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THE NIGHT GUEST

FIONA MCFARLANE

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I

Ruth woke at four in the morning and her blurry brain said, ‘Tiger.’ That was natural; she was dreaming. But there were noises in the house, and as she woke she heard them. They came across the hallway from the lounge room. Something large was rubbing against Ruth’s couch and television and, she suspected, the wheat-coloured recliner disguised as a wingback chair. Other sounds followed: the panting of a large animal; a vibrancy of breath that suggested enormity and intent; definite mammalian noises, definitely feline, as if her cats had grown in size and were sniffing for food with huge noses. But the sleeping cats were

weighing down the sheets at the end of Ruth's bed, and this was something else.

She lay and listened. Sometimes the house was quiet, and then she heard only the silly clamour of her beating blood. At other times she heard a distant low whine followed by exploratory breaths. The cats woke and stretched and stared and finally, when whatever was in the lounge room gave out a sharp huff, flew from the bed and ran, ecstatic with fear, into the hallway, through the kitchen, and out the partially open back door. This sudden activity prompted an odd strangled yowl from the lounge room, and it was this noise, followed by louder sniffing, that confirmed the intruder as a tiger. Ruth had seen one eating at a German zoo, and it sounded just like this: loud and wet, with a low, guttural breathing hum punctuated by little cautionary yelps, as if it might roar at any moment except that it was occupied by food. Yes, it sounded just like that, like a tiger eating some large bloody thing, and yet the noise of it was empty and meatless. A tiger! Ruth, thrilled by this possibility, forgot to be frightened and had to counsel herself back into fear. The tiger sniffed again, a rough sniff, thick with saliva. It turned on its great feet, as if preparing to settle down.

Ruth sent one courageous hand out into the dark to find the phone on her bedside table. She pressed the button that was programmed to summon her son Jeffrey, who would, in his sensible way, be sleeping right now in his house in New Zealand. The telephone rang; Ruth, hearing the creak of Jeffrey's throat as he answered the phone, was unrepentant.

'I hear noises,' she said, her voice low and urgent – the kind of voice she'd rarely used with him before.

'What? Ma?' He was bumping up out of sleep. His wife would

be waking, too; she would be rolling worried in bed and turning on a lamp.

‘I can hear a tiger, not roaring, just panting and snorting. It’s like he’s eating, and also concentrating very hard.’ So she knew he was a male tiger, and that was a comfort; a female tiger seemed more threatening.

Now Jeffrey’s voice stiffened. ‘What time is it?’

‘Listen,’ said Ruth. She held the phone away from her, into the night, but her arm felt vulnerable, so she brought it back. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘No,’ said Jeffrey. ‘Was it the cats?’

‘It’s much larger than a cat. Than a *cat* cat.’

‘You’re telling me there’s a what, there’s a tiger in your house?’

Ruth said nothing. She wasn’t telling him there was a tiger in her house; she was telling him she could hear one. That distinction seemed important, now that she was awake and Jeffrey was awake, and his wife, too, and probably at this point the children.

‘Oh, Ma. There’s no tiger. It’s either a cat, or a dream.’

‘I know that,’ said Ruth. She knew there couldn’t be a tiger; but she wasn’t sure it was a dream. She was awake, after all. And her back hurt, which it never did in dreams. But now she noticed the noises had stopped. There was only the ordinary outside sound of the breaking sea.

‘Would you like to go and investigate?’ asked Jeffrey. ‘I’ll stay on the phone with you.’ His voice conveyed a serene weariness; Ruth suspected he was reassuring his wife with an eyes-closed shake of the head that everything was all right, that his mother was just having one of her moments. When he’d visited a few weeks ago, at Easter, Ruth had noticed a new watchful patience in him, and

a tendency to purse his lips whenever she said something he considered unusual. So she knew, from the funny mirror of Jeffrey's face, that she had reached the stage where her sons worried about her.

'No, darling, it's all right,' she said. 'So silly! I'm sorry. Go back to sleep.'

