

A photograph of a suburban street scene. In the foreground, a silver sedan is parked on the right side of the road. To its left is a sidewalk and a grassy area with a black signpost. In the background, there are several utility poles with power lines, lush green trees, and a person standing near a parked vehicle. The sky is clear and blue.

The Streets of Wilderness

By Chelprefers

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As our world changes in the blink of an eye, the words of this story are assisted by AI; the story itself was created, designed and constructed by the author.

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PART 1

MARY

Mary stands in the kitchen, quietly wondering how she will manage the day ahead. She has been invited to a picnic with her old high school friend, Betty, and plans to take her four children along with Betty's family on the historic Puffing Billy train.

The train, a beloved steam passenger line, runs from Belgrave, east of Melbourne, through the lush Dandenong Ranges to Menzies Creek. Once restored as a tourist attraction, it offers a journey through towering forests and winding hills. Belgrave station is about an hour's drive away.

The outing has been planned for months, but now the logistics feel overwhelming. Fitting everyone into a single car will be a squeeze. The front bench seat holds only three, while the back is crammed with space for five children. Mary glances at the loud, ticking clock on the wall; ten minutes left before they must leave. She is meant to pick up Betty by 10 a.m.

Out in the backyard, her two oldest boys are playing kick-to-kick, their laughter drifting through the open window. Mary checks on them repeatedly, her eyes flicking between the yard and the clock. Today matters. By 9:30, they need to be on the road.

At 9:25, she carries the picnic basket out to the car, savouring the last few moments of quiet. Inside, her nine-year-old daughter Linda is still in her pyjamas, completely absorbed in dressing her new doll. Dissatisfied with the outfit, she fusses over the fringe, unaware of how quickly the calm will unravel.

In the lounge room, the youngest boy, Sandy, stacks his building blocks with careful concentration. They were a gift from the neighbour, hand-me-downs from children who had long since outgrown them.

Mary pauses at the window again, her thoughts drifting back to a phone call from three days earlier. A woman had asked for her husband, Jim. Her voice carried a note of concern that lingered long after the call ended. When Mary explained that Jim was in Rhodesia, coaching the national athletics team and wouldn't return for nine months, the woman simply hung up. The call unsettled her.

Two years ago, Jim had cheated with a woman from his work. The truth had come to light when the

woman's husband hired a private investigator. Mary had given Jim a choice: leave or stay. He chose to stay. Sometimes, she wishes she hadn't given him the option.

The clock pulls her back. It's time. She gathers the lunches and heads for the door, arms full. Halfway to the car, she stops; she's forgotten the keys again. A familiar frustration tightens in her chest. Her forgetfulness feeds her anxiety, and the anxiety only makes it worse.

Turning back, she notices the front door is left wide open. A flicker of alarm, Oscar! She scans the driveway and spots the golden retriever already wandering off.

"Geez!" she shouts, dropping the bags as she hurries after him.

Oscar loves roaming the neighbourhood, searching for familiar scents and friendly faces. Today is no different. But when he hears Mary call, he senses restraint and bolts down the street.

"GEEZUS!" she yells, exasperated. But there's no time. She turns back toward the house, muttering, "That little mutt will have to stay out."

Out back, the boys are still playing. Peter, eleven, kicks the footy too hard, sending it over the fence. Jack, his younger brother, climbs after it. On the

other side, Billy, the neighbour's German Shepherd, waits.

Billy bounds toward him, thrilled at the sudden company. Jack stiffens as the dog jumps and licks his face, but he endures it; this happens every time.

From the front yard, Mary's shouting cuts through the air. Jack freezes, then recognises the signal. Time to go. He pushes Billy away, scrambles back over the fence, and sprints toward the car. Peter is right behind him.

Inside, Linda hears the commotion and edges toward the door. She peeks out just as Mary storms toward her, clearly furious. Realisation hits, she's still in her pyjamas.

Her mother bellows. Linda doesn't wait. She dashes back inside. In her mind, "The Beast" has arrived, that version of her mother who turns into a shouting machine. She knows better than to argue.

Mary stops at the doorway, catching her breath. Then it clicks, the keys are in the kitchen.

She goes to grab them, glances toward the backyard, empty, and lets out another frustrated sigh before marching back to the car.

By some miracle, the boys are already in the back seat. Linda rushes past her moments later and clambers in as well.

Mary loads the picnic basket into the boot, aware now that they are running late. She slides into the driver's seat, starts the engine, and backs out of the driveway.

Without another thought, she pulls onto the road and drives away.

SANDY

The sounds of the house soothe Sandy. There is always something, a footstep, a clatter, a voice, and when those sounds fade, unease begins to creep in. He hears his mother calling somewhere outside, but it barely registers. His world is here, in the careful stacking of blue blocks atop yellow ones, building something tall and important.

