

The Sparrow Ghost

Sonia K. Johnson

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Schauder u. traum
- Samuel Beckett

Introduction

The characters depicted here are based on the particular actions and experiences of actual people, but their personalities and relationships have been fictionalised. No resemblance is ultimately intended between these characters and their real catalysts.

The descriptions of the flu pandemic are as accurate as possible. This work is, however, not intended as an historical account. History is a means, not my end.

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I

In the old boarding house,
night nests between

tight-scarred floor boards.
Hollow walls
enclose darkness.

The day falls,
unfurling grey.
Roof, walls, windows
new-born in day's new form.
In these bones, voices
now stir; rippled
glass coheres light.

*O, the hills of a daughter's insomnia
fence the valley of sleep*

and she opens her eyes.

Here is the nail's grip –
each door, each stair,
all: mute palimpsest
vestigial
yet.

Soon hatchlings under the tin
eaves begin to cry hunger
and a cloud-breeding heat
starts to settle
over the valley. The sun
negates its light.

II

Like rising smoke
in a wood-fire kitchen,
so the voices in the house
thicken over time,
ebbing and rising, gathering in
nooks and hollows.

From this mass
of time-worn words emerges
Ruth Newson,

the owner through the last
heave of the Great War and beyond.
Exact, rounded vowels

bitten square by consonants
recall her tight frame
exactly. And from within this,
a softer tone – *Mother? – Yes Lily?*
knotting familiarity.
In diners' bachelor boots, dirt whispers
now I'd give her a go, alright, the sparrow
ghost that steals the daughter's sleep.

Only the voices now remain,
folded in the turn of the stair:

*Mrs Newson, should I
expected it would be nothing but
my father said the railway
oh no, I couldn't
really, did he
yes, she would, oh yes*

III

Exhumation of broken glass
and all the valley falling,
cauls of dust and spiders' webs
hang in the old corner store.

Vernal roots expand
over and into abandoned walls,
into the church where Ruth once prayed.
Catching at new darkness, this white fan
echoes the splay of anonymous bones.

Perhaps one day this entropy of other,
untended structures will
lap over into the boarding house,
letting its secrets leach away
into the heavy clay but
now it still holds back the rain, still
guards its murmurations.

Cows graze where a cottage once
lifted an asymmetrical veranda.
Engineers have bought the dairy factory
and leave cars to rust there.
No one uses the tennis courts.

Out at the last big farm, a house
falls down hidden completely

in a stand of trees.
There are bees nesting in the walls,
sole survivors. Their brittle bodies

smell of dry rot.
Kettles rust to paper-thin.
In this place, only
nettles, dock and cooch climb.

IV

New moon on a clear night
in November does not bleach
glass to silver, but rather settles blackly
here, where the two-train railway
that runs through the valley

bisects the sealed
road that has collapsed its steel vein.
In a fuller moonlight
neat silver might belly the clouds,
gild slips where wet
surfaces mirror, maybe;

the creeks, cleared and cut
here to drain the swamps,
ensnare the ground in meshed light,

while the trees would anchor
each to their own impermeable
thrall of shadow.

In the full moon's hard light,
rails and water would shine,
rain be a glistening afterthought – but
under cover of the new moon,
pulling up, the tracks
twist themselves of the soil
into such shapes
of metallic logic as
no human mind could bear.

V

Closing door by door by door
on the frosts of winter, spring
lifts new life from the still-cool
dirt. The valley stirs.

Years spill over, grown strange,
etiolated. There were lovers
and there were deaths,
rage and monotony's quiet,
slow wearing away.

Slow, quiet convolvulus
edges out in sightless seeking,
edges out, tracing a helix.
Knowledge is all dumb sense
in that tender tendril;
no signal, no touchstone yet
gained to bend to the blind cells.

How to say what and how
each stem-hold is granted
and determined? The silent
thrust requires no answer.

VI

Eddy of long sleep
shivers tensions of gravity,
closeness and force –
all that holds
place to its foundations.
In the dreaming of this shudder
now the voices that sought
gain a hold and bend.

Feeling a hardness, a sharp edge
in the drifting voices,
now the line of memory coils
around it – a babble of fever
lifting the night, the impact
lingering of a falling body,
yes, and the breaking of glass.

