

This is the complete and unedited version of Ghosts of the Willows, the winning entry in The Australian Women's Weekly/Penguin Short Story Contest, written by Catherine Lyons of Sydney, NSW.

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# Ghosts of the Willows

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By Catherine Lyons

# Ghosts of the Willows

The chair creaked in protest, as it rocked gently, on the weathered timber floor. The heavy scent of jasmine, mingled with the beeswax polish, as it wafted through the curtains, billowing in the breeze. Gold rimmed glasses rested on the cedar stool, waiting faithfully for him to return, and the tic, tic, tic of the clock on the mantle, never missed a beat, as if the rhythm of life had not been broken. She sucked the air deeply as she allowed the waves of nostalgia to wash over her, filling her soul with the essence of her past. One by one a tear escaped and trickled to her chin, streaking through the grime on her face. Her finger left a trail through the dust, as she comforted herself, tracing the beloved face that beamed before her, circled in a tarnished silver frame.

With a flick of her head the spell was broken, “enough” she admonished herself, lifted her chin and tightened her jaw. “This will never do. I’ve cows to milk, pigs to feed and the sun is already behind the gums. No good comes from self pity, life is for the living he always said” and with a grace that belied her 80 odd years, she rose from her rocker and brushed away the tears that had smeared her face. Reaching for the pins that attempted to contain her wiry, steely, curls she stabbed them back in, even though the tendrils continued to spring forth in defiance. She paused at the back

door, pulled on her mud splattered gumboots and with renewed purpose strode through the garden as the heat of the day slowly expired and the air became moist and cool. Pushing away again the lingering questions that had haunted her since that winter so long ago.

She awoke as usual to the screech of the rooster, brimming with his self important pride. Permitting herself a few minutes of indulgence to lie and watch the specks of dust dancing in the shafts of light streaming through the sill. She listened to the moaning of the cows awaiting her arrival and ran through her plans for the day. The thick clumps of cream were still warm, skimmed fresh from the froth in the bucket, the porridge was bubbling and the brown sugar ready when the hum of an engine approaching pricked up Bluey's ears. Her beloved blue heeler was on the alert and always by her side, she ruffled his head fondly.

"Mornin" boomed her neighbour's voice, as she flicked the kettle on and placed two mugs at the ready.

He was early today. James often called in on his way back from town to pass the time of day and indulge himself of her feather light scones and luscious plum jam. She was secretly pleased he enjoyed her cooking so much, but would never admit to such vanity. Casually he tossed her mail on the hallstand, the mail box was at the end of the lane they shared. She eyed it hopefully but stilled herself to wait 'til she was alone, just in case, this time?

"Do you want me to give you a hand with the top paddock tomorrow?" he asked

"I reckon the weather'll hold"

“No I’ll leave it another week, I’m expecting Tess and the little ones tomorrow for a few days” she smiled softly at the thought.

They chatted comfortably over scones and tea.

Little grey Willie Wagtails flitted from branch to branch of the oleander tree, shading the kitchen window. As she boiled the water, filled the bowl and rinsed the dirty dishes, the A.B.C. stock report droned in the background .She tossed the water over the herb garden thriving at the back door. At last, chores done, she returned to the hallstand, gathered the letters and went through to the front verandah. Plumping the pillows she sank into the sun warmed sofa and drank in the scene before her, content to dwell with the ghosts of her past. She looked across the lush green home yard and over the wire fence. Patchy tufts of stringy grass, yellowing weeds and thistles, studded undulating mounds of red soil, that rolled down to the majestic weeping willows, lining the murky billabong. Beyond the river the purple haze of the Great Dividing Range ran as far as the eye could see.

Here her grandfather had stood and dreamed of a home for his bride, over a hundred years ago. Stumps and roots jutted out of the banks, remnants from the floods that had lapped at the gates. The years blurred and she was a young girl once more, her father’s arms held her tight. She snuggled contentedly, astride Solomon’s saddle as they checked the fence lines, weaving in and out of the falling fronds of the willowy canopy sweeping their heads. The rhythm and sway of Solomon’s stride merged with her father’s favourite ballads, whispered in her ear. She leaned into his chest as tales from Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson and Rudyard Kipling embedded in her heart. Her eyes drew closer, to the garden before her. She

could see her Grandmother's familiar shape, kneeling, head bowed, tending the hydrangea, plumbago and geranium shrubs, dizzy lizzies, daisies and pansies. From dust her grandmother, then her mother, had tilled and nourished the parched soil, scattered the seeds and struck the cuttings, until the lawn was thick and spongy and the garden an abundance of colour and fragrance, fiercely guarded from droughts, frosts and plagues of snails.