Curiosity drives him. He needs to understand everything, how things look, how they feel, even how they taste. He studies each block before placing it, deciding its purpose with unusual focus for a four-year-old. But that same focus leaves him unaware of the world around him.

He finds endless fascination in the house and yard. His sister, Linda, plays a game with him, *What is that?* He lifts an object, waves it toward her, and she names it. Mary often watches them together, quietly grateful. Sandy lives in a world of his own, daydreaming, content, quick to laughter. What more could a mother want?

His father is rarely home. And when he is, time is short. But Sandy doesn't mind. He climbs into his father's lap, tugging at his scruffy beard, delighted. Jim laughs, tickling him until Sandy erupts into giggles, a task that never takes much effort.

Sandy places the final block and leans back. Then he notices it. The house is silent, no footsteps, no clatter no hum from the kitchen. The stillness presses in. He knocks over the tower with a loud crash. Usually, that's enough to summon his mother. Today, nothing happens.

He listens, nothing.

“Mummy?” he calls, again, louder.

“Mummy!” Only silence answers.

He stands and walks into the kitchen.

“Mummy!” he calls again.

The clock ticks loudly, filling the empty space. He moves from room to room, the lounge, the bedroom, but finds no one, not even Oscar. The house feels wrong.

His voice rises, each call sharper, more desperate. Tears begin to form.

“Mummy!”

The word breaks into a sob. He stumbles down the hallway, his small voice cracking as it echoes through the empty house.

“MUMMY!”

**

Months earlier, Jim had accepted the role of national athletics coach in Rhodesia, tasked with

preparing long-distance runners for the upcoming Mexico Olympics. But political unrest had turned the opportunity into a burden. There were whispers that Rhodesian athletes might not even be granted visas. Everything he had sacrificed, leaving Australia, enduring the instability, seemed on the verge of collapse.

When he arrived, chaos greeted him. Nothing was organised. The role was far more than coaching; he was expected to build the entire program, fundraising, administration, and negotiation, while guiding young athletes who had little more than determination.

What troubled him most was the indifference of the administration toward the black athletes. Yet despite everything, he saw promise in them.

On his first day, they arrived barefoot, shirtless, wearing worn-out shorts. Jim stared, unsure whether to laugh. Instead, he pointed toward a distant ridge.

“Run there, and back.”

By his estimate, it was fifteen miles. A simple test. He returned to his duties, expecting to see them again within hours. They didn't come back. Two hours passed, then three. Assuming they had given up, he walked back to the compound. That night, there was a knock at his door.

He opened it to find them standing there, exhausted, silent, but unbroken. The next day, he measured the distance.

Sixty miles.

From that moment, Jim knew, these athletes were worth everything he could give them.

**

Mary pulls up outside Betty's house, where Betty and her two daughters are already waiting. They hurry into the car, and Mary apologises for being late before setting off.

The boys in the back are already stirring trouble, nudging, teasing, filling the car with noise. Linda, the only girl, endures it as she always does, drifting between irritation and seeking comfort. She often turns to her mother, or to Sandy, who plays gently with her, always giving her his quiet attention. She glances across the seat and frowns. He isn't there. A flicker of confusion crosses her face.

"Where's Sandy?" she asks.

OSCAR

Jim is furious at the decision to bar Rhodesia's athletes from competing in Mexico. Their visas had been revoked, rendering all his effort meaningless. It isn't just frustration that drives him now, it's a need for people to understand the consequences, the injustice of politics entangling sport.

He resolves to return home and tell the story properly. He'll need Mary's help to document everything, to give it weight, truth, and permanence. A colleague had mentioned an American university offering scholarships to students who had faced extraordinary hardship. It feels like an opportunity too important to ignore. Before leaving, he submits his application, along with an essay recounting the Rhodesia incident.

Contacting home proves difficult. International calls are costly and hard to arrange. When he finally manages to try, there is no answer. After several attempts, he gives up, quietly packing his belongings and preparing for the journey back to Australia.

**

Sandy crouches against the wall, rubbing his tired eyes. Something catches his attention, a small red

object at the end of the hallway. Curious, he rises and walks toward it. It's Oscar's toy.

Sandy calls him "UCKAA." Clutching the toy, he looks around and calls out, "UCKAA! UCKAA!" Usually, he would hear the familiar clicking of paws on the wooden floor rushing toward him. But this time, there is only silence.

He wonders if Oscar is outside. Moving to the back door, he reaches for the handle, expecting it to resist, but it swings open.

Just then, a ringing sound echoes from the yellow phone in the lounge room. He's often asked to speak into it, to say hello to Daddy. But today, he doesn't care about the phone. He just wants to find Oscar.