Wind there balances the silence
interlacing the two,
the mother and the daughter who
hear the strumming of rain

three weeks without end,
holding the truing of spring
into summer, holding
spring's wet death tenderly.

I

Lilies grow still,
imitating sky
lost in the equilibrium of rain
yet to fall, in a suspended saturation.

Over Lily, the laughter of children
fades, winding out of the schoolyard.

The rush of November startles
her into flight.
Electric spring runs through her.

Vegetable elation rises,
and a quickening
layers new flesh to her.
Light through waiting rain
enflames new growth –
yellows and greens burn.

Grace of near horizons
recurs in the turning of her shoulder
or in the angles of her bones
when she stands, when
she pauses as though foundered

in the burgeoning of her
newling frame.

The blossoms scatter white across
her dress as she twists
each spray, making a stiff bunch

she thinks she will keep by her bed.
Her mind falls back to the bright spot of blood
and she
does not hear the pain
exquisite in the branch as she breaks.

Out in the long embrace of hills, she
finds no escape – *that's because you're a woman now,*

this means you can get pregnant.
Her mother's face had been as careful as her voice,

except that her hands had shaken.

Breaking, the limbs bleed a little
of the sap that rises.

A sky as still as windless grass
rests on the shoulders of the hills,
deep, not dull, in its grey.

It cannot soothe her.

*Now what? And why this pain,
grinding? What did I do?*

Her eyes, though blue,
out-grey the sky, growing opaque.
Under the clouds she pauses,
suddenly caught, lambent, a small flame
enclosed, enlarged by the mirroring hills.

*

Kicking, roots shift.

Inner leaves open.

Nerves glut.

Day dilates.

Lichen eats.

Insects hatch.

Nicks saw flax.

Green kicks, breaking.

*

And she moves. She breaks the hush,

precipitating the unbalancing of the sky.
A filter falls over the violent green
lit by clouds and extinguished by rain.
Extinguished? Rather enclosed, growing

long and bright out of view.
In Lily's bend the rain is cambered: she
gives direction to gravity,
her swelling breasts channeling
tributaries to her sodden skirts.

The quickening in her coils,
her breath caught fast as the chill
exploration of water
reaches through and past bleached cotton,
eventually blooming darkly red.

Bunching of breast or shoulder
echoed dimly in the hill-line
touches something in her.
Will I get married now? To who?
Emma's married, and she's not
eighteen yet. The rain
now blurs her

eyes, runs into her mouth
and she stretches out her arms,
reaching to hold
the sky. Water pools in the hollows
her taut tendons make.

And water mats the toi-toi,
new growth bruises, the rain batters
daffodils' fleshy stems.

Heavy and heavier, a beat
under the beat of her pulse,
mixing with the push of her heart
and in her hand the fragile blossom
now crumples,

washing clean, washing

away the loose petals that had remained.
Lily does not see this,
lost in the beating, in the humming
susurrus of rain and earth and skin

and she has closed her eyes,
now all mute skin, all wet skin
drinking in as the rain

splashes the white of the lilies,
kisses the waxy pallor and

You get in now, Lily, NOW.

II

Ingesting this silence,
this narrow coddling of hills

in hills under a close
sky, Jim the old odd jobber

hears the drum of rain
echoing on the tin

roof of his rented bach.
Each of the timbers is

joined at all the proper angles
in all the proper places. He

muses on spring with all the old
habits of his once-young mind

as the rain lowers its mists. His
ugly, yellowed hands lie dormant.

Nancy, in Wellington, had said once
that he had *such lovely hands*...

Summoned by her mother's call
his landlady's daughter runs by, her

edges blurred by rain but her
long dress pulled tight over her thighs.

Day lengthens in spring, but
nothing thaws in his bones.

Only, what else is left?
Well, there is the pub.

*

Lost behind the valley hills
and clouds, the mountain remains,

the stubborn remainder of old
eruptions and erosions, tales

recalled in the flight of hands
in a barroom fire's warmth.

Now Jim remembers the time he
climbed the mountain and the land

lay open, all blued with distance,
open. In the following winter, a sudden

storm caught three climbers out,
Englishmen. They died, bodies lost.

Rain catches on the peak,
winging out inland over the valley.

Anyway, it's time for another smoke.
Long, too long until tomorrow, too

long until tonight, when the moon,
shrinking into new, will leave him dark.

