

**BELLADONNA**

Anthology: sf-envision.com

Ed: [Rowena Cory Daniells](#)

Published: [Fantastic Queensland](#) 2004

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**1948**



'I'm warning you. You better get out here now.'

Lillian woke in an instant, her father's bellow sending panic rushing through her veins, pulsing at her temples. She tripped on her nightdress as she dived out of bed. She had overslept. Lillian raced to the dresser and, with trembling hands, poured water from the urn into the porcelain bowl.

After splashing water on her face, she hastily brushed her hair, which refused to be fastened into a bun. She snatched at some bobby pins and pulled it back as best she could.

Grabbing the grey dress draped over the wooden chair, she threw the shapeless shift over her head. Lillian buttoned her thin cardigan to her neck, careful to hide her budding breasts, then fastened her stockings to the frayed suspender belt.

'What are you doing in there?' Edward's voice boomed.

Lillian froze, breath catching in her throat. Hurriedly, she checked her reflection in the small hand mirror. She traced the dark hollows, beneath her eyes with her finger. Lillian looked much older than her 15 years, her complexion sallow and tired. Before she left her room, she dropped to the floor. Her beautifully bound book of herbs was safe, underneath the bed, where she'd hidden it. A secret gift from her Mother.

Reassured, Lillian went out to face her father.

'Where the hell have you been?' Edward demanded as she entered the kitchen.

'I'm so sorry, Father.'

'Sorry, is that all you can say. Well, I made breakfast. It's your favourite,' he

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mocked, shoving a bowl of thick grey stodge underneath her nose. Her stomach heaved.

'If you don't like it, bad luck. That will teach you for being insolent.'

'But, I wasn't being insolent, Father, I --'

'Shut up and eat it.'

Lillian watched Edward nervously as he thrust his heavy frame into the wooden chair opposite. Pouring himself a cup of tea, his thin lips slurped the milky liquid. Lillian looked at the stodge in her bowl, then back at her father. Nausea came in waves. Pushing the bowl aside she reached for the teapot. Edward's hand slammed upon hers burning it against the lid. She whimpered but he held her hand fast, sneering, 'What's wrong with your porridge?'

Tears spilled down Lillian's face. She didn't dare try to wriggle free. 'Nothing Father, I just feel sick.'

Edward's face turned red. He thrust her hand away, picked up the bowl, and threw it in the sink. It shattered. Porridge splattered the tired green walls.

Lillian saw his arm swing. She ducked. Too late. His palm connected with her cheek, sending her sprawling.

'You whore. You slut. How dare you.'

Spittle flew across her cheeks. Within seconds, he had ripped his belt from his pants wrapped around his fist. The leather whipped her back and shoulders and Lillian flinched as the buckle gouged her pale skin. She crawled across the tattered linoleum, focusing on the back door, desperate to get away.

'Yeah, get outside where you belong, you good for nothing.' His boot connected with the top of her thigh, pushing her so hard she fell into the screen door. It swung open, spilling Lillian onto the stairs. She lay there for a few minutes, humiliation welling, then slowly picked herself up and staggered into the garden. Her body ached and her hand burned. How she hated it here. If only she could return to Auckland and be with Henry. But instead,

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she was so far north of anywhere that she hadn't even seen another white person.

Lillian caressed her belly, felt the tiny mound beneath her hand, and wondered about the life inside. What was she going to do? It was times like these that she missed her mother the most. It was her father's fault. He could've saved her mother, but chose to spend their money on booze rather than a doctor.

Why had he bought her to this god-forsaken place anyway? Deep down, she knew why. He had been shamed by her unexpected pregnancy, but most of all, it was out of spite. He could've put her in one of those homes for wayward girls, but instead, he wanted to punish her. Tears pricked at her eyes, anger threatened to burst out, like a volcano erupting. Molten lava of hate. She wanted to scream, scream at her father for letting her down, taking her mother, taking Henry, but she knew there was no use. Where would it get her? Another beating? She had to calm down for the baby's sake.

Gardening took her to a place of stillness. Lillian picked up the trowel, nestled in the old earthen pot and weeded around the basil. She crushed some of the leaves between her fingers, inhaling the sweet fragrance.

A crow squawked on the dilapidated fence. Movement caught her eye.

'Mother?' she whispered.

'Oh Lil, he has hurt you, hasn't he?' she said moving closer, reaching out for her daughter's burned hand. Her mother's touch soothed instantly.

'That feels much better, thank you,' Lillian said, grateful that her mother's gift for healing had travelled to the other side with her.

'Well, I see your plant is blooming beautifully.'

'It's so pretty, with its bell-shaped flowers. And look Mother, there are lots of berries too.'

'Yes, the black looks delightful against the purple of the leaves.'

