

THE GREEN LADY

**Magical Tales from the Forest
to enchant your Inner-Child**

By Lisa Picard

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THE GREEN LADY

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THE GREEN LADY

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DISCLAIMER

This book is set in South Africa's Garden Route and, specifically, in the town of Knysna, and therefore many of the places mentioned in the book really do exist. However, the characters and the stories are purely fictional and do not depict any actual person or event. Any resemblance to persons, either living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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EXCERPT FROM THE STORY OF THE GREEN LADY

**For Arn, who has always encouraged me to go to my heart to
find the magic and wonder within**

*“And, above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world around
you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most
unlikely places. Those who don’t believe in magic will never find
it.”*

Roald Dahl

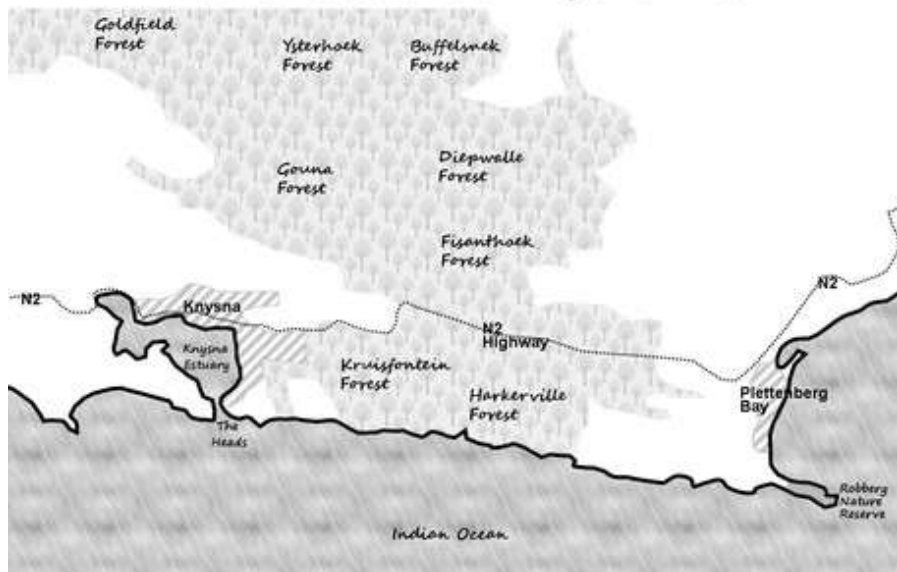
South Africa's Garden Route



Garden Route Area



The Forests of the Knysna Area



Chapter 1: THE GENESIS OF THE BOOK

In the spring of the year I turned forty, my perfectly comfortable, predictable and well-ordered life began to fall apart.

It all started when Clare, my girlfriend of five years, uttered those four dreaded words, which strike terror into the heart of the bravest man.

“Peter, we need to talk,” she told me, her warm, brown eyes that normally brimmed over with good humour regarding me now with the utmost gravity. It turned out that she had decided to leave me. She would be departing on a month-long backpacking vacation across Europe with a girlfriend within two weeks and she made it very clear that, when she returned, she expected me to have vacated our shared home.

There was very little anger or acrimony involved; it was simply that Clare and I clearly wanted different things in life. She had recently turned thirty-five and had finally given up on trying to change my mind about having children (she wanted them and I didn't) and marriage, an institution to which I, as the son of a thrice-divorced mother, was not favourably disposed. Clare's wealthy grandmother had died six months earlier, leaving her with a considerable inheritance, with which she proposed to pay me, at a market-related price, for my half of our shared house. Clare was always scrupulously fair and honest to a fault. I didn't actually object to this proposal, as the house had always been more to Clare's taste than mine, and I certainly didn't relish the thought of having to manage on my own the housework and upkeep required by such a large place. However, it did mean that I would need to find alternate accommodation, and fast. I mused sadly to myself that, in a way, it was almost a blessing that my beloved Golden Retriever, Max, had moved on to greener pastures a couple of months earlier. I was aware that the absence of a large, hairy, ancient and very smelly dog would considerably simplify my search for a new, short-term rental.

And the changes didn't stop with my home situation. My career was about to undergo a radical change as well.

