

ALBERT SHORT



Dirt  
Road  
Ghost

short stories volume I

**Albert Short**

# Dirt Road Ghost

Short Stories I

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## **The Excavation**

He is grateful that they locked him up alone in his own cell on the quiet side of the police station. And the place isn't half as bad as he expected; there's an iron bed, a chair, and a toilet, a sink, and a small window up against the roof. Perfectly fine for one night's stay.

It feels unreal. He can't believe he's in jail. Jail is for other people – murderers and crooks and so on – not ordinary guys like him.

In a way it's nice here at the end of the hallway. There's not much light to bother him and the sounds coming from the charge office are muffled.

He must wash his hands, he remembers. The mud from the grave is still under his nails.

He hears footsteps in the hallway. "Hey, you!" he cries. "Bring me water, the damn tap doesn't work. Do you expect

me to drink from the toilet? And soap and a dish so that I can wash my hands!”

It is hard to believe that he was in the churchyard earlier. He must admit that he was drunk and did not think clearly.

There was fresh soil between the older graves. He walked towards it, making sure no one saw him, and moved some of the flowers away. Then he pushed a shovel deep into the loose earth and scooped it onto the grave next to it. He worked fast because knowing what the deceased had been buried with chased him like the devil himself couldn't. And before he realized it, he stood waist deep in the grave.

That was not too difficult, he thought. Soon he would be done. And as soon as he had it, he could go home and rest where it is warm and safe.

He was vaguely aware of the madness of what he was doing but laughed it off. Everyone needs money – that's how the world works – but what does wealth mean to you when you're dead? Is it really that bad to rob a dead person? But then again, he was really only taking back what was his in the first place.

Annie.

Did she ever belong to him? He did love her in the beginning. Enough that he gifted her something precious,

idiot that he was. It served its purpose. She was warm and loving until one day when, suddenly, she became cold and distant. He couldn't understand it. It was on-and-off, on-and-off, on-and-off, day after day, and week after week until he simply couldn't stand it any longer.

Then he lost his temper. And then it happened.

At the top of a staircase, she lost her balance and rolled and rolled until there was no life left inside her.

And then she was buried with the precious gift still around her neck. He tried to stop them, but no one would listen. It's hers, they said, she was so attached to it. And he silently wondered if any of *them* were thinking of digging it out later. But be that as it may, in the end, he beat them to it. With great effort, though.

Sweat drained from him, his arms cramped, and his back felt like breaking, yet he made good progress. He had to hurry because if dawn caught up with him, all would be for nothing. He would have to leave and probably never have the guts to try again.

The deeper the hole became, the harder it was. The further he sank into the damp depths, the more difficult it was to get the soil out at the top. He had to swing the shovel higher and higher above his head. Loose earth fell on his face and dripped down his neck in a salty stream of mud.

He soon began to wonder if he would have the strength to close the grave back up – and burst out laughing. Did he really think he would be able to commit his crime without leaving traces?

Even here in the cell he giggles to himself. Heavens, he was drunker than he realized. It's not just anyone who decides to dig up a grave.

He is startled when the hallway light goes off and everything is shrouded in darkness. Did they forget about him? Maybe he should try to sleep. Why are they taking so long with the water? He is thirsty and needs to wash himself. His hands are dirty. Very, very dirty. And that revolting mud is still under his nails.

He gets up and walks to the bars, calls out with a voice that echoes through the emptiness. He shivers as cold air cuts through the dark. They must bring him another blanket.

For a moment he sees someone coming down the corridor. But it turns out to be just his imagination.

He curses, walks over to the bed, and sits down. He is tired. No, more than tired. He is broken. Shattered, with blinding pain in his stiff fingers.

At the grave, spade after spade, he battled past the agony, and on the other side of pain, when you have driven yourself far enough, it is only your body that continues. It's as if the rest of you watches from afar.

It was like working blindly. Eventually the hole was so deep that the moonlight did not reach the bottom, and when the shovel finally hit the wood with a thud, he did not immediately realize what was going on. He had to bang against it a few times before it dawned on him.

Knowing that the end was in sight, he fell flat on his stomach and wiped away the remaining dirt with his bare hands. Then he ran his fingers around the side of the lid and yanked at it.

But there was no getting loose.

He was about to give up when, on the side of the coffin, he felt a lock, which he hacked to pieces with the shovel. When he pulled on the lid again, it yawned open with ease. The deathly smell overwhelmed him, the drinks from earlier burning in his throat.

