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LegumeMan Books



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About the author

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Find Shane here: www.jiraiya.com.au/

Ian

by Shane Jiraiya Cummings



Every man I've ever met has been named Ian. I'm not exaggerating.

I am the daughter of proud and doting parents, Ian and Margaret, and was raised in what Ian called 'backwoods' Tasmania, well away from anything that could be called civilisation.

My Dad was a writer. He'd sold a few books in his glory days and could afford the isolation. Mum just fussed around the house a lot, although she did visit her cousins Sue and Shirley up in Burnie every month. Dad and I also went into town, for supplies, but only once in a blue moon. He enjoyed the solitude of his castle, and I was raised to know no different.

When we went to town, we shopped at the grocery co-op. The store owner was a rotund man named Ian. He used to wave and smile and carry on when Dad came in. They would shout 'Ian' at each other like it was the funniest joke in the world.

Dad home-schooled me, so I scarcely met another soul during my childhood. I read a lot of books instead.

Fairy tales and rhymes like Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Jack Horner, and Jack and Jill. To me, all the boys in the world were called Jack. I knew no different; Dad forbade me new books or a TV. He said TV rotted the brain, and I was happy with the healthy brain I had.

All the boys were Jack and all the men were Ian.

There was Ian the co-op owner, Dad's friend Ian who visited from Launceston, and Pastor Peterson. The pastor came down from the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Somerset and led us through Bible study, at least, until he and Dad had a falling out. I only knew the man as Pastor Peterson until Dad wrote hateful letters addressed to a Pastor Ian Peterson.

I accepted all this without hesitation. The one thing I didn't understand was why the Jacks changed their names to Ian when they grew up. I assumed it was a man thing.

I had no reason to question otherwise until I found Dad's secret stash of books in the bottom of his wardrobe. I was dumbfounded. They featured wise or heroic men named John or Peter or Tom. I thought the names sounded exotic. I'd never met a John or Peter or Tom. Just Ians. I couldn't ask Dad, though. He would have killed me for going through his books.

I lived for years that way, yearning for stories of these extraordinary men and more. Yearning for the caress of John Templeton (the spy from Casablanca Murders) or the intellect of Sherlock Holmes, who reminded me of my father in so many ways. Despite

myself, I always chuckled when I read his strange name. I still mutter 'Sherlock' like a cherished sin as I'm falling asleep.

When I reached womanhood, I struggled with the urge to leave, to explore the world and meet a man not named Ian, or just to find a job in Burnie. Dad grew cruel and distant each time I mentioned it, while Mum just kept immersing herself in housework. I'd never seen the fireplace so clean.

My husband-to-be changed everything. He was a survey geologist collecting soil samples near our cabin when we met. He was so rugged, so different to everything in my world. His mainlander ways took some getting used to, but he still swept me off my feet. We married within a year in a private ceremony.

It was the most romantic day of my life; the drizzle forced us from the park but we sheltered under a stand of gum trees, where we declared our vows. Just like one of Mum's novels: the ones with long-haired men and women with torn blouses on the cover. Mum didn't come to the wedding; Dad forbade her. My beloved lost his parents as a teenager, so without my family, it was just the two of us.

I became Mrs. Ian Robinson that day. I never caught the celebrant's name. I didn't need to. Not then. I just assumed.

For the first time ever, I left Tassie, my family, and everything I knew. We settled on a station in the remote north of Western Australia. Ian had landed a job with a mining company leading a survey team in

the remotest parts of the Kimberly and Pilbara. I was used to the solitude and the scenery was a welcome change from Tasmania's endless green. I came to enjoy the red dirt, although it was a curse on the laundry.

Ian was gone for weeks at a time and rarely did he bring anyone home. His best mate was the exception. Also a geo on his team, his name was Ian. My husband enjoyed the 'confusion' this caused with his bosses in Perth. I had no idea why.

I maintained my interest in books and Ian fed my habit. Books with men named David, Simon, and even Nigel (a lovely name, rhymes with *angel*). I wasn't stupid, but I was amazed by those authors' imaginations. To invent so many wondrous names was a feat.

Yet my suspicions flared again. I'd met plenty of different women: Sarahs, Lindas, Hayleys, Stephanies, Kates, and Debras. The list goes on and on. But Ian was the only man who touched my life: Ian and Ian and Ian and Ian and Ian.

When I asked Ian about the names of the men on his team, he laughed off my questions, at first, telling me how endearing he found my eccentric ways. He often told me how he enjoyed my simplicity. As my questions became more pointed, though – about his team and the men's names in the books and magazines – he smiled less and less. He came to look at me as though I were a stranger. That look in his eyes stung me beyond words and silenced my curiosity.

I struggled alone with my questions, putting on a brave face for Ian when he returned home from a survey. As my questions eased, so did the tension, but something ugly lingered between us, something unsaid. Without Ian, there were just the books and the occasional magazine. I craved answers but they held none.

