

## Excerpt – *Soul's Child*

Dianne Gray

My father chiselled his way around integrity and common sense to find celebrity status of a sort. He was born Mervin Oswald Jones, but this name wasn't good enough for a dynamic screen image so he had it legally changed. He became 'Clive Soul', and the shape of the name stuck in my teeth like metal filings. His Hollywood show *Soul Search* sought to prove the reality of precognition, ghosts and demons. The show made enough money to buy all the friends my father craved and the ones I didn't. People would come around to visit, lounge around the pool and dance and drink late into the night. My father loved the attention. He was famous because he said he could talk to the dead and see into the future.

He was a liar.

I told him I never watched his show, but this made me a liar too.

It started out with a studio audience who sat attentively while he rattled off letters of the alphabet.

"There is someone here who has a deceased male relative whose name starts with A," he would begin. People would gasp and he would pick a target and ask, "Is the relative's name Alan?" At this time they would shake their head miserably and someone else in the audience would yell out, "My father's name was Alan!"

He had them in the palm of his hand and for the next half hour he would tell them their dead relatives were speaking through him. For the second half of the show he would follow a group of people, in near darkness, with hand-held cameras through an old house or hotel or jail. They would scan the area and then someone would ask the question, "Did you hear that?" My father

would stop and listen intently before confirming everyone's convoluted and misguided belief by saying his famous words, "There's something here with us – a spirit."

The eyes of the blonde lady holding the microphone would widen as she gasped in disbelief and horror – as if this was the last thing she expected to happen at 9.30 pm every Wednesday on Channel 2.

I could smell his aftershave and arrogance through the television screen. Away from the camera the make-up artist waited to lift and spray his bouffant blond hair before tapping the shine from his sharpened nose. A single thud of the heart would sound as a thick metal chain crashed to the floor. Everyone would jump and he would whisper, "It's a bad one."

The first season of the show was relatively successful but my father was always looking for ways to outdo the competition. He wanted higher ratings, more friends and more money. During the second season, and a month before my sixteenth birthday, he conjured up a sensation – the demon possession.

The first time this happened I was in my bedroom shredding pages from my note pad, crunching them up and sticking them onto black cardboard to make another montage for my wall. The television was on in the background where my father was creeping through an old house in search of ghosts. It was springtime and the scent of the blossoming cherry outside my window drifted through my curtains and lingered above me as the memory of my dead mother and younger sister. Ms Mendez was downstairs in the kitchen with the television on, clanging pans and doing whatever it was my father paid her to do while she wasn't tending to me. She couldn't speak English very well, but she was my only reality in a world of counterfeits.

I heard a guttural growl like a wolf ready to strike and looked up to see my father's face take on a strange hue through the night vision camera. His

eyes began to roll back in his head and he dropped to his knees. Someone tried to hold him up. The cameraman fumbled and the entire scene shook as if the world beneath his feet had given way. Someone screamed out, "Clive! My God! What's happening?" One of the crew rushed in to help, but he struggled harder and his arms lashed out like snakes. A deep voice came from his throat and cut through the chaos. "Get thee out of my house – I will open the gates of hell!" My father struggled for another few seconds and then lurched, as if the demon had jumped from his body. The cameraman followed him and the others outside where he sat on the ground and took a deep breath.

"I'm okay. I'm back," he eventually said.

The crew cheered and clapped and slapped him on the back and the lady with the microphone cried tears of happiness. Ms Mendez ran upstairs from the kitchen and stood at my door clinging to her rosary beads and screaming, "Venció al diablo! Venció al diablo! Gracias a dios!"

Even with my narrow understanding of Spanish I knew she was thanking God that my father had defeated the devil.

His elaborate and badly acted scene infuriated me. I wheeled my chair over to the television, ripped the plug from the wall and threw it at the bookcase. The framed photo of me as a blonde thirteen year old, posing in my tutu, toppled off the shelf and crashed to the floor. Ms Mendez rushed to pick it up. The glass had cracked and she exclaimed, "La belleza ballerina. I fix."

I was tempted to ask her if she meant she could fix the picture or my legs, but the cynicism would have been lost in translation.

The demon possession boosted the show's ratings and added another dimension to my father's litany of fake powers. It became a regular event and evil only attacked him immediately prior to the fifth advertisement. Like a true Champion of Good he could defeat any number of inhuman spirits and send

them back to the fiery pits of hell by the end of the show. More hangers-on came to the house and sometimes I would see paparazzi sitting at our gate waiting to snap him collecting the newspaper when Ms Mendez drove me to school.

But each time he challenged his fake demons and called them to battle he was opening a door to a world he did not understand or control. Inch by inch the darkness beyond the door was moving closer and I knew it wouldn't be long before it was strong enough to manifest. This would be a battle he could never win.

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