

# STORYTIME

*a body in the library tale*



MORGAN SCHATZ BLACKROSE

## Storytime

*There's a body in the library,*

*There's a body in the library,*

*There's a body in the library,*

*Early in the morning.*

Alice opened her eyes, blinked and rubbed the sleep from them.

'I hate that song,' she announced to the dozing mound beside her.

She reached out her hand and patted her partner's thigh. Any higher up and sex would be on the menu. Even though her lover had only just returned from a week away, she wasn't in the mood.

'That tune has been going round and round in my head all bloody night,' she continued.

'Achy breaky heart,' the mound replied.

'No,' Alice retorted, 'here we go round the bloody mulberry bush!'

She eased herself into a sitting position and rearranged the pillows behind her back.

'I guess sex is out of the question then?' the mound said, and rolled over and stroked her belly.

'Alice looked down on Paulo and smiled.

'I'm a bit preoccupied with the body in the library at the moment,' she said.

'Is that a book?' he asked.

'No,' she answered, 'yesterday we found a body at work.'

Paulo climbed out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom.

‘I’ll listen to you in a minute, my bladder’s bursting,’ he said, and closed the door to the ensuite behind him, ‘so you don’t have to listen to me,’ he added.

Alice climbed out of bed, slipped on her dressing gown and walked out to the kitchen. She filled up the coffee machine and got out the cups. Paulo joined her in the kitchen.

‘You’re up?’ he said, confused by her absence from the bed.

‘Yes. I’ve got to go to work this morning anyway, and I’d rather not talk about bodies in bed,’ she explained.

When the coffee had percolated she brought it to the table. Paulo had already laid out their standard Saturday morning fare; butter, cheese, olives, Kaiser rolls and a loaf of rye bread. They sat down and began eating.

‘So tell me about this body of yours,’ Paulo said, as he sliced the bread.

‘It’s not my body,’ Alice protested, ‘it’s ... the library body.’

‘Someone you know?’ Paulo ventured.

‘Yes and no. Why don’t you just eat and I’ll tell you?’

‘Suits me,’ Paulo answered, and crammed a large chunk of blue vein on rye bread into his mouth.

‘Yesterday was our first Friday morning Storytime. They were all lined up ready for opening, you know the usual suspects, pensioners with their four wheeled chariots jostling with the mummies and their racing prams. The doors opened and they stampeded, bottlenecking at the returns desk, and then one of the new kids lost sight of his mother and started howling.’

‘You mean crying,’ said Paulo.

‘No,’ said Alice, ‘I mean howling, like a dog.’

‘Oh.’

‘Then another one took the opportunity to bite the howler. And then the mothers entered the fray and Jim, you know the old bloke that reads the papers out loud every morning, he got between them and gave the kids a lolly each to suck on. Then the mothers had a go at him for giving their kids lollies without their permission. And they’re barely in the door.’

‘Not boding well then?’ said Paulo, and refilled their coffee cups.

‘Oh it gets worse. I had the box of nametags ready and some spares for any new kids. Then I saw the gang. Haydon, Braydon, Shaydon, Jaydan, Aidan and Jaydan W. All together in the one storytime. I thought, what have I done to deserve this?’

‘No girls?’ asked Paulo.

‘No. They must have known something. The only new ones were the howler and the biter.’

‘At least it was a small group,’ comforted Paulo.

‘Mosquitoes are small too, and look what they’re capable of,’ Alice stated bluntly.

She jabbed the olives with her fork and ate them one at a time, spitting out the stones onto her plate. Paulo took her break to eat as a cue for further questions.

‘And then what happened?’ he asked.

‘They pinned on nametags and only one drew blood, not his own, he pricked the boy next to him, and when he stopped screaming, we did the song.’

‘Here we go round the bloody mulberry bush?’ he offered.

‘Yep. The library version of it, where they all get to add their own sentence about the library. Like “the library’s a place to borrow a book” or “there’s a video in the library” and then we have the finishing line, “early in the morning.” Anyone can call out a phrase. So we’re doing the song and I’m thinking it’s not going to be so bad after all, everyone’s joining in appropriately.’

Alice took a bite out of her roll and Paulo waited expectantly.

