

## **B-Grade Reality**

### **by Sharyn Munro**

Even as it happened, I didn't believe it: sticks cracking, the lurch of my right leg – the leap of my heart – as solid ground disappeared and I was falling, falling in the never-ending way of nightmares.

Until I hit bottom, hit it so hard that the wind was forced from my body. A long instant of shocked nothingness. Then, under a diminishing shower of dry leaves and dirt from above, I began once more to be, to hear my blood beating in my ears, to be aware of the faint but painful rise and fall of my ribs. I felt pinned to the ground, as if by the continuing velocity of the fall.

Conscious thought revived slowly. Try and move? Not if my back's broken ... paralysis... quadriplegia.

I lay as I'd landed, taking timid, shallow breaths within what felt like the broken cage of my ribs. Looking up the steep bank over which I'd fallen, I still could not understand how. Up there it was all dry bush and gentle slopes; I would never have expected this gully to be here, a ravine really, it was so deep and narrow. The opening must have been totally covered with branches and leaves. And, like an idiot, I hadn't kept to the track.

Some bushwalker!

No one would be passing; no one would find me down here. I could not just continue to lie here and wait for the paramedics, as they did in the TV shows. Whatever I'd broken, I must move. Try the legs. First the right. Immediate spears, burning, sharp... stop! My hands reached involuntarily for the injured leg, trying to hold it, to halt the pain. A cry – mine, although it sounded wrong in this setting. I was wrong in this setting; things like this were not supposed to happen to me. I steeled myself to try the left leg.

No sword thrust, no message of pain. Then I realised that my back must be okay if I'd been able to rise enough to grab that right leg. My ribs were hurting, but not sharply like my leg. Just a broken leg then?

Hah! Just a broken leg!

A hoarse sound rose in my throat; a laugh? Mustn't get hysterical, must think. This is an emergency; think what people do in such situations. But all that came to mind were ridiculous B-grade adventure films, in which the heroic rescuer ought now to appear. Yet this is real. I'm in it. And I'm alone.

I was nervous of lying in the damp sea of leaf litter. Irrationally afraid of snakes, I never go bushwalking in spring or summer. Silent slithering things that threaten... yet now I was lying, defenceless, on their level.

A mossy rock nearby caught my eye. An island. A primitive urge told me it spelt safety, a vantage point from which to watch for danger. Of course it offered no safety at all, but reason had no place here and now; I was nothing but screaming nerve ends and scraps of self-trembling on the edge of panic. Crying and cursing, I dragged my poor leg through the sodden leaf mulch to the rock. I had never imagined such pain possible; I'd measured pain by toothache, grazes... but this was real pain.

On my rock, I curled forward over my outraged leg, sobbing, almost apologising for having ignored the constant shrieking message to let it stay still. As I tried to reassemble myself, 'Come on Sarah, breathe deeply, calm down, you made it.' I blinked hard, straining to see through my tears into the dim green light of the gully. No snakes.

Yet within seconds, as my eyes adjusted further, I began to see the leeches. I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, willing this to be a hallucination, a teary flicker, a pain mirage. But then I could see them even more clearly, glossily evident against the brown carpet of leaves. They were quivering vertically like small periscopes as they mysteriously gathered their information on the whereabouts of this source of warm blood, as if an alert had gone out. 'Blood is nigh, blood is nigh!' Then they headed for me, lowering a questing sucker to the ground and drawing the rear sucker to meet it in a precise movement, graceful if you could think only of that and not of their motive.

Hundreds of small black and yellow stripes were looping towards me in eerie and absolute silence. I tried hard to think over the rising tide of terror. A strong stick might allow me to hop away from them – but to where? No; after the last experience of moving it, I knew I couldn't stand the pain of such violent motion. I'd pass out and be at their mercy anyway.

At the very least I could use a stick to scrape them off as they came over the top of my boots; I must not be so defenceless, I must have a weapon. Now they were coming up the rock – could they bite through jeans? They might climb further, seeking thinner fabric. I frantically cast about for a stick, but there were no sticks in reach that were not rotted from the damp.