'Are you sure?' said Jeffrey, but he sounded foggy; he had already abandoned her.

Jeffrey's dismissal made her brave. Ruth rose from her bed and crossed the room without turning on any lights. She watched the white step of her feet on the carpeted floor until she reached the bedroom door; then she stopped and called, 'Hello?' Nothing answered, but there was, Ruth was sure, a vegetable smell in the long hallway, and an inland feel to the air that didn't suit this seaside house. The clammy night was far too hot for May. Ruth ventured another 'Hello?' and pictured, as she did so, the headlines: 'Australian Woman Eaten by Tiger in Own House'. Or, more likely, 'Tiger Puts Pensioner on the Menu'. This delighted her; and there was another sensation, a new one, to which she attended with greater care: a sense of extravagant consequence. Something important, Ruth felt, was happening to her, and she couldn't be sure what it was: the tiger, or the feeling of importance. They seemed to be related, but the sense of consequence was disproportionate to the actual events of the night, which were, after all, a bad dream, a pointless phone call, and a brief walk to the bedroom door. She felt something coming to meet her – something large, and not a real thing, of course, she wasn't that far gone – but a shape, or anyway a temperature. It produced a funny bubble in her chest. The house was quiet. Ruth pressed at the tenderness of

her chest; she closed the bedroom door and followed her own feet back to bed. Her head filled and shifted and blurred again. The tiger must be sleeping now, she thought, so Ruth slept, too, and didn't wake again until late morning.

The lounge room, when Ruth entered it in daylight, was benign. The furniture was all where it should be, civil, neat, and almost anxious for her approval, as if it had crossed her in some way and was now waiting for her forgiveness, dressed in its very best clothes. Ruth was oppressed by this wheedling familiarity. She crossed to the window and opened the lace curtains with a dramatic gesture. The front garden looked exactly as it usually did – the grevillea needed trimming – but Ruth saw a yellow taxi idling at the end of the drive, half hidden by the casuarinas. It looked so solitary, so needlessly bright. The driver must be lost and need directions; that happened from time to time along this apparently empty stretch of coast.

Ruth surveyed the room again. 'Ha!' she said, as if daring it to frighten her. When it failed to, she left it in something like disgust. She went to the kitchen, opened the shutters, and looked out at the sea. It lay waiting below the garden, and although she was unable to walk down to it – the dune was too steep, and her back too unpredictable – she felt soothed by its presence in an indefinable way, just as she imagined a plant might be by Mozart. The tide was full and flat across the beach. The cats came out from the dune grasses; they stopped in the doorway, nuzzling the inside air with their suspicious noses until, in a sudden surfeit of calm, they passed into the house. Ruth poured some dry food into their bowls and watched as they ate without ceasing until the food was gone. Something about the way they ate was biblical, she had decided;

it had the character of a plague.

Now Ruth made tea. She sat in her chair – the one chair her back could endure for any length of time – and ate pumpkin seeds for breakfast. This chair was an enormous wooden object, inherited from her husband's family; it looked like the kind a Victorian vicar might teeter on while writing sermons. But it braced Ruth's back, so she kept it near the dining-room table, by the window that looked over the garden and dune and beach. She sat in her chair and drank tea and examined the new sensation – the extravagance, the consequence – she had experienced in the night, and which remained with her now. Certainly it was dreamlike; it had a dream's diminishing character. She knew that by lunchtime she might have forgotten it entirely. The feeling reminded her of something vital – not of youth, exactly, but of the urgency of youth – and she was reluctant to give it up. For some time now she had hoped that her end might be as extraordinary as her beginning. She also appreciated how unlikely that was. She was a widow and she lived alone.

