

# THE FOOLY

## TERRY DOWLING

TERRY DOWLING is one of Australia's most awarded, versatile and internationally acclaimed writers of science fiction, fantasy and horror. He is author of nine books, among them the award-winning Tom Rynosseros saga (*Rynosseros*, *Blue Tyson*, *Twilight Beach*, *Rynemonn*) and the critically praised collections *Blackwater Days* and *Basic Black: Tales of Appropriate Fear*, as well as three computer adventures. His stories have appeared in *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, *The Year's Best SF*, *The Year's Best Fantasy*, *The Best New Horror* and many times in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, as well as in anthologies as diverse as *Dreaming Down-Under*, *Centaurus*, *Wizards* and *The Dark*.

Holding a doctorate in Creative Writing, he is also editor of *Mortal Fire: Best Australian SF*, *The Essential Ellison* and *The Jack Vance Treasury*, and has been genre reviewer for *The Weekend Australian* to the past eighteen years.

In 'The Fooly', Dowling — artist, prestidigitator, and literary excavator — once again casts his spell... and breaks new ground.

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It was a new town, a new chance, a new shortcut home from a new pub. All so similar, yet so different, walking this lonely road on this cool, windy night.

The choosing was what made it special for Charles Ratray. The chance to choose, the ability to do it. He had lost so much, before, during and after Katie, truth be told, but here he was, at the end of that hardest choice, here in Kareela instead of Karalta.

It wasn't so bad. Kareela was like any other small town really, a town you could walk out of in ten minutes it was so small; the Royal Exchange like any other small pub.

And this road across the fields could have been a dozen similar backroads at Karalta, the same clumps of trees, same scrappy field-stone walls and barbed-wire fences, same grasses blowing in the cool night wind.

Some would ask then why re-locate at all? But they didn't know, couldn't, or forgot to remember the handful of reasons that always changed everything for anyone.

Katie was there. Karalta was her place.

Warwick's too. *Their* place now.

Away was better. You had to know when to leave, how to manage it, no matter how demanding it was, how difficult.

And he *had* managed. And weren't they surprised now? If they were.

Charles stopped, just stood in the blowing dark and breathed in the night.

How good it was to be here, anywhere else.

'You're new,' a voice said and Charles Ratray yelped in fright.

There was a figure leaning against a field-stone wall, a dark man-shape, darker in the darkness, with a glitter at the eyes.

'You startled me,' Charles managed.

'That'll do for starters,' the figure said. 'It's all about persuasion, you see. You're new.'

'Arrived last week. I'm the new day supervisor out at Fulton's dairy.'

The eyes glittered. 'I haven't seen you on the road.'

'Should you have?'

'Well, it's my road, see? I'm here a lot.'

'I can't see you very well. There's enough moonlight. I should be able —'

'Part of the effect,' the figure said. 'Adds to the mood. I'm a specialist in mood lighting.' There was a hint of smile below the glitter.

'You're a fooly, aren't you?'

'A what?'

'You know, a fooly. Something in my mind. A figment. My mind is playing tricks.'

'Well, in a sense that's right. I'm already tweaking your mind a bit, see? There'll be more later. It'll get worse once I start bringing up the fear. Slipping in a bit of terror and despair. Walk with me.'

Charles had been walking home anyway. He started along the road again. The figure stepped away from the wall and joined him, walking with an odd crimped walk Charles found disconcerting.

'You're a ghost,' Charles said.

'That's more like it.'

'You don't seem very frightening.'

'They all say that at first. That's the come-on, see. Start out easy. Build up to it. They never tell you about that in ghost stories. What it really involves.'

'Like what?' Charles asked.

'How we adjust the mind, the feelings. Being in charge of something means everything. That's what it's all about, living or dead.'

'I never knew.'

'See? It's the thing that matters most. It's like a work of art really, judging the moment, bringing up the disquiet, the dread. Hard to believe it right now, I know, Mr —?'

'Ratray. Charles Ratray. Charles.'

'Good, Charles. Always try for first names. That's part of it. I'm Billy. Billy Wine. See, much less threatening. They'll tell you about me in town.'

'Then you should let them do that. I'll ask around. Do this another night.'

'Too late, Charles. Charlie. Had your chance. They should have told you about Billy Wine already. Bad death. Awful death. Five people at the

funeral. Disappointing all round, really.'

'So now you're making up for it.'

'That's it exactly. Hey, I like you, Charles. You're quick. You're interested.'

'That won't change anything.'

'Not a bit. Not at all. You took this road. But no one told you? No one at the pub? No one at the dairy?'

'About the road? No. Haven't been here long. Will I survive this?'

