

# *Da.*

It was Saturday morning and the old man was shovelling trays of sausages and bacon into the oven. It had been months since he'd last had a spell.

Cautiously, the boy.

Hi, Da.

The old man in his shaky reverie.

Ey, Jess.

Broken voice. Black-eye. Bourbon breath.

The sausages looked like fists of chubby fingers. The boy nearly forgot himself and smiled.

The fat crackled and squealed, like a campfire in school holidays.

That night was steak and peas for tea. The old man had that absent stare back again, the one they knew so well. He wasn't talking much these days.

A chair scrape on floorboards.

A clang of cutlery on plate.

The screen door croaks. Lets Da out into the night. Ma sighs.

Sometimes he'd come crashing back through like a midnight cyclone in North country, yelling and breaking things. Those times the kids kept in their room, the boy pleading with god or whoever decided these things that he would never be like the old man. He didn't ever touch Ma, or the kids. He was just so angry about something.

In the morning the boy mucked around with Jed in the yard a while, playing tug-o-war with that old piece of rope he loved so much, the one with the slimy tennis ball on one end. He smiled at Jed's dopey face, the long tongue hanging out to one

side, smiling at the boy so human-like.

He was like he had been splattered with paint all over. Brown, black and white, spots and patches and bits of misplaced brindle. The tail that was too long for him. And the front leg that had never healed properly and made him walk with a bit of a limp.

The boy squashed the mutt's face between his hands warmly and held it up to his, nose to nose. Jed. The tiny, sick pup he had found one Easter holidays in the car-park in town. Jed, who had saved him too.

Love you, boy.

The dog drooled happily, following him to the verandah and settling down with a sigh. A happy thump of the long tail, eye fixed on the boy.

The prickles stung his bare feet. The old caravan sat on its patch of dry brown grass up the back of the yard, away from the house. The boy knocked on the window quietly, a layer of dust. Again, louder. He pulled at the rusted door and it jerked open. A cloud of smoke, the thick smell of pot, the cricket playing softly on the transistor radio. Da was gazing out the window, a tangle of hair and beard, engrossed in some thought.

Oh, hey Jess.

He ruffled the boy's curls. His rough fingers brushing his forehead. The boy's chest swelled.

Want to go down to the nets later, Da?

The man looked at the boy. Those eyes were so damned big, weren't they?

All blue and green melting together like some magical sea being, like when they used to visit the coast in the holidays and the boy would swim like a fish for days.

He knew his boy probably belonged somewhere like that, where he had the water.

He wasn't a bushy, like the old man. He was a water baby, like his mother. The old man knew she was only out here 'cause of him. Truth was, she hated this

godforsaken back country with its ragged excuses for trees and its damned snakes

and thirsty cane. He saw it on her face.

One day we'll go back to the coast, he had promised her.

One day.

The old man sighed. He ruffled the boy's hair again, softer. The man's eyes had gone liquid darkness.

Not today, mate. After school one day, eh.

Da spent most days in his van out the back now. The scratching of pen on paper, the rolling of smokes, the constant hum of the transistor radio. He picked up bits of odd work around town. Everyone knew he was a master craftsman, nowadays content to go fixing people's sinks and door hinges for seventeen an hour.

Self-taught, they said.

Could make anything, they said.

Back in the house Ma was sitting with her glasses on, focusing on her craft for the markets in town.

Ah it's so damned fiddly! She sighed.

The boy crawled in next to her on the couch. Ma enveloped him. Her boy. The sad blue eyes and dark tangles of curls.

Aw, what's up darl?

The big eyes were wet, a poorly hid frown.

I dunno. Softly.

Want to help me with this? I could use your quick hands?

He picked up a little old gumnut man. Ma had even made him a pair of tiny spectacles and a wise beard and he was wearing a smart felt winter coat and bow-tie.

The gumnuts had come from the big gum that had started to buckle the back fence, the one they'd buried their crazy old mutt dog Toby under, who used to

turn up at Ma's work in town and bark and bark at her through the window till she came out. And after that was their sweet cattle-cross Molly. She used to run up and down the length of the fence barking like a mad thing, as though working her imaginary herd of cattle. The neighbour hated it. Never stopped going on about it. Da still spoke of it with his voice cracking, of how they had found her hiding under the house, howling in pain as the poison killed her.

The gumtree had always been there. Da used to tell the kids stories, about how trees could speak to each other, how they were intelligent. Da said that when a tree was close to dying, it donated all its life and energy to the tree next to it. They bled, too, same colour as us even. The deep red sap would drip down the trunk from a wound, hardening into beautiful stalactites, sometimes trapping an ant in its wake and preserving it in that moment in time.

When the youngest had finished their final year at school, Ma left him finally. The kids didn't know why she held on so long. Waiting for him to change probably, to turn back into the man she had loved so deeply. The craftsman, the country boy, the musician. In those days he had a drink, but it was different. He wasn't angry then.

Later they had all heard that he had given up the drink, he'd been sober near on two years. He still liked a smoke but he only drank tea nowadays. Buckets of it. He was dressed in a checked flanny, as he always was, and his jeans that had a bit of paint on them. But they were his good pair. The beard was gone and he was smooth faced, hair cut just below his ears.

The boy towered over his father now.

Hey, Jess.

Hi, Da.

They walked past the old house. It was all there, like a photograph. The pawpaw trees, the big old porch, the kids names carved in a piece of timber above the front door. The curtains were gone, and he could see into the front lounge room where Grandma had years ago killed a King Brown snake with a shovel while Ma was away having the twins in hospital. They would tell the story for years. The snake had come in to check the cricket score, they joked. It had taken all her guts though, she had been terrified of snakes. She hadn't grown up with them like these kids had. She wasn't a bushy, either.

And around the back, the old gum tree where the dogs were buried.

Toby, Molly, Jed.

*Oh, Jed.*

It was February and the old gum was flowering yellow blossoms that fell like snow. The treehouse had gone, but there were a few nails remaining in the trunk; he saw how the tree's trunk had accepted them as part of itself, growing around them as they bent to its shape.

Da's words.

*Iron and lithium,*

*Carbon, oxygen, hydrogen,*

*Humans and trees, rock, rivers and animals, We are all brothers and sisters,*

*Formed in the explosions of light and matter, We are all just stardust.*

He loved every part of that hopeless old man. He wanted to take the suffering in his hands somehow, hold it for a while, just for the old man's reprieve.

Da drew on the cigarette he'd just rolled, the wrinkles taking over his face as he inhaled. The smoke rose gold around him in spirals, his eyes shone clear out toward something only he had ever been able to see.