

THE QUARRY

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The Tree

Michael stands on the curb. It is the same curb which he stood on as a child, during the endless games of cricket, on a road which became molten black chewing gum in the crucible of a Perth summer. The road gripped you to your fielding position, like one of the toy fielders from the 'Test Match' game. Michael had decided that the best fielding position was short mid-wicket, since short mid-wicket was on the curb. Now, he is standing at short mid-wicket, regarding the geriatric remains of his childhood home. It seems smaller than he remembers, and like the hand-me-downs which were worn and re-

worn there for generations, the old house has many holes and frayed seams; not even useful for patches.

The property had passed from Michael's great grandfather to his grandfather, and then to Michael's mother, the 'Dragon Lady'. Now, forty odd years later, with the recent passing of his mother, the old place has passed to another generation. The council has vetoed any thoughts of fixing up the place. The house has to be torn down and another built in its place. Michael is glad to have the decision taken out of his hands.

He watches as the excavator makes its first incision into the front corner of the house, where the walls meet the roof. That was his bedroom. Ghosts begin fleeing through the window. Michael reaches out to them; he wants to save them. He catches a hold of one by the tail.

'What have I told you, you little shit?' The Dragon is breathing fire.

Seven years old, curled up in a ball, trapped in the corner of his room; no further retreat is possible. The 'Dragon Lady', in the grip of one of her 'turns' is wailing on his back and legs with a cricket stump. The intensity of her exertions causes her to stumble a few steps backward to catch her breath. Michael runs for the door.

'Get back here you little shit!'

Michael is out the front door; it slams against the wall with a loud bang.

'When I catch you, you're fucked. FUCK!'

BANG! Clunk, clunk! The sound of a cricket stump hitting the wall and coming to rest on the wooden floor.

Michael climbs the big tree in the front yard, all the way to the highest branches, where he can poke his head above the top leaves and survey the neighbourhood. Through tears, he sees Mr Schmidt next-door, watering his garden.

'You okay, Michael?'

Michael nods, embarrassed. He had taken refuge next-door before, but the 'Dragon Lady' had made him pay for 'embarrassing' her. Now Michael runs to the tree, he is safe up there. Michael knows that adults can't climb trees.

‘Just stay there for a while until your mum calms down,’ Mr Schmidt says, ‘You come over here if you need to.’

Mr Schmidt knows the deal.

Back in the present, a voice shakes Michael from his thoughts. He loses his grip on the ghost’s tail and blinking, the past fades from his eyes. He sees that his bedroom is rubble and toothpicks. The building contractor is talking to him.

‘This tree is gonna have to go mate. The roots will be covering an area the same size as the bit pokin’ out o’ the ground. If we have to run the plumbing, electricity and gas around the outside, it’s gonna be an expensive pain in the arse.’

The contractor stands looking at him, waiting for an answer. Michael is still somewhere between ghost catching and house killing, unable to think clearly.

‘Ummm, just let me think about it for a few minutes.’

Michael looks at the tree. It has more wrinkles than he remembers, and a bit less hair on top, but it is alive and well, like a mirror. Michael walks over to the desiccated trunk, runs his fingers over the bark, and remembers. He looks up into the branches; blades of sunlight cut through the foliage. A few metres above, Michael can see the remains of an old fence picket, barely attached to a branch via a single rusty nail.

Seven-year-old Michael transports three old fence pickets up into the tree, one by one, and rests them, side by side, across two thick branches. The pickets will provide a level platform for him to sit on, once he has nailed them into place; high enough up the tree to be safe from the Dragon, with plenty of thick foliage underneath for security. It will be his tower.

Michael can hear the familiar sound of the ‘Sandman’. He pokes his head through the leaves at the top of tree and sees the panel van turn into the driveway; ‘Sandman’ written on the side. Most days the Sandman comes by late in the afternoon, and Michael breathes a sigh of relief. He has seen this drill many times before. The Sandman drives all the way up the driveway, to the back of the house, beeping his horn half way up the drive, which is unnecessary, as the Dragon is always ready and waiting at the back door. The Dragon walks over and leans on the sill of the driver’s door, and they talk for a few

moments. The Dragon gives some money to the Sandman, and he gives her a tiny bit of sand, wrapped in a little piece of plastic, with a knot tied in it to stop the sand from spilling. Then the Sandman reverses back down the drive and leaves, with a big burnout.

Michael had once seen what the Dragon did with the sand, through the gap in her slightly ajar bedroom door. She opened the plastic and poured the sand into a spoon. Then she got a doctor's needle and used it to put some water into the spoon, and then she held the spoon in one hand while using the other hand to heat the bottom of it with a cigarette lighter. After a few seconds, she carefully placed the spoon on her dressing table, and touched the inside of it with the doctor's needle. Finally, she put the needle on her arm and lay back on the bed. He had never seen her concentrate so much; it must be very important.

After she finishes, she is happy and apologises to Michael for being mean, and gives him hugs and kisses. Then she lies down on the couch to watch T.V., falls asleep, and does not wake up until the morning. Michael usually wakes her before running out the door and off to school.

Up in the tree, Michael hammers the nails into place. He sees, through the branches, the Sandman reverse out onto the street. A screeching burnout and off down the hill, engine roaring. A few minutes later, the Dragon, having changed into mum, is standing on the lawn beneath the tree.

'Michael, where are you baby?'

'I'm up in the tree, mum. I'm making a tower with some old fence pickets. Can you see me?' Michael leans his head sideways so that his mother can see him through the foliage.

'Yeah, I can see you puddin'. Just be careful up there, I don't want you to fall and get hurt.'

'Okay mum!'

'I'm going to watch T.V. baby, come and tell me when you're ready for dinner.'

'Okay mum!'

As the sun sets, Michael comes down from his tower and goes inside. He doesn't wake his mother. He puts a pillow under her head and a blanket over her, switches the T.V. off, turns off the light, and shuts the door. Then he prepares his own dinner.

‘Well?’

Again, Michael is dragged back to the present; the building contractor is standing in front of him.

‘Well? The tree? Does it stay or go?’

Michael smiles at him. ‘The tree stays.’