There's someone in the hallway. "It's about time!" he spits. "Your service is poor!" But the person doesn't speak back, just approaches slowly, the footsteps almost noiseless on the hard floor. "And it's getting cold, bring me another blanket!"



But then everything is quiet all over again. He jumps up, looks around. To his shock, the hallway is empty. Abandoned. Just a naked bulb on a crooked wire swinging faintly overhead.

Is this real, or just the shadows playing tricks?

He kicks against the bars, shouts. Surely someone must hear him. They can't lock him up and then forget about him, he also has rights like everyone else.

The grave. The coffin. The corpse.

These images keep playing through his head.

For a moment, as he crouched on the open coffin and looked at Annie, considerably less attractive than a few days before, he hesitated, sick at the knowledge that he would have to touch the rot underneath to get his hands on the necklace. And then, mindful of how much it had already cost him, he stretched out his hands and followed the cool path down the neck.

He jerked at the diamonds, but it didn't give way.

And then suddenly there was someone, the gods only know where from. "Gosh, what the hell are you doing?"

The realization that he had been caught red-handed spurred him on anew. He felt the latch behind the cold neck, unhooked it and ripped it off.

“Stop it! Freeze!” demanded a second voice.

He stumbled up against the loose ground, ready to defend his booty with his last ounce of strength. But as he tried to get away, his feet became entangled in the cursed flowers on one of the neighbouring graves. He fell, with his pursuers violently on top of him.

The cell is now freezing cold.

He walks to the toilet, squats, and begins to wash away the mud and the smell. As he wipes his hands on his pants, a figure appears at the bars. “Finally! Rather late than never. How long must one wait for attention in this place?”

He is drained. It took a lot of fighting to flee from the two men. But he was desperate, and desperation makes one strong. He got away, and he still doesn’t know if he imagined it, but when he was about to jump over the churchyard fence, *she* was there. Annie stood right in front of him, blocking his path.

If she, or her ghost, hadn’t been there, he would have been free. Free and far from here with the diamonds.

He trembles as he stares through the bars.

It’s *her*. Once again Annie is right before him.

“I don’t have it! I don’t have your cursed necklace anymore! Go ask them.” He points to the charge office. “They took it.”

Annie turns her head slightly askew, her face pale blue and bloodied like that day after the accident on the staircase. He staggers back as she walks right through the bars, into the cell. He gets hysterical, dives past her and kicks against the metal until his foot hurts. How is it possible that the guards cannot hear him?

Standing next to the bed, Annie picks up the bed sheet and begins to tear it into strips, as if it was made of paper. She knots it into a loop that she hooks around his neck.

He grabs for something to hold onto while she floats up into the air, pulling him along. She ties the other end of the rope to the bars of the window. Then she leaves him to hang, his feet dangling, until he feels the veins in his head burst one by one.

“Come with me...” are the last words he hears as the darkness settles on him. “Come along...”

## Sleep

She wakes up early, long before dawn. It's the best time of day – there's no one who wants to talk or make a noise. It is just her and the peaceful coming of the new day: freshly squeezed, crisp and clean.

She looks at the time on the nightstand. Three o'clock. Very early, even for her. But... what is that sound? Maybe the ginger cat from across the street, or some kind of insect?

She gets up.

In the hallway she turns on the light, sees nothing, and goes back to bed. In the glow of the bedside lamp she opens a magazine. It's cool, winter is on its way. Must she get another blanket?

And then, from nowhere, a new thought comes to mind: she's not alone. She peers around. At first, she sees just the blanket, the bulge it makes over her feet, and then – a pale figure standing motionless at the base.

“Who are you?” she asks.

No answer.

She leans onto her elbow, glances around. Where is the... *thing* now? Has she just spoken to herself like a mad person?

She hangs a blanket over her shoulders and walks to the kitchen. With a glass of milk in her hand she looks through the window at a couple of branches stirring sleepily, etched against the glare from the streetlights.

It’s still too early to start her chores, so she heads back to the bedroom. Maybe turn the radio on? What’s on this time of the morning? She pushes the power button, but the reception is bad, and she turns it off instantly. Then she lies down again and listens to the morning sounds. A bird singing, a cricket, a dog barking in the distance.