It was time. Her hand trembled as she drew the brown, bulky packet from the rest of the mail. She thought she had recognized a foreign stamp as James had thrown the bundle down but now she wasn't sure she wanted to read what it had to say. After all these years could she finally have an answer? Did she want to know? She eased the envelope open and began to read. Galah's screeched and the shadows grew longer, but she didn't care. Time, for her, stood still.

Eventually she gathered herself, carefully smoothed the contents and returned them to the parcel and slowly made her way back inside. Down the paneled corridor a collection of jackets and hats hung by the door, she automatically touched the faded brown moleskin coat hanging beneath a whip and akubra hat as she passed by. Tomorrow, she thought, tomorrow I'll begin.

The car had barely come to a halt before the sounds of slamming doors and running feet shattered the peace of the lazy Sunday afternoon and sent dust flying in all directions.

“I can’t believe it, I just can’t believe it. We can stay, can’t we Mum, we can stay forever?” Asked Isabella

“Can we have a cat “ shouted Tom

“And a rabbit “ added Bella

“And a .....

“We’ll see” laughed Tess “let’s get in the door first”

She was just as excited as the children as she shoved at the back door with her shoulder. It stuck to the frame, swollen from the recent rain. She stepped inside, smiling one minute and fighting back tears the next, as it hit her, Emma wasn’t here to welcome them anymore. Where was the bowl of freshly picked apples that always smelt so divine, the little cut glass bowls of roses, scattered through the rooms. The house still looked the same but somehow it felt darker, as if it had lost its soul. Now then, she scolded herself, no good comes from self pity, life is for the living as Aunty Emma would say and she set about going through the rooms throwing open the windows and letting the fresh summer breeze chase away the musty, stale air. As she drew back the curtains and looked out the front, her heart lurched again. The garden that had been Emma’s pride and joy was now unrecognizable. A tangle of weeds and seedlings tumbled over the beds and onto the overgrown lawns, smothering anything that stood in its way. Only the hardiest daisies had survived the invasion she realized with great sadness. Squeals of laughter sounded from the distance as Bella and Tom rediscovered their favourite hiding spots. She left them to it and went back inside to continue airing the house. Tomorrow their belongings would arrive, not that they had much to bring. She sighed as she remembered the stress of the last few years and knew Emma would be pleased she had provided a sanctuary for them. It was hard to believe it was 2 years since she’d received the call from James. The minute she heard

his voice she knew. Emma had left with the dignity and grace she'd shown in life. James had found her sitting peacefully on her front verandah with Bluey by her side.

After Emma's death Tess had intended to keep the farm as a weekend escape from their busy lives, but somehow they had "escaped" less and less as city life had crowded in on them. When her company downsized due to the "turbulent economy" her world came crashing down. She felt blessed to have a roof over their heads, but tossed and turned each night as she fretted about how long her redundancy payout would last.

"Mum, Muuum" called Tom "what's to eat, we're starving"

"Right, grab the esky from the car" she said heading for the kitchen. And they spent the rest of the day settling in.

"Who's Jack?" asked Isabella as she bounced into the room early the next morning "Jack" she said again "who's Jack? He's left his coat here."

"What are you talking about?" asked Tess, confused

"Come I'll show you" she said, heading for the front door.

Tess could see a pool of material lying on the hallway floor. She scooped it up and parted the collars.

"Tom did it. He knocked it off, but look, it's got a name tag sewn here. It says Jack Trevethan"

"Jack Trevethan" Tess repeated softly "Oh Belle, I forgot it was there. It's been hanging there as long as I can remember. This is Uncle Jack's coat. Uncle Jack was Aunty Emma's husband"

"You mean Aunty Emma was married? Did she have any kids?"

“No darling Aunty Emma didn’t get the chance to have any children. Uncle Jack died long before you were born, before I was born. Aunty Emma and Uncle Jack had only been married a few months before he went to fight in the first World War, he never came back.”

“Oh that’s so sad mummy”

“Yes, darling it always made me sad. Aunty Emma never talked about him but she was very sad too.”

Tess’s first task today was to sort her room, Emma’s room. Tess loved this room, she felt a sense of Emma close to her, infusing her with love and support. The room had barely been touched since Emma’s death. Her clothes had already been sent to charity but Tess hadn’t had the heart to do more until now. She plopped on the bed her feet hanging well above the floor. The thick, feather mattress felt lumpy and the ancient springs squeaked as her legs dangled in the air. Idly she lifted the lid of the crystal trinket bowl on the table beside the bed and fondled the silver brooch Emma had loved to wear on special occasions. Come on Tess she urged herself, it has to be done.