Pushing through the screen door, Sandy steps into the yard. "UCKAA! UCKAA!" he calls again, his voice louder now. He runs to the side of the house and peers into Oscar's kennel.

He remembers hiding there during games of hide-and-seek with his brothers and sister. He loved hiding, but they never let him be the seeker; they always said he took too long. It used to frustrate him, though he never stopped enjoying the game. But today, there is no game, and Oscar isn't there.

Sandy's gaze drifts to the side gate. It's slightly open. His brothers often forget to close it, letting Oscar wander into the front yard.

Still holding the toy, Sandy pushes the gate open and runs out into the outer yard.

**

“Where’s Sandy?”

The words hit Mary like a shockwave. Dread floods her chest. She already knows the answer, and he is not in the car. Her toddler is still at home. A mother of four, she feels panic seize her whole body. She closes her eyes, the urge to scream something raw and furious rising in her throat, but she forces it down, aware of the children in the back seat.

From behind the wheel, Betty notices immediately. “Mary... why don’t we go back to your place?” she suggests gently. “We’ll miss the train anyway. Maybe we can have a picnic at a park instead.”

Mary nods stiffly, her hands trembling. They’ve already been driving for half an hour, stuck in thick traffic. Betty switches on the radio. A newsreader reports that protests in town are causing delays across the roads.

In the back seat, the boys begin to complain about the long drive, until Mary explains they’re turning back to get their little brother. The complaints stop. Silence fills the car, and Linda begins to cry.

PETER

When Sandy steps into the front yard, he immediately notices the big yellow car is gone. Sometimes his mum takes him to the milk bar down the road, where he gets his favourite treat, a pink milkshake. The thought of it makes him thirsty, and without hesitation, he starts down the road toward the shop. As he walks, he realises he's still clutching Oscar's toy. Oscar might be at the park, he thinks.

The park is on the way to the milk bar, and Sandy knows the path well. Maybe his brother is there too. As he walks along the footpath, something bright catches his eye, a small, vivid green leaflet lying on the ground. He picks it up, turning it over in his hands. It's colourful, interesting. His mum always smiles when he brings home little treasures like this, so he keeps it, pleased with his find.

His oldest brother, Peter, often takes him and Oscar to the park. At its centre stands a small playground, a swing, a slide, and a set of monkey bars. But it's the monkey bars that fascinate Peter most. To others, they're just a place to climb. To Peter, they are something more.

He sits on the park bench, studying their structure, rearranging their shapes in his mind, bending lines, shifting angles, transforming them

into endless patterns. Like Sandy, Peter can lose himself for hours in the quiet study of form and structure.

At school, the other kids tease him, calling him “*Pipe Dream Peter*,” saying he’s always off with the fairies. Peter doesn’t mind the name. What bothers him is when they break his concentration, when noise or disorder interrupts the delicate balance of his thoughts.

He sees the world differently. Repetitive sounds irritate him. Asymmetry unsettles him. But patterns, patterns bring him peace. In the car, he watches the passing power lines, imagining them racing each other across the sky. The taller ones always win.

Mary often catches Peter staring into space and worries he’s drifting too far from the world around him. He becomes deeply absorbed in things, word searches, jigsaw puzzles, and now, increasingly, mathematical equations. He excels at schoolwork but struggles to connect with others, preferring solitude to the unpredictability of people.

His brother Jack is the opposite, outgoing, talkative, at ease with anyone. Mary is grateful the two boys get along, though Jack has a tendency to test her patience, often at the worst possible moments.

**

Oscar lies quietly beneath a bush at the edge of the suburban park, keeping still. Above him, a magpie watches.

The bird is guarding its nest, hidden in the branches of a nearby tree. Beneath the bush, Oscar has found a fragile sanctuary. He knows the rules, step out into the open, and the magpie will swoop, sharp beak aimed for his ears.

So he waits, eyes closed, listening to the soft chirping of chicks overhead. Then, something else, footsteps, a familiar pattern.

Oscar's eyes snap open. He knows that rhythm. In an instant, he's on his feet, bounding toward the sound, toward his little friend.

When Sandy reaches the park, the swing moves gently in the breeze, empty. He runs toward it and leaps, just managing to hook his arms over the seat. He rocks back and forth, grinning, and then he's knocked clean over. A big, brown, fluffy blur barrels into him.

"UCKAA!" Sandy shouts, laughing.

Sandy lifts the toy, and Oscar immediately grabs hold. It's a rope, knotted into a figure eight, meant for tugging. Oscar pulls one way, Sandy clings to the other, and soon Sandy is being dragged, shaken, and

spun. He laughs uncontrollably, delighted by the chaos. Neither lets go.

Eventually, the struggle settles into a stalemate. Oscar stops pulling, but keeps his grip. Sandy beams. He's found him.