She tries to forget that she imagined there was something next to the bed and that she even talked to it. And yet, it was so real. Is something happening to her? Is she going mad?

She closes her eyes and listens to her breathing.

In the distance, a truck rumbles, she can only barely hear the muffled grunt of the engine... and then there’s something like a gentle snort. Here, with her, in the room.

Her eyes flicker open. Her breathing quickens, as again the motionless figure stands at the foot of the bed.

“What do you want?” she asks. “What are you doing in my room?”

At first the figure doesn’t answer, but eventually it speaks in a scornful voice: “This bed is mine.” The deathly gaze glides over the bedframe with its porcelain buttons on the headboard. “I’m tired. I want to come sleep.”

“Who are you?”

She immediately realizes that she is once again speaking to the darkness. There is no one. Only a cold breeze coming in through the window.

In the dim light, she looks at the bed. In the pawnshop, it was wobbly when you touched it, and the buttons rusty and grey. It took a long time to polish and restore it to what it is now, but she did it with love. And with new bedding and a firm mattress, she won’t give it up easily.

And now this shadowy thing is trying to claim it.

She gets up to wash her face and puts on a thin sweater against the morning air. Back in the bedroom, she turns on the light, makes the bed, and tries to forget about what just happened.

In the living room, she dusts off the bookshelf, waters the plants, and wipes the coffee table.

*This bed is mine...*

How ridiculous! Old age and good imagination are a dangerous combination. Maybe she feels guilty in a way. She bought it at a particularly low price, after all. The bed possibly belonged to someone who was in a pinch. Why would anyone depart with it so lightly?

With the front room clean and tidy, she walks to the shop to see if there are new magazines. Something to read later.

That afternoon she pulls the bedroom curtains slightly closed, puts the new magazines on the nightstand, and sits down on the edge of her bed. She arranges her shoes neatly, side by side, before leaning back against the pillow. She is barely on her side, or the words that she heard earlier whispers through the room again: *the bed is mine...*

The mattress goes cold and she flees to the hallway. From there, she looks back. In the middle of the bed lies a figure, eyes closed, and hands folded across its chest. Like something that is sleeping, or dead.

What *is* this?

She slams the bedroom door, turns the key, and runs outside, away from the room, and the bed, and away from that horrible, unwelcome ghost.

*Ghost?*

The word brings her to a halt. Could it be? Is that what this is?

That evening she makes herself a place to sleep on the sofa in the lounge and tells herself how comfortable it will be. But she quickly finds the opposite. It is just too short for her. She must pull up her legs the whole time. Also, the back pillows keep pushing her forward. The blanket falls off, and her head presses hard against the armrest.

How is she ever going to sleep? She can probably try for the floor, but what about bugs and the creeping autumn cold? If things go on like this, she will not get any sleep at all.

She turns on the light, remembering that her new magazines are on the nightstand in the bedroom. Instead, she reads a story from an old book and stares up at the ceiling until her neck hurts.

She yawns.

What to do now?

When the clock strikes for the umpteenth time, she gets up, walks down the hallway, and unlocks the bedroom door.

She can only vaguely make out the shape, hear the soft, rhythmic breathing.

It's asleep. It's safe. It's a double bed.

She laughs. What is she doing?



She lifts the blankets and slips between the sheets. The pillow is firm yet soft against her cheek, and the mattress a comfort to her worn-out body. It doesn't take long before tiredness overtakes her. And when a cold arm wraps around her, she huddles closer before sinking deeper into a timeless sleep.

## Ghost Gum

I'm alone. Without parents. Without anyone. They just moved away one day and left me. Who does that? Clearly my type of parents. If they really are my parents. I've wondered about that many times.

Anyway. I'm alone. Homeless.

And hungry.

A smell swirls past my nostrils. I look around. It's a sweet smell. Fudge or honey or maybe even perfume.

No, not that, it smells like something edible.

I put my schoolbag down on the sidewalk. Even though I'm officially homeless, I still go to school so the welfare can't catch me. Just now they put me in a house full of strange children. It would be horrible.

It's just getting harder and harder not to look like a homeless person. Or smell. It's hard to sleep in a cardboard box under a bridge every night without it showing.

The smell is stronger now. I step closer to an opening in the fence and peer through it. Sniff-sniff, of course.

I can't believe my eyes.

On the other side is a house, crooked and dilapidated. The place looks dark and frighteningly much like... a haunted house!

