

THE QUARRY

Alexander Cavenett

The Thief and His Daughter

There was a commotion out on the street. I could hear it from the stairs, and as I entered the kitchen and gave Caitlin a peck on the cheek I asked her what was wrong.

‘Oh, Donnie, it’s awful,’ she answered, looking up from the newspaper. ‘Robert and Heather had another break in last night. They took some rare books, apparently. I never thought this kind of thing would happen here.’ That was true, at least. Sydney’s North Shore didn’t seem like the kind of place for this to be happening.

‘Hmm,’ I looked out the window at the people gathered in the driveway opposite us. Robert was dressed for work, black suit, red tie, even red suspenders. He always liked to look authoritative. He was talking to a few policemen, one of whom held a notepad and seemed to be writing furiously into it.

Caitlin and I had breakfast in silence that morning. The only times Caitlin spoke was to encourage Susie to eat her breakfast. She was a fussy eight year old and spent the next fifteen minutes stirring her cereal, chatting away until it had melted entirely into the milk. When Susie was quiet we could hear Robert yelling across the road. Our kitchen window was open a crack, so I listened intently to the argument.

Robert and Heather were in different states of disarray. As Robert shouted to the policemen I could imagine his face, bright red and all set to burst at any moment.

‘Can we hurry this along?’ he was yelling. ‘We’ve been through this so many times you should bloody well know what to write. Those were first editions they’ve stolen and I bloody well want them back!’

Slightly quieter, but no less distressed, Heather stood sobbing. We'd heard her cry so often this year.

Susie seemed to ignore it. I urged her to eat her breakfast, but Caitlin had given up. 'She won't listen to you, dear,' she said, taking the bowl and pouring its contents into the sink. Susie followed her as she did this, like a smaller clone of her mother. They had the same auburn hair, the same hazelnut eyes, the same adorable smile. There was little of me at all to be found in Susie, but perhaps that was a good thing. Her mother's features were angel-like. Mine were mundane and boring. Auburn is better than jet black.

'You know,' Caitlin said, turning away from the sink and throwing the wet tea towel aside, 'we really missed you last night, Donnie. Susie really missed you.' Susie nodded beside her.

It took a moment to register what she referred to. Oh yes, the school play. 'I know, I'm sorry. I'm convinced work knows when these things come up so just to annoy me. Grueller definitely has something against me.' A little guilt crept in then, but before I could reflect on it Robert was firing on all cylinders again. Caitlin rushed to close the kitchen window, but his rage found its way inside anyway, and for a time we listened to him as he shouted.

'Yeah, it bloody well could,' he was yelling. 'Could isn't good enough! This fucker's been up and down the neighbourhood for a year and you've got nothing to show for it!' Robert launched into a tirade. I imagined the veins throbbing in his forehead.

Caitlin's mood had soured. She moved over to Susie and held her by the shoulders. 'Come on, let's go get ready for school now,' she said, less enthusiastic than intended.

'I want daddy to help me,' Susie said.

'Mm, afraid I can't, little one. Daddy's got to go to work in a minute,' I said. 'Sorry.'

'It's alright, I'll do it.' Caitlin didn't take her eyes off Susie. 'Upstairs now, Susie. We can listen to one of your new CD's while you dress.'

As Caitlin and Susie disappeared upstairs I straightened my tie and prepared to leave for work. Outside, as I packed my briefcase into my car, the police drove off at last, leaving Robert and Heather standing in their driveway. When Robert looked over

to me, I gave him a worried nod of concern, but he simply leapt into his car and drove off without hugging his wife.

Caitlin was waving at me from the upstairs window, but her smile looked false. It wavered, and a little worry crept into the edges. Susie was beside her, waving with excitement, but I barely registered her over her mother's worried expression. I left the car, mouthed 'I'll go have a talk with Heather' to her, and crossed the street.

'Are you going to be okay? How bad was it?' I asked, wearing a false smile of my own now, an attempt to look optimistic that had no effect on Heather, who suddenly trudged down the driveway, cried out 'oh, Donald!' and buried her face in my chest.

'Yeah,' I said, holding her close as she wept.