Then he remembers the milkshake. He stands and begins walking toward the milk bar. Oscar resists for a moment, still holding the toy, before finally releasing it and trotting alongside him.

**

Not far away, a young man drives through suburban streets, avoiding the growing traffic on the highway.

On the radio, a report plays: protests have erupted over the exclusion of Rhodesian athletes from the 1968 Olympic Games. Mexico, under pressure from the United Nations, has refused them entry. The announcer speaks of politics, of segregation, of outrage.

The man listens with mild interest. He knows the story, knows the tensions, the history. South Africa is not far from its past.

But the news doesn't truly concern him. His thoughts are elsewhere. In the boot of his car sits a small suitcase. Inside it, a collection of trinkets,

tokens, and pieces of something only he understands. Not just possessions, but symbols. Each one is part of a larger game.

He takes pride in the hunt, not just the prize, but the planning, the patience, the execution. Mistakes, however, have consequences.

They forced him out of South Africa, then Perth, then Adelaide and now, Melbourne. He has learned to be careful.

He slows as he passes the milk bar. It's busy, cars coming and going, people moving in and out. Nearby is a park. He pulls over.

Inside, he orders a milkshake. When it's ready, he steps back outside and pauses beside a noticeboard fixed to the wall. He stands there, appearing casual, unremarkable and invisible. He is well-groomed, composed and practised.

He's learned how to blend in. It's essential to his work. To anyone watching, he's just another man reading notices. Although he isn't reading. He's watching, searching, and choosing his next amusement.

1ET1TB

Perched high on a branch at the edge of the suburban park, a male magpie stood watch. The black-and-white sentinel had ruled this stretch of ground for five years. Not far away, his mate guarded their nest, eggs recently hatched, fragile life hidden among the leaves.

Each season brought the same duty: defend the territory. Larger birds, prowling animals, even humans, anything that wandered too close became a threat. Instinct sharpened his aggression, stretching his invisible boundary nearly a hundred metres from the nest.

Now, two figures approached, a child and a dog. They were crossing into his domain. There was no hesitation. The magpie launched from the branch and dropped into a steep, calculated dive.

As Sandy and Oscar reached the sidewalk at the park's edge, Oscar dropped his toy, sensing what was coming. A split second later, the magpie's wings sliced through the air, a warning Oscar recognised instantly.

The bird swooped low, aiming straight for Oscar's ears. At the last moment, Oscar bolted. The magpie veered upward, snapping its wings sharply above Sandy's head. The crack of feathers startled him,

pulling his attention away from the distant Milk Bar sign.

By then, Oscar was already racing up the road. Sandy spotted the bird hovering above his fleeing companion and burst into giggles, chasing after them both.

But when he reached the Milk Bar, Oscar was gone. Instead, Sandy noticed a tall man standing outside.

**

Jenny drove slowly along the street, her daughter Sarah beside her, still humming after singing lessons.

“Stop! In the Name of Love...” Sarah sang, her voice bright and full of pride.

Jenny smiled, listening. “You’re getting better every week,” she said warmly.

They pulled up across from the Milk Bar.

“I’ll just be a minute,” Jenny said, stepping out of the car.

As she crossed the road, Sarah watched idly, until something about a nearby car caught her eye. Her song faltered, shifting into a different tune altogether.

**

Sandy hesitated near the man. His father was often away, so much so that his face had become a blur in Sandy's memory. All he truly remembered was that he was tall... and had yellow hair. This man matched that description. Sandy stepped closer, tugging gently at his pant leg.

“Are you my Daddy?”

The man turned, startled. “What did you say, little man?”

“Are you my Daddy?” Sandy repeated, hopeful.

The man glanced around, uncertain, as though expecting laughter, none came.

Sandy handed him a small leaflet. The man studied it briefly, confusion lingering.

“No... I'm not,” he said slowly, before pausing. A thin smile crept across his face.

“But I could take you to him.”

Sandy beamed. The man reached down and took his hand.

**

Oscar crouched beneath a bush near the Milk Bar, watching as the magpie finally gave up and returned to the park. Sensing it was safe, for now. He turned back toward the street... and froze. Sandy was with someone else. Something wasn't right.

A low growl built in Oscar's throat as instinct took over. He sprinted forward and lunged, clamping down hard on the man's heel.

**

Jenny stepped out of the Milk Bar just as the commotion erupted. A dog snapping at a man's leg. A boy shouting,

“Bad dog!”

She froze, watching. The man struggled, panic flashing across his face. He looked up, met Jenny's gaze, and in that instant, something shifted. He released Sandy's hand.

Without a word, he bolted to his yellow car, jumped in, and sped away. Jenny approached cautiously.

“Are you okay?” she asked the boy.

The dog stood close beside him now, alert, protective.