I had been working since my graduation from university some fifteen years earlier as a journalist for a top daily newspaper in Cape Town. I had, over the years, developed somewhat of a reputation for my tenacity and my ability to always "get the story". But lately I had started to lose my edge. Somewhat to my dismay, I realised that I wasn't quite as hungry for the story anymore. The daily news had begun to feel rather tediously rinse-repeat to me and my energy and enthusiasm were definitely on the wane. It was becoming very clear to me that I needed to pull it together fast or I would rapidly become victim to the ruthless ambitions of younger, hungrier journalists fighting for opportunities to make their mark.

In addition to these changes, my best friend and pub-buddy of some ten years, Mark, his wife and two children had packed for Perth three months earlier. Mark and his wife believed that they would be able to secure a better future for their children in Australia. With gregarious and sociable Mark's departure, our small circle of friends seemed to lose their glue and we gradually drifted apart. For the first time in years, I found my previously busy social life to have become somewhat quiet and I was secretly relishing the time and space now available to consider my future.

One Saturday morning, a few days after Clare's departure, and with no action yet taken to resolve either my home- or work-related dilemmas, I was awoken before dawn by the barking of the neighbour's dog. Rather than turning over and going back to sleep, I decided to get up instead and go for a hike on Table Mountain, in an attempt to clear my head. I decided to hike from the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens up Skeleton Gorge, a beautiful, forested ravine on Table Mountain, and then take Smuts Track all the way to Maclear's Beacon, the highest point on the mountain at 1,086 meters. Although relatively strenuous, this remains one of my favourite hikes up the mountain, as it allows one to experience the dense Afro-montane forest in the ravine, as well as all the floral zones on the mountain and some truly spectacular views over False Bay and the vineyards

of Constantia Valley, all the way to the Hottentot Holland Mountains in the distance.

By six-thirty I was already in the ravine and I kept up a steady pace to emerge onto Smuts Track less than an hour later. This popular track was named after Jan Smuts, a South African statesman, philosopher, author and keen hiker, who reportedly hiked this route regularly, well into his eighties. I maintained my pace and emerged onto the Table Mountain Plateau, stopping for a well-deserved water break and breather. I spent some time admiring the beautiful flowering [fynbos](#), a floral biome unique to South Africa's Western Cape Province, before setting off to Maclear's Beacon.

I had not encountered a single other hiker on the trail thus far, but as I stowed my water bottle in preparation for continuing the walk, a soft voice to my right disrupted my reverie.

"Beautiful day for a hike, isn't it?" Startled, I whipped around to find a dapper and dignified-looking elderly man with a neat and well-trimmed white beard and clear blue eyes, leaning on a wooden walking stick and gently smiling at me.

"Goodness!" I exclaimed, *"I didn't see you. How long have you been here?"*

He disregarded my question, suggesting instead, *"Shall we walk together?"* and then setting off at a spanking pace on the path to the beacon. I shrugged and followed him.

Shortly afterwards I found that I was thoroughly enjoying myself. My companion was excellent company and provided a wealth of interesting information on the plants and birdlife of the mountain. He also had a delightful, dry wit, which had me chuckling out loud on several occasions. I realized that I had been feeling rather lonely and melancholy on the first part of the hike and that I was now having a lot more fun. I found myself telling the old man about the recent events in my life, which was rather unusual for me, as I was normally the one coaxing the story out of someone else. But it was very easy to talk to my companion, whom I experienced as an excellent, non-judgmental listener, who was also rather astute in his comments.

Once we had reached Maclear's Beacon, we stood for some time admiring the breathtaking views over the whole of Table Mountain, all the way to Cape Point, Table Bay, Devil's Peak and Robben Island where Nelson Mandela had been incarcerated for eighteen years. The old man turned to me, fixing me with his intense blue gaze, and then said something which caused a chill to run down my spine. *"The art of life is all about timing, my young friend. You need to pay attention to the signs guiding you to where you next need to go. It seems to me that life is telling you that it's time to take that leap. What are you waiting for?"*

Wordlessly, I stared at him for a few moments, before the screech of an eagle high above us caught my attention and I briefly glanced up to see if I could catch a glimpse of the bird. When I looked back at my companion again, he had simply disappeared! Gone. Not a sign of him anywhere, as far as the eye could see!