III

Keeping their tongues,
noting the crude release
of rain groping
the windows' flaws,
the cut lilies listen.
*Exactly what were you
doing, Lily, getting yourself all wet...*

This is how you act? And you all of sixteen!
- *I was just... - Yes?*
- *Mother, please, I was only...*
but her voice fades down,
ebbing into the rain's patter.
*Really, Lily, anyone could have
seen you out there, your dress all...*

Sorry, Mother, I won't...
The cones of the lilies are tight
in their polished vases.
*Lily, change at once, catch your death,
look at you! Well, get ready, you'll*

help serve the dinner tonight.
Oh, and throw away those branches,
Lily, don't bring things like that in. I
don't know where you get these ideas...

*

In Ruth's boarding house, the doors
number guests off neatly, dividing

the upstairs corridor into
headcounts and table places,
each clean, ledgered numeral

measured into days and nights
and the linen to be washed.

In this wet afternoon
nothing moves in the hall.

Here, after the zenith has passed
on, only Ruth moves, her footsteps
undertone on the well-swept carpet,
secrets whispered into the child's
ear who listens through the keyhole.

*

Silverware shines clean
in the guests' dining room.
The evening and the rain settle in,

just touching on dark
under the hills' and clouds'
shadows.
The Britannia steel

and lucid glass hold
back the fall of evening for a little.
Only Ruth now, in the pre-dinner hour,
variegates the thin gleams
each time her shadow passes.

Table by table,
her eye, keenly trained,
exacts symmetry.

Forks raise slender arcs,
lifting away from the horizon
of polished wood.
Overhead, the high stud
diminishes into dimness.

Linen napkins splash
in bleached blossoming.
Not quite satisfied, she straightens
each edge once more.

*

After dinner,
nightfall.
Deep night

swallowing.
The diners
rest fitful,
aware of the dark
in some
nadir of sleep.

Kernel night,
eternal
enclosure
no spring wakes.

Eve of
yes and no and
everything
slips.

*

Over the valley, the boarding house,
Newson's homestead, the bach,

the corner store and all, dawn
huddles into wet waking.
Egmont is lost still,

clouds beyond hills shrouding.
Ruth Newson wakes
early, always
earliest in her house,
preparing her self
in the shifting light.
Not a sound as she laces,
grips, cleans and kempt.

Once built and square, Ruth
finally looks into the mirror

to see, in the chalky reflection,
her eyes grown hard and nested,
eyes of carpentry and steel.

What makes her stare so long
and then turn away?
The mirror spits her out,
echoing the clean wall once more.
Ruth's footsteps in the hall
shake her daughter from sleep.

*

Out into the unstable morning,
following the worn path, Ruth

sets out for the boarding house.
Pushing into the kitchen, the heat
remaining from last night greets her.
In she walks at six each day, belying
now and never the loss of days in her punctual
gesture, in her echo of herself, of herself again.

I

Eating the rain,
vegetation
extends hungry hands.

Over fire-cleared earth,
fingering, it inches forward.

Spanish flu, a hissing, falling
overflowing sound,
mingles with the talk of milk prices,
ewes and the slips over at Jack's,

vanishing finally into closing lips.
It's just up Auckland,
nothing to it'll spread this far.
Eddie said to never mind, it's not so bad,

some aspirin and bed rest's all...
Then closer to home,
reaching as far as cousins,
uncles, friends, and closer.
November eighteenth:
God, did you hear?

They said he died sudden, skin turned black,
ebony she said he was, and right in town!
Now it's wives and husbands,
sisters, mothers, all
in the fevers and it comes
on so suddenly *just fell over, he was fine*
no warning, *all the young ones, strong, the doctor*

reckons, hits the healthy ones worst
Everyone wants pills, wants camphor, wants
lemons and oranges, the price of them!
Everyone at the inhalation chambers
a gulp of formalin, that sort of gas thing
Sulphur on the fire smokes
epidemic's bad in the city, Sally said,
she saw the special train out to the cemetery.

If you bleed at the nose, you'll be fine.
Now, just wear this little bag, you'll be safe...

Thick fluids rattle in lungs,
hearsay of bodies dumped in the sea,
emergency morgues in city parks and

Doctor, they have taken out the lining from my inside!
and the smell of the houses
rancid with illness, flimsy houses
keeping all that green so slightly at bay.

