

This story is provided freely for educational purposes only. It is intended for use in conjunction with the book it was published in, *Worlds Next Door* (FableCroft Publishing). Please respect the rights of the author, artist and publisher in your use of work from this website, and please consider purchasing a copy of the book.



GHOST TOWN

PAMELA FREEMAN

My dad says we never would have had ghosts at all in Mandee if it hadn't been for the town meeting on November 20th. Miss Sabatini (my teacher) took us (Grade Six, Mandee Public) along to observe the meeting because she said it was a good opportunity to observe democracy in action. So I suppose we were there for the beginning of it all.

"We've got to do something," the Mayor said. "Now that the coal mine's closed down, there's no work left in the town."

"Too right," Wal Harvey, the owner of the pub, shouted from the first row. "House prices are so low people can't even afford to sell up and move out."

"Mandee is in a bad way," Alderwoman Carter said. "We need to attract business to the place."

Lots of people in the audience yelled out "Yeah, you tell 'em Eileen" and "Betcha" and "You're not wrong".

"I propose the Town Council look into ways to bring business back to Mandee." That was Mick Carter, the Alderwoman's husband. She nodded approvingly to him.

"Seconded," she said. The vote was in favour.

“How are you gunna do it, though?” Wal Harvey wanted to know.

“You can make a lot of money from tourists,” a voice suggested from the back of the hall. That was my dad. Gordon Farrell (I’m Cathy). He’s the accountant for the Council. He knows about money.

The Mandee Town Council looked thoughtfully at each other.

“That gives me an idea...” said the Mayor.

Two days later, the Mayor made a trip to the city. He spent three days there, on Council business, he said, so the Council paid. When he handed in his expenses to Dad, there was a big bill from ‘Cosmic Contacts Pty Ltd’.

“What’s this for, Will?” Dad wanted to know.

“You’ll see,” the Mayor said. And laughed to himself.

It all started a few days after that, when the first ghost showed up at six-thirty on the first floor balcony of Mandee pub.

And what a ghost! A full-blown, no doubt-about-it in-full-daylight apparition, Dad called it. A headless man, carrying his head tucked under his arm, just like in all the stories.

It caused a bit of a stir. The ghost appeared right in front of Mick Carter, who was leaning on the railing near the stairs. Mick was so surprised he fell over the balcony and broke his leg. Dad tripped backwards down the stairs. People screamed and rushed for the staircase — but there the ghost was, floating about ten centimetres off the floor, with his head tucked under his arm, *smiling*.

Everyone backed up to the other end of the balcony, and waited. The ghost just stayed there. Andy Petrovic swears he was enjoying watching them all shiver in their boots, but Andy always spins a good story. The ghost made them wait for an hour before he disappeared — slowly.

It happened again the next day. Same time, same place. The first floor balcony was full. Everyone who’d missed being there the day before had turned up just on the off chance — not really believing the ghost would show again.

But at six-thirty on the dot the apparition started to materialise. People had brought cameras and started clicking away. Andy Petrovic

was the only one who'd been there the first time who'd risked turning up again. (My dad was in bed with a bad back from falling down the stairs, but Andy came and told us all about it afterwards.)

"G'day," Andy said to the ghost, "fancy a cold one?" and offered the ghost a schooner of Old.

The ghost shook his head — with both hands. Blood dripped from the neck and sizzled on the floor tiles. Three people fainted.

None of the photos of the ghost came out. They showed the balcony all right, but the ghost wasn't there.

Trying to figure out where he'd come from kept the whole town busy for days. No-one knew of anybody who'd been beheaded in the area, not even back in the convict days. Andy Petrovic reckoned it was a travelling ghost.

"Got good manners, too," Andy said. "Well brought up."

A couple of days after that me and Tanya Celi (my best friend) were in the local milkbar playing video games when the ghost wandered in. But this time he wasn't alone. He was arm-in-arm with a Woman In White.

"Eeerrk!" Tanya pointed. "She's got a knife in her!"

It was true. The Woman In White had the handle of a black knife sticking out from her ribs. There was a big red patch of blood on her dress.

They were interested in the video games. Mrs Carter (that's the Alderwoman) started yelling for Mick to come but he was in the back room with his leg up in plaster. Mrs Carter backed out of the shop really slowly like the ghosts were snakes or something. I stuck to my seat — I was aiming for my highest score and I wasn't going to be scared off by any ghosts. Besides, they were between me and the door. Tanya backed up till she was right against the wall but they just wanted to look over my shoulder.

Maybe being nervous makes you play better because I got the highest score ever made on that game! (It's the one with the girl karate fighter.) Afterwards I got up and let them have a try. I even put

money in for them, but they couldn't play. Their fingers went straight through the controls. They looked pretty disappointed. Then they disappeared.

The next day it got exciting. Four different TV crews turned up to do a story on the ghosts. No-one knows how they found out about them but Dad said he reckoned the Mayor let them in on it.

Miss Sabatini said we could go and watch them work because it would be good media education for us, so we got to see it all.