‘Then Kelly comes out of the storeroom that adjoins the kid’s section, and stands in the middle of the room and babbles, “there’s a body in the library.” And this sets the kids off singing “there’s a body in the library.” The poor girl’s white as a ghost and raving. The kids think it’s a great lark, and start yelling the song at the top of their lungs, until Jim comes over and bellows at them to shut up. He can’t hear himself read. And the biter starts bawling and his mother tells Jim off for scaring the kids. Meanwhile, Kelly’s still behaving like she’s having a psychotic episode. Actually, I thought she might have been, and I was just about to go to her when Yvonne came over and tried to take her away. But she kept pointing at the storeroom. By this time Jim had gone and closed the door to it. Then Yvonne went over and opened it. She looked inside, but shut it pretty quick. I could see she was shaken up. So Jim went back to sentry duty while she rang the Police. By now the rumours were rife and the ghouls started crowding round Jim, wanting to know whose body was in the room. I excused myself from the Storytime crowd and took Kelly out the back to the kitchen. Next thing Yvonne’s voice came over the PA announcing that the library was closing, and could everyone stay inside as part of the library emergency procedures drill. I found out later the Police told her to lock the doors until they came and not let anyone enter or leave, and to tell the patrons it was a

drill. So there we all were, locked in the library with a dead body and Haydon, Braydon, Shaydon, Jaydan, Aidan and Jaydan W and the wolf cubs, still singing “there’s a body in the library.”

‘Traumatised for life you think?’ asked Paulo.

‘No I’ll cope,’ said Alice.

‘I meant the kids, Alice.’

‘I doubt it. Jaydan asked me what a bobby was. But before I could answer, his mother told him. “It’s a body Jaydan not a bobby. A dead body.” Then she turned to me and explained how he gets his b’s and d’s’ mixed up. And I thought that’s the least of his problems.’

‘So what happened when the police came?’ asked Paulo.

‘You’ve seen the British mysteries on telly haven’t you?’

Alice paused in her telling and waited for Paulo to speak.

‘And,’ he said.

‘Nothing like them.’

Jim Thomas lifted the newspaper off the desk and unfolded it. He adjusted his glasses and turned each page until he found the article he wanted to read. He cleared his throat and read it out aloud.

‘Body found in Library. Police are investigating the death of a forty-five year old Victorian man found in the storeroom of the Fern Forest Library. Residents of the outer Eastern suburb of Fern Forest were shocked to learn of the death of the local property

developer, Mr Russell Smithers. Mrs Yvonne Bartholdy, the Branch Manager of the library told Police that Mr Smithers was not a member of the library and she had no idea how his body came to be there. Police are treating the death as suspicious and are asking anyone with information to come forward and contact their local branch.'

Yvonne listened patiently as Jim read the news and before he found another item of interest, approached him with her request.

'Good morning Jim,' she said, 'you're looking rather dapper this morning. Is that a new suit?'

'And good morning to you Yvonne,' said the old man, 'I wore it specially for you.'

'It suits you.'

'You're in fine fettle this morning Yvonne,' he said and laughed loudly.

'Thank you for informing us all of the news Jim,' Yvonne continued, 'but could you please read a little softer, as it disturbs some of our patrons?'

'Certainly, Boss' he said, and saluted her. 'No body in the library today?'

'Every body's here today Jim, but thankfully they're all alive and kicking,' she said, 'and thank you for your help yesterday. I can't believe I didn't recognize our friend Mr Smithers. It must have been the clothes.'

'It's not the clothes that make the man,' said Jim, and returned to his paper.

The phones were more demanding than a pair of two year olds having tantrums. Before Alice had a chance to hang up one, its partner rang. Everyone had 'information' about the dead man.

'Please ring the police,' she informed each concerned caller.

‘But the paper said to ring the library,’ they protested.

‘No they didn’t,’ said Alice, ‘contact your local branch of the police, not the library. As if we’re not busy enough already,’ she thought to herself, as she hung up.

The library remained closed all day Friday, while the police and their affiliates interviewed everyone and examined the library. By Friday evening the body had been identified as Russell Smithers, a local developer, lobbying to demolish the very building he was found in. Come Saturday morning there were record-breaking numbers of library patrons and prospective members visiting the library.

‘Why waste time and energy on membership drives when all a library had to do was add a dead body to its collection?’ Alice muttered to Polly, as the two librarians eased the trolley with the returned books, away from the desk.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sight of Mrs Spinoza and her friend.

