

## What Grows Here

*Timothy Rickwood*

After hanging up the phone she didn't quite know what to do. She sat down, then got straight back up again. She opened the door to the spare room, turned on the light and sighed. All of it would have to go. She'd have to clean it all out. He may have passed away years ago, but his legacy of hoarded records and turntables had outlasted him. She knew he would be dismayed to see the state of them. Even still, she hadn't been able to bear selling them, but now she had been pushed. She sighed again. Perhaps it was for the best.

She had become sedentary. It was like an inertia of isolation, slow but hard to break out of. Even the jack russell, Kipper, was slowing down. Their walks were becoming shorter. They used to do two laps of Neangar but now only managed a half before turning back.

She rang her neighbour Phil, keying the number into the landline from an address book. Phil was a young man, with kind eyes and a moustache. He was a carpenter and lived with his long-time girlfriend and two chittery whippets.

“Sorry to bother you at work, Phil.”

“Nah, no worries. I'm not far away in Golden Square, is it the water again?”

“No, nothing to worry about like that...” She took a moment to gather her thoughts. Everyone speaks so quickly now. At the shops she knows she seems slow.

“Hello?”

“Sorry, Phil. Yeah, I need some help... clearing out my spare room. It's full of records and the players, you know. I'm not sure. Pete's old things. I don't quite know where to begin.”

“Ah. No worries. Hm, we can do a big sale, put some on Facebook Marketplace. I have a mate who is right into that shit... sorry... stuff. I’ll see if he can swing by after work with me.”

\*\*\*

Cleaning the room didn’t take long. In fact, it only took an evening. Phil’s mate Adam took everything. He had a guilty look as he did it. Like he knew he was ripping off a pensioner. He kept offering money, but Elizabeth was just glad to have it go somewhere where it will be appreciated. The next morning she heard her gate hinges swing softly. Phil had slipped \$500 under the door. Cheeky bugger, she inwardly chided him. She folded it and put it under an indoor plant.

He would arrive this afternoon. She'd only met him once before. Phil and his girlfriend had helped her set up a flatpack bed and cupboard. They put the bedsheets on and stood back, happy with their labours.

“When did you last see him?”

“Hmm?”

“Have you seen him recently?”

“Oh, Aaron? No, years ago. He was tiny then, four years old, I think. Just starting school. They said he was eight now.”

Phil whistled. “Like my mum used to say, all families are complicated.”

“Sharon was such a good girl. It was just a shame she shacked up with that bikie.”

Phil looked sad. “Well,” he swung his arms around, “He’ll love it here.”

\*\*\*

The car tyres crunched on the driveway gravel and the brakes squeaked lightly as it came to a halt. Elizabeth was already out the door; she hadn't been this anxious for a lifetime. Her body had forgotten how to deal with such signals. She was jittery, she'd already had three cups of green tea. Which hadn't helped and had only made her need to go to the toilet constantly.

A lady got out wearing a lanyard with a government logo. A quiet dark-haired boy emerged slowly. He had big eyes, with dark rings. A big thick hoodie with an emblazoned logo. She couldn't imagine wearing such a thing in early summer. It might not be a heatwave right now, but he must be sweltering.

There had been meetings and inspections of her house in the previous days. All up to scratch, apparently, not that they really had any alternative. She had seen the advert signs around, 'foster a child today'. So many lost kids. Elizabeth wasn't sure if she could do this. If she had the stamina. If she wouldn't stuff it up entirely. The government lady, Suzie, or was it Sarah, brought him over, and couldn't get away quick enough.

\*\*\*

The boy went into his room with barely a word. Accepting the situation as if it was almost normal. Moving in with a near stranger. Something about his countenance unsettled Elizabeth deeply. Children should be more excitable, more silly. She had popped her head in to give him a snack and some milk, and he had been glued to his tablet computer. She tried to ask what it was and he'd said the people had given it to him as a prize for going to school for a whole week. She did not find that fact comforting.

At dinner time, she opened the pantry. She hadn't forgotten what it was like to feed others, it was just odd doing it again. That part of her mind felt like a library book, long

forgotten on a dusty back-wall shelf. It was like the book itself was surprised that it needed to be read again, pages sighing as they pulled apart.

They sat at the small table in the laminate-floored kitchen. The old wooden cabinetry had been all done by Pete himself. The vinyl chairs squeaked as he wriggled.

“These chairs are so hard,” he whined.

“Hm. I suppose they are. My bottom too,” she replied.

He laughed, the sound made Elizabeth smile. She loaded up two plates of pasta bolognese and placed them in front of him and offered the cheese.

He shook his head. “Don’t want that.”

“The cheese?”