The pumpkin seeds Ruth ate for breakfast were one of the few items in the pantry. She spread them out on her left hand and lifted them to her mouth, two at a time, with her right. One must go in the left side, at the back of her teeth; the other must go in the right. She was like this about her daily pills, too; they would be more effective if she was careful about how she took them. Through this symmetry – always begin a flight of stairs on her left foot, always end it on her right – she maintained the order of her days. If she had dinner ready in time for the six o'clock news, both of her sons would come home for Christmas. If that taxi driver didn't ring the front doorbell, she would be allowed to stay in her chair for two

hours. She looked out at the sea and counted the pattern of the waves: if there were fewer than eight small ones before another big curler, she would sweep the garden path of sand. To sweep the sand from the path was a holy punishment, a limitless task, so Ruth set traps for herself in order to decide the matter. She hated to sweep, hated anything so senseless; she hated to make her bed only to unmake it again in the evening. Long ago she had impressed the importance of these chores upon her sons and believed in them as she did so. Now she thought, If one person walks on the beach in the next ten minutes, there's a tiger in my house at night; if there are two, the tiger won't hurt me; if there are three, the tiger will finish me off. And the possibility of this produced one of those brief, uncontrollable shivers, which Ruth thought of as beginning in the brain and letting themselves out through the soles of the feet.

'It's nearly winter,' she said aloud, looking out at the flattening sea; the tide was going out. 'It's nearly bloody winter.'

Ruth would have liked to know another language in order to revert to it at times of disproportionate frustration. She'd forgotten the Hindi she knew as a child, when she lived in Fiji. Lately, swearing – in which she indulged in a mild, girlish way – was her other language. She counted seven small waves, which meant she had to sweep the path, and so she said, 'Shit,' but didn't stir from her chair. She was capable of watching the sea all day. This morning, an oil tanker waited on the rim of the world, as if long-sufferingly lost, and farther around the bay, near the town, Ruth could make out surfers. They rode waves that from here looked bath-sized, just toy swells. And in every way this was ordinary, except that a large woman was approaching, looking as if she

had been blown in from the sea. She toiled up the dune directly behind the house, dragging a suitcase that, after some struggle, she abandoned among the grasses. It slid a little way down the hill. Once she had made her determined way to the top of the dune, the woman moved with steadfast purpose through the garden. She filled up a little more of the sky with every step. Her breadth and the warmth of her skin and the dark sheen of her obviously straightened hair looked Fijian to Ruth, who rose from her chair to meet her guest at the kitchen door. Her back didn't complain when she stood; that, and the woman's nationality, made her optimistic about the encounter. Ruth stepped into the garden and surprised the woman, who seemed stranded without her suitcase, exhausted from her uphill climb, encased in a thin grey coat, with the thin grey sea behind her. Perhaps she had been shipwrecked, or marooned.

'Mrs Field! You're home!' the woman cried, and she advanced on Ruth with a reckless energy that dispelled the impression of shipwreck.

'Here I am,' said Ruth.

'Large as life,' said the woman, and she held out both hands cupped together as if they had just caught a bothersome fly. Ruth must offer her hands in return; she offered; the woman took them into her sure, steady grip, and together they stood in the garden as if this were what the woman had come for. The top of Ruth's head didn't quite reach her visitor's shoulders.

'You'll have to excuse me,' said the woman. 'I'm done in. I was worried about you! I knocked at the front, and when you didn't answer I thought I'd come round the back way. Didn't know what a hill there'd be! Woof,' she said, as if imitating an expressionless dog.

‘I didn’t hear you knocking.’

‘You didn’t?’ The woman frowned and looked down at her hands as if they had failed her.

‘Do I know you?’ Ruth asked. She meant this sincerely; possibly she did know her. Possibly this woman had once been a young girl sitting on Ruth’s mother’s knee. Perhaps this woman’s mother had been ill in just the right small way that would bring her to Ruth’s father’s clinic. There were always children at the clinic; they dallied and clowned, they loved anyone who came their way, and they all left punctually with their families. Maybe this woman came out of those old days with a message or a greeting. But she was probably too young to have been one of those children – Ruth guessed early forties, smooth-faced and careful of her appearance. She wasn’t wearing makeup, but she had the heavy kind of eyelids that always look powdered in a soft brown.