‘Excuse me,’ Alice called, ‘but that blue tape is a police barrier, so please do not go near there.’

The elderly women feigned indifference to Alice’s order, and tried to open the door to the storeroom. Alice excused herself to Polly, and wove her way through the crowd to the storeroom door.

‘Could you please come away from there?’ she said in the voice she employed for naughty toddlers.

‘Mrs Spinoza was just showing me where the rogue was,’ said the elderly woman, sitting on her walker. ‘Are you serving tea yet?’ she asked, smiling at Alice.

‘A man died here,’ said Alice, ‘and regardless of what sort of man he was, it is very sad for his family, and no we’re not serving tea today or any day.’



‘Can I quote you on that?’ a woman dressed in a tailored suit and carrying a notebook, spoke over Alice’s shoulder.

Alice turned to face the interloper.

‘No you bloody can’t,’ she answered.

‘What did you just call that woman?’ Mrs Spinoza asked, her eyes glinting with mischief.

‘I did not call her anything,’ Alice replied, ‘now can you please come away from the door ... now?’

‘Beverly Anders, Freedom Press, did you discover the body Ms er Alice?’ the reporter persisted, looking at her nametag.

Alice walked towards to the Reference desk, Beverly Anders bustling after her.

‘Yvonne, there’s a woman from the press here. Do you want to talk to her?’

Yvonne looked up at the clock, and faced the reporter.

‘We close shortly. I’ll see you out the front of the building then. Thank you,’ she said, dismissing the reporter. ‘Now Mr Jaffe, I’m sorry about the wait,’ she spoke to the old man sitting in front of the desk, ‘you’re interested in steam locomotives.’

‘Miniature ones my dear. I don’t think the wife would stand for a big old Puffing Billy in the backyard,’ he said, chuckling to himself.

‘Spare me,’ mumbled Alice to herself, returning to the loans desk, ‘the model railway brigade. If Paulo ever became one of them she’d be on the first train out of their relationship.’

The queue for loans had grown longer and more vociferous in the interim. It was only by chance she looked towards the storeroom and noticed the door was open.

‘Those old busybodies. How did they get in?’ she said, and charged towards it.

Alice was about to pull it closed when she saw Kelly standing inside the room.

‘Kelly. What are you doing here?’ demanded Alice. ‘I thought you had a week off work.’

Alice shut the door behind her and the young library officer turned around, her face the picture of sorrow.

‘I loved him you know,’ she said. ‘I know youse all hated him, but he was good to me.’

‘He was old enough to be your father,’ said Alice.

‘So,’ the young woman said, pouting.

‘But he was going to knock the library down and build luxury flats on the land,’ said Alice.

‘Yeah. An’ he was gonna give me one of them,’ she replied.

‘But you didn’t recognize him when you found him?’

‘No. I should of known him, but he was wearing dirty old clothes an’ he looked like a tramp.’

‘So why are you here now?’

‘We used to meet here. You know. For sex an’ stuff.’

‘Stuff?’

‘He liked playing in the library at night, pretending he owned it like. He had a key he got from some bloke in Council, and I got the storeroom key cut for him.’

‘But why here?’

‘He liked the idea of doing it sort of in public if you know what I mean. It got him excited, and the storytime pillows are comfy enough.’

‘Right,’ said Alice, making a mental note to replace all the Storytime cushions.

‘So did you see him here the night he was killed?’

‘Yeah. I left just before midnight. I always leave first and he locks up afterwards.’

Kelly burst into tears and slumped to the floor.

‘Now I’ll never get a luxury flat of me own,’ she said between sobs.

The door burst open and Beverly Anders stood in the doorway.

‘Sex and death in the library,’ she announced, ‘a very touching story.’

‘Were you listening in at the door Ms Anders?’ asked Alice.

‘Unfortunately I missed a few words, but I’m sure I can fill in the gaps,’ replied the reporter.

‘I’m not sure you’ll be allowed to print anything yet Ms Anders. ‘There is such a thing as libel,’ said Alice.

The reporter laughed.

‘Well sue me,’ she said. ‘And you can tell your boss I’ve got all I need, so she can have the afternoon off to do whatever it is you raunchy librarians like to do.’