I press my eye against the opening and jump away when suddenly someone speaks. "Can I help?"

I relax when I see it is just a little girl. "I'm just... having a look..." I stammer.

"How nosy!" she scoffs. "My name is Salome. Who are you?"

I grin. "Bernard. What smells so sweet?"

"Ghost gum. Do you want?"

My teacher has warned us a million times not to accept gifts from strangers, but this little girl seems harmless. And on top of that, my stomach rattles.

"Yes, gladly!" I reply.

Salome opens the garden gate. I pick up my suitcase and walk in. I must be careful not to stumble over the long grass and tendrils.

Next to a broken bird bath I pause to get a closer look at the house. It looks like something out of a scary movie. I surely don't want to be here after dark.

But where is – what’s her name again? – Salome. Where did she go so quickly and unseen?

She appears from nowhere. “Here!” She holds out a huge stick of gum that makes my mouth water.

“Blue!” I lick my lips. “My favourite colour.”

I bring it to my mouth but lower it when I realize it is slightly translucent. I look at the little girl, only to realize that she is also a little translucent and that she disappears almost completely in the sunlight.

It suddenly dawns on me. “Are you a ghost...?”

She laughs. “Yes! I am and I live in this haunted house with my ghost mom, ghost dad, and ghost brother. They’re out, they’ll be back later.”

I try my best not to look scared or ask what ghostly things they were out doing. To hide my trembling, I break off a piece of the gum and taste it. The taste of blueberry melts in my mouth and squishes between my teeth.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever eaten such delicious gum,” I say with a broad smile.

“That’s because it is real ghost gum,” she replies.

Ugh. Did I hear correctly? Made from her and her father and mother and little brother? Suddenly I feel a tiny bit nauseous. But it smells and tastes so good that I soon don’t care anymore and eat piece after piece.

I want to give her something too, but what? Maybe the new pencil I bought with my last money the week before. It's white and red and has a dazzling yellow eraser on the tip. That would mean I don't have a pencil, but the ghost gum is worth it.

I take the pencil out of my schoolbag and hand it to her. It looks like she wants to cry. "No one has ever given me a gift. It's beautiful! Thank you, Bernard, thank you!"

I smile wider than a pumpkin ghost.

"Do you want to see what our house looks like on the inside?" she asks.

Again, I remember one of our teacher's warnings. She'll be very upset if she ever finds out. "Yes," I reply. "I would love to see the inside of your house."

We walk across the cracked path to the porch. Salome glides noiselessly up the steps. My footsteps are loud in contrast.

The front door is old, the paint stained and peeling. As we walk in, a hundred cobwebs tickle my face. The plank floors are rotten, and I must watch where I step.

"Sorry that it's so dirty," she says. "We clean every year, but it stays dusty."

"How long have you been living here?"

"Two centuries."

“What?!”

“We’re ghosts, remember!” She laughs.

I look around. Wallpaper is coming loose, and a chandelier, covered in spider webs, hangs in the middle of the room.

“You must be very happy here,” I say to be polite.

“Yes, we are! But there’s a problem.”

“And that is?”

“We need to move soon. The house has been sold and is going to be demolished to make way for a block of flats. I don’t know where we shall go. It’s not easy for four ghosts to find a new place to live where no one will bother us.”

“That’s bad,” I say.

Then her eyes brighten up. “Do you want to see something?” she asks. “A secret?”

“Definitely!”

I follow her to the dining room. She lifts one of the floorboards. I peer down the hole, but it is too dark to see anything.

“What’s in there?” I ask.

“A box.”

“And what’s in it?”

“Gold.”

I almost choke. “Gold?”

“Gold coins that are hundreds of years old. It’s very valuable. It belonged to one of our ancestors. A smuggler.”

“Aren’t you afraid someone steals it?”

“Nope. This is a haunted house, remember, no one ever comes here. And there’s not much that ghosts can do with money other than build little towers or shoot it around with rubber bands. That’s why you must take it.”

“WHAT?!”

“You’re the only friend I’ll ever have,” she says. “People normally run away when they accidentally see us. But you talked to me. And came to visit me. And gave me a pencil. Take the gold. It’s yours.”

It’s two months later.

I stand on the porch of my new home, selling ghost gum: green, blue, yellow, and pink, depending on whose toes it was made of. Yes, really. I know it sounds “ugh”, but it’s very tasty. And there’s a long line of kids waiting to buy one or two or six.