‘Sorry, sorry.’ The woman released Ruth’s hands, propped one arm against the house, and said, ‘You don’t know me from Adam.’ Then she adopted a professional tone. ‘My name is Frida Young, and I’m here to look after you.’

‘Oh, I didn’t realise!’ cried Ruth, as if she’d invited someone to a social event and then forgotten all about it. She stepped away from the bulky shadow of Frida Young’s leaning. In a fluttering, puzzled, almost flirtatious voice, she said, ‘Do I need looking after?’

‘Couldn’t you use a hand round the place? If someone rocked up to my front door – my back door – and offered to look after me, I’d kiss their feet.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Ruth. ‘Did my sons send you?’

‘The government sent me,’ said Frida, who seemed cheerfully

certain of the results of their chat: she had eased off her shoes – sandals from which the laces had been removed – and was flexing her toes in the sandy grass. ‘You were on our waiting list and a spot opened up.’

‘What for?’ The telephone began to ring. ‘Do I pay for this?’ asked Ruth, flustered by all the activity.

‘No, love! The government pays. What a deal, huh?’

‘Excuse me,’ said Ruth, moving into the kitchen. Frida followed her.

Ruth picked up the phone and held it to her ear without speaking.

‘Ma?’ said Jeffrey. ‘Ma? Is that you?’

‘Of course it’s me.’

‘I just wanted to check in. Make sure you hadn’t been eaten in the night.’ Jeffrey indulged in the tolerant chuckle his father used to employ at times of loving exasperation.

‘That wasn’t necessary, darling. I’m absolutely fine,’ said Ruth. Frida began to motion in a way that Ruth interpreted as a request for a glass of water; she nodded to imply she would see to it soon. ‘Listen, dear, there’s someone here with me right now.’

Frida clattered about the kitchen, opening cupboards and the refrigerator.

‘Oh! Then I’ll let you go.’

‘No, Jeff, I wanted to tell you, she’s a helper of some kind.’ Ruth turned to Frida. ‘Excuse me, but what are you, exactly? A nurse?’

‘A nurse?’ said Jeffrey.

‘A government carer,’ said Frida.

Ruth preferred the sound of this. ‘She’s a government carer, Jeff, and she says she’s here to help me.’

‘You’re kidding me,’ said Jeffrey. ‘How did she find you? How does she seem?’

‘She’s right here.’

‘Put her on.’

Ruth handed the phone to Frida, who took it good-naturedly and cradled it against her shoulder. It was an old-fashioned kind of phone, a large heavy crescent, cream-coloured and attached to the wall by a particularly long white cord that meant Ruth could carry it anywhere in the house.

‘Jeff,’ Frida said, and now Ruth could hear only the faint outlines of her son’s voice. Frida said, ‘Frida Young.’ She said, ‘Of course,’ and then, ‘A state programme. Her name was on file, and a spot opened up.’ Ruth disliked hearing herself discussed in the third person. She felt like an eavesdropper. ‘An hour a day to start with. It’s more of an assessment, just to see what’s needed, and we’ll take things from there. Yes, yes, I can take care of all that.’ Finally, ‘Your mother’s in good hands, Jeff,’ and Frida handed the phone back to Ruth.

‘This could be wonderful, Ma,’ said Jeffrey. ‘This could be just exactly what we need. What a good, actually good use of taxpayers’ money.’

‘Wait,’ said Ruth. The cats, curious, were sniffing at Frida’s toes.

‘But I want to see the paperwork, all right? Before you sign anything. Do you remember how to use Dad’s fax machine?’

‘Just a minute,’ said Ruth, to both Frida and Jeffrey, and, with bashful urgency, as if she had a pressing need to urinate, she hurried into the lounge room and stood at the window. The yellow of the taxi was still visible at the end of the drive.

'I'm alone now,' she said, her voice lowered and her lips pressed to the phone. 'Now, I'm not sure about this. I'm not doing badly.'