The first leech found flesh and bit the back of my hand. I scraped it off, hard against the rock. Then I saw another leech on the inside of that wrist, heading up my sleeve. I didn't want to touch it, but at the thought of it reaching my armpit, I dragged savagely at it with the nails of my other hand until I dislodged the thing. Shudderingly, nauseatingly soft, squashy...

But there were now dozens on my boots; I could only move one foot to scrape them off. Feeble, futile... One was between my fingers, I clawed it out; blood welled. Already. I hugged myself tightly, elbows clenched to my sides, teeth grating; I must keep them out! Then through the fabric of one sleeve my fingers felt a lump of squelchiness. They were in.

Sometime, somewhere, I awoke to small jabs of pain. A dim greenish room, a figure, a man, bending over my leg. He was taking off my boot. I remembered the leeches. My hands flew to my arms. They were bare; my skin felt slimy. As the full horror returned, I panicked anew, jerking my leg into massive pain. Waves of darkness forced me back under the surface. Through it, I heard the low voice, soothing, reassuring, 'They're gone, they're all gone. You're safe here. It's okay.'

I felt the freshness, the damp wiping of my face, my neck. A cup was placed at my lips, my head tilted forward. 'Drink. It's for the pain. You'll sleep.' A repeated cool stroking of my forehead with a soft wet cloth, like my mother used to. Hypnotic. 'Sleep... sleep.' There were snatches of vision, wisps of voice. My injured leg became a thick bundle of cloth to the knee. My skin, when I absently touched it, was coated with gel. Cups of liquid, lukewarm and bitter, were put to my lips often. I drank. I slept. Drifting, delirious, I could not be sure what I heard and what I dreamt.

I began to register a strange word, 'hirudina', repeated, forming a mantra weaving through it all... 'My hirudina were certainly in need... you didn't need to break your leg obeying though... damn nuisance really... no animals come down here since the creek went dry... they can swim, you know... well, undulate, actually...'

The word 'hirudina' slithered in and out of my floating mind. It merged into a recurrent childhood nightmare, sparked by a very B-grade Saturday afternoon flick to which my older sister had taken me, as mandatory chaperone. Embroiled in her first teenage romance, 14-year-old Rose had abandoned 8-years-too-young me, left me with a packet of Jaffas alone in the darkness. She slipped up to the back row to do forbidden and

dangerous things with her boyfriend – like kissing, I imagined, since we convent girls knew that kissing could get you ‘in the family way’.

For months after that film, I’d fought sleep each night, fearing the waiting snake pit, red-eyed serpents weaving through grinning skulls and open treasure chests, a victim fallen into their pit, no escape, vividly real terror. I was still sometimes vulnerable to that image invading my adult mind on the verge of sleep.

My subconscious connected the leeches with what I was hearing now about the ‘hirudina’. They became the new nightmare... Rows upon rows of hirudina swayed in lines as they waited for me in the hidden green gully; on mossy logs and soggy leaves, they listened to my crunching, innocent footsteps in the bush above as I came closer, the master’s thought waves trembling louder and louder, amplified through the ripples of their erect bodies, black and yellow lines waving like sea grass in the gloom.

‘One good feed can keep hirudina going for months... they store the blood in pouches beside their stomachs... suck up to three times their own weight at a time, you know. Just fall off when they’re full. Meals like you are few and far between... wallaby usually... I mean, they will feast on worms and insect larvae, even other leeches, if they have to.’

‘Research... their anti-coagulant could be valuable... hirudin, it’s called... need lots of them to get enough, need them in action though... lucky I got to you before you lost too much blood... people can die from it.’

The waving lines became rows of fat glossy striped balloons, bloated, sated with blood like small vampires, dropping off a pale senseless figure, blood flowing from a hundred bites of their sawlike teeth... blood... baths, people cut their wrists in baths, don’t they? ...supposed to hurt less as you bleed to death...