Lillian hung her head, and looked up at her mother. 'He wants me to get rid of it.'

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'But why? Does he know it's poisonous?'

'No, of course not. It's just because I love it.'

'Hmn, Belladonna. That's what you are, my dear.'

'What do you mean?'

'Belladonna is Italian for Beautiful Woman.'

Lillian's face flushed. Tears threatened. She reached for her mother and felt a tug of energy, a warmth embracing her.



That evening, her father's heavy breathing was the only sound in the room as they ate. Edward shifted his weight in the chair and spooned a large dollop of mashed potato into his mouth.

'Did you get rid of that God awful plant today?' Edward asked. Lillian stiffened as she swallowed the potato with a gulp, not daring to look her father in the face.

'Well?' he asked.

She fidgeted in her chair, afraid to look up, but knew if she didn't it would fuel his anger further. When she did, his cheeks were red, eyes bulging.

'You didn't, did you? How many times have I told you to get rid of that damn plant?'

'I'm sorry Father, I will.'

'You will.' he spat. 'But you haven't and by God if I find it there tomorrow, I swear I'll tear the living daylights out of every plant out there. Is that quite clear?'

His chair scraped against the floor as he stood. He leaned across the table, his nose almost touching Lillian's. She stared back in disbelief, for this close, his eyes seemed enormous, filled with loathing. Her head snapped back as his fetid breath of stale tobacco and

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whiskey caught in her nostrils.

'Why do you hate me so much?' Lillian asked.

Edward spat in her face. She felt the gunk hit her cheek, then slowly dribble down her chin. She was going to vomit.

Edward smirked. 'You're just like your bloody mother.' Raising his arm to slap her, but knocked the chair flying instead because Lillian had jumped up.

She dodged left, then right. Infuriated, Edward mimicked her. It was like a dance, a dance of battle. He lunged, grabbing her hair as she tried to run. Bobby pins fell to the floor, her dark hair spilled in his grasp. He shoved her to the floor and kicked her in the stomach twice. 'And that's for your bastard child.'

He stalked out, leaving her alone.

Lillian lay in a foetal position as the pain tore through her guts searing into her chest. The room spun. She closed her eyes against the agony and dizziness, before falling into a dark void.

When Lillian came to, the kitchen was black and she was freezing. Thankfully, the pain in her belly had lessened. She was shaking so much, she held the table for support as she struggled to her feet. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her hands trembled when she lit the candle. She removed the dirty dishes from the table and placed them quietly in the sink, before making her way to bed.

Lillian crawled beneath the heavy layers of blankets, shivering. She watched the candlelight flicker, hues of blue and yellow, casting shadows on the wall.

'It's time, Lil. You know what to do, don't you sweetheart?' her mother whispered, gently caressing her forehead. Lillian relaxed a little, feeling the calm wash over her, mesmerised by the serene blue of her mother's eyes.

'Yes, it's in the book,' she whispered.

'That's my girl.' Her mother leaned forward and kissed Lillian's cheek.

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Breakfast was eaten in silence. Lillian did not want a repeat performance of yesterday. She had made sure she was up in time to clean last night's remains and make bacon and eggs. She watched warily, as Edward sucked at his greasy fingers. He smiled with a smugness that Lillian did not understand. Her body ached all over, but she ignored the pain for she had much to do and only a few hours.

As soon as he left, Lillian headed outside and picked a bunch of the Belladonna leaves and berries, stuffing them into her apron pocket. Hurrying back into the kitchen, she ran a piece of string above the coal range, tying it around existing cup hooks then fastened the leaves with wooden pegs. She knew the heat from the stove would dry them, she just wasn't sure how long it would take. She crushed the hard berries with a mortar and pestle, until she had a small glass of black juice.

She then headed for the shed. It was a mess of old engine parts, rakes, and hoes but eventually she found the shovel. She trudged over to the Belladonna and started to dig.

'Are you sure you need to do that?'

Lillian turned, watching her mother approach. She smiled. 'I have no choice. If he finds this here tonight, he'll kill me and my baby.'

'It's such a shame, it truly is beautiful.'

Lillian shrugged with resignation, and continued digging at the plant. It was stubborn to shift, its roots entrenched in the earth. Lillian's hair spilled over her face, dirt splattered her clothes. Finally the Belladonna pulled free. She threw it against the shed, knowing her father would see it as soon as he came home. Propping the shovel against the wall she asked, 'Why does he hate us so much, Mother?'

Silence.

