**Small country town 3147 words**

Sundays we’d go to church. It was the old lady’s idea, said we should go as a family. Dad didn’t seem to enjoy it much, he couldn’t wait to unbutton his pants the minute we got home. Mum’d shake her head and take Cathy into the kitchen. Dad, in his chair, would reach to the radio. He’d always look surprised when it shouted to life, quickly he’d silence it. On Sundays he was only allowed to have the races on if the sound was real low.

One Sunday Mum came out with dad’s usual bottle of beer but this time she had two glasses.

“Best be sharing it with him by now,” she said, nodding at me.

“Oh, yes?” my dad chuckled. “Grown man now, is ’e, eh?”

“Sixteen he is now, Tom, his birthday last month, remember?”

Dad poured me a beer: dark and muddy, with a half inch of creamy moustache. I lifted my glass and just about spewed from the smell, but it was okay, he didn’t see me – he was listening to the horses. I watched him tilt his glass and pour a brown triangle topped with white into his mouth.

“Aah,” he breathed, wiping with the back of his hand, “that were a good’un.”

Mum stepped out from the kitchen carrying steaming plates of food for the table. Cathy had laid out the knives and forks. That time she’d got it right and all the forks were on the left.

Bright sunny Saturday mornings always depressed me. According to my mum I should have been engaged in sports and social activities - cricket games or picnics, I don’t know what. I didn’t want to do those things and wouldn’t’ve known how to make them happen anyway, so on bright sunny Saturday mornings I stayed in my room. Mum worried I was taking drugs. She should’ve been worried that I wasn’t. It’s normal to smoke pot at that age. I’d thought about getting some pot or maybe even some ecstasy and wondered who I could ask - no one in town would’ve even spoken to me let alone scored me drugs.

Mum enjoyed bright sunny Saturday mornings, she’d bang about in the kitchen humming to herself, make a list and go shopping. Dad went into the garden.

Once I looked through the window to see him kneeling by a garden bed behind glossy green leaves of silverbeet. He wore gloves and had a trowel yet seemed to stay in the same place all morning. When the creak of the gate told him the old lady was home, he quickly pulled some carrots and knocked the dirt from them, sliced the green ends off with a thin blade.

“’Ere are, luv,” he said, presenting his gift of ignorant enthusiasm.

My mother had returned with four lime green Granny Smiths lying neatly on a Styrofoam tray, wrapped in plastic. They had a coloured logo and a date stamp.

She wanted to socialise more, my mum, but Dad wouldn’t go out so she’d invite people round for dinner. She was an alright cook, too, so it was usually an okay night for the olds.

When she wanted Anna and James Mathieson from down the road to come she telephoned them and volunteered me as baby sitter for their daughter. That way they didn’t have an excuse.

I walked to the Mathiesons with a big dark wind pushing me up the hill. When Mr Mathieson opened the door it blew down the hall and rattled all the pictures hanging on their walls. They were arty, the Mathiesons. Anna Mathieson made huge and monstrous paintings of waterfalls and rocks, James concocted assemblages of twigs and feathers with beads and string. Their daughter, Janie, was spoilt and sulky.

Anna Mathieson hurried into the hall making noises about her handbag and coat and pointed me into the living room. Janie was up on the couch watching television. She gave me a look then turned back to her movie.

“Hi Janie,” I said, trying to be friendly, at least while Mrs Mathieson was there.

“Bye sweetie,” said Anna Mathieson.

She kissed her daughter and was gone. I heard the bang of the door being slammed shut and noises of surprise and laughing at the wind from the arty Mathiesons. I went to the kitchen and ate their food. Anna’s stuff was good too, different from my mum’s, more spicy, salty. I drank a scotch with clinking ice cubes then poured another and settled down on the couch next to Janie. We didn’t have TV at home, or scotch. It was quite a good deal being there instead of at home in my room trying not to hear mum’s singing and dad’s donkey laugh as they did their entertaining.

The wind was still swooping round the house, sucking at the gaps, shaking the walls. A big gust rattled the doors and windows.

Janie sat up and looked about her. “That’s big wind!”

It blew and howled again.

“Ooh, oooh,” I teased, waving my fingers in her face.

She shrieked, delighted, hid her face in a cushion, peeked out, hid again. Next time she looked out I was closer, softer, gentler. My fingers were the wind that tousled her hair. I teased the ends of it over her face, tickling her nose and cheeks. She cried out, giggled, sighed and smiled, closed her eyes. I was intsy wintsy spider crawling up her legs while she laughed and wriggled with the fun of it. Then I was up to her thigh, whispering spidery secrets with my hands.

“See my new panties!” she declared.

Her little fingers holding up her dress melted me. I felt a stab, hot and cold. I started to ache.

But I had to stop it. I had to go.

When I came back she was sitting on the floor with her teddy bear, marching it round. She stopped and looked up at me.

“Where you go?” she asked.

“Bathroom,” I said.

“Oh.”

She continued with her game.

I’d put Janie to bed and added some water to the bottle of scotch before Anna and James came home. They were grateful and gave me $5.