It started because I was bored. It had been getting tougher, but everyone loves a good challenge. I had met with iron bars on the back windows as I snuck into Robert and Heather's garden the night before. The night sky had darkened fully by eight o'clock, and the neighbourhood was empty of sound. We're a neighbourhood of families, so it was at least convenient that something insubstantial like a school play meant I could set about my business earlier than usual.

The bars were new. What a thrill! When I'd last been here, some weeks ago, I'd entered through the same window. I'd expected this to happen at some point. Security was always going to tighten in a neighbourhood where theft is so common. But they'd neglected to do anything about the back door, which from memory only had a simple latch lock. Thanks to my friends in security, I knew it would be easy to break. The door groaned as I opened it, but I was the only one around to hear it.

Stealing was like hunting. From across the road I could watch when Robert and Heather would leave, and marvel as they once again forgot to enable the security system they'd recently installed. Robert really was a careless man.

Robert and Heather were the neighbours who flaunted everything. Their front yard always had one too many ornaments – before I'd stolen them. The interior was the same; ridiculous vases, paintings, collector's items from all kinds of absurd things. Robert had explained where each of these had come from, but bugger if I was going to listen properly to that pompous man.

A few weeks ago, while watching Susie play tag with her friends at what felt like the hundredth neighbourhood barbeque of the year, I overheard Robert talking to

someone about some rare first edition books he had. ‘Leather bound, gorgeous print. Some of them are signed, too,’ he beamed. Let’s see how you cope without them, Robert.

As I made my way back across the road with the pile of leather-bound books, I wondered what exactly I should do with them. Keeping them was never an option – if the police came looking that would be the end of everything. Most of the things I stole were passed off to charity as anonymous donations, but first edition books were a bit different.

The charity idea came to me when my dear mother passed away. In the throes of depression I remembered the stories she had read to me in bed as a kid. The story of Robin Hood had fascinated me. Surely it’s better giving to those who need it? I am nothing but a modern day Robin Hood; then, taking the superfluous suburban litter and giving the profits to those who dearly need it; the sick children, the homeless, whatever the cause.

I was nothing more than a modern day Robin Hood.

I spent the work day sitting at my desk, unfocused, filling database entries without a proper understanding of what exactly I was doing. I just wanted to go home, see what the neighbourhood was doing now. After previous thefts I’d seen people leave their front lights on all night, and heard others pacing nervously up and down the street for several hours. It was beautiful.

When I pulled into the driveway that night, I paused before entering the house. Robert and Heather had their front blinds closed, but even behind them and the security bars I could see their silhouettes at their dining table, sitting upright and alert.

‘Ah,’ I muttered to myself. ‘What a beautiful night.’

Down the road, Judy and Mason had taken to eating dinner on the front porch. They waved at me with cautious smiles.

Caitlin and Susie were eating dinner. In contrast to the morning, Susie was eagerly eating, while Caitlin sat twirling strands of pasta around her fork. She smiled when I said hello, but her face dropped immediately afterwards, and she turned her attention back to her fork.

‘Is something wrong, Cat?’ I asked, and as the words escaped my mouth I realised just how stupid they sounded.

Caitlin picked up on that as well. ‘Of course something is wrong, Donnie,’ she mumbled. ‘How many break-ins have we heard about this year? In one neighbourhood? It’s ridiculous. It’s only a matter of time before whoever is doing this targets us, and...’

I broke her off there. ‘Should we be discussing this in front of her?’ I nodded my head in Susie’s direction, but she paid us no attention, humming a slow tune as she ate her dinner. Still, she didn’t need to be privy to this conversation.

Another smile came and went across Caitlin’s face as she looked over to our daughter. Then she stood up from the table, shrugged her shoulders as if to say ‘let’s talk somewhere else,’ and walked out into the hallway.

Susie watched her go. ‘Where’s mummy going?’ she asked me, her eyes filled with innocent curiosity.

We looked at each other in silence for a few awkward moments before I said anything. ‘Ah, mummy and daddy have to discuss...something secret, you know? Grown-up stuff.’

‘About my birthday?’

I held a finger up to my lips to shush her. ‘Maybe.’ She grinned at that, and as I pulled myself away from the table and left the room she resumed humming to herself.

