

Excerpt – *Let Sleeping Gods Lie*

Dianne Gray

Nick Landau slowed his motorbike on the highway and looked up at the road sign that welcomed visitors to Bookalong Creek. Beneath it the words, ‘Tidy Town’, were laced with bullet holes. He had deliberately bypassed the sign that pointed to the place where the nightmare began.

He padded harder at the brake and turned onto a corrugated dirt road that led to a labyrinth of sugarcane fields. The corpse of a rock wallaby lay on the side of the road like an old brown blanket draped over door knobs.

The afternoon sun shone through a gap in the flame trees. He shielded his eyes from the light and the memory — his first memory, sitting in his high-chair in the kitchen of the old farmhouse before they moved into the Queenslander. A circle of light on the food tray in front of him that speared down from a hole in the tin roof. He had moved his hand to grab at it; it disappeared and reappeared, refusing to be snatched. Tiny angels floated through it as his mother swept the daily deposit of farm dust from the linoleum.

But that was a lifetime ago. There were no more memories. They were trapped in the dark place.

He slowed his bike to peer into the garage of a small, neat farmhouse. There was no car in the driveway so he drove further down the powdery road and stopped at the old wooden bridge.

He could feel throbbing in his left temple and he knew from the tightness on his skin that the blood from the wound on his face had dried. He waited for the dust to settle before peeling away his black, open-faced helmet to reveal a face as hard and sharp as a statue. He untied his bandanna and teased at the tips of his leather gloves with white teeth. His dark eyes held a sense of danger; like a campfire that could easily flare at any moment and ignite the countryside.

The heat was riding the first thermal train down from the equator. Nick lifted his head to smell the coming of a wicked tropical summer. October fruit burdened the trees and rainbow lorikeets abandoned their assault on fermenting lychees at the sight of him. He watched the birds explode into the sky like coloured fireworks, before they settled, slapping and gossiping their way back to the fruit for another season of drunken oblivion.

He stood for a moment, rocking on thick leather boots, wiping sweat from his hands on dirty blue jeans. His black leather jacket had been cut away at the shoulders to reveal coarse tanned arms. He rested his elbows on the railing of the bridge, inhaled the tropical scenery and splintered memories of his childhood — skimming stones, building dams, examining the eyeballs of fish and birds left to rot on the river bank.

This was where his fascination with eyes began. He remembered it now. This was his place of discovery into the world of the dead. A place of cutting and probing. Holding disembodied eyeballs up to the light like diamonds.

He leaned over the railing then coughed and spat. His spittle plopped into a deep calm pool near the bank, bobbed for several seconds then slowly stretched out to be ripped away with the current like a child on a waterslide. He could have stood there all day spitting into his disjointed reflection. Anything would have been better than going back.

This was not the road traffic would normally take when visiting Landau's sugarcane farm. It belonged to a neighbouring property and was used for tractors and harvesters. It was just one of many pockmarked headlands that sliced through the tropical sugarcane fields, dividing them into neat, workable chunks of farming land. The main access road to Landau's homestead lay seven kilometres south and Nick would have been there by now if he had taken the turn-off. He chose this road to give himself time to calm his demon.

If he had stopped on the bridge a moment sooner, he would have noticed a feral figure diving for cover between the rotting wooden pylons and river bank. As his attention to detail sailed downstream, the hiding figure focussed a determined eye on his back.

He turned quickly to see a shadow darting away into the undergrowth. The only sound he could hear was water spilling over rocks from the rapids upstream. His demon was heavy, twisting its claws into the base of his neck and whispering in his ear – *let's get this over and done with and get the fuck out of here.*

The bike roared with a twist of his wrist before rattling over the wooden planks of the bridge like a child's fingers over piano keys. Nick turned its smooth, black nose southeast, toward the monsters of his past.