Jenny hesitated. Something about the situation unsettled her. She glanced down the road where the car had disappeared, a thought nagging at her, she should have taken the licence plate.

**

Back in the car, Sarah was quietly singing again.

“And in my hour of darkness...

She is standing right in front of me...”

Jenny smiled faintly. “Was that on the radio just now?”

Sarah shook her head. “No... but the number plate on that yellow car, it spelled something.”

Jenny turned to her.

“What do you mean?”

“1ET1TB,” Sarah said. “It looked like... ‘Let It Be.’”

Jenny blinked, surprised, then smiled, softly joining her daughter as they sang together:

“Let it be, let it be...

There will be an answer, let it be...”

But when they arrived home, the song lingered differently in her mind.

Jenny picked up the phone and called the police.

**

Across the street, Simon sat on a bench, sipping his milkshake. He had seen everything, but not quite the same way. He recognised the boy, Sandy. Jack’s little brother and Jack... wasn’t exactly kind to him at school.

Simon's lips curled into a slow, thoughtful smile.
An idea was forming.

JACK

Jack was a mischievous boy, restless, clever, and always one step ahead of trouble. He had a habit of slipping away from his mother in public places, vanishing into crowds as though it were a game. Mary struggled to control him and dreaded taking him anywhere. At shopping centres, Jack would disappear without warning, leaving her to wait for the inevitable lost-child announcement over the speakers.

To Jack, it was hilarious. To Mary, it was exhausting, but oddly predictable. She knew he would return eventually; he always did. When her patience wore thin, she would threaten him with the same warning:

“Wait until your father gets home.”

Jack knew better. His father was rarely around, and the threat carried little weight. So Jack did as he pleased.

Despite his behaviour, Jack was gifted. Schoolwork came easily to him, and he could keep pace with the most athletic kids. But his true passion was marbles, a game played in schoolyards and parks across Australia. The rules were simple: flick your marble toward a small hole in the ground. Once in, you could strike your opponent’s marbles,

and after three clean hits, you claimed one as your prize.

Jack wasn't just good, he was ruthless. At recess, he could often be found with his marble bag, challenging anyone willing to play. Most didn't stand a chance.

Simon was one of the few who came close. He was skilled, but not quite at Jack's level. Still, Simon had one advantage: his family had money, and he had an endless supply of marbles.

The last time they played was near the stormwater drain in the park, a favourite meeting spot with its flat concrete and low wall. That day, Simon won. Slowly, he reclaimed marbles Jack had taken from him before, more than fifty in total, including several prized large ones.

Jack's frustration boiled over. Without warning, he scooped up Simon's marbles and hurled them into the stormwater drain.

The drain was large enough for a child to crawl into, but it was dark, damp, and unsettling. Simon hesitated at the entrance, staring into the blackness. Still, there were too many marbles to lose. Reluctantly, he climbed in.

The deeper he crawled, the darker it became. When he finally found one marble, he dropped to his knees, feeling blindly along the ground for more.

Then he heard it, a low, menacing growl. Simon jolted upright and slammed his head against the concrete ceiling.

“Ow!”

Pain shot through him, followed quickly by fear. He let out a cry.

At the entrance, Jack laughed. He had been making the noise all along.

“Sucker!” he shouted before running off.

“I’m going to get you, Jack!” Simon yelled after him, his voice echoing in the darkness.

**

That memory lingered. So when Simon spotted Sandy across the road, Jack’s younger brother, something stirred in him. Simon sat on a bench, slowly sipping his milkshake, watching. Then, with quiet intent, he spat into it and stood up.

Sandy stood nearby, scolding Oscar.

“Bad dog! Bad dog, Uckaa!”

Oscar lowered his head submissively. Sandy looked up to see an older boy approaching, smiling.

“Hey, little man,” Simon said casually. “How’s it going?”

Sandy’s attention shifted immediately to the milkshake in Simon’s hand. He held out a leaflet,

offering it as though expecting something in return, a trick he had learned from Jack.

Simon glanced at the leaflet, confused, then handed it back.

“Milkshake?” Sandy asked, pointing eagerly.

Simon shrugged. “Sure.”

He handed it over.

Sandy took a long sip. “Chocolate,” he said with delight.

Simon nodded, taking it back. Then, with a calculated smile, he said,

“Hey... I know where we can get you another milkshake.”

Sandy’s face lit up. “Milkshake! Yum, yum!”

“It’s back toward the park,” Simon added, turning to lead the way.

Sandy followed without hesitation. Oscar trotted beside him, grabbing onto the dog toy still clutched in Sandy’s hand. Sandy held on tightly, comforted by his companion.