“Not at all,” I said, “any time.”

\*\*\*

The next day I stayed in my room reading about guitars in *New Music* magazine. I thought about getting a twelve string and learning how to play it and wondered how I could do that. Then I was hungry and thought Mum might be in the kitchen making sandwiches for lunch, so I left my room, quietly closing the door behind me.

“He should come with us, a grown boy like that,” I heard from the kitchen. One of the old lady’s friends, Mrs Parry perhaps.

“It’ll be quite safe,” she continued, “it’s a family event. He’ll be home by half past nine.”

My mum decided I should go, my dad didn’t say anything.

Next Saturday Mrs Parry came to the door to take me to the rural fire brigade’s annual fundraiser barbecue and dance. Mr Parry drove us to the showground and we walked the sand-slippery hill to the hall. At the door was Merryn Hooper, full and fat in a blue dress and Warren Thornley, holding a bottle of beer, checking out Merryn’s tits. While Mr Parry said suitable things to them I ducked inside.

Mrs Parry followed, taking hold of my elbow with her cool fingers.

“Now, Will, I’ll just introduce you to Mrs Parker,” she told me as she steered me along.

There was Mrs Parker and Mrs Dowling and Mrs Harrington and Mrs Harrington’s daughter, Emily or Mandy or something. Then the ladies were in their own conversation and it was just me and her standing there, trying not to look at each other. I knew I was supposed to invite her to dance, but I didn’t want to. I went and got her a lemon squash from the CWA ladies and manoeuvred her towards a row of chairs. I sat and watched Mr and Mrs Parry dance and eventually Emily-Mandy got bored and moved away, taking her empty glass with her.

I pissed off outside to hear the sizzle of meat on grill and hearty male voices. Yellow rectangles of light lay across the grass showing Eskys holding bleeding meat and pink

penis-shaped sausages with ice and bottles of beer.

“Hey, here’s young Will,” Ron called, “come’n ’ave a snag, Will. Oy, Pete, get the lad a beer.”

I ate a sandwich of sausage dripping with oily onions and sauce. It was excellent. The beer was icy cold, thin and nasty. I stood in the circle of men and supposed I was accepted. I nodded when they mentioned cows, said yeah-no about the rain.

But I was watching something else. Two girls in their sparkling party dresses. The older girl had long dark hair woven into thick plaits and she wore a black cape with stars, but the younger one was cute, she had silver wings and a wand.

\*\*\*

“I don’t understand, really I don’t, but, I’m your mum so I have to, I have to try. We’re your parents, you could tell us what happened.”

She knew I wouldn’t, she wasn’t pressing, just sort of reminding me that she was there to be told things, like that’s what her job was. My dad sat stiff on a hard kitchen chair, his hands cupped over his knees, white and bony, bloodless and cold. Mum poked the fire, clanged the doors of the range. She straightened, turned to him.

“You must speak to him Thomas,” she said, “or, or, someone will have to… she was only six years old…”

She left then, thank God. But it wasn’t any better with just me and my dad

I saw him at the end of our poor kitchen table, leaning into the space between us, serious and red. Then there was a knock at the door. I heard my mum pulling it open and the chink of the latch as it fell back and it was so quiet I could hear the thudding of my own blood. A soft voice thrummed in the background, became louder and pushed its way in. Then there were boots in the hall, then in the kitchen, Dad’s stupid astonishment, Mum’s trembling hands and a policeman lifting me up, marching me out of the house.

The police station was full of bright lights and lowered voices. A man with fat fingers poked at a little typewriter. The telephone rang. A thin policeman gave me a cup of tea and directed me to sit in a room on my own.

There was loud knocking and shouting from outside.

“Lemme in. She’s my daughter. I’ll kill ’im.”

Again the soft voice, firm and persistent. Then a man sobbing and later a car door slamming and the sound of a lonely old engine puttering into the night.

\*\*\*

I was at Kenston Facility for eighteen months. Mornings I’d wake and watch and get out of bed when the bell said so. I’d stand, fall in, keep my eyes on the back of the guy in front, move out. I’d work digging and carting muck for the Facility’s gardens. They grew heaps of stuff there, vegetables my dad would’ve smiled at and lots of little leafy things all with a different smell.

I didn’t get to say anything at Kenston except for my time with Brian the counsellor. He *wanted* me to talk.

“At your age, Will, you could still open up to someone. I could be that someone,” he told me.

“I’m not making sexual advances towards you,” he told me again.

Then I got parole. Not real parole, I was only 17, but the same thing. Two blue security guys walked me down a shiny corridor and pushed me into a room so bright with sun I couldn’t see them at first, two bulging brown suits showing thin socks and a brassy blond bitch.

“I’ve a boy his age,” one brown suit said solemnly.

He looked down at the papers in front of him. I supposed his son was the clean cut type.

“Yes,” the blond bitch said, “I have young daughters.”

“Legally he *is* a child,” said the other brown suit.

“Yes,” she said, “so are they.”

Pause.

The first one turned to me. “Do you believe that what you did was wrong?”

I straightened. “Oh, yes.”