Ruth didn't like talking about this with her son. It offended her and made her shy. She supposed she should feel grateful for his love and care, but it seemed too soon; she wasn't old – not too old, only seventy-five. Her own mother had been past eighty before things really began to unravel. And to have this happen today, when she felt vulnerable about calling Jeffrey in the middle of the night with all that nonsense about a tiger. She wondered if he'd mentioned any of that to Frida.

'You're doing wonderfully,' said Jeffrey, and Ruth winced at this, and her back vibrated a little, so she put out her left hand to hold the windowsill. He had said exactly the same thing on his last visit, when he mentioned retirement villages and in-home carers. 'Frida's only there to assess your situation. She'll probably just take over some of the housework, and you'll relax and enjoy yourself.'

'She's Fijian,' said Ruth, mainly for her own reassurance.

'There you are, some familiarity. And if you hate it, if you don't like her, then we'll make other arrangements.'

'Yes,' said Ruth, more doubtfully than she felt; she was heartened by this, even if she knew Jeffrey was patronising her, but she knew the extent of her independence, its precise horizons, and she knew she was neither helpless nor especially brave; she was somewhere in between; but she was still self-governing.

'I'll let Phil know. I'll tell him to call you. And we'll talk more on Sunday,' said Jeffrey. Sunday was the day they usually spoke, at four in the afternoon: half an hour with Jeffrey, fifteen minutes with his wife, two minutes each with the children. They didn't time it deliberately; it just worked out that way. The children would

hold the phone too close to their mouths. 'Hello, Nanna,' they would breathe into her ear, and it was clear they had almost forgotten her. She saw them at Christmas and they loved her; the year slid away and she was an anonymous voice, handwriting on a letter, until they arrived at her festive door again; for three or four years this pattern had continued, after the first frenzy of her husband's death. Ruth's younger son, Phillip, was different: he would spend two or three hours on the phone and was capable of making her laugh so hard she snorted. But he called only once every few weeks. He saved all the details of his merry, busy life (he taught English in Hong Kong, had boys of his own, was divorced and remarried, liked windsurfing); he poured them out over her, then vanished for another month.

Jeffrey ended this call with such warmth that for the first time Ruth worried properly for herself. The tenderness was irresistible. Ruth was a little afraid of her sons. She was afraid of being unmasked by their youthful authority. Good-looking families in which every member was vital, attractive and socially skilled had made her nervous as a young woman, and now she was the mother of sons just like that. Their voices had a certain weight.

Ruth followed the phone cord back to the kitchen and found Frida sitting at the dining table drinking a glass of water and reading yesterday's newspaper. She had removed her grey coat and it hung lifelessly, like something shredded, over the back of a chair. Underneath it she wore white trousers and a white blouse; not exactly a nurse's uniform, but not unlike. A handbag, previously concealed by the coat, was slung across her body, and her discarded sandals lay by the door. Frida's legs were stretched out beneath the table. She had hooked her bare toes onto the low rung of the

opposite chair, and her arms were pressed down over the newspaper. She read with a mobile frown on her broad face. Her eyebrows were plucked so thin they should have given her a look of permanent surprise; instead, they exaggerated each of her expressions with a perfect stroke. And her face was all expression: held still, it might have vanished into its own smooth surface.

‘Listen to this,’ she said. ‘A man in Canada, right? In a wheelchair. They cut off his electricity one night, it’s an accident, they get the wrong house, and he’s frozen stiff by morning. Dead from the cold.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Ruth, smiling vaguely. She noted that Frida’s vowels were broad, but her ‘t’s were crisp. ‘That’s terrible. You found the water all right?’

Frida looked up in surprise. ‘Just from the tap,’ she said. ‘Who’d live in a place you could freeze overnight? I don’t mind heat, but I feel the cold. Though I reckon I’ve never been really, truly cold. You know’ – she leaned back in her chair – ‘I’ve never even seen snow. Have you?’

‘Yes. Twice, in England,’ said Ruth. Her back trembled but she bent, nevertheless, to reach for a cat. She wasn’t sure what else to do. The cat evaded her and jumped into Frida’s lap. Frida didn’t look at the cat or remark on it, but she stroked it expertly with the knuckles of her right hand. She wasn’t wearing any rings.