Lillian looked around. The garden was empty, except for some finches flying

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around the freshly dug hole. But she was used to her mother coming and going at odd moments so she dusted herself off, and went inside. The leaves were drying nicely. Lillian checked the clock, only a few hours before her father would be home. Nerves got the better of her and she couldn't stop shaking. She ran into the bathroom, stripped off her dirty clothes, poured water from the pitcher into the bowl and scrubbed vigorously at her arms and legs. Wiping a wet flannel over her face, she then pulled her hair back into a bun. She slipped into her white nightdress, the soft cotton, caressing her ankles as she trod barefoot into the kitchen.

After grinding the dried leaves, she mixed the Belladonna with the black tea into the Bushels canister. It had a funny odour and looked different, but knowing her father, he probably wouldn't notice. Then she took the honey which he used to sweeten his tea from the cool safe. She stirred some of the juice from the berries into the gold liquid.

When her preparations were ready, Lillian glanced out of the kitchen window. The fading sunlight glistened upon the rich crimson flowers of the Pohutukawa tree, she thought it magnificent against the backdrop of dust and dirt. It softened the landscape.

Fear tugged at her. Could she go through with it? What if he didn't die? He might just get sick, what then? She looked for her mother's reassurance, but the room was empty and growing dark. Lillian lit the lantern, casting a warm glow across the kitchen. Leaving the lamp on the table, she headed toward the parlour directly opposite the kitchen. She glanced at the old black phone in the hallway. It was a party line, nothing more. Lillian picked it up anyway, but all she heard was click.

Click, as the other callers had either hung up or were listening in.

'Hello,' she whispered into the mouthpiece secured firmly to the wall. She held the other end, attached by a long cord to her ear. A deathly silence greeted her. 'Please, anyone?'

More clicks, as people deliberately hung up. She trembled. Weak and shaky, Lillian entered the parlour, and lay on the daybed. No sooner had she closed her eyes, she

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heard a sound. Her heart raced, *was that him?* She sat up in such a rush, she became dizzy then overwhelmed with stomach cramps. With trembling hands she lit the candle beside her. Shadows danced across the room, then she heard it again. Pulling her knees into her chest, she called into the darkness, 'Mother, is that you?'

She stood and took one step. Suddenly pain tore through her pelvis. Lillian grabbed her belly, gasping. She looked down at her feet and saw dark liquid pooling on the floor, felt a warm stickiness on her thighs.

Blood.

'My baby.' Lillian wiped at her legs with her nightdress, but the blood kept coming. She shuffled toward the phone. The pain gripped her again, twisting her belly inside out until she fell. Unable to move she screamed for what seemed an eternity, before she heard the old screen door slam shut.

'What the hell's going on?' Edward bellowed, storming into the room. She saw the look of repulsion on his face, as he took in the scene.

'You did this,' Lillian ground out through clenched teeth.

'Me?' he shouted. 'You stupid whore, you did this to yourself.'

Lillian closed her eyes, waiting for the attack. Then she heard the screen door slam again.

Silence.

Deafening silence.

She opened her eyes and yelled, 'Father, come back. Please don't leave me here.'

The pain pushed at Lillian's spine, driving her tired body against the cold timber floor.

'Everything is going to be alright, sweetheart.'

Lillian scanned the dim light of the room until she saw her mother sitting in the tattered armchair. 'Help me. Please? My baby is dying.'

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'Shh, Lil, everything will be alright, you just wait and see.'

The familiar slam of the screen door reverberated through the house. Lillian's eyes darted across the room. Her mother disappeared.

'Father, did you bring help?'

Struggling to see in the dim light, Lillian hoisted herself onto her elbows, when suddenly Edward loomed in front of her.

'Do you want some tea?' he asked, but before she could answer, he walked away laughing.

'You bastard,' she screamed. 'I hope you die.'

'Shh, Lil,' her mother whispered.

'Mother? I thought you left me.'

'Never. I'm always with you. It will all be over soon.'

Lillian heard slurp, slurp, as Edward drank his tea. Pain gripped her belly again. She moaned into the empty room.

'For crissake, shut up, you're making my head hurt,' Edward yelled from the kitchen.

'I hope your head explodes, you fat pig,' Lillian muttered then cried out as another spasm gripped at her belly.

'Jesus, for the love of God, will you shut up?'

Lillian heard timber splinter as a chair hit the wall. She winced, then closed her eyes tight.

'Mother,' Lillian whispered. 'Will he die? Please tell me he'll die.'

Silence.

'Mother,' she screamed.

Lillian heard heavy footfalls approach. Edward stood in the doorway gripping the handle of the battered axe.

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'Your mother can't help you now, you little bitch.'

'I hate you. I hate you. Get away from me.'

Edward laughed, then coughed. He staggered, clutching his stomach. Lillian thought he was going to vomit.

'You bitch, what have you done to me?'

Lillian managed to back up, pulling herself into a ball. At last, she thought, *he's going to die. Thank God.* What mattered now was her baby, perhaps she could save it after all.

