

# THE GHOST WALK

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FREMANTLE PRESS

## I. WINDOWS

The body they found at the Ghost Walk was Dr Beaufort's.

Lily whispered it, leaning in close as though she wasn't allowed to tell me. She didn't know I'd already seen the police cars parked across the entrance to Campus Avenue and nosed into the wetlands gate. It was at the gate that all the action happened. Even the horses from the veterinary school gathered at the fence to watch. Police in uniforms and then the forensics people in their white onesies and elastic-topped booties conferred and wrote on notepads, their backs to the wind. Hidden behind my window, I watched the nodding and gesturing. Then one of them pointed and set off into the trees, trailed by the rest. I followed them until the green canopy closed over their heads, then turned my eyes back to the solitary police officer guarding the road.

He'd got the short end of the stick, standing there in the rain, and arguing with drivers who wanted to take their accustomed route to the carpark. I watched him bend into the driver's-side windows and point back down the road. Then the driver would thrust their pointer finger through the car window, as though this would make it clearer that their parking bay was *right there*, and it would be of no consequence to the police officer to let them through. Then the officer would make that *no-go* sign that people do with their hands, spreading them apart, palms down, and shaking his head. Only one driver got out of the car, which surprised me, to show the policeman with both hands the direction he had to go, like he was directing a commercial aircraft into its docking bay. If that's what it's called. I don't know, I haven't travelled much. The driver

also slapped his watch. Judging by his clothes and car, you'd guess he was a student, but I've spent enough time on campus to know that professors don't always look much different. Each time, the pantomime would end with the driver doing a U-turn and the officer looking skywards. I wanted to wave to him and give him a thumbs up. *You're doing a great job. Sorry that people can be so shit.*

I know what it's like to deal with the general public. I've spent hours of my life in customer service, serving people who look right through me to their next meal. When I was at university, I worked at a barbecued-chicken takeaway on the highway near our share house. I could only manage a few hours a week, but it was enough to escape the rarefied air of higher learning and earn a few dollars. My shift was a Tuesday morning, one of the quietest so it didn't stress me out too much. Tuesdays were half-price meal days, so my customers were often people making do on welfare. They'd scan the board over my head while they worked out which specials would give them the most calories for the fewest dollars. One of them was a woman who slept rough at the back of the campus. She'd count out her coins and was often short. Sometimes, if there was no-one else in the shop, I'd ring her order through anyway and pour the coins into the till without counting them out. No-one cared if my float was under by twenty cents or so. It makes me shiver now to think of those coins. These days I need to be careful about anything that might have been touched by lots of other hands. Cash is the worst. I'm kind of glad we hardly use it anymore.



I wasn't at work on the day they found Dr Beaufort because I was in a hospital bed with prongs up my nose, and anyway, it had been years since I'd worked at the barbecued-chicken place. Lily came back with my afternoon meds in a plastic cup. She gave me a second cup with water to wash them down. I could tell she'd been crying, even though she was trying to look composed. People hold their faces a particular way when they're trying to keep it in. Their necks

go all tight. I've tried copying it. You have to press your tongue hard against your soft palette. It makes your wattle disappear but also makes it hard to swallow.

The pills rattled in the cup as I tipped them into my throat.

'Oh dear, you're shaking, you poor thing,' Lily said. 'Let me.' She held the cup of water up to my mouth and I sucked it down. 'I understand, we're all a bit upset today.'

I blinked. Kindness does that to you, opens the floodgates to the feelings that you want to hold in check. Lily was blinking a lot too, so I did the right thing and let her get on with her job. None of the usual small talk. She took my temperature and pulse, wrote in the chart, and fled back to the nurses station. As she left, another nurse walked past, dabbing her eyes. There would be group hugs, I guessed.

I don't think I could have been a nurse. There's the whole infection-risk thing for a start, but I also think there's no way I could be on my feet all day. The internet says nurses walk between eight thousand and ten thousand steps in a shift. Can you imagine how tired you'd get? My fast-food shifts were three hours. All I did was stand at the till and restock the fridge and even then, I needed a lie-down afterwards. When I graduated, I wrote advertising copy, sitting at a desk, but only for four hours a day. I've never been able to manage more than that.

Outside my window, the horses swung their heads from the police officer to the entrance to the Ghost Walk. Horses are awful stickybeaks; they have to know what's going on. The officer and I followed their gaze and watched a white figure emerge from the trees. The Ghost Walk is named for reported sightings of various ghosts in the wetland. There are two main ghosts. A female student, beautiful, of course, who overdosed on campus in the 1970s. She's a happy one. She sways along the boardwalk waving funeral flowers in the air. I heard a student in the tavern once, claiming she'd heard the bells on her skirts tinkling. It had made her feel peaceful and

calm, she said, like everything in her life would turn out okay. Later that evening, I saw the same student leaning over the boardwalk railing, wailing about how all men are bastards and throwing her guts up into the swamp, while her friend held her long glossy hair away from the deluge.

The second ghost is a health-economics professor who hanged himself on the branches of a she-oak after he was caught falsifying research data. The academic journal that published the research withdrew the article and the professor lost his job and his title and took himself into the Ghost Walk with a bottle of rum and a length of rope.

Apparently, the ghost of the disgraced professor doesn't wander about like the beautiful hippie; he just hangs from a selection of trees around the boardwalk, emanating shame and sadness. You never actually see the professor. The legend goes that anyone who senses his presence will be overwhelmed by the memory of all their own faults and wrongdoings. Every student suicide – and there was at least one each year, poor lambs – was traced by the student body back to that student's supposed journey through the Ghost Walk in the months prior.

I'd never seen any ghosts on my own walks through campus, and the white figure that the police officer and I watched emerging from the wetland's dark mouth wasn't the hippie student or the professor, it was just a forensics dude returning with evidence bags.

Somewhere down the corridor, I heard gasping and nose-blowing. Of course, the nurses were upset. Dr Beaufort – Gabe to everyone who knew him – was worshipped on the ward. He was godly, in form, manner and intellect. A deity in the flesh. He was a rising star in the operating theatre and research lab, a caring doctor loved by his patients, and a great mind that would transform the scientific field of respiratory medicine. The ward practically shimmered with anticipation ahead of his daily rounds. Even the floors, which I wouldn't put past cleaning themselves

spontaneously so that his sainted feet remained uncontaminated by the dirt tracked in by mere mortals. Everyone was in love with him. Everyone wanted to be my friend when they found out he was my doctor. *I hear Dr Beaufort is your surgeon, you lucky girl*, each new nurse or admissions clerk would say. *I wish he was my surgeon*. And they'd shiver, as though they'd like nothing more than to have Gabe Beaufort's fingers digging around inside their chest cavity. *Trust me*, I'd wanted to say to them, *I'd swap you my life any day so you could have him*.

But that's not true. Not really. Gabe saved my life. I guess you could say that if he hadn't been the one digging around inside my chest, it would have been someone else, and that would be true. He wasn't the only lung transplant surgeon here. But he kept me going before and after he cut my chest open and I'm not sure someone else could have done that.

First published 2025 by  
FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press  
PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159  
fremantlepress.com.au

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Cover image: Sunset at Menindee Lakes, Outback NSW, Australia,  
gettyimages.com.au

Author photo by Jess Gately

Designed by Nada Backovic, nadabackovic.com

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press



A catalogue record for this  
book is available from the  
National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760993214 (paperback)

ISBN 9781760993221 (ebook)



Department of  
Local Government, Sport  
and Cultural Industries



Fremantle Press is supported by the State Government through the  
Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

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where we work in Walyalup.