“We are going to run out of gum,” I say softly. “Next time we need to make more.”

The children think I am talking to myself because in daylight ghosts are invisible. They cannot see Salome. All

that even I can see is the pencil that flashes next to me as Salome writes down our sales in a book.

As the children walk away, I say: “Thanks again for the gold. It was a brilliant idea. Not only could I buy the house from that apartment developer, but we could also start this cute little shop.”

Salome smiles. “Who would ever have guessed that our haunted house could look so beautiful? Beautifully painted. So many colours and patterns and decorated with pictures of different kinds of gum.” She spins around. “The nice thing is that you and I and my ghost mom, ghost dad and ghost brother can stay here forever.”

“Forever and ever,” I say. “As long as we want. Everyone is together, no one is ever homeless, hungry, or alone.”

I’m satisfied. And happy. I love my new ghost family. And although I sometimes long for my parents and need to hide from the welfare now and then, I wouldn’t trade my life with my new ghost family for anything on earth.



## Snowman

She gasps when the man suddenly appears in front of her. White jacket, white trousers, and even his shoes are the same colour as the snow. No wonder she didn't see him coming. Someone like that can easily blend in with the surroundings, except for the shiny black hair and those eyes that looked at her just a moment too long.

He whispers hello and disappears behind a fence, and then it's like he was never there. But those eyes will look at her again in her dreams, she knows. It's not the kind of face that one easily forgets.

However, the dreams will have to wait. There is something much more important that requires her attention.

She is lost.

Maybe she should have asked the man for directions. Why didn't she? Perhaps everything was just too sudden. She did not have time to think clearly. But maybe it's a good

thing that she kept quiet, or she just may have stuttered and embarrassed herself.

She unfolds a map. Thank heavens she decided to bring a printed copy. But her face goes blank while she reads it. The street names that she is looking for are not shown, and things are not nearly to scale. Still, it's better than nothing, especially since her phone has been nothing but a hi-tech paperweight since she arrived in England. The sim card, probably, or some other technical matter that she still needs to attend to.

But where *is* she?

The streets are deserted. Must she knock at one of the houses? She looks at a door at the end of a short garden path. Rather not. She does not want to be a nuisance.

Her boots crunch on the snow. She focusses on her breathing, but it is difficult to remain calm. What if she's in the wrong neighbourhood altogether?

Rubbing her neck, she looks at the world anew. Who would have thought that snow could turn a village into something *this* white. It's completely baffling, the opposite of blindness, but just as disabling. Roads and roofs are the colour of the sky, and so are the lawns and front gardens. Pretty, she thinks, if you know where you are.

She takes out her phone and swears while looking at the network signal. But since that doesn't affect the camera, she decides to take a couple of photos to send to her friends later.

There is so much to share – especially the snowmen. And snowwomen, of course. This neighbourhood is clearly obsessed with frozen statues. She can see at least thirty, maybe even fifty, from where she is. Each one a masterpiece. Jackets, hats, scarfs, and wigs. Pebble eyes and carrot noses. One even has a beard made of bark. And they gesture dramatically with crooked arms made of branches. Just too bad she cannot talk to these snow folk and find out where she is.

So, where to now? What to do? Must she keep going and hope for the best? She clenches her teeth. All she wants to do is get to the hotel and kick off her shoes. Take a hot bath. Have some coffee.

Why did she act so smart earlier? The taxi driver offered to help her look for the hotel, but she was so sure of herself. So convinced that she could take shortcut around the back of the houses.

Despite her predicament, she snaps a couple more pictures. A world of ice broken here and there by a bit of green, or a road sign or car that speckles the scene. It speaks to the decorator – no, *artist* – in her. Everything is fresh, yet

cosy – precisely what she tries to achieve with her clients' homes.

After a moment she puts the phone away and starts to walk again, dragging the suitcase behind her and getting sweaty under all the layers of clothing. On the corner she decides to cross the road, but right at that moment a car comes flying toward her, out of nowhere. She jumps out of the way, just in time. The sudden movement makes her feel dizzy, with the aftershock like blood in her mouth.

What the hell? It's like she could actually feel the car brushing against her. Lucky escape. But a warning as well – she must not get distracted by the things around her and forget about safety!

While standing there, trying to get her breathing under control, the man in white appears again. She laughs and does her best not to sound crazy. "Good morning," she manages. "I'm looking for Halcyon Hotel. Do you know where that is?"