Alice and Kate looked at each other and Alice helped her colleague to her feet.

‘I’ll come with you to the Police. It’ll look better if you volunteer this information rather than have them find out through reading that filthy rag she’s writing for. I’m assuming when you gave your statement yesterday you never told them about this.’

‘I only found out it was him cause it was on the news this morning.’

The two women walked out and Kelly handed Alice her key. She locked the door behind them and pocketed the key.

‘I don’t think you’ll be needing it any more,’ she said, and put her arm around her. ‘I’m sorry it’s the key to the library storeroom and not a luxury apartment.’

Polly announced over the PA that the library was closing. Alice told her that she was just taking Kelly to the kitchen and would return in a moment. Kelly stopped at the reading desk and Jim looked up at her and uttered a word. The young woman burst into tears and Alice took her hand and walked her on.

‘Go and grab a cuppa and I’ll be with you when we clear the place, OK?’ said Alice.

But Kelly wouldn’t let go of her hand.

‘He’s wearing Russell’s suit,’ she whispered into Alice’s ear.

Alice looked over at the reading table but Jim had already left. Yvonne was packing away the till when she saw the two women.

‘You’re supposed to be on leave Kelly,’ she said.

‘Kelly and I are going to the police when we close, and that reporter doesn’t want to see you any more,’ explained Alice.

‘Good,’ said Yvonne, ‘the only thing I want to see is a bottle of red and a bath after this.’

‘Did you notice Jim’s clothes today Yvonne?’ asked Alice.

‘I complimented him on his natty new suit in fact,’ said Yvonne. ‘Why?’

‘Kelly said he was wearing Russell Smithers’ suit,’ said Alice.

‘His wife didn’t waste any time clearing out his stuff then,’ said Yvonne, locking the cupboard door with the petty cash in it.

Alice sat next to her colleague and listened as she dictated her statement to the station sergeant. The murder squad detectives would interview Kelly if they deemed it necessary. For now the local police were given the task of collecting information.

‘Anything else you want to tell us?’ the sergeant asked.

Kelly mentioned seeing Jim wearing her lover’s clothes, and then signed her statement. After that they were free to go. Alice waited for the sergeant’s parting words, ‘however we advise you Miss not to leave town,’ but they never came. As they walked down the steps Kelly turned to Alice, ‘That Jim bloke called me a collaborator.’

Paulo poured the beer into glasses and they sat on the balcony in the warm sunshine.

‘So have you solved the murder mystery yet Agatha?’ he asked Alice, and took a deep draught of ale.

‘Very funny Paulo. I’m not even sure it is a murder. The police are calling it a ‘suspicious death.’

She took a few sips of her beer.

‘That hideous reporter from the Freedom rag was in today and overheard Kelly confessing to having an affair with Smithers. The mongrel told her he was going to set her up in one of the luxury flats he was going to build when he pulled the library down. You’re the psychologist Paulo. Could she have murdered him?’

Paulo frowned.

‘Everyone is capable of killing another person, but that’s not necessarily murder. People kill by accident and in self-defence. When it comes to war, duty covers all manner of killing. Murder is determined by intention. So we have to ask why would Kelly intentionally kill her golden goose?’

Alice thought for a moment and answered.

‘What if he was going to dump her, then dump her in it? No fancy flat and no job when her shenanigans were found out.’

‘But what about his wife? She may have discovered her husband’s shenanigans, as you call them, and decided to put an end to them ... permanently?’

‘Of course there’s also the possibility that he was also having secret liaisons at the preschool, the community information centre and the girl guides hall.’

Alice laughed at the puzzled look on Paulo’s face.

‘He might have had more than one lover and promised them all a flat,’ she explained.

‘That’s true, a serial philanderer,’ said Paulo, ‘but what if this isn’t about sex but money, or more specifically property? He was a developer and he wanted to demolish the library. Maybe that was enough to send one of your Friend’s of the Library Group over the edge, and they killed him?’

Alice burst into laughter.

‘Yeah right. The old *Murder on the Orient Express* scenario. I can just see them all, Readaloud Jim, the Burkehardts, Mrs Spinoza and her sensible shoes cronies, each sticking a knife in Russell Smithers’ belly.’

‘Is that how he died? Stabbed?’

