

Do Ghosts Have Freckles?

By Kathy Childs

“Grandma. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Good heavens girl. What sort of question is that?”

“But do you?”

“I most certainly do not.”

“If I was a ghost would I still have freckles?”

Viola giggles.

“Alma. Enough nonsense.” She tugs at the kitchen drawer, rummages around, pulls out a few coins. “Now since you have nothing better to do, I want you to run up to Bennett & Woodstock Butchers in Swanston Street and pick up some meat for your Aunt. A pound of beef steak and four lamb chops should do nicely.”

“Can Viola come with me?”

“No. I have other jobs for your sister.” She hands me the coins. “Now don’t dally. Just run the meat to Aunt’s then straight back home.”

“Yes Grandma.”

“Off with you.”

I skip up to Swanston Street wishing Viola was with me.

At the butcher I place my order then turn my back and lower my eyes. I detest the spectre of dead skinless animals suspended like a wallpaper of carcasses, loathe watching the knife slicing and carving into the flesh. I pay, tuck the wrapped parcel of meat under my arm and pull the door closed behind me.

He’s here. Leaning casually against the side of the building, cigarette dangling from his lips, hands running through his greasy hair. I know those hands, nicotine stained and coarse as they run over my leg as I sit at the dinner table. He touches Viola too but Grandma won’t believe us. She says it’s accidental and no harm meant. She’s wrong.

I slip back inside the butcher shop; hold my nose against the smell of rancid meat. I lean against the glass panels on the door and stare at my scuffed black shoes.

“You still here Alma? Better be on your way.”

I open the door. Peek outside. I can't see him. I dart out, hurry down Swanston Street, into Little Collins. I stop. Look back. I know he's watching. I can't see him. The paper package tears as my sweaty fingers press in against the soft meat. I wipe my hand on my overalls. I dawdle now, staying in busy streets. I walk past the Wine Shop, glance at the window and pick up a shadow in the reflection. I lick my lips; taste the sweat. I pick up my pace, my footsteps keeping time with my heartbeat. He matches my speed. The street falls into shadow. Where did everyone go? We're alone. A hand grabs my arm. I scream.

My body lies prone in Gun Alley, naked in the early dawn. The mist seeps up and swirls around the cobblestones. Around me.

A man approaches.

“Help me.”

He lets out a sharp cry, moves back, his hand over his mouth.

“Don't leave me. Stay. Please.”

He backs out of the alley. I hear him holler.

I'm cold. One of the policemen moves my long red hair aside and places his hand at my neck, holds it there. He shakes his head. Another man throws a blanket over me, burying my face. I want Grandma. I want to be home in my bed, my own worn blanket tucked up under my chin.

I hear a cry. Grandma. She bends down; her aching knees creak with the effort.

“Oh Alma.” There are tears in her eyes. Grandma never cries. I reach out to touch her, to comfort her but my arm doesn't move. She rises and walks out of the alley, bent low, supported by Aunty.

“No.” I run after her; grab her sleeve, try to wrap my arms around her. I hear her sob. I follow her gaze and I can see ... me. My red hair cascades out from under the blanket, my arm lies slack on the pavement, its white colour harsh against the black tarmac.

I slump to the cobblestones. My head falls to my knees then jerks up. I'm naked. Where are my clothes? I have no memory of what happened. I use my

hands to cover myself, embarrassed in front of the policeman. He doesn't seem to notice me. I wave. Nothing. I hit him. Nothing. I want to scream but only a whimper escapes. My throat was crushed when he.... I do not want to remember. The policeman however does not spare the details as he speaks to the bystanders, a beating, rape, and strangulation. No one should have to listen to others discuss the trauma of their death. No one. Especially not a 12-year-old girl.

I wish I had my clothes, was dressed. Then I am. I am back in my overalls and my favourite white shirt, soft from so many washes. I pull the red band from my hat and tie it around my throat to hide the bruising.