His voice is as dark as his eyes. "First street on the left, and through the iron gates. Red sign at the entrance. Hard to miss it."

"Thanks." She hesitates, wants to say more, stretch things out a while longer, but nothing comes to mind. "Have a good day, sir," she says then, far too formally.

No response. He doesn't smile but doesn't look unfriendly either. He could just as well have been one of the snowmen. Hopefully not as cold, though. It's just those eyes. There's something very, very mysterious about those shadowy eyes.

Without further ado she aims in the direction that he described. While walking she looks back, but he is gone. Once again. Without a trace. This time probably forever because what is the chance that they will meet a third time?

At least she was able to get directions from him – and then, barely a minute later – the gates!

She starts down the gravelled path toward the colossal mansion, almost laughing with relief.

At last!

The building is three storeys high. She goes up the steps and puts her luggage down. She knocks and gasps as the door opens instantly.

“Is this Halcyon...?” she begins, but the words get stuck. The man in front of her is none other than... *him!*

A hundred questions swirl through her head. How did he get here so fast? Why did he explain the way, but not invite her to walk with him? And why is he looking at her like that?

He smiles. “I am glad my directions were good enough.”

She follows him into the shadows of the house. “If you could give me the key to my room, please.”

There is a stained-glass window next to the front door, and in its light, it looks like there is a soft glow around him. Something ghostly. Is it his white clothes reflecting? Does she look the same? But the play of light is not the only thing she looks at. There is more muscle under that jacket than she realized. And then there is the cheeky way he moves.

She looks away. Just now he realizes what she is thinking. Pretending to look at the lobby she takes off her scarf.

“For sure. I’ll get the key.”

He starts to walk but stops. “I made coffee earlier. Would you like some?”

Despite herself, the words come before she can stop them. “Would be nice, thank you.”

When he’s gone, she bites on her finger. What is wrong with her? Where are these strange thoughts coming from? One moment she thinks he is a ghost, the next she stares at him with thoughts she would not confess to anyone.

To calm herself, she looks at the chandeliers, the old-world furniture, the paintings – an interior decorator’s dream. She will certainly steal some ideas here. It must be wonderful to live in a place like this.

She rubs her face and looks at the snowflakes floating down to the earth like tiny feathers. A moment later he appears in the doorway, and he looks so... normal.

Hopefully the coffee will make her think straight again.

“Do you like the view?” He puts down the tray and comes to stand next to her.

“It’s a fairyland.”

“I agree. What is your name?”

Her name? Why is he asking her name? Surely, he must have looked at the booking when she arrived. “Emma,” she answers regardless.

“Nice name. I’m Henry.”

“Nice name, Henry.”

“Where are you from? That accent... South Africa?”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course. Is that not what it says on my booking?”

“Booking?”

“For the room.”

“You don’t have a booking,” his dark eyes smile. “And this is not a hotel.”

“I... what?”

“This is my house. But please, don’t go. There is a big room on the first floor. You can sleep there.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know it sounds odd. And yes, I lied about the directions to the hotel. But now that you are here, you can just as well stay.”

“Stay...?” She tries to resist but cannot. What is happening to her? What kind of power does this stranger have over her? Helplessly she nods. “Okay then, why not?”

He walks over to the coffee pot and starts to pour. “What are you doing in England?”

“Work. There is an exhibition in London that I am involved in.”

“All the way for an exhibition?”

“I am an interior decorator,” she says. “But if I look at this place, then my work feels rather insignificant in comparison.”

He shakes his head. “It’s just earthly things. Ultimately it does not mean much.”

She likes him more and more. The way he talks, the things he says, and how he moves – despite the strange glow that she notices every now and then.

“About the statues,” she says. “Why are there so many of them?”

“It’s the village hobby. We are very proud of that. In fact, I’m going to build one later. Feel like helping?”

“But there are already more than enough!”



He laughs. “Indeed. And therefore, another one will not look suspicious.”

It’s impossible to say no. “Sounds like fun.”

She glances at him again. This man should be a model. She can see him on billboards, full lips, stubble just breaking through.

He mutters. “It would be nice to have an accomplice.”

She leans forward, then quickly back again. Did she want to kiss him? What is wrong with her? She is never like this. She crosses her arms and once again gets the feeling that there is something different about him. Something spooky, perhaps. Can it be...?