They set the cameras up on the balcony of the pub. Wal Harvey was just about to be interviewed by one of the reporters when *Zap!* Both of the ghosts appeared in a flash of light.

It was pretty spectacular. The camera crews were just about falling over and the reporters were all saying "Are you getting this, are you getting this?" and the camera operators were all saying "No, no, I'm not getting a thing," and the sound people with the microphones on long sticks were saying "Quiet! Please, quiet!" and Miss Sabatini was saying "Oh my God!" and the kids were all cheering and the ghosts were just floating there.

They waved to Tanya and me and we waved back and that meant that later on the reporters interviewed *us* and we were on all the channels the next night. All over the country. Maybe the world.

They interviewed us because ghosts just don't show up on videotape and they said they had to put some kind of story together. The reporters weren't too happy and the camera operators started getting all technical and talked about fifty cycle phase interlock and stuff.

They said they'd be back with more equipment. I thought they were glad to get away, but two days later they were back with film crews. They thought maybe the ghosts would 'register' on film even if they didn't on videotape. We told them about the photos that hadn't turned out but they wanted to try anyway.

The Woman In White liked being the centre of attention, I think, because as soon as the crews arrived she appeared on the steps of the Town Hall and started posing.

The film crews started filming like crazy and the reporters tried to interview her but she just smiled at them and turned sideways so they could get a good shot of the knife sticking out of her ribs. One of the reporters turned a bit green.

Then it was mega exciting because a helicopter came to pick up the film and take it back to the city to be developed. The crews stayed on to do some more filming, interviews with some Mandee people like the Mayor and Wal Harvey and Mick Carter who had to explain how he broke his leg. But they needn't have bothered because the next day we found out that the ghosts hadn't come out on film either.

When we watched the news that night we found out that another ghost had appeared on the road outside town to wave goodbye to the film crews. It was a convict in chains, and pretty soon he started turning up with the other two. They were still interested in video games, and they really liked Jason Miller's skateboard tricks. When he got off they made the skateboard do tricks all by itself — somersaults and wheelies up walls and everything.

People started coming to stay at the pub. Mr Harvey put a lot of ads in the city papers, saying stuff like "Have a drink with spirit at Mandee pub", and "Mandee — the pub with more spirits". He even had some T-shirts printed: "Mandee pub — more spirits to the glass".

And you wouldn't believe the loony tunes who turned up. We had some very weird people in town. They kept popping up in odd places like the graveyard, or stopping us on the street to ask if we'd seen any 'manifestations'. Mum made me come straight home from school. I wasn't even allowed to go to the milkbar anymore.

Miss Sabatini took us to the next town meeting as well. The council was planning to discuss how Mandee could make money out of the ghosts. We were supposed to take notes and report back in class on what happened, but we never had to do it.

"Fellow citizens," the Mayor started off, and then *Zap!* again and all three ghosts appeared right over his head. Did he get a shock! They were floating about two metres off the floor and they were all sitting cross-legged. They waved to us kids and we all waved back and then the Convict took a pack of cards out of his pocket and they started to play. It looked very spooky, the way the cards were dealt and just landed on thin air, like there was an invisible table in front of them.

Mrs Carter was already off the platform and heading for the door and half the audience went with her. The Mayor was green and didn't

know what to do and my dad yelled out “Close the meeting, Will!” so he did.

“I declare this meeting of the Mandee Town Council closed,” he gabbled and then headed for the exit. The rest of the council had already run off. In the end there was just Grade Six and my parents. Miss Sabatini was very cool. She waited till everyone had rushed out and then got us all into two lines and led us right out of there like nothing strange had happened. Tanya and Jason and I wanted to stay and play cards but with Mum and Dad looking over my shoulder it wasn’t the right time to say so.

After that, things started hotting up. There were ghosts everywhere. The Convict was joined by some convict mates, still in chains, and a little kid ghost started following the Woman In White around. They hardly zapped at all now, just wandered around town nodding and smiling to people.

There were lots of people to smile at. The place was full of priests and ministers and people from the University called parapsychologists (they study ghosts) and mediums and just general weirdos. The pub did a roaring trade and a lot of families took in boarders.

I think the ghosts weren’t too impressed by all these visitors, because they started hanging around us kids. During the last week of school a whole crowd of convicts drifted right through the wall into our classroom. Miss Sabatini was smart. She changed the lesson from maths revision to Australian history and started talking about the convicts’ clothes, and how they were chained and punished during the old days.

The convicts got right into it. They were listening and nodding away, and when she started talking about the way they were lashed if they did anything wrong, even little things, a couple of them took off their shirts and showed us the lash marks on their backs. It was gross. They were still oozing blood and looking really horrible. Then the Convict showed us the noose mark around his neck and he got a couple of his mates to help him demonstrate death by hanging.

Alex Holden threw up all over Paul Tsekouras and Cecilia Maxwell fainted. Miss Sabatini gave us all an early mark. She’s so cool. She even thanked the ghosts for trying to help “bring home the realities of the penal system”. I think the Convict liked her.