'Probably not. But you have to understand. I don't get many along this road so I like to draw it out. Sometimes I misjudge the heart business. Scare folks too much.'

'I thought ghosts just gave you a quick scare and that was it.'

'That's the quick shock approach. The public relations side of it. We can do far more. That name you said. Fooly. We like to bring the victim — the subject — the scaree — to the point where they're not sure if it's real or in their heads. You get much more panic once you get to that point.'

'Maybe you could just give me a quick scare now and I can come back tomorrow night.'

'Hey, you're a real kidder. You wouldn't, of course. Surprised no one told you about me though.'

'Maybe you had something to do with that.'

'Boy, you're quick. Charlie, I really like you. Where are you staying?'

'Out at the Dickerson place. Six-month lease.'

'Well, there you go then. That explains it. They probably figured you for a relative of old Sam Dickerson. Shutters would've come down the minute you said.'

'Or maybe you did something to stop them telling me.'

Billy Wine grinned. 'That too. Lots of things are possible.'

Charles smiled to himself, at least meant to. It was actually rather pleasant walking in the night; windy, blustery really, but cool, not cold. The grass was souging on the verge. The trees were tossing. There were house lights far off to the right — and more behind when he glanced back, the homes of people he didn't know yet, and right there, the patch of light where Kareela sat in the night, like the glow of a ship at sea.

He kept alert for the fear, the thinnest edge of terror, but felt nothing. Perhaps he was immune. Maybe it didn't work for him.

'Should be feeling it soon,' the fooly said. 'Your senses will go a bit, bring in weird stuff. You smelling the sea yet?'

Charles couldn't help it. He sniffed the wind.

And he did. He could. The salt tang, impossibly far away but there. Charles *smelled* it.

Billy Wine's eyes glittered, a paring of smile beneath. 'Seabirds?'

They were barely there, thin, far-off, wheeling four, five fields away, but there.

'Why the sea?' Charles asked.

'Always loved the sea,' Billy Wine said. 'You hearing trains?'

Trains, yes! Nowhere near as surprising; there was a station at Kareela, after all.

'But steam trains!' the ghost of Billy Wine said, anticipating.

And that's what Charles heard, chuffing, snuffing, stolen back, there and gone, there and gone.

'Circus!'

A calliope whooped and jangled in the night, forlorn, distant, dangerous.

'Weeping!'

And, oh, there was. Full of ocean-lost, clown-sad, missed-train

sorrow, desolate on the wind. Billy Wine brought it in. Made Charlie do the bringing.

‘Getting you ready, Charlie, my man! Think now — all the things you’ve had taken from you. All the things you never got to say. All the bitter.’

Not bitterness. Bitter. Billy had the way of it, the ghosting knack, sure enough.

Charles kept walking. ‘What can I give? What can I trade?’

‘Trade? Don’t need souls. Nothing to hold ‘em in. Old fooly joke.’

‘Fooly?’

‘Just using your terminology, Charlie, my man. Don’t get excited! Maybe an invitation to the Exchange. That’d be worth something.’

‘I can go back. See what I can do.’

‘You wouldn’t. You couldn’t. They don’t see you. They served you up.’

‘You did that,’ Charles said. ‘Stopped ‘em warning. Tweaked their minds.’

The eyes glittered. The paring of smile curved up.

‘Taking care of business,’ Billy said. ‘It’s what you do.’

‘I’m nearly home.’

‘You’ll never get there.’ The smile sharpened. ‘Walking’s getting harder, isn’t it?’

It was. Suddenly was.

Charles felt so heavy. His legs were leaden, wooden, twin stumps of stone. This was feeding Billy, Charles saw. The power. The finesse.

Billy read the moment. ‘Time for a flourish. Look how scary I’ve become.’

And he had. Oh, how he had, Charles saw, felt, knew.

That awful darkness. That blend of glitter-gaze, crimp-step and pared darkling smile. In spite of everything, knowing it was coming, Charles saw that Billy was the same but not the same. Never could be.

The wind was slippery now, pushing, coddling, blustery and black-handed. The grass blew, hushed and blew again, reeling them in. No, not them. Him. Him.

Billy Wine lunged, strode, tottered, stayed alongside yet flowed ahead, all at once. He was sharps, dagger edges, razor-gaze and guttering grin. The dark of him was too much, too close, too stinking hot.

But mostly it was the gut-wrench suicide cocktail inside Charles Ratray, three parts dread, two parts despair, one blossoming nip of revulsion slipped in sideways.

Charles could barely breathe. He staggered, breath to breath, inside and out, fighting to remember what breathing was, what walking was, what self was.

This deadly, crimp-stepped Billy truly was good at what he did.

