

Tales of Love, Beauty and Danger

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Tales of Love, Beauty and Danger Six scintillating short stories Samantha Bond,
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Barker Community Centre Mount Barker

This anthology is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the authors' imaginations, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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This edition uses Australian editorial, grammatical and spelling conventions.

1 Foreword by Nicki Van Hooff, program coordinator

This short story collection is a result of the hard work and dedication by local writers and teacher and editor, Samantha Bond. The compilation came out of a series of creative writing workshops Samantha held at Mount Barker Community Centre as part of the Hills Connected Communities Program. The aim of this program is to improve social connections and connect people with their local community centre. Community connections can be made in many different ways and, in this case, it was through a shared interest in creative writing.

Mount Barker Community Centre is proud to have supported this workshop and the final product of a published short story anthology by local authors.

2 Foreword by Samantha Bond, editor

During 2017, I delivered a writing course titled *Fiction Fundamentals* at my local Community Centre. I designed it for beginning writers to teach the basic building blocks of writing a story from the kernel of an idea, to a publishable story. My students were diverse in age, gender and walks of life.

For many, this was the first time they'd attempted writing a story and their ongoing enthusiasm throughout the course was awesome.

We met once a month for six months to learn and inspire one another and, at the end of our time together, no-one was ready to say goodbye. And so the idea of this anthology was born. I wanted all my students to see their work in print and what better way to showcase their amazing imaginations and writing talent than in a collection?

There was no particular theme for this anthology, but as I edited each submission, I noticed certain shared subjects: fantastical worlds, characters who face danger and prove themselves heroes, beauty in the everyday and the ever present human conditions of love, pain, and heartbreak.

This collection was a pleasure to put together and the writers should all be extremely proud of their work. I hope you enjoy reading their stories as much as I did.

The Happy Plan by Beverley Boag

The curtains snapped open, flooding Beatrice's bedroom with light. Bea groaned, suddenly wide awake.

'I know you're hurting and you've every right to feel sad but enough is enough, Bea, it's time to get up and face the world again.'

It was Ellie's voice, her best friend since childhood. But Ellie lived miles away and she hadn't spoken to her in days, so it couldn't be her.

Beatrice squinted and waited for her brain to shake off the sluggishness of sleep and work out exactly what was happening. The face she saw through the narrow gap between her eyelids really was Ellie.

'What are you doing here, Ellie ... and how did you get in?'

'I'm here to rescue you from being swallowed completely by your quilt. And it didn't take a genius to find your spare key; you only have one flowerpot in the backyard. I'll give you ten minutes to take a shower and get dressed then I'll meet you in the lounge.'

Within a minute, Beatrice was standing under the shower, letting the streams of hot water relax her muscles and soothe her soul. For a moment, her mood was lifted until a vision of that awful scene flashed through her mind and reminded her exactly why she had been hiding under the bedclothes and hadn't showered in days.

Life had been going along just fine until she finished work early one afternoon and decided to head home early and surprise Darren. Bea was the one who got the surprise. Candice was from the gym, and after she'd grilled her husband in the hours that followed his betrayal, she learned it wasn't the first time Candice had called by for a bonus workout with Beatrice's husband. She'd felt like such an idiot. Once the shock had worn off and she'd realised that her marriage had been a lie, darkness had descended and settled in to stay. She'd retreated to her bedroom and had barely left there since, except to go to the bathroom and replenish her stash of tissues and chocolate.

When Beatrice entered the lounge twenty minutes later, Ellie was waiting for her cross-legged on the sofa.

'Talk to me, Bea. Tell me what you're thinking, what you're feeling. It helps to talk things through.'

Bea sighed and closed her eyes. She was feeling so many different things, it was hard to decide which feeling was the strongest. If she started trying to put her feelings into words, she would dissolve into tears again. She felt lonely because she missed her husband, even though he had hurt her in the cruelest way. She felt angry with him for placing such little value in their marriage. She wondered if things would have been different if she'd been funnier or sexier or more attentive.

'I just feel so....sad,' Beatrice managed to say before her words were stolen by deep, deep sobs that shook her whole body. Ellie wrapped her arms around her friend, holding her while she cried, saying nothing. When the sobbing lessened and the tears stopped falling, Ellie looked at Beatrice and squeezed her hand.

'You know what I think?' said Ellie. 'I think you need a change of scenery. You have too many things to remind you of your arsehole soon-to-be-ex-husband here in this house. Come and stay with me for a while. It will help take your mind off things.'

