



TOWN OF
VICTORIA PARK

LOCAL HISTORY AWARDS

• 2025 •



Night Sweats

Glen Morgan

Category
Personal Memoirs

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Childhood Memories

Night Sweats

It's the dog among the fairies, the rip and cur among the myths, the snapper at demons, the scarer of ghosts, the wizard's heel-chaser. Dylan Thomas.

When I was a small child, I lived with my parents and elder brother Bill in the south Western Australian town of Busselton. The town then was a quiet coastal spot – a population of no more than a few thousand. This was long before the development and tourism boom; a time when dairy farming was the major industry of the region. The town sits on the gentle sweep of the Vasse River, where peppermints and eucalypts touch the placid waters as it winds past. Nearby, St Mary's church with its historic cemetery, looks over the river, lending a peaceful aspect to the setting.

We lived in a tiny asbestos iron-roofed home in Dorset Street. The house has long been demolished. It had a small entrance porch, where, I'm told, I tipped a bucket of hot cleaning water over when my mother refused my demands for sweets. Down the right-hand side of the house was a wide and pleasantly grassed driveway, with a variety of trees and rows of pink hibiscuses.

Dorset street lies two blocks from the sweep of Geographe Bay. The bay has dazzling sapphirine-blue beaches, and out on the wind-blown jetty, seagulls swirl and shriek, where fish are still caught in abundance. Such was the idyllic, complacent, self-contained little sea-town of my early years. It seems inconceivable to me now, that it was here, when I was about four years of age, I began to be held in the icy grip of nightmares; a time of deeply troubled thoughts, fearful presentiments and anxieties that clouded my young life.

Both the night and the moon terrified me. Terror would begin in the penumbral light of early evening after being put to bed. As it turned inky-black, the moon would gleam, ghost-like, pale and mysterious through the shutters of the little sleep-out where I lay with my brother close by. It would cast a pool of silvery light to leave me shaking. Sometimes, a soft breeze would ruffle the bed sheets as my imagination went wild. I do not know how long it took to fall asleep. It always seemed a very long time; every minute went like an hour. I would wonder what time it was, or if I was asleep, was I dreaming that I was awake? I imagined gremlins everywhere. These hallucinations, for that is what they were, horrified me. I would squeeze my eyes shut so tight it hurt, but they continued as though I was caught in a solipsistic trance.

On this moonless night, in dreadful blackness, I'm asleep. Suddenly, blinding lights of yellow, orange and red shoot a thousand sparklers that go pop in my head like a Catherine wheel spinning crazily out of control. Boom! I think I will explode, with no-one to save me. Then I dream I am being sucked into a swirling sewerage drain down, down, down, into an abyss of

hell where I find gigantic lizards that tongue-lick me lasciviously. I sit up as if struck by a lightning bolt, trying to scream, as Bill lies, sleep unbroken, in his bed. My mother would say later that my brother could sleep on a barbed-wire fence. Next, I think I hear the soft murmur of surf from the bay, and the faint shriek of seagulls. The night ocean holds terrible fears for me; the great, restless rolling waves come lapping into our house with squirmy ocean creatures slithering into my bed. "Mama! Mama! I scream. But mama won't hear; no one has heard a sound. It is all in my child's mind.

Then, from far away, a dog fills the night air with a sharp "Whoof! Whoof! Whoof! Its barking is a call-out; a secret, hideous call to every goblin, witch and troll to rise from their haunted hideaways to find me. Suddenly, it's quiet. Now, out of the quietness comes the toot and rattle of a train, chugging somewhere out of town. "Whoeee! Whoeee! Its whistle sends shivers up my spine, for I fear it will bring bad news, perhaps a death in the family. A wind picks up. Leaves flutter on trees that whisper to each other, stretching their limbs like the tentacles of an octopus, gliding over the house. I hear our front yard gate break loose; it flaps and bangs in the gathering breeze. Hens cluck from a neighbouring chook-pen. Is it the wind, the gate, or the animal that stirs them? The train is a rhythmic, distant, cha-choof, cha-choof, cha- choof, until it fades in the distance. All is silent; the hens settle, and finally, I fall into a troubled sleep.

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It was in my seventh year that my father transferred to Perth, where we rented a home for two years in Mars Street, Carlise. Other animals and birds now terrified me; blood-soaked wolves with slobbering chops and fangs going Snap! Snap! Snap! Crows pecked my face, carking ferociously. Snakes crept into my bed, or perhaps they were lizards. At this time the first sign of sleepwalking came when mother found dust fragments and pebbles in my bed.

Late one night, horror of horrors, I find myself lying on the steps of the Carlise hotel! I wake up screaming in the deathly quiet. I race home with the moon, mocking, and wizards snapping every fearful step of the way. In the clouds, satyr-like faces with imperfectly formed bodies howl and jeer at me as I run, screaming to our house. I am too frightened to say anything next morning, but mother finds evidence of my nocturnal walks. Father puts a lock on the front gate. My night wanderings are curtailed, but the nightmares go on.