"Hello? Hello? Where have you gone?" I called, over-and-over-again but there was no response whatsoever and it was very clear to me that there was absolutely nowhere to hide on the rocky plateau of the mountain.

Thoroughly spooked, I collapsed onto a large rock, my legs no longer able to support my weight. I repeatedly shook my head, simply unable to believe the evidence supplied by my eyes. What had just happened? Who had the old gentleman been? Had it all just been an hallucination? But, no! He had been just as real as I was, of that I was convinced. But, then... where had he gone?

But, very gradually, an overwhelming sense of gratitude started to swell in my heart, and tears began to squeeze past the constriction in my throat to well up in my eyes. Did it really matter who he had been? He had provided me with exactly what I had needed, when I most needed it. Surely this was one of those signs that were pointing me in the direction I next needed to go? The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I knew exactly what it was that I wanted to do. An idea that had been slowly germinating in my subconscious for several months suddenly blossomed into my full consciousness and I was overwhelmed by a bubbling sense of excitement and anticipation.

The very next day I approached my editor with the idea of taking a six-month sabbatical from my job. I knew that this was tantamount to career suicide in the fast-moving journalistic world, but I guess that I wasn't ready to completely sever myself from my familiar world by resigning just yet. The fact that it was surprisingly easy to convince my editor was further confirmation for me that my career had been on a downturn. I also knew that, if I was to return six months later, I would need to put in a concerted effort into putting my career back on track. Despite the panic-inducing potential of this thought, I felt remarkably light-hearted, happy and sure of my decision. A month later, I packed my pathetically few personal possessions into a cardboard box and departed from the offices in which I had spent the better part of fifteen years.

Over the next few weeks I boxed up and donated the majority of my belongings to several local charities and rented a container in which I stashed the few remaining items. I completed the outstanding necessary administrative duties and then packed a single suitcase and my laptop into my battered old Fiat station wagon. I drove the 550km to the small coastal town of Knysna, singing along to an old 80's rock album, feeling younger and more optimistic than I had felt in years.

Once I arrived in Knysna, I rapidly found a small, furnished apartment in town at an affordable price. Within hours I had unpacked my few bits of clothing into the wardrobe, set up my laptop and stocked the refrigerator and cupboards with some basic groceries. I sank down onto the couch and released years of pent-up frustration and unfulfilled desires, of which I had up till this point been unaware, in a prolonged, very loud, heartfelt sigh of contentment. My entire body thrummed with excitement and I inwardly beamed as I realized that I was now finally ready for my new life to begin.

So, having kept you in suspense thus far, I guess it's time to tell what my idea was all about. Several months prior to the events described above, Clare and I had been holidaying in a self-catering cottage in Knysna. As I waited for Clare to get ready for a forest hike we had planned, I picked up, and began reading, a small booklet

on the hikes in Knysna and the surrounding areas. A humorous footnote at the bottom of a description of a hike into ancient, untouched, indigenous forest informed me that, *“Over the years many hikers, forestry workers and local inhabitants have described encounters they have had with a so-called spirit of the forest. Apparently, this Green Lady appears at moments of deep personal transformation and seems to have a positive effect on most of those who encounter her. But, woe betide those seeking to harm the forest or her creatures! The Green Lady can be a serious adversary to those of ill intent.”*

The tiny seed of an idea that had been planted by the footnote described above was further nurtured by an event that occurred a few months later. Whilst I was waiting for a colleague to return to his office, I picked up a newspaper lying on his desk and idly paged through it. It was the local Knysna newspaper, The CX Express, which he had brought back with him to Cape Town after a recent visit to the Garden Route. An article written by Helena Kroukamp, a free-lance journalist living in Knysna, caught my eye. It was a whimsical, tongue-in-cheek piece about the abundance of supernatural experiences to be had in the forests of Knysna. Somehow this article sparked my imagination.

I had always held in the back of my mind the intent to write a novel (don't we all!) My encounter with the old gentleman on the top of Table Mountain and the two events described above had provided me with the idea for a book. I would spend my six-month sabbatical in Knysna, using my journalistic skills to find, and interview, those who had experienced supernatural encounters in the forests of the region. I would use the material thus obtained as the basis for my first novel. I had always believed that Knysna had many secret stories just waiting to be told and so I decided that I would be the one to tell them!