**

Simon’s plan was already forming, dark, deliberate, and cruel. He would lead Sandy to the stormwater drain and convince him there was a “milkshake factory” inside. Once the boy crawled in,

Simon would leave him there, alone in the darkness, and tie him up.

Then he would go to Jack. He would tell him Sandy was at the park, looking for him. When Jack arrived, Simon would claim Sandy had gone into the drain. Jack, without thinking, would follow.

And then, Simon would seal the entrance. Both brothers trapped, forever. The thought made him smile.

**

As they reached the edge of the park, Oscar suddenly froze. He dropped the toy and bolted toward the nearest bush. Simon barely had time to react.

A magpie struck Simon hard on the side of the head. Pain exploded near his ear as the bird's beak tore into his skin. Simon staggered, clutching his head, disoriented.

Before he could recover, the magpie swooped again.

Panicked, Simon ran straight back toward the Milk Bar, the bird screeching as it chased him beyond its territory.

The magpie circled once more. Its attention shifted. The smaller human remained, unaware.

From high above, the bird began its descent. Its target: the eyes.

LINDA

Linda sits in the back seat, tears tracing silent paths down her cheeks as she stares out the window. A heavy guilt settles in her chest. How had they all failed to notice Sandy before they drove away? Everything had felt rushed, chaotic... and in that moment, her little brother had simply been forgotten, and it wasn't the first time.

Sandy had always been the one who wandered. Curious, restless, drawn to the world in ways the rest of them didn't quite understand. Linda remembers the day he disappeared at the shopping arcade. Panic had spread quickly as she and her mother searched frantically, calling his name through crowded aisles. When they finally found him, he was calmly talking to a stranger. Later, when their mother asked what they'd been discussing, the man explained that Sandy had asked if he was his father.

The memory still stings. Sandy barely saw his dad, and Linda often wondered whether he even knew what his dad looked like.

There were other times, too. Like when he vanished from the house and was eventually found at the park, gently swaying on the swings, perfectly content. He loved the swings. It became Peter's

responsibility to take him there now and then, just to keep him from slipping away again. Their mother, worn down by worry, would sometimes tether him close when they went out.

Still, Linda found comfort in one thing: no matter where he wandered, he always seemed to be okay.

She loved playing with him. Sandy was all laughter and light, his giggles effortless and infectious. Not like Jack. Jack's idea of fun was teasing, always pushing, always pranking.

Like the time he left a fake turd on the toilet seat. Linda had walked in unsuspectingly, lowered the seat, and screamed at the sight of the wobbling brown lump. Jack's laughter echoed from the next room, uncontrollable and merciless.

Usually, Peter had to sit between them in the car to keep the peace. But not today. Today, the car felt different, quiet, even heavy. Even the radio seemed to deepen the mood, the song repeating like an accusation:

Get back, get back...

Get back to where you once belonged...

**

Not far away, Sandy is growing frustrated. Oscar has run off again, disappearing into the bushes. Sandy shouts after him, his voice sharp and insistent. “UCKAA! UCKAA!”

Oscar crouches low beneath the branches, watching. On the third call, he finally emerges, glancing upward as if sensing something unseen.

Above them, a magpie dives. Its wings cut through the air with precision, eyes locked on its target. But just as it closes in, movement below catches its attention, four-legged hunters disrupting its focus. The bird veers sharply, snapping its wings as it pulls away, abandoning the attack and retreating toward the park.

Oscar wastes no time. He grabs the toy from Sandy’s hand, tugging playfully, but insistently. Sandy frowns, annoyed. He doesn’t want to leave; he hasn’t finished his milkshake. He pulls back, trying to steer Oscar toward the shop, but the dog resists, determined. Then Sandy notices the dropped milkshake nearby. Without hesitation, he picks it up and finishes it.

A tug at his arm pulls his attention downward, Oscar again, more urgent this time. There’s something different in the dog’s persistence, something protective. Sandy hesitates, then smiles softly.

“Okay.”

Together, they turn and head home.

When they arrive, Sandy wanders into the playroom and drops the leaflet onto the floor. His attention lingers on it, the strange symbols, unfamiliar yet intriguing. An idea sparks.

He lets go of Oscar’s toy, and the dog bounds away.

From the closet, Sandy retrieves an old easel, a hand-me-down covered in colourful magnetic letters. Carefully, he places the leaflet on the floor and begins matching the symbols with the letters on the board. One by one, he arranges them, studying, adjusting, comparing.

When he’s satisfied, he steps back. Then, just as quickly, he loses interest and returns to his blocks.

**

The car screeches into the driveway. Mary barely waits for it to stop before jumping out, running toward the house. The others remain behind, frozen in place.

She bursts inside, heart pounding, heading straight to where she last saw Sandy.

And there he is, safe.