Edward reeled forward losing his balance as he slipped on the bloodied floor, 'Jesus Christ.'

'Lil, watch out.'

'Mother?'

Despite the desperate tug of pain deep in her belly, she struggled to her feet, scrambling for the phone. Edward lunged, he missed, slipping in more blood, the axe smashing timber.

Lillian got tangled in her nightdress, almost tripping her. As she scurried down the hallway toward the phone, she dared not glance behind her, for she could feel Edward closing in. Lillian thought she heard rumbling of distant thunder. She stole a glance and realised that it was the axe, its head dragging along the timber floor, the handle firmly in Edward's grasp.

The room spun and her focus doubled for a second. She tried to push the pain back into the far recesses of her mind. Desperate, she grabbed at the cord. The earpiece fell, swinging against the wall.

Pain gripped Lillian's belly, blood gushed, pooling at her feet. The room grew dark making the earpiece harder to find. She sobbed in frustration and smelt the booze long before Edward lumbered into her vision, even more unsteady than her.

Lillian's fingers finally found the phone. Gripping it to her ear, she yelled into the

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mouthpiece. 'Help!'

Edward let out an ungodly sound, as he hefted the axe above his head. Lillian screamed. Dropping the phone, she staggered back. Whimpering, she lifted her hands in a futile gesture of defence. She heard the axe whoosh closer. Dizziness overwhelmed her, before turning her world black.



The wailing of several voices pierced her eardrum, resonating within her head, bringing her focus to the present. The high pitched sound of sorrow, tore at her heart, so full of pain, she wanted to cry. Unfamiliar voices filled the room.

Lillian caught movement in her peripheral vision, her throat ached, and her head throbbed. She instinctively reached for her stomach. It felt hard and icy. *My baby*. The memories slowly filtered through the dense fog that filled her head. She tried to see, against the sea of red.

Blood. It was everywhere.

A dark skinned woman, her face lined with age, stood over her. A tattoo etched upon her mouth and chin. The Maori elder knelt at Lillian's side repeating over and over, 'Patu tangata, patu tangata.'

It was a language Lillian didn't understand but spoken with such anguish she shivered in response. Rough hands, slipped beneath her, lifting her from the blood soaked floor, onto a stretcher. She felt the uneven rocking motion as two men carried her into the kitchen. She saw that the lantern burned softly, just as she had left it. Her father lay slumped at the kitchen

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table, vomit, and putrid bile splashed across his face and clothes, the bloodied axe by his side.

Two large men with grave expressions hovered over him. She heard someone mutter, ‘Atua.’

Then she recognised their uniforms. Police. Relief washed over her. Her father was finally dead.

A white sheet swooped up her body, continuing right over her head, cutting off her view of the room. She panicked, reaching out to the woman walking beside her. The elder pulled back in fright. ‘Turituri.’

The old woman’s reaction filled Lillian with terror and confusion. Just when she felt sure the panic would suffocate her, she felt her awareness rise above the white sheet, so that now she was looking down, at a body on the stretcher. Her body. Now she understood. And so did the others. The elders continued to wail, while those who had no task hastily fled the room. The terror in their eyes was enough to firmly imprint itself on Lillian’s mind. Only her mother welcomed her, smiling radiantly, holding out her hand. Lillian drifted down to stand beside her.

Though clearly terrified, the policemen hurriedly carried her body out, followed by the Maori elder who chanted, ‘Haere. Haere. Haere.’

Lillian’s heart cried out against a chasm of emptiness.

‘Mother, he killed me.’

‘There was nothing I could do.’ her mother explained. ‘Now it’s time to come with me.’

‘But I can’t, I must stay here with my baby.’

‘Lil, your baby is not here.’

‘No. I can’t leave without my baby.’ Lillian sobbed.

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‘Oh sweetheart, stay awhile, if you think you must. I’ll be waiting.’

‘Mother, I’m scared, the old woman keeps chanting, what does it mean?’

‘Sweetheart, she is bidding your spirit farewell. Do not worry my love.’

With a gentle touch of warmth, her mother faded away, leaving the sweet smell of basil behind as a reminder that she would never be far from reach.

Lillian watched as the policemen returned with another stretcher for Edward. She saw the dark cloud hovering above his lifeless body. The black form slowly dissipated, and she knew that he couldn’t hurt her anymore. The police finally removed Edward from the house. Before they drove away, she heard panicked voices of the two men arguing outside on what should be done about the bloodied mess. She recognised the fear in their voices and knew it would be a long time before anyone would return.

The lantern dimmed as the oil slowly burned away. With the strangers finally gone, Lillian wandered the empty rooms, safe at last and grateful for the peace.

ENDS