Caitlin was sitting on the living room couch when I found her, the one we’d only recently bought. ‘We need something new, dear, something to match the walls,’ she’d decided, choosing a vibrant red colour that apparently complimented the faded yellows of the walls. I didn’t understand it, but it was nice to know we were exercising that sort of design control over the house.

That made it all the more heartbreaking to hear the first words out of Caitlin’s mouth as I sat next to her. The words hit like a catastrophic wave, only I was left tumbling through them long after the initial surge.

‘I don’t want to live here anymore.’ I wasn’t able to get a word in before she broke down in tears.

‘We’ll be alright,’ I said, after a few minutes of silence. Caitlin had managed to calm down, and we now sat with one arm wrapped around each other, staring into the empty TV screen.

‘How can you know that? I’m worried for Susie. I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight, I’m so scared. It’s lucky nothing seriously bad has ever happened to

anyone but, well...what if it does, you know? It's just...I don't know...I'm not overreacting, am I?'

'No, it makes sense.' I said. She rested her head on my shoulder, and we fell into silence again. I was left to think about my course of action.

If Robin Hood was asked to stop, what would he do?

Caitlin had been so happy when we'd bought this house. 'Finally!' she'd exclaimed, arms spread wide, basking in the sun. If she'd have twirled on the spot it would have been the perfect moment.

'We can make a great family here.'

And I'd ruined that.

I was swimming in these thoughts when Susie came into the room, her face smeared with pasta sauce. 'I'm finished!' she said.

Caitlin straightened up and made to move, but I stopped her.

'Let's clean you up then,' I said to Susie, 'you sure know how to make a mess of your food!' I hoisted her over one shoulder and carried her up the stairs to the bathroom. The pasta sauce managed to make its way onto my shirt – figures. No good deed goes unpunished...

'I guess I've been neglecting you a bit lately, huh little one?' I said, more to myself than to her.

'What's 'neglecting' mean?'

'Oh, uh...nothing. I thought I told you we were talking about birthday secrets that you shouldn't hear about.' I said.

She was quiet for a few moments before she simply said 'oops,' and giggled.

Susie was restless as I washed her hands and face. 'Okay little one, calm down,' I tried, 'why don't you tell me about your play last night?' She talked even as I wiped the cloth over her mouth, her voice muffled but nonetheless excited.

'I wanted to be the witch, but Mrs. Lewis said it was Lisa Miller's turn to get the big part, so I got to play her cat,' she said.

'A cat? Like a talking cat?' I asked.

'Mmm...I don't think I was sposed to talk, but I did anyway! Mummy said it was really funny though, so Mrs. Lewis said it was alright!'

'That's great, Susie,' I smiled down at her.

'Will you come to our next play?' she asked.

‘Another one? Gee, that’s quick!’ I pressed my hands to my hips as if deep in thought. ‘When is it?’

‘Not for another two months,’ Caitlin said. She was leaning against the door frame, arms folded against her chest, wearing a smile. ‘They’re asking parents to volunteer with costumes and set building. You could help out.’

‘I’m gonna be a robot!’ Susie said.

‘If you have the time, of course,’ Caitlin added.

I thought about it for a moment. Would Robin Hood settle for this? Was it too boring? To go from stealing books and vases to helping a child in a school play? Susie was looking at me with a hopeful grin, and any doubt I had vanished. ‘I’d like that.’

Susie clapped her hands together, beaming. ‘Can we watch TV?’ she asked.

‘Okay, but not for too long. You have to go to bed soon, you know,’ Caitlin said. She looked to me. ‘You two go on ahead, I just need to freshen up a bit.’

‘It’ll be alright, Cat,’ I tried to reassure her.

‘I know. Well, I hope.’

Susie and I were heading for the stairs when a question occurred to me.

‘Hey Susie, what do you think about stealing?’ I asked.

She held her thumb to her mouth for a moment. ‘Mrs. Lewis says it’s a bad thing.’

‘It is,’ I said, ‘but what about Robin Hood? He steals, but he gives it to the poor. Isn’t that good?’

She had to think about it. ‘Mmm...maybe.’

As we walked downstairs, I thought about what I could do. Return the books? Maybe. Surely that couldn’t hurt. Halfway down, Susie added to her answer.

‘But it’s still kinda bad.’