*

Two wide-built men struggle
heavy bed-frames around the landing,
expletives muffled by Ruth's presence as she

directs them to take care
in not scratching the banisters.
No need to be careless, Tom.
In the dining room,
narrow needful beds line up,
gleaming pale with clean linen.

Ruth moves the sick guests
out last, supporting them
or having them carried.
Movement disorients.

In the dining room, Jim helps
shift the last bed into place,

shuffling his old man's walk
to and fro, pushing a little here and there.
In the hall outside,
Lily hangs back, frightened by the sweat-smell
lifting from the men and by their unfamiliar sounds.

The men are tired.
Heavy vowels slacken
rough-already voices.
Over this slow bass
unleashes a bright,
glissando of delirium,
haunting the silence after.

The beds are straight, the sheets
hospital clean.
Emergency hospital.

Doctor's visits once a week
and volunteers to nurse,
young and old,
smiling tightly as they tend.

*

Lily holds a smudged glass
up to Tom's mouth.
*Mother said for you to drink, oh
but you're so hot and won't you drink?
Even this lemon drink? And lemons so
rare now and he won't drink.*

- Come now girl, he's in no state for that.
And the doctor's back again, a week already,
ugly man, he's all teeth and hair.
*Give him an enema, like I told you,
he won't take anything like that,*
the doctor says, already leaving.

But Lily doesn't know what
enema means – something like
the Germans, like an enemy?
*Well, just keep at it,
excellent work, no fatalities yet,
excellent work and he's gone,
nothing for another week.*

Up at the homestead, her mother
sleeps, just an hour or two
each day and Lily is in charge

and she doesn't know.
Ned keeps shouting that his
Da's up the cowshed, Da's up the

Rose is starting to turn black,
ends of her fingers
first, but it's spreading
under her skin, clouding up,
smoky sort of a black,
a kitchen window left too long.
Lily turns away.

Wendy is asking if she might
ask for some water.
I hate to, Annie, love, but...
the sheets under her
sweat and seam.

The door slams, shifting
heavy, foetid air, and Ruth
enters, the hem of her skirt muddy and eyes
raw with sleep. *Mother, the doctor said that Tom needs...
enema...? – Then do it, Lily.*

*

Her tight bun now unraveling,
eyes sunk with exhaustion,
Ruth, carrying a basin,
enters the sickroom again

and

pin-thin wrinkles crack
in the bodice of her dress
as she tips out of balance
now drag of inertia
on the fibres of her fabric
when she bends
into breaking
the basin
hanging
now hands spread
unknit to splinter fans
make sharp angles her elbows
break loose of her waist
elapse
rigid symmetries
erode sawn and
dead straight lines
keeling
eyes roll back
yellow whites in
sanded frames water
coils out of the basin
and her knees
not holding
on
no
longer lumber
yearning for release
eyes close face
variegates in light she
eclipses and fluid
rest forces
down
rusted failures
explosions
and scattered
migrations fling

out of shards of tin
falls bright the water
under candles
now the basin hits
steel ring
the bone crack
as knees hit
in one-two and
now hip
elbow
down
in the wet
vegetable slap
of flesh
resounds through
years and hard wood.

*

As Ruth fell, Lily
saw the breaking of her.

It broke her,
that sound of impact.

Fever did not come
and the doctor said exhaustion,
it was only exhaustion.
Lily could not shake the hard
sound of flesh meeting wood.

*

Slow-fast weeks
in the dining room,
Lily and Ruth and others
eke small life out.
No death has yet darkened this dark room,
claustrophobic with thought of it
eating into flesh.

*Perhaps dawn will never come, never
rise above the school house.* Lily
endures this thought each night.
She is hollow eyed
in the loud
delirium, keeping the patients in their beds,
emptying the pans and basins
spit-heavy,

wiping away bright
haemorrhages with dirty towels.
Enema, she has found,
requires a terrible knowledge;
each body with its own textures and smells,

own tics and slow movements. They are, at least,
not aware of her dark intrusion. She
carries the bottle to
Edward, who needs *to piss but*

me arms, me hands, I can't...
Edward's skin is hot with fever
now, hotter there

and the bottle splashes warm, cooling
to tepid as she carries it over,
empties it in the bucket.

