

SOMETHING TO LAUGH ABOUT

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I feel like I'm on the TV show Skippy as Grandpa pulls up beside the shed. The fumes plume into a mushroom cloud as I jump off the back with the dogs, diving through the exhaust's smoke, the red Ute's tray creaks as I walk over its rusty back. Feeling the gum-nuts crunch beneath my feet, the bush, the trees and the smell of nettle steal me from life at mum's or dad's.

Grandpa calls for me from the steps. He makes the ugliest faces in the world. I tell him the wind will keep it that way but he never listens. He pulls one of them as I run toward the porch. The Queenslander is as old as he is, I reckon. Maroon, tin roof exaggerating the cry of the rain. I swear it'll rattle off soon. The veranda circles the brick like a moat and has two handmade rocking chairs I helped varnish. I sit down beside him and we both throw our bodies into motion. Grandma brings me a treat of lemonade as Grandpa slurps back coffee. 'Get them devil birds off me porch, will ya', Tom?' Grandpa says, as I drain the final drops from the bottom of the glass.

I stomp over to shoo the cockatoos from the paling, watch them fly into the bush screeching. White droppings flake off the railing like sunburned skin. Grandpa limps to join me, muttering. When I'm around he calls them damned devil's birds and something much worse when I'm not.

I lean on my arms listening to bugs as they chirp. I feel the weight of his stare and as he drops a hand onto my shoulder, doesn't say nothing. We stand there. His milky eyes cross from me to the bush, searching for things unseen. I don't know what he's looking for. It's only after the devil birds' final cries die that he grumbles about the white puddles they leave and I feel his stare relent. I wonder what he sees when he stares at the back of me, or if he sees at all.

I look into his gaunt, hollow cheeks, flapping like sails with his every breath. 'Should I fetch the rag,

Grandpa?' His nostrils, ears — and all the other cavities, really — grow long grey shoots that remind me of reeds. I smile up at his leather-crinkled face as it screws taut.

'Why bother,' he grunts.

Grandpa tussles my blonde hair and tells me his thinning mop used to be that colour when he was at my age. He scratches it with his gnarled fingers, fuzzing it in the way mum hates,

muttering about how it needed a trim. Not that he could talk.

‘Now that, me boy,’ Grandpa says, turning toward the bush. ‘That’s a bird.’ He bends down, eyes level with mine and points a slow finger in front of me until it rests on a brown patch of scrub. I watch his calloused hands extend. The low orange light peeks through a nest of branches, illuminates deep greens of summer on the backdrop of a blue, cloudless sky. ‘You see it yet? There.’

I squint along with him, training my eyes down the length of his arm. ‘There!’ I shout. My arm shoots out, pressing along the inside of Grandpa’s with an excited flexed finger. Spying the burst of blue fringes nestled amongst the bird’s slick brown feathered coat, the sun pauses on the horizon. The thick beak, made for crushing nuts and snail shells, snaps open, closed, head swinging left, right. And my smile grows large, larger.

‘The healing bird, a kookaburra,’ Grandpa says. ‘The ‘burra bears omens on its wings, spreading the word of healing from its carnivorous cries. The king of kingfishers.’

‘The king of kingfishers,’ I repeat. ‘What does it heal?’

‘The land. The bush. The self and the other.’ The kookaburra snaps its head around and stares right at us. A tingle creeps up my neck, a wave of hairs standing in its wake. ‘And there’s only one way to say thanks to a creature like that, me boy. You think it’s easy healing the land over?’ He says. ‘Nah. It don’t ask for nothin’ but it’s important to remember to pay ya’ respects to creatures of such magic.’

‘How do you repay a bird?’

‘This isn’t any bird. It’s a kookaburra,’ he says. ‘It’s a lonely, harsh thing healing. So, I’ll let you in on a secret.’ He bends down to me, lame leg straining, smile opening his mouth wide so his teeth peek through his bushy moustache. ‘There’s only one other thing in this world that can heal greater than the ‘burra. Laughter. So you know what I do?’ I shake my head. ‘I give it something to laugh about.’

Grandpa straightens and stares the king of kingfishers right in the eye as he hobbles closer. Before I can fix my gaze in amazement Grandpa pulls the ugliest face I’ve seen. His cheeks bulge, eyes bloom to the size of dinner plates, his swollen tongue breaks through his lips like a croc bursting from a river, and whips spittle through the air. Grandpa shakes his lanky arms like a roo chasing fleas. ‘Well, what are ya’ waiting for, me boy?’

I step forward, cacking, and do my best impression. I pull at my eyes, cheeks and lips and dance until my feet don’t know what to do next. We laugh until our throats are dry and before too long I hear the call that makes my heart leap.

We stop in that instant, look at one another before gazing back into the bush, the kookaburra has its thick neck propped back on its wings, eyes fixed on the boundless skies, beak apart,

wider than a croc's maw and it's laughing. It laughs long and it laughs loud. It laughs until the sun dies and the day is masked by the black veil of night.

'You gotta' give them something to laugh about,' Grandpa says, as the bird — no, the kookaburra — moves on and Grandma calls us in for supper.

Now I have my L's, Grandpa lets me drive the Ute. He says responsibility is catching up with me. This is the second summer I've spent in the bush with him since dad moved to NZ and mum took on another job. Sitting out here on the hill, where the bush is split by a shallow creek, I hear the rocks clack together as fresh water trickles by. The smoke from the Ute lingers, adding a bitter taste to my sandwich.