In another sleepless night comes a ghastly *thing* - a ghost, surely - floating through the ceiling. It slides under my bed. A cold shaft of wind blows softly through the thin bedroom curtains. Next, the apparition, dressed in a milky-white shroud, stands impassively at my bed-side. I'm glued to the sheets, too frightened to move. The ghost comes closer. Now it draws the blankets back with infinite slowness. Its long-nailed fingers linger over my calves. It leans toward me, smiling. Now it tears away my bed-clothes, saying nothing. I'm thrashing and kicking, but I'm striking at shadows. The hens begin to cackle, and the gate bangs; I

scream and crawl over to Bill, but he sleeps soundly. I have wet the bed and when I return the dampness makes me shiver, but the ghost has disappeared.

It was around this time that I first saw the one-handed woman, poor soul. I had gone into a local shop. She was just coming out of the store and brushed past me. I nearly died of fright when I saw the black and bruised stump of one hand. She was heavily painted, with a pale, bloodless face, and I remember her lurid red lips. She had a haunted look; haunted as Correggio's Medusa. "Sorry!" she said, grinning. I saw lipstick smudged on her teeth. From then on, whenever I saw her, I ran away in fright. Her name, I learned, was Catherine, and she lived in a nearby Street; I saw her coming out of her house one morning and vowed never to go that way again. Such were my deep memories of our Carlisle time.

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In the mid-fifties, with another transfer, my mother, brother, and me, flew to Carnarvon where father had gone earlier to find a rental house. Carnarvon. I might have been going to the moon for all I knew of that town. We flew MacRobertson Miller Airlines (MMA) in the old work-horse of flight in those days – the Dakota DC3. Piloting the planes were former World War Two pilots. The flight took all day, refuelling at Geraldton. How the rivets on the plane's wings popped! We hit air pockets and my heart went into my mouth; we would surely plunge to our deaths. The vast omnipotent ocean glittered below as the engines throbbed and the wings bucked and wagged. Then tracking ever northward over the land, everything went dun coloured and eventually turned a deep reddish-brown and all greenery disappeared. As we veered toward the landing strip my mother, who had valiantly battled air sickness, vomited into my lap. "Wait, mum!" I had yelled as I saw the sick coming. I scrambled for a brown paper bag, but it was too late. "I'm sorry, darling," she repeated. With mum and me still cleaning ourselves, we landed in swirling red dust from the propellers of the shuddering plane. From a window seat I saw father. He stood frowning in shimmering heat as the plane clattered to a halt. He clutched a bunch of over-ripe bananas as a welcome gift. I remember, still, the smell of those bananas.

Our Carnarvon home in James Street became another house of horrors, with night terrors ever present. Ahead lay the inevitable, dreadful, first day at school. The stares. The whispers, "there's the new kids," as though we were aliens from another planet. My only assurance was that my big brother would be close at hand to keep an eye on me. He could not save me, however, from one Saturday afternoon at the movies. The film that day was about the life of Helen Keller; the blind, deaf and dumb woman who became a national figure in the early twentieth century in America for her work on behalf of disabled people around the world. I remember hiding under the seat with Keller grunting as she hauled her way around her house on a rope. She lived with me in my mind for many years after.

One day, when the easterly felt like it was coming out of a furnace, I rode my bike a considerable distance to the whaling station. The stench of the whales being flensed filled my senses, and this, combined with the heat, made me feel sick. I recall men on top of the

carcass cutting the skin off the whale to expose the salmon-coloured flesh underneath. The men wore bloodied overalls and wobbled precariously on studded rubber boots as they hefted long handled blades in the shape of giant hockey sticks. Great hunks of the beast were flung to other handlers before being sliced and readied for the boiling vats. I was sickened by the sight, the blood, and the smell. Late that night I dreamt of being hacked into pieces and thrown into the boiling vats. I carried images and smells of the butchered whales with me for the three years we lived in Carnarvon.

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It is many years later, and I'm in a psychologist's room. The psychologist is stringy thin with oiled hair combed to hide a thinning pate. He wears an impressive ruby-stone ring; a gold chain at his neck. He nods and scratches in a notebook as we discuss my problems. Behind him is a clock embellished with gold filigree. It ticks loudly. Gentle Bach is in the air. We go through Cognitive Behavioural Therapy techniques. Before that, it was Image Rehearsal Therapy. Months of the combination of these two treatments is helping me to overcome night terrors. "You are on the right track," he says, an avuncular hand on my shoulder as he steers me to the door. My sleep patterns are near normal, with only the occasional fright. I have been free of nightmares and decide to discontinue our sessions.

A few months later, though, in the dead of night, I hear a voice, soft and soothing:

"Glen." I know it's Catherine. Her voice is somewhere in space.

"It's me. I'm here again ... you want to be with me, don't you? Come. I'll take you on a magic ride to heaven; then we'll live in hell forever. I am with you *aeterno modol*."

"I will come," I say, and wake up screaming.

Soon after, I dream of a lone wolf. It is observing me. I see it moving among the trees near our Busselton home. It pauses, snout twitching. Now it raises a front foot like a red setter about to pounce. No doubt I am a mystery to the beast. Yet I feel we are bonded; in the same way I feel bonded to the whispering trees. We are all watching each other: the wolf, the trees, and me, and, in the gleam of moonlight, among the silvery heavens, I see Catherine, laughing.

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