

Story for performance #969  
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Writer/s: [Jane Gleeson-White](#)

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Although built from pulsing sinew and muscle, hearts are delicate objects and must be treated with care. They can be broken, lost or stolen. If severely wounded they are capable of triggering unexplained cosmic events, as in the case of Judge Frederick Long.

Helen Long couldn't explain what had happened to her marriage, but she was absolutely certain of what had happened to her husband Frederick. From the moment she'd announced that it was time for their daughter Antonia to go to boarding school on the mainland, he had been grieving for her. At first Helen thought his grief would pass, but three years on still it continued. Each night, the Judge turned from her after dinner and retreated to the verandah where, for some reason unknown to her, the Government Vulcanologist would join him. Together they'd sit smoking and drinking gin and talk over the latest seismic disturbance.

And later the Judge would go to his shelves of leather-bound books and pull down *The Complete Engravings, Etchings and Drypoints of Albrecht Dürer, 1471-1528*. He'd sit back in his worn armchair, cigarette burning and turn to Dürer's engravings of angels. By the dim light he'd study their faces, their eyes and curved lips, the drape of their gowns. They were the only angels the Judge had at hand. But they were violent and muscled angles. They were men. Dürer's Archangel Michael stood over the beast fiercely and fatally wounded it with his long sword, while his manly face contorted with the effort.

Nowhere could the Judge see the face he was looking for. But every night he returned to the book and examined the angels closely for his own gentle angel. His heart longed, not for his daughter but for some trace of grey eyes he'd once so clearly seen.

At the first sign of dawn the Judge would close the book and rise, aching. Usually the first sign of dawn was from the volcano. The Judge could see the smoke in the darkness. The clouds of dark pumice dust began to glow thousands of feet up in the sky while the sun was still well below the horizon. But some mornings the sun shot up over the mountains while the moon still shone across the sea. And then the Judge saw night and day at the same time from his house on the ridge and was appalled by this freakish fusion. He considered it part of the same travesty that once had thrown an angel at his feet.

Three years ago he'd been standing on the verandah, thinking over his wife's pronouncement, mesmerised by the white petals of jasmine and frangipani which glinted in the moonlight. In one hand he held a bottle of gin. His daughter Antonia slept at the end of the verandah swathed in mosquito netting and the tendrils of bougainvillea. She was the subject of his wife's pronouncement. The Judge watched her and ached with an intensity the gin couldn't touch. He

knew his wife was right but he also knew seven was so young to be leaving home. In the moonlight he saw only an angelic infant, her golden curls crushed around her face and her cheeks flushed.

But the Judge's night musings were broken by a faint rumbling which grew like an invading force. Across the bay he could see three red bolts of magma shoot into the black sky and violent blows rip apart the night air. He snatched up Antonia from her net cocoon and ran inside, almost colliding with Helen in the dark passage. He pushed his daughter into her arms and yelled, 'It's the volcano. Take Antonia and I'll get the car...'

And in the single moment that the Judge stood alone by the car, one hand in his trouser pocket fumbling for his keys, he glanced back at the mountain. He saw a mass of molten rock erupt from the depths and send forth a grotesque and misshapen thing. Within that same instant he saw an angel emerge from the fire. Except that angels did not exist—or not in the way that this creature did, so real that when it crash-landed in his moonlit garden its naked feet made an impression in the grass and the downdraft of its frantically beating wings blew frangipanis from the nearby trees.

As he looked down into the face of the fallen creature the Judge's fear almost melted under the tender and puzzled gaze of its grey eyes. There was nothing about this loosely draped figure that told him it had any sex. It looked dazed, and faintly surprised.

And then it seemed to ask, 'Can you see me?'

This was too much for the Judge. In his moment of doubt the angel faded rapidly from view and the Judge was left alone among frangipanis freshly fallen on disturbed grass. He would not mention the angel to anyone.

Four years later when the volcano blew for the second time, the Judge was prepared, warned by his friend, the Vulcanologist.

The second eruption was smaller than the first. When it began on the Friday afternoon the Judge was in court hearing a matter. At the first sound of the siren over the rattling earth he had adjourned the court. This time he did not doubt. He rushed towards the vent across the bay spilling orange lava and shooting clouds of vapour into the blue sky. He realised as he gazed across at the site of the eruption that it was not powerful enough to disgorge an angel from the bowels of the earth. And as a great fireball rushed towards him and he fell into its arms, he also realised that the very idea of an angel being disgorged from the earth was preposterous.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Jane Gleeson-White.*