There is dirt on her skin, under
her nails all the time,
even when she has cleaned them.

Red when fresh, blood dries
a maroon, brownny colour,
verging on black in the dim room.
Each of the beds darkens

night by night, sweat and blood,
into the weave, seaming.
No dawn, surely, can be
granted after this.

She no longer
hears words
among the cries.
Day could not
enlighten this.

Only if day would break,
filling the room with colour.

She is alone
in this night, her mother
lying up at the homestead –
exhaustion, she must rest, Lily you...
Nola sick too.
Catherine at home tonight.
Each of the beds darkens.

Lily dips a sponge
into a dented basin, not
knowing what
else to do.

Mrs Wells is awake,
out of the delirium, but now
she's losing all her hair.
She collects it in a shoebox.

If dawn could
never come again.

The voices spill out,
hiding in the chinks,
eaves, the small places.

The voices swell and swell,
only there is no breaking,
no breaking in sight.
Grown numb to flesh, Lily
undoes the buttons,
eases out soft,
secrets

of men and women and she
feels their sweat soak in

to her skin and it won't wash
off, won't wash out
no matter how hard she washes.
Grown deaf to the voices, Lily is
unflinching now,
even against Rose's sudden screaming

and Lily moves like a ghost
now, as though
dawn would scatter her.

Grey dawn
rises finally and brings
on the threshold her mother staring
Oh Lily... Your hair, your hair, Lily...
Very soon, too, the wives and daughters of the valley
eccho overnight, she turned grey overnight.

II

Muddy creeks spill
an overflow of waters,

now the spring rains are in.
The weeks wear on.

Late one afternoon, Jim
exhausts his luck and falls

down outside the pub.
The publican calls his brother

in, says to take him home.
Mick, the brother, is busy,

but they can't just leave him there.
'e was fine just now, fit as a

Resting in Newson's dining room, his
sleep is broken by the fever in him.

*

And his skin burns and crawls
reaching into his dreams, no

escaping his skin, twisting
eating at him, gnawing in.

And the cool hands on him
scutter, thrilling chills

into his bones, the room pulses
loud around and growing

young his flesh fills out but
earwigs are hatching in the walls,

new and glossy in the walls.
The woman beside his bed

extracts a dark, lithe body –
richly smooth – and cracks open.

*

Even his bones are burning now,
dug under skin and muscle

in a darker darkness.
Now his skin begins to smoke,

murky, unclean wood-smoke,
unclean fires in him.

The woman who bends is
every woman who has bent

since he was sixteen and *Jimmy*
is a good boy, ooh such a good boy

lilting, lilting, *oh Jimmy lad*
every sweaty hand and tit

No but the woman with the black eyes
crawls insectile into him.

*

Every wall of him is torn open.
Spiders breed in hollowed organs.

Pulsing, plush tissue plumps
inside him, crawling, crawling and

*Damn things've laid their
eggs in him, and he*

rips at the gauzy egg-sacs,
stands to fight and she

bends him back down,
right back, he's lying back, he's

every Jim he ever was, he's
electric bright as pain lightning

down his bones twists,
enthralls his bones, cold.

*

And his skin falls away,
rips off in broad strips,

wallpaper rots away
in wide swathes.

Gristle shines in the blood,
showing dusky, dirty,

something moving there,
clicking and swift, jointed

and glossy fast, darkening
the bright blood-rich muscle.

the skin keeps dropping, dropping
exposes shifting, dropping

red, darkening, swarming. Skin
coils away and his flesh shines.

*

And the meat drops away
now, bones slip through,

now the bones slip
out and she's watching him,

nipples red and her lips and she
echoes, echoes *oh, Jim*

oh, Jimmy, such a good lad,
flesh in her hands, in her

tongue, between
her teeth rip wide, spiders

in between her molars pop and he
screams and he screams and

he screams and she smiles
over him, sighing *oh, Jimmy.*

*

Lily asks *How are you now?*
dabbing a sponge on his forehead.

The walls have grown still again.
Only Lily sits beside him.

Weeks and months will recover him
and though he'll never be

the old Jim, he'll continue his slower
erosion, sinking quietly year by year.

Right, for now, seems right enough.
the skin on his hands

is yellow, scarred,
gnarled but it's there,

hiding the blood and hiding
the thing that scuttles in him.