The next two hours disappeared in a flash as she smiled and wept and smiled again. Memories washed over her with every piece she touched. Finally she turned to the small Victorian dressing table against the far wall. A heavy photo frame hung above it, showing Emma and Jack sharing a secret smile on their Wedding Day. The carved walnut table was also Emma’s writing desk. Pulling on the small brass knob Tess opened the first of the three little drawers on the left of the mirror’s lower edge. Here she found Emma’s monogrammed writing paper, an E entwined with a T embossed in the middle of each sheet. The next two drawers

contained stamps, pens and bits of stationary. In the matching drawers on the right Emma had kept theatre programs, wedding invitations, thank you notes and a few pictures friends had sent. Pushed to the back of the lowest drawer a bunch of folded letters lay, bound by a black velvet ribbon. Tess pulled up the stool, sat, and hesitantly untied the bow. Part of her was eager to know more about her darling aunt, but part of her felt embarrassed to be intruding on Emma's privacy. Her indecision didn't last long, curiosity got the better of her and she unfolded the letter on top "*To my Dearest Wife*" it began and Tess found herself swept away to 1916 and the Western Front of the First World War

Tess had always known Jack had been the love of Emma's life, it was obvious by the slight reserve in Emma's disposition, her valiant attempt to contain the pain of her loss that never went away. These letters confirmed it. They were heart wrenching to read. They began with a certain sense of excitement and optimism. How were these two young lovers to know the terrible toll this war would take on so many. At first Jack's letters were full of colorful descriptions of training and life in foreign locations, but increasingly the tone grew more serious as he realized his chances of survival. Torn between reassuring Emma all will be well and preparing her for the worst, he poured his love onto the pages as an eternal farewell to his beloved bride. Tess reached for the next letter but found instead an envelope with Emma's writing on it - unopened, "present location uncertain" scrawled across it. The same with next and the next and the next. Tess grieved for the heroic boy soldier pictured above her with his chiseled good looks and mischievous, twinkling eyes and the happiness he had deserved. Choking back her tears she picked up the next envelope. This one was addressed to Mrs J .W. Trevethan and postmarked 1916.

Dear Madam,

Further to your correspondence we are seeking identification of any prisoners taken by foreign forces and will notify you of any information that comes to hand.

Another one dated 1917.

Dear Madam ,

Please be assured we are continuing our enquiries into the unconfirmed death of lieutenant Jack William Trevethan last seen on the 19<sup>th</sup> July 1916 at the Battle of Fromelles

And the last dated 1918.

Dear Madam

We sincerely regret to inform you we are still unable to advise you of the final whereabouts of Lieutenant Jack William Trevethan. We can confirm a court of enquiry has found that the aforementioned was killed in action, date and location unknown.

“Oh my poor, poor Emma” cooed Tess. How could she bear it. How devastating not to know. How could nobody know? Where were his belongings? Did she ever find out?

Tess buried her head in her hands in distress. And she never said a word, thought Tess. Emma never said a word of regret or anger or pain. She reached for a plain brown paper packet marked airmail and slid her fingers beneath the flap .

Brrring the doorbell rang. She hurriedly tossed the letters into the drawer and opened the door to find James standing there, a large wicker basket in his arms and two sets of sleepy eyes gazing out at her.

“Thank you James for the kittens” Tess said as she walked with him to the back gate “you just made two dreams come true. Just a minute,” on impulse Tess squeezed his arm. She raced back into the house and returned with a large bundle in her arms. “Here, I want you to have this” and opened out Jack’s handsome moleskin jacket. “I know Emma would have liked you to have something of hers.” His eyes glistened as he recognized it. He had grown up with Jack and had felt his loss deeply too.

“Thanks” he said gruffly and jumped into his ute

It was much later that night after the children were tucked up in bed that Tess had a chance to think about this morning’s discoveries. She drew the lounge room curtains. The air had a chill in it, a hint of the Autumn to come. There will probably be a frost in the morning she noted. She slipped into her pyjamas and ugg boots, wrapped herself in her soft, fluffy, dressing gown and retrieved the parcel from dresser drawer. On her way back to the lounge she picked up the glass of red she’d poured earlier and placed it on the table beside the rocking chair and made herself comfortable. The lamp cast a soft golden glow and threw long eerie shadows of the furniture against the walls. Filled with anticipation she pulled out the contents of the packet. Three letters were enclosed, each of a different texture and style. She smoothed out the first.

The crisp letterhead stated Thompson & Associates Private Investigators, Piccadilly Circus, London.