Grandpa can't smell it. He smiles, hands shaking as he lifts a spoon to his lips. 'How good is this,' I say, gazing at an endless horizon.

Grandpa grunts in agreement. 'Ah, Tom. This ain't the half of it.'

'Wooo,' I shout, hearing my voice trail, echo within the range walls.

'Ooo. Oo,' The world calls back.

Grandpa looks as though he might join in, his face screws inward instead. Over the range, he points at the clouds, tells me they'll be on us by the arv with a promise of rain. Happens a lot in this part of the world, blue one moment, grey the next. Adds to the fantasy, really. Grandpa's company brings something outta' me. Grandma's sangas somehow taste better than mum's, even when bitter and smokey.

'Hey, lemme help you with that,' I say, noticing Grandpa struggling with the lid of his soup. I replace the empty Tupperware with a Banksia flower and he smiles as the wind carries the yellow stems away.

'Say, me boy,' Grandpa says. 'Reckon you could spot a 'burra from up here?'

I'd driven us through the bush from Grandpa and Grandma's. There's a full-on dirt road that takes us up into the hills beyond the eucalyptus. We sit in the back of the tray and stare at the range together. Grandpa's eyes flicker back and forth from the bush to me beside him. Thoughtful as always.

'For sure, Grandpa.' I jump up on the tray where we sit. 'Hey, I bet I could lure one in.' Standing with my back to the valley I belt out my best 'burra call. 'Khoo-goo-gaa-gaa-gaa...'

'Hah!' Grandpa cries. 'That the best you got?'

'Don't see you doing much better,' I say.

'You're a bloody ratbag, you know that?'

I slump back down beside him. 'I know.' I pick up the Banksia's fallen pieces. The clack of the creek is calming as Grandpa struggles with the lid of a thermos.

It's a postcard kind of day and I stand alone. The sky is blue, the grass is greener and the clouds have fucked off over the range. It's hot enough to wear my Stubbies and jersey but of course I'm in a suit, black, that drowns me in size and sweat. I hear the thud of my tears breaking against the wood of his coffin more than my own thoughts.

The world is quiet.

I turn my back on the hole in the ground, with a varnished box, to the sound of wings beating overhead, to the sound of twin rivers, the sound of a spade.

Blue-grey depressing skies fill the pockets of the brown bush like the canvas to a faded portrait, painted only with the colours of the land. The sun's intense heat begins to set, a soft draught teases the eucalyptus leaves, the buzz of familiar bugs ring in my head as I scratch the flakes of green paint from the porch railing a final time. A for sale sign, SOLD slapped across its face, a leather mask of despair rolled across mine.

'Where are you now, mate?' I say, staring up into the scrub. I hold my hands up to my face. Examine the paint chips, blowing into the wind as I cling to the memory of his laugh. I notice the patch of deck where the rocking chairs used to sit, the wood's a different colour there now, though it'll fade soon enough. The green flakes disappear into the bush. I search for a sign that I'm not alone. The trees, once so familiar, look further away now. My eyes dart left, right.

Noticing flapping, I turn to witness the blur of a cockatoo landing further down the porch. A part of me wells, remembering another time, my gut burns. 'Get out of here!' I scream at the damned devil, my feet thunder across the aged floorboards.

How do I find my feet again when they buried the rug I once stood upon? I can't keep my eyes steady. He used to look out here with such hope in that stare.

'Come back, will ya?'

There's no one there to hear me. I'm due back in the city this arv. I pray for rain.

Alone in a crowded place, the world is wringing.

I let the rain fall, soak and suffocate. The cement is chipped. Heavy droplets break upon me. I take a step, my socks darken, my jacket drapes from my shoulders, like a used rag hanging in the wet. A tie loose at my neck, the remnants of an empty bottle on my tongue. Raindrops ball up and roll down my coat.

I knock shoulders with a passing man and fall to the road. There's a worried look in his eyes as I drop my things, though he keeps on. I pick myself up and bury my stare in the sky's bawling face. I haven't been to work for a week.

The mall is the centre, the city the storm. The thoroughfares are tin-can packed. Am I the only one walking south? The onslaught parts for me with sour disgruntlement. A lady is affronted as she comes face to face with my sinking cheeks, ghostly eyes. A man gives me with a wide berth. A child peeks up at me from beneath her father's umbrella. I trudge on, look up from my feet at the grey horizon, searching. I reach the junction, the lights, the stares. The cars shoot by, their headlights illuminating the umbrella-less me. Running a hand over my face, wiping at the scratchy hair, the puffy bags, hot breath running along my palm and I sag waiting for the green light, a signal to move forward. My eyes dart across the grey landscape, I can't see further than ten metres without some structure interfering. I try and find a break in the horizon, instead I find a bird.

My vision blurs as blue fringes catches my eye.

In among the wet browns the colour shines and the clouds pause on the horizon. Perched on a power line, rain seems to fall around the bird. The thick beak, snaps open, closed. Its head swings left, right. My heartbeat quickens. Our stares meet. The cars blur, slow, stop. The stare remains, strong, I'm caught. The lights change and the stampede closes around me. I shuffle forward, feet dragging, not wanting to conform. The moment is slipping. Anticipation washes over me as I look down, and down and breathe deep. My bones creak like rusted hinges as I stand tall. The king of kingfishers looks within me, an inquisitive rivet. I turn to avoid it. Yet the weight of the 'burra's stare encapsulates me. I turn back.

In the middle of the road, in the rain and amidst the turmoil of the pedestrian mosh that closes me in like a zipper, I face it. I pull the ugliest face in the world.

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