



The morning my infant sister died, the sharp chill sucked the oxygen from the air and felt like it would strip the skin right off your face. Sparkling icicles hung like crystal daggers from the eaves. One policeman slipped in the dirty driveway slush, leaving bright red drops freezing in the puddle.

It was 1944 and I was six years old.

My mother's sister Kath found me holding the blanket over Emily's face. She bustled into the sleep-out and slapped my hands away, and she had this expression on her face that I'd never seen on an adult before, a sort of thrilled horror and irritation all at once. I almost expected her to say *Bloody hell, June, what's the little monster done now, I s'pose I'll be the one who has to sort out the mess.* In any event, it was close to the truth, 'cause Mum wasn't up to sorting out much, let alone a dead baby in a crib, and so Aunty Kath did all the wailing and calling of police and making of tea and so on. She was good in a crisis, Aunty Kath, as she never tired of telling us.

Like I said, it was her who called the police. Got right on the blower and blurted it out – *He's killed her! He's killed her!* she kept shouting into the receiver – and then glaring at it like it might come alive in her hand. She didn't like to use the telephone, Aunty

Kath; back then it was one of those new-fangled bits of nonsense that she could get along quite well without, *thank you very much*. I still remember the piercing sound of her voice, echoing through the cold, still rooms of that cold, still house.

Everything after that was a bit of a blur. There were police officers. Seemed like quite a lot, seemed like the kitchen and sleep-out and sitting room were all crowded with people in uniforms and smart hats. I even stumbled across one young fellow throwing up his breakfast into the basin in our mildewy bathroom. There were probably only two or three police officers but I was at eye level with a lot of unfamiliar legs, so maybe that multiplied them for me. And soon enough there were nosy neighbours popping over to help. Even that Catholic woman from next door, the one with about a dozen kids. She'd never said a word to Mum all the months we'd lived there, and her twin boys (who were about my age) had called me names and thrown dog shit over the fence. Even she appeared, saying wasn't it terrible, and was there anything she could do?

So there was a general palaver and people asking questions and then the doctor coming and looking at Emily, and noise and commotion and who knows what else. In the midst of it all sat Mum, real quiet, her eyes blank, like she was staring at something far away, as if she was trying to see something of great interest or importance but she couldn't quite figure out what it was. And she didn't say anything, not then anyway, and not to me. But I heard this keening, this high-pitched wail that seemed to come from no-one in particular, and it got louder and louder until it filled that tiny kitchen, bouncing off the walls and right into my eardrums, and I realised it was Mum making that sound, and I really wanted to switch her off and make her go quiet again.

They took her away, all wrapped up in a blanket for the shock. I think she went to the hospital and then she stayed at Aunty Kath's place. I know she never went back to that house. They took me to the hospital too, I think because they didn't know what else to do

with me. I remember sleeping that night in a bed so huge that even with my arms spread out wide I still couldn't touch the edges. The sheets were perfectly white, and stiff like they'd never been washed. And they let me keep a light on all night, the lamp on the bedside table, like a little midnight sun burning.

If I'd known then what I knew later, I'd have fought harder to stay in that hospital room. I would've put on a cough or feigned an incurable disease or something. But I didn't, and so they made me leave ... but that's all coming along further in the story, and I don't want to burden you with too much information right at the start. Suffice to say that life is a long, hard road, and I learnt that lesson early.

It may be that you're wondering where my father was when all of this drama was going on. Well, not two weeks earlier, Mum had broken down in tears as she told me that she'd received a telegram informing her that my dad was missing in action somewhere in the jungles of New Guinea.

So I suppose that didn't help.

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Those years of enduring the cold of the southernmost bit of Queensland around the Darling Downs have made me appreciate the mild weather of the capital. Every year until I was sixteen, I spent at least five months freezing my balls off walking to classes or pedalling my clapped-out bike, my ears red as beets, my nose dripping and my eyes streaming. Too cold to snow, that was what the weather girl usually said. At least a bit of snow would've made a change. All we had was frost and numbing winds. Toowoomba, Warwick, they were all the same. The little towns around Stanthorpe that took their names from the battlefields of the Great War – Pozieres, Amiens, Passchendaele – growing up in those towns you could well imagine the men in France freezing their balls off in the same way.

Mind you, that was the least of my troubles.

Still, at least I can't complain about the weather at the moment. Sunshine is good for the soul, no doubt about it. There's a fresh chill in the morning even here in the big smoke, sufficient so you don't feel guilty for wanting to lie under the covers a little longer. Soon enough the thin sun spreads fingers of warmth creeping through my bedroom window, settling a pale golden blanket over me in my bed – that's when I get up, and not before.