Before I left for Knysna, I did some research about the town so as to prepare myself for my work there. Below is a very short summary of what I found.

The charming coastal town of Knysna, in the heart of South Africa's beautiful Garden Route, is a favourite tourist destination.

Knysna lies thirty-four degrees south of the equator, between the Indian Ocean and the Outeniqua Mountains, which are covered by indigenous vegetation. Dramatic sandstone cliffs, the Knysna Heads, separate the warm water estuary from the ocean. This estuary, which is fed by the Knysna River, is a protected marine reserve and home to the endangered seahorse and over two hundred species of fish. South Africa's largest Afro-montane or temperate, lush, indigenous, closed-canopy forests can be found in-and-around Knysna. These forests, which were made famous by Dalene Matthee's book, *Circles in the Forest*, are home to Africa's most southern, and only free roaming, elephant herd.

The Knysna area, with its oceanic climate, has one of the highest rainfalls in South Africa and is green all year round. Higher up in the Outeniqua Mountains, the beautiful and remarkably diverse fynbos contributes over eight thousand plant species to the Cape floral kingdom.

Knysna and the surrounding areas offer wild pristine beaches, large lakes, breathtaking views and countless hiking trails. The area is on the migratory route of southern right whales, other whale species and dolphins. It is also home to several seal colonies.

The wild, unspoiled beauty of the area encourages creativity and therefore Knysna provides sanctuary to vast numbers of artists, healers, as well as interesting eccentrics of every kind.

FOOTNOTES:

Translates to "fine bush" in English. Fynbos is a collective term for thousands of flowering plants, indigenous to the unique Cape floral biome of South Africa. ([click here to return to text](#))

Chapter 2: THE LADY

When I first arrived in Knysna I knew absolutely no-one in the town and I was somewhat challenged as to how I would go about finding the stories that I required for my book. I tried a number of different approaches, one of which was to place an advertisement in the Action Ads, a weekly publication of classified advertisements, which is freely available just about everywhere in Knysna. My ad read:

*Have YOU had a supernatural encounter
in the Knysna forests?
TELL ME YOUR STORY
It could possibly be included in a book!*

As it turned out, I received only one positive response to my advertisement, but it did lead to the very first story of this book.

I was contacted by a middle-aged woman called Evie. She told me that she had lived next door to a lovely old lady, named Lucy Baldwin, whilst growing up. Lucy and Evie, despite the large age gap, became firm friends and Evie would spend Saturday afternoons with the delightfully eccentric old woman, baking cookies, doing art projects or simply chatting. Lucy shared with Evie the story of her life and her several encounters with the Lady, as she called her, during these Saturday afternoon visits.

The first part of the tale below is based upon Evie's memories of the stories that Lucy had shared with her over the years. The final part of Lucy's story was purely a product of Evie's imagination, but I liked it so much that I decided to include it in my book. When I tried to pay Evie for the story, she refused, saying, "*It's not my story, but Lucy's. But I know that she would have loved to have had it included in your book. So please do use it and do her proud. This is my way*

of remembering a lovely old lady and a wonderful friend, who was such a positive influence in my life.” This, then, is Lucy’s story.

The first time Lucy saw the Lady she was only four years old. Although the house was full of people murmuring in hushed tones over endless cups of cooling tea and fishpaste sandwiches with curled-up edges, nobody noticed Lucy slipping away through the kitchen door and tip-toeing down the weed-choked garden path. At the bottom of the garden the overgrown honeysuckle bush hid from sight the loose board in the fence that Lucy had discovered a week earlier when she had been banished outdoors whilst the grown-ups whispered with furrowed brows and furtive tears. The little girl slipped behind the honeysuckle bush and crawled through the gap in the fence, allowing the loose board to swing back into place behind her.

Lucy found herself in a bramble- and nettle-infested tangle; the wild grasses tickling her snub little nose as, for a moment; she experienced the thrill of her very first foray into illicit territory. Her mother had strictly forbidden her from venturing alone into the wild and forested area behind the house. A wave of sadness washed over Lucy as she remembered that her mother would never again forbid her to do anything and she stood in the sunshine, her bottom lip quivering as she gulped back tears whilst rubbing her eyes with her fists. She had never felt so alone in her entire short life. Just then, she was momentarily distracted from her sorrow by a sudden cacophonous chirruping, as a large flock of Cape White Eyes swooped right past her and into the thick forested area a few meters ahead. Looking around, Lucy noticed a narrow animal path stretching ahead through the brambles into the tangled thicket beneath the trees and, without a moment’s thought to the consequences of her actions, she set off down the path.

