eyes to find the bottom and orientate himself.

The shock of seeing a body face-upwards on the sea floor brought out the last of Darren's air in a yell of surprise and he swallowed some water. He choked and flailed his arms, trying to drag himself to the surface as fast as he could. The ocean played a cruel trick and a gathering wave chose this moment to suck him down again. The blurred sight of the body came back into his view. It was a girl's figure, he was sure. She wore jeans and a dark, patterned shirt of some sort. Long black hair fanned around her head and her dead eyes were open and staring at him. The swell moved her limbs and Darren would have sworn she was reaching for him, wanting to drag him down to join her. Even her eyes seem to lock on his and beg him to swim downwards, not up and away.

Another swell lifted him and Darren abruptly broke the surface. He kicked his legs furiously, partly to tread water in the thin foam wash and also because of the dreadful feeling that something would try to grab his ankles and pull him back down. Black spots were in front of his eyes and his chest ached. Darren was grateful to see Cory back in the water and paddling fast towards him. His friend's look of concern turned to relief when he saw Darren's head among the waves.

Cory called, 'Jesus, man! Are you all right? You were down there forever.'

Darren waved weakly and hauled himself wearily to lie on his board. When Cory came alongside he said thickly, spitting salty phlegm, 'Cory, there's a *body* down there. I saw a drowned girl on the bottom.'

‘What? Fuck—are you sure?’ Stunned, Cory sat up straddling his board with his legs dangling below and stared around. Darren had an urge to tell him to lift his feet up. Cory said again, ‘Darren, are *sure*? It wasn’t just someone swimming or—or a lump of weed or something?’ He kept searching the water, but it wasn’t clear enough to see the bottom from the surface.

‘I definitely saw it,’ Darren said and added, ‘And she was definitely *dead*.’ Darren was denying to himself those open eyes looking straight into his and her reaching arms trying to embrace him.

Cory told him, ‘We have to get back to the beach and tell the lifeguards. The longer we wait, the further any current might move the body and they’ll never find it.’

Darren didn’t need any encouragement to leave the water. Together they rode the next wave in without bothering to stand or surf the break. Jean and Leanne were waiting anxiously at the water’s edge.

‘Are you all right?’ Jean asked Darren, seeing his exhausted face as they carried their boards past. He nodded tiredly while Cory explained.

‘Darren saw a body in the water. A young girl on the bottom. We have to tell the surf lifesavers.’ He jerked his head at the nearby lookout tower.

‘Oh my God,’ Jean put a hand to her mouth and stared at Leanne in a fit of panic and renewed guilt. ‘What did she look like—’

She stopped as her eyes followed Cory’s towards the lifesaver station and, beyond him, Jean saw the girl who had walked into the ocean. She was standing at the edge of the car park again. Relief flooded through Jean, although she was confused, too. *How did she get back here so fast?* There was no doubt it was the same girl. Although she was much further away, the clothes and pale face were easy to recognize.

The girl seemed to be staring back at her. Jean shivered in the sunlight and tore her gaze away.

‘We’ll come with you,’ Leanne was saying as they reached their towels and the men dropped their boards.

‘No, stay here,’ Cory said. ‘Mark this spot and I’ll be able to show the lifesavers where Darren was in the water.’

‘Oh... all right,’ Leanne looked disappointed as the men walked away.

‘Look, Leanne,’ Jean said, touching her arm. ‘There’s that girl I told you about. It’s not *her*, at least.’

When Jean tried to point the girl out, she had vanished. They searched in vain for a minute.

‘Do you think Darren actually saw someone?’ Leanne asked. ‘Really?’

‘Well I’m sure he saw *something*.’

The lifeguards needed convincing, too. Nobody had been reported missing.

‘Are you sure?’ the crew’s leader asked Darren. They were standing in the shade of the tower. A two-way radio chattered on his hip.

‘I’m almost certain,’ Darren said, which was different from the frightened conviction he’d had in the water. On the beach, things weren’t the same. Unseen, Cory pulled a surprised face.

‘Then we’ll call in the chopper for a sweep and get some boys out in the boat.’

As the lifeguard lifted the radio to his mouth Darren held up his hand. ‘A chopper? Does it really need that?’

‘Did you see a drowned girl or not?’

‘I think I did, but it was only for a few seconds and I wasn’t wearing goggles or anything. You know what your vision’s like under water. I thought you guys would go out for a search, not start putting helicopters in the air...’ Darren knew he was sounding bad.

‘The chopper’s *already* in the air. It just needs diverting, that’s all.’ The lifeguard was eyeing Darren. ‘All right, I’ll put it on standby. You guys show me where you found this dead girl.’

They took him to Jean and Leanne. ‘Straight out maybe fifty metres,’ Cory said, pointing. ‘I saw him go under and take a hell of a long time to come back up.’

‘We’ll go take a look. You might as well stay here.’

The two couples sat huddled on the sand to watch. The sun was getting low behind them and people were streaming off the beach. After a minute Cory dared to say, ‘Sounds like you were changing your mind back there, Darren. What’s the story?’

‘Hey, I *saw* her,’ Darren said. ‘But I don’t want to be responsible for a million dollar search-and-rescue operation calling in helicopters and the

fucking marines, either. You'd think those guys would just take a boat out for a look first.'

'I guess they know what they're doing,' Cory said, trying to make light of it.

An inflatable dinghy had been launched and was doing a grid pattern in front of them. The unmistakable sound of rotors hacking the air grew in volume and a bright red helicopter appeared flying low and slowly across the water. It entertained the remaining beach-goers. Darren shrugged unhappily at the others to say, *it wasn't my idea*.

After a while Cory stood up and announced, 'I reckon we can go. There's nothing else for us to do.'

Leanne asked, 'Do you need to tell the lifesavers? Won't they want your name or something?'

'They're busy. We can drop in tomorrow, if we want.'

They were traveling again the next day and it was unlikely they'd find the time. Cory wasn't serious and everyone knew it.

At the edge of the beach they used a public shower to wash the sand from their feet. They were all feeling flat and couldn't think of much to say. Darren was self-absorbed remembering the sight of the dead girl in the water.

He didn't notice Jean was preoccupied, too. She was searching the car park.

END SAMPLE

Serious Stuff...

The Girl in the Back Seat
by G.M.HAGUE

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