Relief floods her, but before she can reach him, Linda rushes past, dropping to her knees and wrapping Sandy in a tight embrace. Emotion fills the room, thick and overwhelming. Mary lowers her head, her eyes brimming with tears.

Then something catches her attention. She looks up. On the easel, two words, carefully formed with magnetic letters. Her gaze drops to the leaflet on the floor. She picks it up and studies it closely.

“What’s this?” she asks, her voice unsteady.

The symbols match exactly. She turns to Linda.

“Did you do this?”

Linda shakes her head. Slowly, they both look down at Sandy, and he simply smiles.

JIM

Two days later, Sandy feels special. Everyone is kinder to him now, and both Peter and Jack make an effort to include him in their games. Today, Sandy wants to play hide-and-seek. Peter is the first seeker, then Jack. Now it's Sandy's turn.

He presses his hands over his eyes and begins to count. He knows the numbers, but they tumble out clumsily.

“Ate... Nie... Kenn... Ready or not, here I come!”

With that, he sets off in pursuit, heading straight for the doghouse.

**

Inside, Mary stands in the kitchen preparing lunch, the radio murmuring in the background. A news bulletin interrupts the music.

Police have taken a suspect into custody in connection with the disappearance of the Beaumont children, three siblings who vanished from a beach in Adelaide two years earlier. Witnesses had last seen them playing with a tall, fair-haired man.

Mary pauses, listening more closely.

The report continues: just yesterday, there had been a confrontation at the Blackburn shops

between a man matching that description and a young boy with a dog. The man fled, but a bystander remembered his license plate, 1ET1TB, and reported it to police.

The suspect was later arrested. In the boot of his car, officers discovered a suitcase containing items believed to belong to children, possibly the missing Beaumonts.

Mary feels a chill. They live near those very shops.

The announcer adds that the witness remembered the license plate because it resembled a popular song.

“If that doesn’t ring a bell,” he says, “let me play it for you.”

Moments later, *Let It Be* fills the kitchen.

Mary frowns, unsettled. Who was that boy? And the dog?

**

Outside, a car pulls up. A tall, fair-haired man steps out and retrieves a suitcase from the boot. He looks toward the house, hearing voices drifting from the backyard. Without hesitation, he moves toward the side gate. Reaching it, he sets the suitcase down and peers over. A toddler stands nearby, peering into

a doghouse. The man slips through the gate and approaches quietly.

Sandy turns, and freezes. He studies the stranger, then slowly lifts his arm toward him.

“Daddy?” he asks.

The man smiles.

“Yes... it’s Daddy.”

**

From behind the barbecue near the gate, Peter watches. Recognition sparks instantly.

“DADDY!” he shouts.

Jack comes running from behind the wheelbarrow. Both boys reach him at once, throwing their arms around him.

Sandy beams. As if a question long held has finally been answered, he joins them, wrapping his small arms around the group.

Jim exhales softly. It feels good to be home.

The children have grown, especially Sandy. Walking, talking, understanding. So much has changed in just eight months. I should have been here, he thinks. I should spend more time with them.

He decides he will. He’ll be home for a while now, working on his book. It will be a chance to reconnect

with Mary, with the children, with everything he's missed.

But Mary's welcome was not so warm.

When Jim enters the house, she stands rigid, confusion clouding her face. She remembers the strange phone call from days earlier, and he wasn't due back for another month, not until after the 1968 Games. She thinks that something is wrong.

"Why are you home, Jim?" she asks.

He explains Rhodesia, the situation, and the book he wants to write. He asks her for help typing his experiences.

Mary sinks into a chair, overwhelmed. Tears come without warning. Jim moves to her, placing an arm around her shoulders, unsure of what he's stepped into.

"I'm glad you're home," she says at last, her voice unsteady. "But... something has to change."

Jim nods. He understands, and she agrees to help him.

She's an excellent typist, and soon the house fills with a steady rhythm, the heavy thump of keys striking paper on her old Flemington Model 1 typewriter.

**

The typing sounds echo through every room. Sandy turns it into a game, stomping around the lounge in time with each tap, pretending to be tall and important. Days turn into weeks. Jim dictates; Mary types. The manuscript slowly takes shape. At last, it's finished.

Mary leans back, relieved.

"What will you call it?" she asks.

Jim hesitates. "I'm not sure."

Sandy is still stomping. The noise grates on her nerves, and she rises to stop him, but something catches her eye.

Across the room stands Linda's easel. The magnetic letters are still arranged from earlier. Two words.

An idea forms.

"Jim," she calls. "Come here."

He joins her, follows her gaze, and reads the words aloud.

"Yes," he says quietly. "That's it."

Mary retrieves the leaflet from the floor and hands it to him. He reads:

"Rhodesia Denied."

Inside, it describes a rally protesting Mexico's refusal to grant visas to Rhodesian athletes, held just days before Jim's arrival in Melbourne.