Dear Mrs Trevethan,

As per your instructions I have been making further enquiries regarding the whereabouts of the remains of lieutenant Jack Trevethan 30<sup>th</sup> Battalion A.I.F. Unfortunately my investigations in France with the Red Cross proved unfruitful as they were unable to direct me to any marked grave for Lt Trevethan. However after many months of locating and interviewing remaining members of your husband's company I believe the enclosed information may provide you with some of the answers you seek.

If we can be of any further assistance please let me know

Yours Sincerely

Robert Thompson

The next letter she unfolded was in a strong, strident hand.

Dear Mrs Trevethan,

On the advice of Mr Robert Thompson P.I. I would like to forward you a letter I found amongst my mother's papers on her passing last winter. I know my mother felt a great deal of anguish at not being able to fulfill her commitment to your late husband, to pass on his last wishes to you, but unfortunately in the hurried evacuation of the hospital tent where she was nursing, your details were lost to her. I know it would give her great peace to know her undertaking had been completed.

Yours Faithfully

Alistair Mc Kenzie

The last piece of paper felt thin and fragile, with a feathery font

Dear Mrs Trevethan,

You don't know me but I feel as if I know you. I hope you don't mind if I call you Emma. My name is Constance Mc Kenzie and I write to you with great regret and the saddest of news. Your husband Jack passed away today from the wounds he sustained last Thursday in the battle of Fromelles. It was his dying wish that he asked me to pass on his greatest love and affection to you and his deep sorrow that your time together was so short. Please be assured I did all in my power to keep him comfortable and he did not suffer in the end. I send to you my deepest sympathy Emma. The time I spent caring for your husband showed me what a wonderful gentleman he was and how much he truly cared for you. He wanted you to know he

will look over you both always and he was insistent I tell you to not fear for the future, use the provision he has left for you.

Sincerely Yours

Constance Mc

Kenzie

A shiver ran down Tess's back. After all those years of waiting, at last Emma had finally had an answer. She turned off the lamp, and made her way to bed.

The days rolled past and turned into weeks. Life was becoming more routine at "The Willows." But still Tessa worried about the future. To keep herself busy she determinedly set about reclaiming the garden. With a bit of advice from James, she had already made good headway with the large, front circular bed. Today she would tackle the longer one, further from the house and nearest the billabong. Thoughts of Emma and Jack kept tumbling through Tess's mind as she dug and pulled, and pulled and dug. She couldn't help wondering what was the provision Jack had mentioned. Emma had always managed to make ends meet but Tess had never felt she was comfortably off. She grabbed at a handful of thick vines and waist high weeds under the wisteria tree, but they wouldn't budge. Crawling in further to cut them away, her clippers hit something cold and hard. As the undergrowth was stripped away, rusty, white, decorative bars appeared in the shape of a small wrought iron frame. Was it some sort of garden seat she puzzled? No it looked more like an antique child's cot. Carefully she leant over the bars and smoothed away the soil with her shovel. As she scratched the dirt, letters appeared before her.

*In Loving Memory*

*f*

WLLIAM JACK TREVETHAN

aged 7mths

Born 21<sup>st</sup> April 1916

Died 19<sup>th</sup> November 1916

*Beloved son of Jack & Emma*

*In God's Care*

She was stunned. Anger flooded through her at the injustice of it all. To lose the love of your life and then your only child just wasn't fair. The children found her there when they arrived home from school with James.

"Look Mum" shouted Tom with his usual exuberance

"James has something to show you".

James opened his hand to reveal a chunky, old fashioned key with a tag tied to it.

For Emma it said

"I found it in Jacks coat, some coins had slipped into the lining and this came out with them."

"I wonder if Emma knew about it" mused Tess. "Unless she wore his jacket, I doubt she would have known it was there ?" she said, as they headed in for some afternoon tea .

Tess hurried the children into bed that night and ran a deep bath to soothe away the aches and pains of the day. As she soaked she couldn't stop thinking of Emma and little baby William. Had Jack known he had a son? Something niggled in the back of her mind, then it came to her. Quickly she dried herself off, threw on her nightclothes and jumped into bed with Emma's letters in hand. She flicked through them til she found Constance's letter and there it was. *Look over you both*. He did know. Jack had known he was a father. That must have been why he was reassuring her they would be provided for. As she stacked the letters to put them away Tess realized there was one envelope she had not noticed before, stuck behind another. It was addressed to her. Immediately she recognized the E & T on the paper. It was from Emma, dated two weeks before her death.