He turned back.

“Family?” he asks.

“I think not,” she said, “there’s a younger sister.”

“Fresh start then.”

The blond bitch frowned.

“He’s only 17, he’s not a criminal yet.”

He turned to me.

“So, you’ve finished with school, what next? An apprenticeship? Would you like to learn a trade?”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

The men looked at each other. Blond bitch screwed her lips.

“What then, carpentry, plumbing? P’raps you’d like to be a sparky?”

I coughed, announced: “I think I’d like to learn about machinery.”

“Aah,” they said, pleased, at last they had something.

“What, like a fitter and turner in a factory?”

“No… more…a mechanic, in a garage,” I said.

I’d need a car.

\*\*\*

I was to start at Central Tyre and Auto, working for Charlie Greg. I was signed up, indentured and stuck in another small country town for three years.

“You’ve got guaranteed work, a real opportunity for you,” said Brian the counsellor.

“We’ve made every effort to keep you out of the system,” he said again.

“Oh, yes, I’m grateful,” I said brightly and tried to think what else was required, “I’ll, I’ll…” I’ll what, I wondered, stop aching?

But I did stop. I worked and went home, ate food, watched TV. I went with Charlie to the pub for a beer and once again drank the chill brown liquid in the company of men. We made lots of noise but didn’t say much. Social worker turned up to check on me, gave me her card and told me to call if I needed anything.

One night I took a walk through the dusty town. Everyone was inside then, eating their dinners together or settling down in front of the TV. I walked down the empty main street to the only public phone in town with my hands in my pockets. One hand jangled loose change, the other held her card – Wendy the social worker.

“Hello.”

It was her, the deep voice, husky, she was a smoker. I smelled it on her when she came round. And her flowery no nonsense deodorant. I saw her standing at her telephone, in a neat skirt and blouse with a cigarette, sucking on it.

“Hello?”

“Hell-o,” louder.

She hung up.

Good. I pissed her off. I thought about it later, about her being angry, and the ache came on. But I took care it of myself.

Charlie fixed me up with an old Ford Escort. I was allowed to work on it in my spare time and pay for the use of his tools from my wages. I got it running pretty good and took it out to the coast, about twenty k’s from town.

I liked the briney estuaries and the scrubby bush behind the dunes but I’d park where I could see into a little beach, a neat curve of sand and shallows where mothers lay in the sun watching their children. I’d see chubby bottoms and little legs and cute older sisters making sand castles and women in floppy hats smoothing on sun tan lotion. I’d keep watching them, bring on the hot and cold ache, and keep watching while I took care of it.

Once it was so windy the car shook about. The ocean was steely grey, no one was out on the sand, so I drove down a track on the other side of the highway, to find some scrubby spot out of the wind. I found a cleared place off the track and sat in the car.

A black Labrador came bounding down the path. I sat up, ready to drive away when two young girls came running out from behind the trees. They were laughing and calling out to each other, they didn’t see me in the car, and they carried on, tumbling through the bush, their shrieks and giggles echoing away.

I tried not to but I went back there. but never saw them again till the one day the dog came nosing its way down the track. I looked back up the path, saw one girl, alone. Quickly I got out of the car, waited for her to come to me.

“I’ve lost my dog,” I told her, showing her my dog leash.

“Oh, oh really?” she said, “um, what type of dog is it? What’s its name?”

“Like yours, but golden colour, she’s younger too, still a bit of a pup really, Susie I call her.”

“Oh! We’d better find her then, where’d she go?”

She came with me then, through the bush and I found a soft place on the sand for us to rest. I gave her a drink from my water bottle.

“What pretty hair you have,” I said, “such a lovely colour.”

She blushed and giggled and turned her face away.

“Don’t be shy,” I said. I was gentle, “it’s nice that you’re so pretty. You really do have beautiful hair. Can I feel it?”

She didn’t say, just let me. I stroked her hair, teased the ends of it over her face, tickling her nose and cheeks. Then softly slowly I stroked her neck, smiling to show her it was alright.

“That’s nice, isn’t it.” I told her.

She nodded and closed her eyes and I was aching hot and cold but I didn’t stop it, and it took over what happened next.

\*\*\*

It was never quiet - fluorescent tubes flickering, trolleys rolling, clanging bars, alarms and shouts. We all had much to say but couldn’t speak it so we’d moan and growl and blame each other for our thoughts. It was never dark either. Always a seam of light or the blank bright window pane sheened orange by the perimeter lights.

After a month I was moved to B block to share with Pretty Lenny, the block’s fag. Kranmer told me Lenny’d do just about anything for a tube of lipstick. God knows what he did with the stuff. The screws would’ve gone mad to see him wearing it.

One night the van brought new ones, poor silly buggers. Red and blue light throbbed on the ceilings of our cells, like at a disco. By breakfast the next day, the big guy, Ry Briggen, had sorted the newcomers. One had a swollen eye, another limped. Briggen didn’t like Lenny either and beat the crap out of him just for the fun of it. I hung back, waiting my turn, which was last, for the next eighteen years.