At my age, getting up's a feat in itself, that's for sure. Truth be told, if I had one of those catheter thingamies like poor old Roger down on Boundary Road, I'd probably stay in bed even longer. But I'm not that far gone, not yet anyway, and the pressing pain in my bladder eventually persuades me to make a move. 'Course, once I make it to a standing position, and find my damn slippers, and manage to knot the dressing-gown cord and then shuffle down the hall to the loo, I usually stand there for a good few minutes, waiting. One more advantage of being old: your body demands one thing and then changes its mind.

But we should be thankful for small mercies, as my Auntie Kath used to say, so I'm grateful the days are mild. There's a spot out on my back landing where I like to have my cup of tea in the morning. I've got a chair out there, and a little rickety table, and I sit and read yesterday's paper while the sun's rays fairly burn right through my clothing. I swear I can feel my blood thawing and starting to flow again.

When the kids in the street are blessedly quiet, there are a couple of rainbow lorikeets that visit. Might have something to do with the fruit I put out but I like to think they come for the company. Bob and Noreen, I call them. No idea what sex they are actually, but they bicker and argue over the food like an old married couple, so that's what I've named them. Not that I would know anything about old married couples, bickering or otherwise,

being as how I've never had the pleasure myself, but still. Just 'cause I'm old doesn't mean I've got no imagination.

So once Bob and Noreen have buggered off and I've read anything worth reading in the paper (I refuse to call it a *newspaper* on principle), then the excitement of my day begins. Ha. If only. But, like I said, life's a long, hard road, and it certainly doesn't get any easier.

Kids today, they don't know how good they've got it. Larking the day away, no chores to do, no worrying about getting a clip over the ear if they're not done, or not done properly. No respect, some of these young ones. You pick out any handful of the kids around here, from this very street, yahooing and backchatting and smoking and swearing when they're still in short pants. Cricket on the road after school, balls going every which way, and those kids scrambling over your garden beds to retrieve them. Not a care in the world that they're on someone else's property. Wouldn't occur to them to ask permission. Like every backyard in the street is their playground. And the noise and all sorts of carry-on from some God-awful hour of a Saturday and Sunday. The kid next door dragging his stick along my side fence, making a din loud enough to wake the dead. Scaring my chooks. I've a good mind to have a word to that mother of his. Not that that would get me anywhere. Kid seems to do pretty much as he pleases. Bet he's never had a chilblain or a woodchopping blister. Bet he's never lain awake at night with his empty stomach growling, or had to fight his way through a horde of kids to get a seat close enough to the fire that your backside doesn't freeze solid.

That kid has no idea what life can be like. None of them do.



The boy felt the weak sunlight on his eyelids. He lay perfectly still, hoping that sleep might reclaim him. But the wretched cough hacking through his bedroom wall resigned him to relinquishing his haven. As if on cue, she called his name.

*Be a love and bring us a cuppa, would ya?*

The boy pulled back the thin coverlet, releasing a musty odour. He danced miserably from foot to foot on the wooden boards, looking around for a jumper. He discarded one as too smelly, but then took a whiff under his own arms and realised he smelt worse than the clothing. He dragged the hoodie over his head. The sleeves stopped a good five centimetres above his wrists. He pulled on two odd socks, encrusted with yesterday's mud.

In the living room, the television was still on from the night before. A blonde woman in a leotard demonstrated the Amazing Results of the Ab-Buster. He switched it off and made his way to the kitchen.

Thousands of dust motes spun merrily in the light that spilled through the dirty window. The boy paused for a moment, watching. When he was little, he used to think they were wishes, waiting to be captured and granted. At nine years old, he no

longer believed in wishes, or fairy tales, or angels. But he did believe in the devil.

He pushed aside an old margarine container overflowing with cigarette butts and ashes to reach the kettle. He filled it from the tap and sat it on the hob. Lit a match and flicked the gas until he had a ring of blue flame. He rinsed the curdled dregs from a chipped *Star Wars* mug, put in a Woolies teabag and three heaped spoons of sugar straight from the packet.

The table was littered with dog-eared copies of *TV Week* and *Woman's Day*. He pushed aside a stiletto with a broken heel and a plate congealed with grease, and sat with his head in his hands. When he lifted his arms, his elbows stuck to the tacky surface. *Someone should tidy up*, he thought. He pocketed three lotto tickets peeping out from under an empty McDonald's packet, thinking he would go down to the newsagent later. A carton of milk stood lidless on the table. One sniff was enough; he tipped the gluggy contents down the sink. He reached hopefully for a plastic bag with a few slices of bread still inside, but wrinkled his nose at the fine green mould creeping across its surface, and shoved the whole lot in the bin. Searching through the fridge, he found a half-full jar of peanut paste. He scooped it out with his fingers.