Close up, there was his sudden, awful intimacy, while out there, oceans closed over ships, birds plucked at eyes, calliopes screamed into the fall of colliding trains, and Katie was denied, denying, again and again.

Charles screamed and stilted and propped, fought to breathe. No part of the night was satisfied to hold him. It pushed him away, hurled him from itself back into itself, made panic from the stilting, flailing pinwheel he had become. He screamed and yelled because Billy wanted him to.

Though Billy knew to stop, of course, to relax and savour, to settle for shades and ebb and flow. He had a whole night, a whole splendid, new-to-town Charlie Ratray to teach the last of all lessons.

But Charles managed to keep his sense of self through it all, did manage, and he let the Dickerson house be the focus, off in the distance, its single yard light showing where it was.

'I made it,' Charles said, knowing how Billy would respond.

'Did you? Have you? Are you sure?'

The house swept away, one field, two, road threading between, single

yard light jiggering, dancing off like a small tight comet.

‘Too bad,’ Billy Wine said. ‘We’re almost at the end of it.’

‘We are?’

‘It’ll be quick. You’ll be fully aware.’ Billy sounded gleeful.

‘But it’s still early —’

‘I know. And *do* be disappointed! That bad death I had. Only five people to see me off. It makes you hard.’

‘But you have the whole night. Surely there’s more fear? More dread?’

‘No need. All that’s just window dressing anyway. Absolute clarity is best. Just the anguish. The disappointment. Enough despair. You go out knowing.’

‘Billy —’

‘No more, Charlie. Time to go. It’ll hurt just a bit. Well, quite a bit. Well, a lot actually, pain being what it is. But maybe you’ll get to come back. Some do.’

‘Maybe I already have.’

And Charles Ratray was gone, spiralling away as a twist of light on the wild dark air.

‘Hey! What? What’s that?’ Billy Wine demanded, but knew, had even imagined the possibility, though had never ever expected it.

For who else watched the watchmen, hunted the hunters, haunted the haunTERS?

Who else fooled the foolies?

All that remained of Billy Wine stood on the dark windy road and felt the ache of disappointment tear at him again and again.

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## AFTERWORD

There's a scene in Ridley Scott's fine 2000 film *Gladiator* when, with grudging admiration, Derek Jacobi as Gracchus remarks on Commodus's shrewd PR move of staging over a hundred days of gladiatorial games and says: 'Fear and wonder. A powerful combination.'

That's what constantly motivates me as a writer: delivering fear and wonder for all sorts of useful, straightforward, sometimes very important reasons as someone living in the early twenty-first century. Like many writers in the field, I never set out to be a horror writer per se, or any sort of genre writer for that matter, seeing such things as fixed prices on variable goods and useful only to marketing departments, booksellers and librarians.

But quite early in my career I saw that I was being constantly drawn to what can usefully be called tales of unease, to this constant braiding of fear and wonder. As part of this, I found myself fascinated by the nature of ghosts and hauntings, and the very human preoccupations and perceptions of reality that keep bringing us back to these things. Terror (in its potent, original, pre-1980 meaning) has always been infinitely more powerful than horror, so I've rarely been that interested in the easy shocks of gore and gross-out. I guess I've always sensed, intuitively, that the power of the very best horror writing lay in that careful and splendid hesitation between the thrill of the disquieting moment, the disturbing situation for the human mind experiencing it, and its resolution, often with the too easily given 'oh, is that all' of the inevitable supernatural explanation. I sensed that the supernatural is rarely terrifying once it's shown for what it is, that the real chills, the real creepiness, lay in all that precedes its arrival. Such a simple realisation: that the real impact, the real punch, be given in the mood, the feel, the staging. The nifty ending is still the *sine qua non*, of course, but the getting there is just as important and often much more so.

From the beginning, I found myself — sometimes successfully — exploring the time-honoured tropes and traditions of the ghost story in tales like 'The Bullet That Grows in the Gun', 'The Daemon Street Ghost-Trap', 'Scaring the Train' and 'One Thing About the Night'. In the light of these tales, 'The Fooly' seems an inevitable companion piece, a small story built around an idea so simple that it was quite irresistible. Once again it let me consider what ghosts are and exactly *how* and *why* they do what they do, this time with a touch of Bradbury (always pay your dues, Terry D.), a touch of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* (pay 'era, you hear!) and a touch of the tall tale that's really quite Australian. I'm inordinately fond of 'The Fooly'.

Part of me kept wanting to make it larger, have it stay around a bit longer, but small things can read large and every time I re-read this one it feels bigger than it is. And just maybe, to recall Derek Jacobi's words, the combination is there enough to work the spell.

— *Terry Dowling*