I stay in Gun Alley long after my body is removed. I sit on the cobblestones, my back braced against the shop wall. I raise my ghostly hand to the sunlight and touch its rays. There is no warmth. I watch the particles of dust dance in the afternoon breeze, moving away. I remain seated. I do not wish to leave.

Time flows on and around me. The kids resume playing football in the alley. They kick the ball to me then laugh as it passes straight through. I fascinate them.

"Hey Alma." Tom started coming here when he heard about the ghost girl. He is sitting on an old wooden crate, scratching at the mud between the stones with an old pipe.

I drift over to him.

"They caught the guy. You know the guy who,.." He pauses, embarrassed. "Who did those things to you." Tom stares at the ground. "Who would have thought Colin Ross was like that?"

Colin Ross. I am confused. It wasn't him. I shake my head vigorously mouthing the word no over and over. Look up Tom. It wasn't him.

"They found your hairs in his room and they have witnesses who say you were drinking with him at the Wine Shop." He looks up. "Why would you go in there Alma? It's a bad place." He pauses. "What?"

I mouth the word no. Shake my head.

"Are you saying it wasn't him?"

I nod.

"Who was it then?"

I felt a hand on my arm, a dirty hand over my mouth but I do not remember anything else. George Murphy was following me so it could have been him.

I motion drinking out of a cup and shake my head.

"You weren't at the wine bar then?"

I stand up abruptly. I will show Tom what happened. I walk slowly, look behind me, walk faster, check behind me again. "Someone was following you?" I nod. I grab my arm. Pretend to drag myself sideways. "He grabbed you." I scream a silent scream then clamp my own hand over my mouth. "He stopped you screaming? What then?" Tom is standing now, excited. I cock my head to one side. "Oh. Um. Yeah." He blushes. Pauses. "You want me to tell them don't you? They won't believe me, you know. I told Mama that I see your ghost but she told me to stop telling lies."

You have to try Tom. Please. I reach out to grab his arm but my hand passes straight through. He shivers and steps back. "Alma, they won't believe me. They have evidence and witnesses and..." he stops. "They're going to hang him next month." Tom drops the pipe. The clang reverberates in the alley. "Alma. I'm not allowed to come back here anymore. Mama says it isn't good for me. That coming here is making me behave oddly and that I tell lies." He reaches out his hand towards me then drops it as I stare at him. "I'm sorry Alma." Tom walks out of the alley. He doesn't look back.

The years move swiftly, Melbourne grows up and Gun Alley no longer exists. I have moved, but not far. I'm now a drawcard; a highlight of Melbourne's ghost tour circuit. Tonight a woman arrives with the crowd. There is something familiar about her. She listens, not to the guide as he recounts my terrible death and the trial and execution of an innocent man, but to the breeze as it winds its way down the alley, bending around me.

"Alma?" Her whisper is barely audible against the inner city hum. She stretches out her arm; then pulls away, rubbing her arms as if against a sudden chill. "Is it really you?"

I reach out, stroke her face. I watch her eyes widen then slowly a tear escapes, sliding down her cheek unchecked.

"Mum sent me." She whispers. "Viola was my Mum." She brushes away the tears that are falling freely now. "Mum passed away this morning. She asked

me to come here. To tell you. She said ‘tell your Aunt Alma I’m coming to see if ghosts really do have freckles’.”

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Just before dawn on 31 December 1921 the naked body of 12-year-old schoolgirl Alma Tirtschke was found in Gun Alley off Little Collins Street. Alma, who had disappeared during an errand the previous afternoon, had been raped and strangled.

Despite having a solid alibi the owner of the Wine Shop, Colin Ross, was charged with the murder. Protesting his innocence to the last, Ross was hanged on April 24, 1922. He was subsequently pardoned in 2008 after the evidence against him was discredited.

Alma is now a fixture on the Ghost Tours of Melbourne, which is when I first heard her story. My account is purely fictional.



State Library of Victoria

<https://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/rebels-outlaws/city-criminals/gun-alley-murder>