My Dearest Tess,

I have tried to write this letter many times before as there is much I have wanted to tell you but couldn't bring myself to say. I feel my time is coming and want you to know I have loved you as if you were my own. Not long after Jack left for war I discovered we were going to have a baby. I didn't want to add to Jack's worries so I didn't write to him until just after William was born. How I wished I hadn't waited, because I never knew if he received my letter before he went missing. William was just like Jack and I was so glad to have part of Jack still with me. I loved William with all my heart but I could not save him when the diphtheria epidemic swept through town. I wanted to die too. The only thing that kept me going was the chance that Jack had survived. What if he was wounded and needed me here to come home to. Every day I would sit by the river willing him back to me. Day by day I waited for further news but nothing ever came. I tried everything to find

him, but nobody could tell me where he was or what had happened, but I never gave up and then finally, after 60 years an answer came. I searched for months through the house to find Jack's provision but have found nothing so far. I'm not even sure what I'm looking for, but I still hope to find it. I have no need of it now but I want you to have it Tess, and I know Jack would want that too. This winter has felt so cold and I can't seem to drag myself away from the sunny verandah, but I think I'll try looking in the dairy. It's the only place left I haven't tried. Tess I know of the struggles you've faced, and I know you'll have more when I'm gone, but without sadness my darling we can't know happiness. I want you to remember the willows when you think of me. Draw strength to sustain you, as I have, from the roots of those who came before you. Floods may overwhelm and droughts may deprive, the willows may bend, but their tenacity and dignity cannot be swayed. Branches will die but new buds of hope will shoot again. Remember, the willows weep not in despair but heal with tears of love.....

The letter stopped there. Emma must have intended finishing the letter later and never got the chance. So that was how Emma had coped with the pain, she refused to bow to it or let it change her. Tess wrestled with her thoughts for another hour before abandoning any hope of sleep. She couldn't wait a moment more. Snug in her coat, she lit a kerosene lamp and stepped into the pitch black of the night. The dairy was only meters from the back door. Moonlight shone on the ivy smothered tin roof. Glossy green leaves curled around the chunky timber stumps, supporting the sloping corrugated awning. She pulled her collar tight against her neck as it tingled with trepidation. Gradually the door gave way as she pushed with all her might. Tentatively she shuffled forward and nearly tripped on the uneven cobblestone stairs plunging before her. The temperature dropped with each step as she descended into

the earth. She shrieked, frantically brushing at a cobweb clinging to her face. Layers of dust and decay covered the shelves. She recognized the old butter churn, chipped enamel bowls and piles of unused egg cartons. Scanning the room for anything out of the ordinary was impossible she sighed, it would take days to sort through all this clutter. Turning to go she jumped in fright as a swoosh against her leg was followed by a loud clatter as a stack of milk buckets went flying. She spun in time to see the mottled tail of Tom's kitten disappear into the debris.

“Great,” she fumed “now I’ll have to find you before you get stuck down here.” She lowered the lamp and pushed her way under the workbench till she caught the wriggling feline, who protested loudly at being picked up by the scruff of the neck. It was the lock that caught her attention, otherwise the small, rusty, tin chest would have remained hidden for another 60 years. Heart racing, she lugged it up the stairs and round to the front verandah, grabbing the key James had found as she went. It was a perfect fit and she eased open the lid. A thick wad of diaries and notebooks dating back to 1846 filled the box. Why did she feel disappointed ? What had she expected? Jewels? Besides she loved peeping into the past. Nestled into the sofa, her knees hugged to her chest, she once again stepped back in time.

Of course it was the final journal that held the answer.

19<sup>th</sup> May 1915

Today is my last day as a civilian until I return. Forever I will hold dear those last hours we spent beside the river. I know we have pretended otherwise, but in our hearts I know we are both worried about what lies ahead. If despite my best efforts I don't return to you my darling, I want you to have this and hope it is of some help to you.

She didn't recognize the hand writing on the loose page before her, but she knew the signature at the bottom straight away – *A. B. Paterson*.

It was dedicated to Will Trevethan on the birth of your eldest son Jack. Jack must have realized how valuable an unpublished poem by Banjo Paterson would be one day. This was his loving bequest. Tomorrow she would contact the National Library and if her suspicions were confirmed who knew what it was worth. Exhausted, Tess sank back in the pillows. She had been so engrossed in the diaries she hadn't noticed the first rays of sun streaking through the swirling mists of dawn. Dew glistened on the grass. Little William's grave lay blanketed with falling purple petals from the wisteria above. Gently, a tender smile spread softly across her lips, as she raised her eyes, and looked to the weeping willows. Always she would remember Emma and Jack and the ghosts of those who had gone before and she knew all would be well.