‘He’s nice, your son,’ said Frida. ‘Got any more kids?’

‘Just the two boys.’

‘Flown the nest.’ Frida folded the newspaper to frame the blurry face of the frozen Canadian and shook the cat off her lap.

‘Long ago,’ said Ruth. ‘They have kids of their own.’

‘A grandmother!’ cried Frida, with bloodless enthusiasm.

‘So you see, I’m used to being alone.’

Frida lowered her head over the table and looked up at Ruth so that each brown eye seemed cradled in its respective brow. There was a new gravity to her; she seemed to have absorbed it from the room’s more important objects, from the newspaper and the table and the rungs of Ruth’s chair. ‘Don’t think of me as company, Mrs Field,’ Frida said. ‘I’m not a guest. I come for an hour every morning, same time every day, I do my job, and I’m out of your hair. No surprises. No strangers showing up any time of the day or night. I’m not a stranger, and I’m not a friend – I’m your right arm. I’m the help you’re giving yourself. This is you looking after you, this is you mattering. Does that make sense? I get it, Mrs Field, I really do.’

‘Oh,’ said Ruth, who believed, at that moment, that Frida Young ‘got it’: that she understood – how could she understand? – the tiger’s visit, the smell in the hallway, Fiji of course, that strange, safe place, and the dream of consequence in the silly night.

But Frida broke the spell by standing up. Her bulk arranged itself quite beautifully around her; she suited her size. And her voice was cheerful now; it had lost its thrilling, tented quality. ‘Let’s leave it at that for today,’ she said. ‘There’s a lot to take in. And I’ve left my bag outside.’

Ruth followed her into the garden. ‘Lovely day,’ Frida said, although it was a flat, pale day, and the sea lay dull against the dull sand. Frida paid no attention to the view. She stepped down the dune towards the suitcase with her elbows folded in and her hands up near her shoulders, as if afraid of falling. She was more graceful in descent; her back had so much strength that it made Ruth’s ache. Having retrieved the case, Frida paused to check the state

of her hair, which was dark and drawn into a no-nonsense knot at the back of her head. The suitcase was heavy and she chatted as she heaved it.

‘There’s nothing to worry about, Mrs Field,’ she said. A rim of sweat shone on her forehead. ‘We’ll talk duties tomorrow. I cook, clean, make sure you’re taking your meds, help with exercise. Bathing? You’ve got that covered for the time being, is my guess. Whatever’s hard on you now, I’m here for. You’ve got a bad back, am I right? I can see how careful you are with it. Gotta look out for your back. Here we go.’ Frida hoisted the suitcase over the lip of the dune, swung it across the garden and into the house, and brought it to rest next to Ruth’s chair under the dining-room window.

‘What’s in there?’ asked Ruth.

‘Only about three thousand kilos. I’ve got to get me one of these with wheels.’ Frida kicked the suitcase at the same moment a car horn sounded from the front of the house, so that the suitcase appeared to have honked. ‘That’s my ride,’ she said. ‘I’ll be back tomorrow morning. Nine o’clock suit you?’ She seized her coat and hunted for her sandals until Ruth pointed out where they lay beside the door. The car horn came again; the cats jumped and flew in giddy circles around Frida’s feet. Frida didn’t bend to pet them; instead, she looked around the kitchen and dining room as if surveying the goodness of her creation, and walked with confidence down the hallway to the front door.

‘You have a nice house,’ she said. She opened the door. Ruth, following, saw the rectangle of light from outside, the shape of Frida in the light, and, dimly, the golden flank of a taxi.

‘The suitcase?’ Ruth asked.

‘I’ll leave it, if that’s all right with you,’ said Frida. ‘Bye now!’ She was closing the door. By the time Ruth reached the lounge-room window, there was no Frida and no taxi. The grass stood high in the winter garden, and there was no sound besides the sea.