A few hours later, Beatrice was sitting in the passenger seat of Ellie's car. She had thrown some clothes in a suitcase, arranged for her neighbour to water the plants then started the journey to Ellie's house. The daylight was fading and the setting sun filled the sky with a beautiful orange glow. Beatrice loved sunset skies and her spirits were lifted a little by the sight. It was a three-hour drive to Ellie's house and most of the journey was spent in companionable silence. As they approached the city where Ellie and Bea had both grown up, Beatrice remembered how much she had once loved the buzz and bright lights of city life. She had imagined herself always living in the middle of a thriving metropolis, full of life and noise and people. But then she met Darren and he had wanted to move back to the small country town he called home. So they left the city behind and she'd adjusted to life lived at a slower pace.

As the lights of the city grew nearer and brighter, Beatrice felt a hint of excitement amidst the sadness. Maybe Ellie was right, a change of scene might do her good.

'This can be your room for as long as you want to stay', said Ellie.

Beatrice put her suitcase down and looked around. Ellie's spare room was a haven decorated in muted tones of pale green and natural wood. Strings of miniature lanterns adorned the edges of a bookshelf and a tall vase of twinkly twigs stood in the far corner of the room, casting the room in a soft, restful glow.

'This is perfect, Ellie, thanks'. Beatrice hugged her oldest friend, already feeling a little calmer, a little less upset, from the magic of the room and Ellie's company. They had so much history together, so many shared stories.

'I'm sorry that I haven't been better at staying in touch,' said Beatrice, 'It's been such a long time since I last came for a visit.'

When she'd first moved away, Beatrice visited Ellie often but her visits dwindled over the years as the routine of her new life with Darren took over. They still talked on the phone, but a phone call couldn't replace being in Ellie's presence. Ellie was the type of person who was filled with so much light and energy that it spilled out onto whoever was near, lifting their spirits and lightening their hearts. And Beatrice could really do with some of Ellie's energy right now; she had never felt so low and lethargic, disinterested in life.

Ellie gave Bea's hand a squeeze. 'Don't worry about it, Bea. Let's just enjoy spending time with each other again now that you're here.'

'I'm really glad that you persuaded me to come and stay with you, Ellie. Thank you. I really mean it.'

A change of scene wouldn't stop her feeling sad, thought Beatrice, but at least she could feel sad in the company of her closest friend.

After her best night's sleep in a while, Bea headed downstairs and joined Ellie in the kitchen.

'What would you like for breakfast? There's fruit, yoghurt, bread for toast. I can make scrambled eggs, or pancakes, whatever you fancy.'

'I'm not really that hungry, maybe just a piece of toast.'

'No worries, Bea, coming right up.'

Ellie popped some bread in the toaster and got some butter and jam out of the fridge. She grabbed two glasses out of the cupboard and filled them with orange juice, handing one to Bea. Beatrice took a seat at the kitchen table.

'How did you sleep?' asked Ellie.

'Pretty good. It's such a comfy bed and it probably helped that I didn't spend the whole day in bed yesterday too, thanks to you. My sleep patterns have been all over the place recently.'

'I'm not surprised, you've had a big shock and your mind is still processing things, but you have to take care of yourself and your body. Try to force yourself to sleep at the right times, eat at the right times, get out and get some fresh air and exercise, otherwise everything will just feel ten times worse.'

The toast popped up and Ellie put it on a plate and carried it to the table with the butter and jam, sitting down opposite Bea. Bea buttered her toast and took a bite. Ellie looked at Bea, opened her mouth to say something and then closed it again with a little shake of her head.

'What were you about to say?' asked Beatrice, taking another bite of her toast.

'I'm not sure this is a good time to say this, but I'm not sure there's going to be a good time so I'm just going to say it anyway. Forgive me for sounding insensitive, but I actually think that what happened with Darren might turn out to be a positive thing.'

Bea nearly choked on her toast.

'How can you say that? My husband cheated on me with a lycra-clad gym junkie. How can that in any way be a positive thing?'

'Just hear me out. I'm your best friend and I always have your best interests at heart. Sometimes we need to hear things we might not want to hear.'

Beatrice glared at Ellie but gestured for her to go on, intrigued to hear what she had to say.