The next day we found out that the Holdens and the Tsekourases and the Maxwells were all going to sell their houses and move out of town. The houses got sold the *same day*. To a University, and a study group from a church, and a strange woman who was hoping her dead husband would show up in town. Paul Tsekouras said they got heaps of money, lots more than his parents expected.

When other people heard about that, they sold up and moved too. We were losing lots of townspeople, but by the end of the school holidays we had fourteen ghosts. Eight of them were convicts, and they started having these parties in the graveyard at night. Clanking chains, moaning and groaning, doing acrobatic stunts in the air like fighter planes. I think it was a contest but I'm not sure. They still didn't talk to anyone.

By the time we went back to school we had lots of ministers and priests and rabbis and even some Buddhist nuns in town. They all tried praying the ghosts away — laying their spirits to rest, they said.

It went like this:

A minister would meet a ghost on the street, or in the graveyard, and he'd start to pray "Begone, spirit! Return to the eternal rest your Maker has prepared for you!" And the ghost would just stand there until he'd finished, and then walk away. They were very polite about it. I think the problem was that they didn't *want* to return to their eternal rest. They were having a good time.

And there were more and more of them. Tanya and I did a count — on January 20th there were twenty-three headless men, eleven convicts, seventeen women in white, two women in red, eight children *and* Mick Carter's Great-Uncle Ned who cut off his own leg thirty years ago while he was trying to fell a bloodwood up near Taree.

The Carters were really excited when Great-Uncle Ned turned up in the graveyard one afternoon. He and Mick got to be good mates. They spent most of their time in the pub, Mick with his leg out of plaster now but still on crutches and Great-Uncle Ned with only one leg. The regulars got used to blood dripping onto the tiles.

We all got used to Them. (Except Mum.) But strangers had a lot more trouble. When we played Narromine under-12s in netball, they just couldn't keep their minds on the game. We won 44-0, just because there were a few (well, around twenty) apparitions sitting on the sidelines.

The ghosts liked netball. After the game, they took over the court (women in white vs convicts). They used one of the headless men's head as a ball. I think it liked being tossed around, but it didn't bounce very well. The body stayed on the sideline, rushing up and down the side of the court trying to keep level with it.

Those convicts were such cheats! They used every foul in the book. I got annoyed. I mean, we'd *explained* the rules to them. So I stopped the game and started to umpire. The women in white won. They had a great time. We planned a whole comp for them. Return match the next day.

Mum and Dad weren't too impressed when they found out, and neither were the other parents. I think that was one of the reasons a lot of families put their houses up for sale. Neville Barker (the real estate agent) kept persuading parents that they owed it to their kids to leave town. Especially when they were getting bulk money for their houses. Enough to buy a house in the city and have some left over.

Eventually even Mum and Dad were convinced. They sold our house to a University Psychology department. But Dad had to give a month's notice to the council so we didn't move right away. I didn't want to leave, but at least Tanya's family were moving to the city too, so we might be able to go to the same school still. And Miss Sabatini was going to apply for a city school.

By the time Dad left his job, there were only three families left in town. Just us, and the Carters and the Mayor's family. Then the Mayor sold out to a Hollywood company who wanted to make a film about the ghosts. They were trying to invent a new kind of film that would photograph the apparitions. I don't think they had much luck.

We left Mandee at the beginning of March, and there was only the Carters left. Mum didn't understand when I wanted to go round and say goodbye to all the ghosts, but I did anyway. It was even sadder than saying goodbye to all my friends, because I'd probably see them in the city. I might never come back to Mandee. The Woman In White was upset too. I gave her my netball to keep.

We moved to the city and a couple of weeks later the Carters followed us. They brought Great-Uncle Ned with them. It was nice to still

have one ghost around, even if the local pub wouldn't let him in at first. Then Mick got a bright idea and took a bucket in with them to catch the blood drips, and they said all right. Lots of people came to drink there just to get a look at Great-Uncle Ned.

The Mayor went back to Mandee to organise the final settlement on his house and he said the study groups and the filmmakers and the priests had changed the sign on the road from "Mandee" to "Ghost Town". Real creative.

By the end of March all the houses had been paid for. The Mayor went round all the ex-residents of Mandee and took up a collection for the final payment to Cosmic Contacts Pty Ltd. Dad says it was worth every cent.

On April 1st, we had a big party in the *best* hotel in the city — The Mandee Ex-residents' Association April Fool's Party. Great-Uncle Ned was the guest of honour. It was great. We all got together and had a really good time. The best part was when the Mayor turned on the big TV screen in the corner and we watched the news. All of the channels had reports about Mandee.

They said that around ten o'clock that morning, all the ghosts got together on the steps of the town hall. Of course all the study people and the ministers and the para-psychologists were watching them. They stayed there for two hours, playing with my netball and Jason Miller's spare skateboard that he gave to The Convict, and then as the town hall clock struck twelve, they all started laughing. Right out loud so you could hear them! And then they all just ... disappeared. Waving goodbye. And they never came back.

I mean they never came back to Mandee. Mum doesn't know about it, but before I left I gave the Woman In White and The Headless Man our new address in the city... They're really good friends to have. Even Miss Sabatini says so.