The tangled undergrowth was extremely dense, but the child was small and the spirit of adventure driving her progress was a welcome respite from her sadness as she burrowed along the animal

track. After a while, the path broke through into a small clearing under the canopy of massive trees and Lucy looked around, trying to locate the way forward. She might have turned back at this point, as she suddenly remembered her parents' warnings about the dangers of children getting lost in the forest, but then a beautiful, large, white butterfly fluttered past and disappeared between the trees and, without a second's thought, Lucy ran after it, winding between the trees and crawling under brush in her attempts to keep the butterfly in sight.

After a short while Lucy lost sight of the butterfly, but now her attention was attracted by the brilliant orange bracket fungi growing on a dead tree up ahead, and so she meandered through the forest, her attention constantly diverted by some wonder or another. After about an hour, Lucy's steps began to slow down and she became aware of the fact that she was tired and thirsty, not to mention, extremely hungry. She remembered that she hadn't eaten any lunch and that she had only managed a few spoonfuls of cereal that morning; her father and aunt being far too distracted by all the funeral arrangements to notice. She also started to feel a little bit scared because she couldn't remember how she had gotten to where she now found herself. When she also remembered that nobody knew that she had gone exploring, Lucy's lower lip started to quiver and she whispered, "*Mommy, mommy... Where are you?*" her voice rising in agitation at the end of the sentence, as she remembered that her mommy had gone to heaven and that she wouldn't be back again, ever. Now Lucy started to bawl in earnest; the intrepid adventurer giving way to a scared, lonely and lost little girl.

Suddenly there was a loud crashing in the trees above and a harsh, grating, cawing sound sent Lucy running for the relative safety of a nearby Yellowwood tree, where she crouched amongst the massive roots, hiding her face in her hands, her little heart wildly fluttering as she whimpered in fear.

After a while the realization gradually dawned upon Lucy that everything had become extremely quiet and she dared to peep through her fingers to check if she was safe. Lowering her hands, she gasped in surprise, as she noticed that the entire clearing was

suffused in a softly glowing, green light. And, drifting through the light towards the little girl was the most beautiful Lady that she had ever seen. The Lady was very tall and slender, with pale green, luminous skin and long, tangled, dark-green hair, adorned with lichen, ferns and bits of bark. Although the Lady was clothed only in soft green light, it was the most beautiful raiment that Lucy had ever seen. As she stared in fascination, a small lizard crawled up the Lady's arm and disappeared into her hair and two little birds landed on her outstretched hand, briefly preening before fluttering away into the treetops.

"Who ... who are you?" whispered Lucy, who had completely forgotten her fear and sadness in her wonderment at the vision standing before her. The Lady gently smiled and came to a stop right in front of the tree under which Lucy was sheltering.

Lucy heard the Lady's answer in her heart, "*I am the Deva, the spirit who takes care of this forest. I think that perhaps you may be lost?*" At that, Lucy remembered her plight and tears once more began to run down her cheeks. The Lady reached out a hand and, with one long, slender finger, she gathered Lucy's teardrops, which rolled down into her hand, one-by-one. With her other hand she reached out and gently unwound a long, shimmering piece of silk from a spider web just above Lucy's head. Then, with a few deft movements of her long, graceful hands, she threaded the teardrops onto the spider silk and tied the ends together behind her neck. Lucy forgot to cry as she stared in admiration at the exquisitely beautiful, iridescent teardrops sparkling against the Lady's glowing green skin.

Then the Lady lifted her chin and made a soft, gentle sound like the wood pigeons that Lucy had often heard in the woodpile behind the cottage. "*Coerrrr...*" and Lucy gasped in amazement as the sound emerging from the Lady's mouth transformed into a delicate white flower, which the Lady plucked from the air and dropped into Lucy's lap. "*Coerrrr.... coerrr... coerrr...*" went the Lady until Lucy's lap was filled with fragrant white flowers. Then Lucy's strange companion plucked a long, green hair from her head and twined it through the flower stems, fashioning a beautiful crown

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