“No, the sauce... the red stuff.”

“The tomato?” she asked. He nodded. “Hmmm...” Her brow creased. She’d heard of this picky eating thing. “What would you want?”

He shrugged.

“Plain pasta with cheese?” She’d heard a mum in the supermarket talking, it was all her kid ate apparently. She’d also heard a program on Radio National about it. He nodded. She got some of the leftover pasta out of the colander, filled a bowl and offered it to him. To her relief, he started to eat.

“I hope you like staying here with me. I will be able to walk you to school tomorrow.” She tried. How do you make conversation with an eight year old you barely knew? He nodded slowly, sucking in a piece of spiral pasta straight from his hands.

“Do you remember when I met you a few years ago? We had ice-cream in town?”

He shook his head.

“You’re mum's friend?” He looked confused.

Elizabeth tried to smile, poor kid. “Kind of. I’m your mum’s Aunty if that makes sense. Which makes me your great aunty.”

\*\*\*

“Don’t wanna, don’t wanna, don’t wanna!” the boy tossed and turned under the sheets. Elizabeth had tried to pull them off, but he had twisted around so much in them she couldn’t get them off without pulling him off as well.

She recognised a power struggle. “I am going to go have a cup of tea. Come out when you’re ready for breaky.”

It took half an hour but eventually the boy emerged. He still wore the matching Roblox pyjamas she had bought for him at Big W. She smiled. Better to restart.

“I don’t wanna go to school today.”

“Okay. Let’s start with breakfast. We can figure out the day from there.”

“Can I have coffee?” he asked, with a sly smile. Elizabeth coughed on her mouthful of tea. “Spider would make me coffee. With four sugars,” he boasted.

“Right... I think maybe you can have an English breakfast tea.”

“Is it good?”

“It’s fantastic. I never drink anything else in the morning.”

“No energy drinks?”

“Never had one.”

“Wow,” he said, and meant it. This was another world to him.

\*\*\*

“Come on then. If you ain’t going to school, you don’t get to laze around on that computer.” Elizabeth was flying by the seat of her pants now. Making it up. What the hell could they do for the day. She just started to drive and she had an idea. Finally she parked the car. A half-baked plan had emerged.

“What is this place?” Aaron asked, hands in pockets, hood up, looking at the big, blue shed.

“It’s a hardware store. I swear Pete spent half his life here.”

“Who is Pete?”

“My husband.”

“Where is he?”

“He died years back.”

“Oh... okay.” His eyes darted around. “When?”

“Years ago now.”

He was quiet for a moment, hands shifting in his hoodie pockets. “Do you miss him?”

“Just every day.” She reached out and pulled the hood off and ruffled his hair. “That’s not for you to worry about.” He pulled away, but she saw him smile.

\*\*\*

It was hard keeping him focused, but once he got into the swing of it, hands in the soil, with the different tools he started to enjoy gardening.

“Pete had always been the groundskeeper here,” she was explaining, chatting away as he slowly scooped small spades full of mulch and compost out of the big bag they had bought. She wanted to get the moo poo but he had stuck his tongue out saying “ewww!”

“It’ll be nice to see something grow here again,” Elizabeth continued.

Next they watered it and made some little signs on some old wood offcuts with stakes attached using tie wire that Pete had left in the shed. They made signs for each section. She helped him with his letters. Having worked in the school office, she had an understanding of where kids should be at and she was dismayed at his attempt at the letters. But once finished, they looked over their crop proudly. Basil, tomatoes, oregano, and zucchini. He even seemed excited.

The next day he still didn’t go to school again. So this time they went to the library near Canterbury Park, in the old mechanics institute. He’d played with the Lego at the table for hours while Elizabeth read a new Jane Harper. It gave her an idea. She wasn’t above bribery for the greater good.

\*\*\*

The Lego had worked and weeks passed with only a missed day here and there. Aaron’s Lego collection had grown substantially. Elizabeth had noticed his old tablet computer was now often sitting under the bed and she hadn’t seen him use it in weeks. They would read books together from the library, he loved Dog Man. She put on all sorts of theatrical voices.

She had started noticing other things, small things. Things that made her happy, but also worried for him. Like “my room” and “let’s go home”. Would Sharon and Spider try to take him back one day?

Pete and her had always hoped for this, kids, but it hadn't worked out. She wondered if he was watching her now, if he saw and what he would think? He'd be happy about the garden, that's for sure. The boy had become a little green thumb. He said it was a bit like crafting in a video game. He watered it every evening without fail, spraying the hose like an old man on his lawn. Kipper would jump around and try to bite the spray. Aaron even ate some of their first cherry tomatoes and didn't hate them. Said they tasted better if you grew them yourself.