III

Over, filtering all that water washes –
linen, cups, faces, floors – back into the light,
December remains somehow stained.

Now is to clean and to straighten.
In the afterwards,
grunts and curt directions
herald the return of the beds
to the upstairs rooms.

*

Birds, fragile hatchlings,
escape or are exiled from the eaves,
claiming a small moment
of flight before gravity hits.
Mornings find their translucent
eggshell bodies
surrounding the boarding house.

*

Evening and *Lily, where have been for so long?*

- *At the store, Mother, like you asked.*

Ruth draws the tendons in her neck tight, under slackening skin.

- *Lily, did you get the extra sugar? I need that.*

- *Yes, mother, it's all there.*

Minutes silently pass as Ruth inspects.

One by one, she weighs the packages in the basket,

reckoning some short, looking askance at Lily, and saying

No-one's to be trusted, Lily, you have to watch for their thumbs.

- *I will, Mother.*

Now Ruth cannot weigh and prod any longer, and Lily goes again, pale and sufficient in the twilight.

*

Darkness draws out the days
and summer warms the raw green.
Yellow softens the hills at twilight.

Blackness draws back,
recoiling into shorter hours.
Each day hardens Ruth's rule:
an error is always seen,
known and punished. Darkness
sleeps, only waiting.

IV

Secrets etched in
unbroken rain run under and Jim

now drinks hard. Tonight he
risks bringing home a dozen.

In the twilight Ruth enters. She'd
seen the crate. She takes two bottles –

exact, anatomical grip of her
hands. Then out again. Shatter

as her sinews flex. The salt
smell of his tears in his folded face

and the yeast smell mix. She goes
right past him without looking.

Echoes again and again that shatter.
Drench of beer soaking into moss.

Dirt drinks. She doesn't say a word.
And it's Jim, not Ruth, who sees Lily

watching from the boarder's window,
naked, before she snaps the curtains shut.

Silence like moss
in the turning of a heavy season –
listen for the breaking of memory,
each voice pulling clean of its skin.
Night brings the wet irruption,
cold years seeking heat,
escaping finally with this.

Lily of the Valley grows
in the shade of the boarding house,
kindling a pale light there between
earth and human walls and sky.

It is here Jim haunts, held
now, later, in closer walls.
Knotted timbers still hold in the main house,

sit just above the flood line and strain
keen eyes on the creeping of the waters of spring.
Eve of some vine-strung tension releases in the dark.
The dining room is still through the days, lumber
caught between use and refusal waits there;
here a piano with numbered keys can only
ever dream of unstained ivory as it fails.
Silence presides where once men ate,

the ravening shade of silence like moss
in the tongues of tongue and groove.
Mantled timbers are easily
entered in mute silence;
spiders breed,

earwigs scatter,
Can none of this
hold to water-tight?
Old night becomes
early morning,
Day breaks.

Sunrise
has
a
red
dawn.
Silence.



Notes

The place, events and descriptions that the setting, narrative and the three main characters are based on can be found in the 'Douglas Boarding House' section of *Douglas: A Taranaki Rural Community*, a short history published to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Douglas School.

The project as a whole, and especially pages 24 to 41, draw heavily on Geoffrey Rice's excellent history of the flu pandemic in New Zealand, *Black November: The 1918 influenza pandemic in New Zealand* and Jim Henderson's 1967 radio documentary *The Great Plague* (excerpts available as text and audio files at www.nzhistory.net.nz).

The epigraph is taken from Samuel Beckett's theatrical notebook for *Krapp's Last Tape* (Faber and Faber, 1992).

Page 10: Ruth's reported speech here is adapted from an account given in Vicki Marie Culling's doctoral thesis, *Writing/righting menstruation: a feminist analysis of New Zealand women's knowledge of the menstrual cycle* (Victoria University of Wellington, 2001).

Page 24: 'a gulp of formalin spray' is taken from Audrey Drummond's account in *Black November*; 'sort of gas' is taken from an anonymous account in Henderson documentary.

Page 25: 'Doctor, they have taken out the lining from my inside!' is taken from Dr David Lloyd Clay's account in *Black November*.

Page 34: 'turned grey overnight' is taken from *Douglas: A Taranaki Rural Community*.

Page 49: the Douglas Boarding House.

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