Maybe he sensed my frustration or maybe he was just bored, but either way, Ian suggested we install a satellite dish. Everything in my life had grown stale, especially me. The books were stacked floor-to-ceiling. Nuisances, like the red dust. Ian thought satellite TV would break my monotony. The very idea of television terrified me. Yet shameful butterflies tickled my stomach. My head buzzed with possibilities.

I struck up a conversation weeks later with Ian, the Telstra technician who installed the satellite dish. He talked of his son, Jack, studying in Perth. I thought eighteen was a little old to still be a Jack, but when I asked the technician about it, he turned vague and changed the subject. I confided to him my yearning for children, too, but chose not to show further ignorance about the name change. Ian would tell me when the time came, I was sure of it. I blamed my parents for not raising me right. A mother had to know these things.

The technician's description of the city's wonders enthralled me and decided me on my course. I had a television set to buy, although I had no idea what I was looking for. It was the perfect chance to test

my theory (or hypothesis, as Sherlock would call it). Again, I had no real idea what I was looking for.

I called up a travel agent the very next day, a nice man named Ian, who arranged a return plane trip from Broome to Perth. I made sure the flight was on a day Ian would be home so he could take me to the airport. I still hadn't learned to drive, which was another of my parents' failings.

I asked Ian to drop me at the airport when the day arrived, telling him I was having the adventure of a lifetime – going shopping for a television and a new wardrobe while seeing the sights of Perth for a week. The lines around his eyes tightened but he seemed happy to oblige.

A courteous older man whose name badge read *Ian* took my bags and checked me onto the flight. Once aboard the twin engine jet, I was oddly comforted to find the flight attendant was a woman. Carina. After we had been sailing over the ruddy Kimberly interior for twenty minutes, the Captain's muffled voice floated over the PA system. Ian Bennett was his name. He'd been flying for eighteen years, he assured everyone.

With my head spinning from a million thoughts and one crazy hope, I closed my eyes, losing myself to sleep for the rest of the flight. I awoke to a bumpy landing. Captain Ian was a veteran, perhaps, but his landings could do with some work.

After I left the plane, I entered the terminal to collect my baggage. It smelled of stale body odour, greasy chips, and dust. The people were all irritable

or in a rush. I was too intimidated by the ruckus to approach anyone.

Instead, I waited patiently for a taxi and watched the people bustle by. The burly, sweaty man who welcomed me into his car was talkative all the way to my hotel. His licence, plastered with an unflattering mugshot of his unflattering face, declared him as Ian.

I checked into the hotel. I forget the name of it now; it might have sounded like a gemstone. Anyway, a pimply-faced but well-dressed Ian assisted me at the reception desk. At my insistence, he gave me directions to the largest shopping centre in the area. Once I had settled into my room, I set out on my mission in earnest. An Ian dressed in a business suit gave me terse directions to the train station.

From there, finding the mall was easy. On the train, a trench-coated young man in dark make-up told me where my stop was. He told me he was a 'Goth' (quite a silly word), and at first, I thought that was his name. My heart leapt for joy! He corrected me but revealed his name as 'Eye On'. Still, my heart continued to flutter for my discovery, but I couldn't let it be. When I forced him to spell his name before he slunk away, it came out like everyone else's. I. A. N.

Downhearted as I was after leaving the train, the sight of the mall lifted my spirits. It was huge, with signs everywhere. People practically poured in and out of its glass doors.

Entering the mall, my head was buzzing in the strangest way. I aimed straight for the heart of the largest store. Along the way, I passed many women

with name tags, including Suzette, Jody, Bianca, and Noelene, before I found the first man. His badge confirmed the worst. *Ian*.

The drone inside my skull grew steadily worse as I stumbled into the throngs of shoppers. Grabbing men at random, I demanded they give me their names. The first few Ians responded politely, but as the pressure built inside me with my desperation, the Ians grew nervous at my approach. The chatter in the mall was drowned out by the chatter in my head. That same word over and over again. Ian.

They tried brushing me off, these Ians, as I clawed at their sleeves. There had to be a Tom, Dick or Harry! Isn't that how the saying goes? Everything I'd ever read told me so. Someone, somewhere out in the world, any man at all, had to have a name from one of my books. Anything but Ian.

I was a pariah as shoppers gave me a wide berth.

Sinking to my knees, I clutched my aching head as people flooded past. The pressure wouldn't let up. The last things I remember are screaming, a blur of colour, and a sea of legs.

A lifetime of pent-up frustration was released with that scream and those tears.

'Ian!' I cried. The mall echoed the name to infinity. Every last man in the mall turned.

Ian visits me often now. Sometimes Ian does, too. They won't let me leave though. They keep me in a little room, with only minimal furniture. In case I hurt myself, they say.

I get to wander the common room for a few hours each day, where I chat with the other ladies. It's a welcome change to have so much company, and I especially enjoy watching TV in there. It's probably rotting my brain like Dad always said. There are Michaels and Stephens and even more outlandish names like Arnold and Sean on the TV. It's more than I've ever imagined.

Every evening, a considerate man gives me three yellow pills that dull my throbbing head. I can't hear the chatter as loud as I used to.

He doesn't wear a name badge or even tell me his name.

I call him Ian. He doesn't seem to mind.