'I'm going to be completely honest with you. I never really liked Darren. Yes, he could be charming

and funny, but I always felt like he never truly appreciated you and that he put his own interests before yours. Like when you moved away from here. I know you loved living in the city and really didn't want to go, but he persuaded you to move away from your friends and family to the middle of nowhere. And he never seemed to make your needs a priority. Whenever we talked on the phone and you were telling me what you had been up to, it always seemed that you had been doing things that Darren wanted to do. Either that, or he was off playing golf with his friends while you were at home. When was the last time that Darren agreed to do something with you that you wanted to do?'

Bea cast her mind back to try and think of an example to prove Ellie wrong but was ashamed to realise she couldn't think of one.

'Can you honestly tell me that you were happy before all of this happened, Bea? Truly happy?'

Had she been happy? What did that even mean? She loved Darren, she knew that much. Making him happy had made her happy, hadn't it? Yes, she had made personal sacrifices for the sake of her marriage, but isn't that what marriages were about?

'I didn't mind doing things that Darren wanted to do. That way we could spend time together. Marriage is about compromise, isn't it?'

'Well I'm no expert on marriage, Bea, but to me, it seems like the compromises shouldn't be all one-sided. There should be balance in a relationship so that both people get some wins, not the same person putting themselves last all the time. Anyway, just give it some thought. I have to head out to my yoga class shortly, so make yourself at home. I'll be back in an hour or so.'

After Ellie had gone, Bea got dressed and headed outside into Ellie's back garden. It wasn't a huge space but it was beautifully kept and full of colour and life. At the back of the garden, there was a round, white, wrought iron table with matching chairs. It looked like the perfect spot to sit and contemplate life. Bea sat down and thought about her conversation with Ellie. Maybe Ellie had a point. Maybe life hadn't been that great. Fine, but not great. It was true that she had stopped doing a lot of things that she had once liked to do and she had prioritised Darren's needs over her own. She had also started to feel somewhat disconnected from Darren, even before the incident with Candice. It sometimes felt like they were just co-existing, only talking about things on a superficial level, not really connecting in a meaningful way. Maybe she should do as Ellie suggested and try and see the break-up in a different light, to see it as an opportunity to connect with herself again and to focus on her own happiness instead of someone else's. Why not? She had nothing to lose.

A slam of a door and the sound of footsteps on floorboards signalled Ellie's return from yoga.

'Where are you, Bea?'

'Out here, in the garden.'

A slightly flushed, but smiling Ellie appeared through the French doors and joined Bea at the bottom of the garden. 'That was great, the best start to a Sunday morning. You should join me next time.'

'Maybe I will,' said Bea.

Ellie sat down at the chair across from Beatrice, leaned forward and fixed her gaze on her friend's face.

So,' said Ellie, then waited for Beatrice to respond.

'So?'

'So, have you had a chance to think about what I said?'

Beatrice shrugged then replied, 'A little.'

'And?'

'And maybe there's some truth to what you said. Maybe things weren't perfect. But I was doing fine.'

'Fine? Who wants to be just 'fine'. I think you need to aim higher than fine, Bea, you need to aim for fantastic.'

Bea nodded, hesitantly, still a little unsure that fantastic was within her reach at the moment, but willing to give it a try. 'How do you suggest I do that?'

'Here's what we're going to do. We're going to take advantage of this glorious day and sit here in the garden and start working on your happy plan.'

'My happy plan...?'

'Yes, your happy plan. I know that you're sad and that isn't surprising given what's happened, but you need to work on a plan to feel happy again. We're going to sit down together and write a list of all the things that you enjoy, things that make you feel good, and then you can work through the list and each time you tick something off, you will feel a little less sad and a little happier.'

Beatrice sat back in her chair and closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of the sun on her face. It really was a glorious day. It was hard not to feel a little more hopeful on a day like this. A happy plan. Hmm. Bea wasn't convinced it would work. Hiding out in Ellie's spare room and wallowing in self-pity sounded much more appealing, but that wasn't going to help change her situation. Why not give it a go?

Ellie dashed into the house and returned, armed with paper and pens. Together, the friends got to work on a list:

Go for a walk in the botanic gardens.

Visit my favourite coffee shop.

Read a book.

Take a bubble bath by candle-light. *

In Tales of Love, Beauty and Danger, six short stories show that:
Happiness is better shared…
Young girls are everyday heroes…
The light can be more terrifying than the dark…

Karma catches killers…
The search for love can be unending, and
Self-destruction is the harshest kind.

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