God, I’d love a bath... a warm bath... I surfaced, opened my eyes. Where was I? Strange green light from above. His back to me, the man was rubbing something soothing on my unbandaged leg, talking as he did so. The voice was familiar; it was the one in my dreams, or perhaps I had heard him talking to himself as he was now...

‘Hermaphrodites they are... well-designed really... self-sufficient almost... apart from the need for a feed now and then...’

I cleared my throat. It hurt. ‘What...? what?’

He turned at once. ‘Oh, hello, awake, are you? Here, let me prop you up a little.’ Bearded, glasses, strong arm, funny smell – damp, mould?

‘Drink.’ I croaked. ‘Water.’

‘The water’s a bit funny here; have some of this instead.’ The bitter taste.

‘What is it?’

‘Just herbs to purify it, plus a few to help you build your blood back up. I was putting in some for the pain too, to dope you up a little for your leg, but I think you’re over the worst.’

I managed to lift my head to look at the swaddled limb. It was a great effort; I felt very weak, dopey.

‘It’s not a bad break. I’ve set it and splinted it. Should mend good as new. I’m Harry, by the way.’

‘It certainly hurt enough. Thanks... Harry. Thanks a lot. Um, I’m Sarah.’

He had returned to his swabbing. ‘What’s this stuff you’re putting on the ... bites?’

‘Just aloe vera. Pity about the itching. You can well afford the blood they took, but the bites don’t affect everyone like this. You must be allergic to them.’

‘You seem to have an awful lot of remedies on hand. This sort of thing happen often?’

His glasses reflected green light as he looked up. ‘Oh no,’ he said, ‘I’ve only been here two months.’

Did that make sense as a reply? I slumped back against the pillow, wearied, confused – and embarrassed, as I realised I was almost naked under the blanket. Of course he would have had to cut my jeans off – but then there were the bites. Just where the bites might have been on my body did not bear thinking about; I must think of him like a doctor.

‘How did you get them... the leeches ...off?’

‘Oh, best to let them fall off, you know. Bleeds less.’

‘But salt, doesn’t salt stop them injecting that stuff in? I know salt makes them drop off quickly.’

‘Yes, it does,’ he said. ‘But it kills them, you see.’

I shut my eyes. How long had I been unconscious before he found me? Or how long had he waited for them to... finish? No. Don’t go there... ‘Um, I ought to let my family know where I am. They’ll be looking for me.’

‘Of course, only I don’t have a phone. As soon as I can leave you on your own for a day I’ll walk into town, OK?’

My eyes flew open. ‘Walk? But my car’s here, or at least, it’s in the National Park. At the Rocky Crossing camp. Are we still in the Park? Anyway, you could take that; it’d have to be quicker to walk up there and get it, surely, than to walk to town? I mean, it must be well over 20 kms! Is that what you usually do?’

He stopped anointing my leg, straightened up, and carefully placed the half-used aloe vera stem on the small folding table beside me. He barely had headroom to stand. His head backlit in the green dimness, his face in darkness, I could no longer see his features or determine his expression. ‘Now, Sarah, you’re sounding a little hysterical. You must stay calm. My research into hirudini is very intensive. I prefer not to be interrupted, and I am quite self-sufficient here. But when you’re somewhat better I’ll certainly take your car and telephone for you.’

He handed me the aloe vera. ‘Here, I think you can do the top half now. Just don’t move that leg. Then you ought to rest; sleep if you can.’

He left. The door scraped to and I heard a thud of something heavy against it. I lay there, rubbing the cool gel over my arms, my chest, my stomach, thinking impossibilities, but rejecting them, as any rational person would. Naturally Harry would be a bit odd, living on his own like this, well, choosing to do so. Two months, did he say? No wonder he talked to himself. And I must still be a little delirious to be imagining these weird things.

Yet the questions were insistent. That ravine. Could it have been used as a deliberate trap, an animal pit, carefully hidden from above, like in those Saturday afternoon serials of my childhood? At least there had been no sharpened stakes awaiting the victim – me – but that was really silly! Fever fantasies, B-grade nightmares ... the serpents ... on no, not that again!