‘No. A blow to the head, according to our library sources. Mr Smithers was an ex-rugby player, so they’re assuming someone strong must have hit him. But no weapon’s been found.’

‘What sources?’

‘Polly from Brereton branch, was helping out today. Her husband’s a cop, so he let slip a few details, which Polly duly passed on.’

‘None of your Friends of the Library are martial arts aficionados?’ Paulo asked, half joking.

‘I daresay quite a few of them could swing a mean walking stick. And Jim was a soldier in Korea, so he probably knew a few moves in his younger days.’

‘The Forgotten War,’ said Paulo. ‘And it’s still not over.’

‘Before we get sidetracked by the war, I forgot to mention that no-one recognized Smithers because he was wearing dirty old clothes. And Kelly said Jim was wearing Smithers’ suit today. Maybe Smithers was wearing Jim’s clothes? You know he sleeps rough and doesn’t get them washed too often.’

‘So there was a mix-up in the clothes? Jim was having his wicked way with Kelly too and.’

Before he could finish the sentence Alice cut him off.

‘Ugh! Don’t be disgusting,’ she reprimanded him. Now I’ll have to wash my eyes out with soap.’

‘But he may have known about their affair?’ offered Paulo.

‘That wouldn’t surprise me because he was sleeping out the back of the library, on the hall verandah. He might have witnessed their rendezvous.’

‘Would an old soldier kill a man for a designer suit?’

‘I’ve heard plenty of women say they’d kill for a pair of shoes,’ said Alice, ‘but I have my doubts whether greed, or sex, would be Jim’s motive. Assuming he’s our killer. You’ve interviewed lots of veterans. Come and meet him yourself on Monday?’

‘At the library?’

‘No. There’s a public meeting about the future of the library. We thought Smithers Development might have cancelled it, but they want to go ahead. Jim will be speaking on behalf of the Friends group.’

The old man shuffled the papers he clutched in his hands, and stood to attention at the podium. He looked at the assembled crowd, much larger than the Friends of the Library anticipated, due to the death of the developer. A representative from Smithers Development sat beside Jim, confidently smiling at everyone. The company had convened an emergency board meeting earlier that morning, to assess the development proposal of the library site. The outcome of the public meeting would determine whether they proceeded. If they couldn’t elicit a well of public sympathy at this point in time, they never would.



Alice and Paulo stood at the back of the hall. She surveyed the gathering. Standing room only. The front row was occupied by the Friends Group. She recognized quite a few library patrons sitting immediately behind, the Mayor, an assortment of local councillors and the press. She hoped that Jim would do the cause proud; he'd had enough practice in the library with his oratory. The old man cleared his throat and began.

'Ladies and Gentlemen let me tell you about the last haven of real democracy in our country; your public library. It's free and open to anyone regardless of their age, colour or creed. It has something for everyone; books, magazines, newspapers, DVD's, games and computers. It's warm in winter and cool in summer, it's dry, and it's safe.'

'Not for developers it's not,' a voice yelled from the crowd.

'But,' said Jim, addressing the heckler, 'he shouldn't have been there after opening hours.'

'How do you know he was there then?' persisted the heckler.

'Because I saw him,' Jim answered.

There was an audible gasp in the crowd.

'Did you kill him then? You're Russell's murderer,' accused the heckler.

Alice watched Jim, waiting to see whether he would run or defend himself. The old man took a deep breath and while he did so, Mrs Spinoza and her friend stood up beside Jim, and she took the microphone from him.

'No-one killed Mr Smithers sir,' said Mrs Spinoza. 'We can testify to that because we saw him, too, in the library on the night he died. He was in a state of undress and he was smoking.'

A second collective intake of breath from the crowd. The elderly woman smiled at the effect of her words.

‘Marjorie and I were horrified at his behaviour. A so-called respectable citizen like himself, doing that in our public library,’ said Mrs Spinoza.

‘What d’ya mean undressed?’ demanded the heckler.

The Burkehardts both stood up and took the podium.

‘The fellow was running around inside the library stark naked,’ said Gerhard Burkhardt. ‘Doing God knows what in there. The back door was open so we entered and called him out. But the fool ran and then we heard a crash and ...’

Jim took the microphone and continued.