No. Of course not.

Goodness, but it’s tragic when one mistakes attraction for the supernatural!

Next to the rose garden, they pile up snow in the shape of a body. Then they make a ball for the head. Surprised, she stands back when they are done. It’s the biggest snow statue she’s ever seen – slightly taller than herself.

“Who taught you to build snowmen – and of course – women?” she asks.

“I taught myself,” he says with childlike pride.

“You do it well.”

He grins. “I have built hundreds. The best part is when they melt.”

“How so?”

“It probably sounds ridiculous, but it’s as if nature takes things back. Dust to dust and snow to water.”

She smiles. “That’s not ridiculous at all.”

She picks up two pebbles and a short stick and forms the eyes and the nose.

Just then the snow begins to fall with renewed fervour. The wind picks at her jacket and cuts right through her.

“We must go in,” Henry says, and once again she is lost in the dark eyes. “I... hope you will eat with me tonight.”

Without hesitation she agrees. “Are you sure it is not too much trouble?”

He nods. “Dead sure.”

Dinner is a scene from a fairy tale. The table is formally set, complete with wine, candles, and flowers. Flames dance in a fireplace to drive away the cold.

He lifts a silver lid and reveals a fragrant stew. Wow, the man can cook. Maybe her earlier thoughts about him being unreal were not too outrageous!

They talk non-stop, and soon it's like they've known each other forever. Time stands still, yet the clock moves silently towards midnight.

"Time to go to bed," she says, yawning. "I'll take the dishes away."

"You don't need to," he protests, and when she says goodnight she must stop herself from giving him a hug. It will only make things uncomfortable.

She walks away, but when she gets to the door, he says her name. Just once. Barely audible. And then he is next to her, and she puts her hands in his. Their lips touch and when his tongue plays over her lips, she knows – it's happening. This is *really* happening.

Whether the kiss lasted two seconds or two hours, feels unimportant, yet she manages to push him away. Why is she resisting? What is there to lose?

"I have to go," she whispers.

"Yes. That's better." He wipes his face. "I'm going out. Fresh air."

"But it's snowing."

"Good for cooling down."

She walks along and when the cold air hits her in the face, she can think clearly again.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he remarks. “Moonlight on the snow...”

“And the wind,” she murmurs. “Cold wind over the ice. Magical. Freezing.”

“It’s not as cold as it looks,” he says, and as if to prove a point, he goes down the porch steps and heads to a clearing beyond the bushes. And there he stands, his legs wide apart, and his face turned to the heavens while snowflakes fall on him like little kisses.

She doesn’t know how she got to him so quickly. Nor how she ended up on the ground with his lips pressing on hers, but this time when they kiss, they sink down together, like melting statues of ice, with the blanket of snow as their bed. And in the cold, they find each other’s warmth – an explosive heat that causes them to lie there for a long time afterwards, content.

Emma wakes with the sun breaking through the curtains. She looks around excitedly. Who would ever believe her story? Not only did she save money on hotel accommodation, but she got to see this amazing house. And not to mention the dark-eyed hunk.

At an antique dressing table, she brushes her hair and puts on a denim and a brightly coloured sweater. She will

make him a hearty breakfast. Poor man, on his own he probably hasn't had a decent farmer's breakfast in years.

As she walks down the stairs, she sees him through the window standing next to the snowwoman. He is dressed in the same white as the day before. She cannot help but laugh. It looks as if the two of them are having a deep conversation.

When she gets to him, he looks handsome and fresh, his fringe a brilliant black against the white.

She greets softly. In a way, her voice sounds like the wind. Maybe the cold from the night before – not that she minds, it was certainly worth it!

“Emma...”

She looks away, shyly. She wonders about the snow. Are the tracks of their deed still visible? The thought makes her blush.

“Henry, I...” She hesitates. What does she want to say? She must not spoil their act by talking about it in the morning light. Best not to say anything. She leans forward and kisses his cheek. She blinks in surprise when he moves away.

“About last night...” he says.

“Henry, is everything okay?”

“It was a mistake. Too sudden. I am sorry.”

She frowns. How unexpected. She thought it was precisely the spontaneity, the suddenness, the primitive surrender, that made it so special.

She should have known. If something seems too good to be true... What did she expect? That she can simply show up at someone's door, drenched in sweat, and live the rest of their lives happily together? What makes her so special anyway – surely there are lots of girls in these parts who would give anything to be by his side. Girls who are far prettier and much better-looking than her.