It must be just the idea of so many leeches that was derailing my thinking to this extreme degree. I’d always hated the things; the memory was still vivid of my first experience of them. When I was seven my family had moved from the city to a coastal

farm, high rainfall, lots of kikuyu grass and snakes – and leeches.

Early that first wet year, I'd sat on the step to take off my gumboots and leapt up screaming for my mother at the sight of a black thing, a baby snake, stuck to my leg, eating me! Mum hadn't known any better; we'd both panicked. It hadn't helped much, later, when told what it was, or how to get them off in future; the application of salt or a lit match was the local advice. Nor did it now, knowing their Latin name. If anything, it gave them a more evil status... hirudina, hirudini...oh for God's sake, they're still just leeches ... nasty but natural! Bushwalker? more like a babe in the woods.

I heard myself giggle. Hysterical, he'd said. Perhaps he was right. Get a grip on yourself, Sarah. I turned my head to look up at the skylight. The room was so dim that there must be no windows, unless they were heavily curtained. The walls seemed to be of mud, but I couldn't be sure. The only light came from above, a similar greenish light to that to in the ravine.

As I gazed at the slanted green rectangle, several leaf shapes landed on it, to lie in silhouette. At the edge of the rectangle my eye caught a short movement, and another, then several, like dots. Raindrops? but there was no sound, no pitter-patter of rain. The dots increased, and I began to see a pattern in them. They came in a beat of two. One-two, one-two. Then I thought I could detect faint darker links between the beats; the realisation slowly dawned that I was watching the suckers of leeches on the move – one-two, one-two.

The skylight must be near to the ground for them to be crossing it in their daily routine. I could even be underground. But perhaps this was not normal routine; perhaps they were looking for me, criss-crossing in confusion as to how to reach me but clearly sensing me near. 'Me'! No, not 'me'; to the leeches I was just a container of blood. I shook my head at my wild thoughts. I was safe here, and it made sense that Harry would live in a disguised place, like a bird hide, for his research. Or did it? Were leeches so people-shy?

Nothing made sense anymore; this was not my real life... no known rules worked here... I was not thinking straight... I was a nervous wreck, as Mum would say... and I was so tired. 'A container of blood', 'a nervous wreck' – what else was there to 'Sarah' now? Yet despite the questions rattling round my brain and the restless pattern of dots above, I fell asleep.

I woke at the sound of the door opening. It seemed dark beyond his figure in the doorway. 'Oh, hello,' I said sleepily. 'Is it night time?'

'Almost,' he replied. 'How are you feeling?'

'Not sure; a bit queer in the head, but that stuff you give me does help the ache in my leg. I'm not so itchy either.'

'Fine, fine. Do you feel like eating yet? I manage mostly on tinned and dried stuff, sort of stews, with a few fresh things like nettles and watercress chucked in.'

'Well, yes, I think I am hungry. Thanks. Although I really shouldn't be; I had a big breakfast before I left.'

Facing the rough bench fixed along the far wall, he lit a kerosene lamp. I could hear him opening a tin, the hiss of a gas burner. He did not turn around when he finally said, 'Yes, but that was two days ago.'

'You're kidding! But it can't be; I don't remember...' I stopped. Those bitter drinks. If it wasn't a bad break, why had he given me so much that I'd been out of it for two days? 'Oh look, I must get touch with my family at once; they'll be so worried! I just went for the afternoon! Couldn't you take my car to town tomorrow?'

‘It’s not there,’ he replied. ‘Must have been stolen.’

I shut my eyes tightly, baulking at the surely ridiculous accusation that rushed into my head. That sort of thing only happened in movies – he was a scientist, not a... a ... His voice was close by.

‘Here we are, sit up and have some of this. You’ll feel much better for it.’

He helped me up. The leg hurt, but not unbearably, as it was moved up the bed. I was shaky; he was being kind; I was being silly again. I took a spoonful from the bowl. It was very hot and I swallowed it too quickly to taste it properly. I blew on a second spoonful, sipped. It tasted very bitter.

More bitter than the last drink even.