‘Mr Smithers fell against the newspaper table and died. So we dressed him in my clothes, to preserve his dignity you understand, and laid him on the storeroom floor. We knew the police station wasn’t staffed at that hour and we knew he was definitely dead. We intended to ring the police and tell them the following morning. Unfortunately the library staff found him first.’

‘Where were his clothes?’ demanded the heckler.

Mrs Burkhardt took the microphone and answered.

‘We found them near the door on our way out, so Jim took them and put them on. After all he’d given his own suit to Mr Smithers.’

‘What were you all doing out the back of the library in the middle of the night anyway?’ the heckler continued.

‘Having a meeting, on the verandah of the shed’ said Jim. ‘There’s no law against that is there? I heard someone creeping round outside the library so I went to investigate.’

The others followed. We saw the library door ajar and went inside. There he was. I thought he was an arsonist or a burglar, or both, and being stark naked, I didn't know what mischief he was up to. It was my duty to confront him. I wasn't to know he would bang his head and kill himself.'

Any semblance of sympathy for the dead developer vanished with the image of Russell Smithers running naked through the library 'doing God knows what.' The representative of Smithers Development elected not to speak at all, and the meeting quickly dissipated. The board had no trouble making their decision.

The suited men, who Alice suspected of being detectives, made their way over to the Friends Group. Alice walked up to Jim and held out her hand.

'I like the notion of the library being the last haven of democracy Jim. We will always be indebted to those people who fight to defend and preserve democracy,' she said.

'Thank you,' said Jim, 'its our duty.'

Alice poured the hot water into the three cups and placed them on the kitchen table. Fifteen minutes to opening and the three women chatted about the previous week's events. Polly had been transferred to Fern Forest branch permanently and Kelly had resigned.

Alice was sad to hear of the young woman's departure, but agreed it was in Kelly's best interests to move on. She had violated everyone's trust and the library's

security, by cutting the storeroom keys and giving one to Russell Smithers. No-one criticised her sexual antics; blame rested squarely on the shoulders of the developer.

‘Are our Friends group still operational or are they all in gaol for conspiracy?’ asked Alice.

‘Tom says that no-one’s been charged with anything more than concealing a death,’ said Polly. ‘The detectives don’t believe any of them had a motive or were strong enough to kill Russell Smithers. They’ve put his death down to misadventure.’

‘I don’t suppose the preservation of democracy is a motive in peacetime?’ Alice posed.

Polly and Yvonne both frowned at Alice.

‘You know Paulo works with veterans don’t you?’ said Alice. ‘He was doing some research and discovered they’re all veterans, our little group of Library Friends. Special Forces. You know, secret missions, spying, commando stuff.’

‘No!’ said Yvonne, ‘you don’t believe they banded together and secretly planned to kill Smithers?’

‘What I believe is irrelevant,’ said Alice. ‘What I know is that members of the Special Forces are trained to kill people.’

‘But that was eons ago. The Friends aren’t soldiers now,’ said Polly.

‘That’s right,’ said Alice. ‘Who’s going to tell them?’

Alice chuckled loudly and her colleagues smiled.

‘You had us going for a while there,’ said Yvonne, as she cleared the cups off the table.

‘Sometimes it’s easier to see what you want to see and hear what you want to hear,’ said Alice, ‘which brings me to today’s Storytime. I’ve asked Paulo to come in. We’ve devised a little plan to cope with the wolf pack’s insistence on singing the ‘Body in the Library’ song. They did it on Wednesday and I want to stop it before it gets out of hand and is sung down through the ages.’

The door to the library opened. Prams, pushers, four wheelers and walking frames all vied for position in the surge for the returns desk. Alice waited in the Children’s section handing out nametags as each child arrived. She could already hear two of the boys singing the dreaded ditty.

‘OK everyone,’ she announced, ‘Welcome to the library. Because you’re all keen to sing the library song, I’ve bought my friend Bobby along so you can sing him the song. And then we’ll sing my name, that’s Alice remember, and then we sing Haydon, Braydon, Shaydon, Jaydan, Aidan, Jaydan W and the new boys Max and Jack.’

Paulo stood beside Alice with the nametag ‘Bobby’ displayed prominently on his chest. Everyone sang:

*There’s a Bobby in the library,*

*There’s a Bobby in the library,*

*There’s a Bobby in the library,*

*Early in the morning.*