“It's... okay!” She will not allow herself to look desperate. She manages a broad smile. “In any case, I must focus on the exhibition now.”

“I'm sorry, Emma. I really am.”

The dark eyes look at her softly, but instead of making her knees go numb, it makes her feel a bit nauseous.

“I will phone a taxi to come pick me up. Thank you for your hospitality.”

But she doesn't call. She packs her suitcase and sits down by the front door.

Something is wrong. She sees Henry walking towards her, but as soon as he gets close, he becomes invisible. And then she looks around and doesn't see him anywhere.

Or she hears his voice. He speaks terribly fast, or slowly. Then the wind blows his voice back and forth so that later she does not know whether it is Henry or a sound coming from the house.

She sits motionless and watches the morning turn to afternoon, and the afternoon to early evening.

Henry is next to her. "The snow is melting," he says.

"So soon?"

"It's not soon. It's been two months."

"Impossible!" she exclaims, but she knows he is right.

"Don't let it upset you," says the dark eyes. "Time is of no importance."

She knows she's supposed to be shocked. She must tell him that this is a mistake, tell him that she has known all along that he was a ghost, but also suspected for some time that she was one herself. And even though her memory is hazy, she remembers the speeding car, the headlights, the tyres...

And now she has been sitting on a wooden bench at the entrance of this large, old-fashioned house for two months.

"I want to show you something," he says.

Like someone in a dream she gets up. They go around the corner of the house, as if floating on the wind, over the

neat gravel, through a couple of bushes, and up to the rose garden.

“You must be strong. Don’t let it upset you,” he warns.

But strangely enough, she is not at all startled when she sees her body tied to an arched trellis. The snow around it is slowly melting away. She doesn’t panic because she only has fond memories of the day when they built the snow statue around her corpse.

“Why, Henry?”

“To keep you. You’re beautiful.”

“Frozen in ice, and in time,” she says.

“But everything will eventually perish – like the melting snow.” His eyes look darker than ever. “Will you stay?”

It is impossible to say no.

Together they drift toward the front door. He floats right through it, and helplessly she follows.



## **Postscript**

The unabridged version of this story collection is available at:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CH8M32QZ>

Stories that you can look forward to:

### **The Excavation**

A man digs up a coffin to get to the deceased's diamond necklace. Is it really that bad to rob the dead?

### **In the Basement**

A guy moves into a remote cottage. What are the strange noises he keeps hearing? And then he makes a terrifying discovery in the basement.

## **Once upon a Night**

Rumor has it that these woods are haunted by the ghost of a man that was hanged from one of the trees. Myth or not, it is not easy to walk here alone.

## **Hitchhiking**

A beautiful girl is stranded on the side of the road. An eager guy gives her a lift. But he should have known – it is just not safe to pick up hitchhikers these days.

## **Sleep**

A lady buys a secondhand bed and restores it exactly to how she likes it. But what is the dark figure that keeps appearing, claiming that the bed belongs to it?

## **Portraits**

Pictures reflect life. When a portrait falls, that person dies. Therefore, be sure to regularly check the nails and threads. And don't accidentally knock one off.



## **Snowman**

A girl travels to England and meets a very handsome man. But it becomes clear that he is a ghost. A haunting romance ensues.

## **Silent as the grave**

The bond between twin brothers. An accident. Anger, silence, and regrets.

## **Candy**

It's Halloween. A table full of ghastly snacks. Children dressed to scare. And a neighbor that does not like this at all.

## **Ghost Gum**

A story for the kids. A little orphan boy ventures into a haunted house where he meets a ghost girl who gives him some ghost gum. But what is ghost gum really made off?

## **Horses**

A young man's car runs out of petrol. He decides to spend the night in his tent next to the road and is awakened by the sound of hooves coming from the thick mist around him.

## **Dirt Road Ghost**

Stranded next to the road, help comes from a frightening and unexpected source. But it is the thing that happens later that night that is even more bizarre.

## **Floating**

Eventually the pain goes away. The horrible witch becomes a beautiful girl – exquisite, nude, and pure. And you follow. With all that you are.

This book takes you into a world of darkness and dread. If you love ghosts and horror, then dive right into the free sample.

This book is also available in Afrikaans by clicking here:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CHFPCJHW>



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