The kettle whistled. He splashed water into the mug, dunked the teabag in and then sat it on a saucer for her next cup. He carried the scalding mug carefully down the hallway.

A tentative knock on her door. He pushed it open with his foot and peered into the room with accustomed wariness.

*It's all right, love, he's gone. Left early. Oh, that's lovely and hot. You're a good boy for Mummy.*

Her room smelt as bad as his, or worse. The same mustiness, a stale, airless quality – she never opened the window. Cigarette smoke, an overturned beer can leaking onto the carpet. The strong animal fug of the absent man.

*Come here, baby, give Mummy a cuddle.*

He let her hold him, briefly. Her body, warm with sleep, enveloped him in a feeling so familiar it made him faint with longing. Abruptly he rose.

*Gotta go to the shop. No bread or milk.*

She fumbled on the bedside table for her purse and handed him a ten-dollar note.

*Here, love, buy yourself a Mars Bar or something.*

He took the money. Paused at the doorway.

*It's only eight o'clock in the morning, Mum.*

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Later he was squatting at the bottom of the back stairs, following a trail of ants that marched down the guttering and across the soil in a tidy line. He placed obstacles – a stone, a jagged tile – in their path, and they went around without hesitation, each one following the one in front. Ants on a mission. He tired of watching and decided to create havoc. With his bare foot he squashed a whole battalion of ants and brushed away their broken bodies. A sharp, sweet smell rose. The other ants panicked and scurried about, antennae waving. Some collected their fallen comrades and returned the way they had come, communicating with their fellows along the way. Others were nonplussed; they continued on their path as if nothing had happened. The boy thought about ants. He thought about their reactions. He wondered.

The soil was tightly packed underneath the sprinkling of dust that lifted with each breath of wind, catching in crevices. Nothing grew here. The boy squinted against the grit and wiped a finger under his itching nose. He sneezed out a globule of snot. The ants headed straight for it.

Further across the yard was a riot of vegetation, as if to make up for the bare patch around the house. Tangled weeds choked overgrown bushes. Ancient ornamentals long gone to seed struggled for space with native trees. The boy parted a section of matted



green vine, snarled around grasses peppered with tiny, neon-yellow flowers. He lay with his cheek on the cool ground and heard the ticking of a bug's wings. He imagined himself small enough to swing on a grass stem, to sit cupped inside a yellow petal. He breathed in the smell of approaching autumn.

Next he investigated the turkey mound in the back corner of the yard. The male strutted in alarm, proprietarily scratching at leaves and soggy detritus, adding more height to the already enormous nest. The boy knew this was to regulate the temperature of the eggs incubating below. The father's anxiety was amusing but somehow admirable. The bird cocked its head and stared at the boy, one black beady eye appraising him, the risk he posed. The boy shook a stick to assert his dominance, and laughed as the turkey opened its beak in protest.

He ran the stick along the wooden palings of the fence. The sharp *crack crack crack* ricocheted loud in the emptiness of the morning. He saw a movement at the window of the house next door; the old guy peeked out, probably wondering what was making such a racket.

She appeared at the doorway behind the boy.

*Come over here, love.*

He struck a last reluctant crack to the fence and went to her, trailing the stick behind him in the dirt.

*Sorry about school today. I didn't realise it was so late.*

*Doesn't matter. Didn't want to go anyway.*

*Yeah well, school's important. You know, I wasn't feeling too great this morning and the time got away on me.*

She inhaled a deep draught of acrid smoke, pulled it into her lungs and expelled it in a hazy stream.

*How about we do something together, the two of us? Want to see a movie?*

He waited a beat before replying.

*What about that new vampire one? It's on at Indro tonight at seven. I checked.*

Another plume of smoke.

*Sorry, love, not tonight.*

She stood and pirouetted grotesquely.

*Got myself a hot date!*

He looked away.

*Wanna do something else? Maybe this arv?*

*Nah, it's all right.*

The turkey watched them, never straying far from his nest.

*Come on, love. Don't be like that.*

He didn't turn his head. She got up in disgust.

*Jeez, aren't I allowed to have a life? It's not all about you, you know.*

She stamped into the house and slammed the screen door behind her.

The boy lunged at the turkey, whooping loudly. He landed full force on the mound, and imagined the sound of eggs breaking.