"Where did this come from?" he asks.

Mary shakes her head. “I don’t know. Sandy must have found it.”

Jim looks at the words again, thoughtful.

“Well,” he says, “*Rhodesia Denied*, that’s the title.

The doorbell rings. Jim sets the leaflet aside and answers the door. A postman hands him a telegram. He opens it, reads, and smiles. Returning to the lounge, he hands it to Mary.

She reads aloud:

“We congratulate you. You have been awarded a doctoral scholarship at Temple University in Philadelphia.”

She looks up, stunned.

“What does this mean?”

Jim smiles, “It means,” he says, “We’re going to America.”

Mary blinks.

“...We’re going where?”

PART 2

PHILADELPHIA

Tracy's brothers have Jack cornered. They want him to pay for calling her a *thug*, and maybe it was the wrong word. Jack knows Tracy has a reputation for doing brutal things, but he couldn't stop himself. The word slipped out before he could think. Now he's paying for it.

Jack had met Tracy two months earlier, not long after arriving from Australia. She had wandered past his yard one afternoon, watching him play with his brothers, Peter and Sandy. She lived just down the road, and since they were the same age, it didn't take long for them to become friends.

She liked his accent, different, unfamiliar. He stood out. But today, everything has changed.

To Tracy, it feels like betrayal. She had been nothing but friendly, and now Jack keeps pushing her away. She doesn't understand it.

Jack, on the other hand, is beginning to regret ever befriending her. Still, he can't help himself, his cheekiness, his impulsiveness, his need to say exactly what he thinks.

Today, that instinct has gone too far.

Earlier that afternoon, they had all been playing hide-and-seek in Tracy's backyard, Jack, Greg, Brad, Tracy, and her three brothers. During one round, Tracy spotted a squirrel hiding beneath the porch. Without hesitation, she ran to the garage, grabbed a baseball bat, and came back swinging. She chased the animal across the yard, cornered it, and struck it down.

The moment hung in the air. Jack felt something twist inside him.

"You Thug," he said.

Tracy froze, and then her face hardened. She demanded he take it back, and Jack refused. So she called her brothers.

Tim, the eldest, steps forward first, solidly built, confident, and quick to anger. He carries himself like Moe from *The Three Stooges*, impatient, dominant, always ready to strike.

Howard lingers behind him, smaller, quieter, lost somewhere in his own thoughts, and Wayne, the youngest, watches with sharp eyes and a quicker tongue, known for blurting things out without thinking. Together, they form a wall around Jack.

Greg and Brad move to Jack's side. Greg is tall and wiry, with a strange Philadelphian drawl that

always stretches his words. He greets everyone the same way, “Y’all!”, followed immediately by another question before you can answer the first.

Jack had met him over a game of marbles that turned into a fight. Neither had won, but both had gained something better: respect.

Brad is different, shorter, heavier, always defensive, always ready with a sharp remark. Greg once described his family as “*bound by blood, but not by love.*” Jack had laughed at the time, thinking it was just another of Greg’s odd sayings. Now, standing beside him, Brad doesn’t look like he’s joking.

Tim steps closer.

“Say ya’ll sorry!” he demands.

Jack hesitates and for a moment, he wonders if it’s worth it, if a dead squirrel is worth what’s coming next. He glances at Greg and then at Brad. They look just as disturbed as he feels. So he holds his ground.

“Up yours!”

Everything moves at once. Tim lunges. Jack reacts first, shoving Wayne to the ground. Greg grabs Tim from behind, pulling him off balance. They crash into the dirt.

Howard charges, but Brad catches him in a headlock.

For a second, it looks even.

Then Tracy grabs Jack by the collar, yanks him backward, and slams him onto the pavement, a trick she picked up from watching *Gunsmoke*. She pins him down hard.

Greg pulls her off by her ponytail. Jack scrambles to his feet and just in time to see Tim coming again.

He lowers his head and drives forward, aiming for Tim's stomach, and Tim sidesteps, and Jack crashes into a bush.

Greg doubles over as Tracy kicks him in the gut. Brad starts losing his grip on Howard.

The balance shifts, and they're outnumbered and outmatched. Their moment was gone.

Jack gets up, breathless, and yells
"Run!"

Jack leads, Greg with Brad close behind, feet pounding against the pavement as Tracy and her brothers give chase.

**

Months earlier, Jack's family had arrived in Philadelphia. His father, Jim, had earned a doctoral scholarship at Temple University. They settled in

Glenolden, a working-class suburb south of the city, rough around the edges and unfamiliar in every way. Their money was tight. Most of their furniture came from “Leftover Day,” when residents left unwanted items on the curb. If you were quick, you could claim something before the garbage trucks did.

What they didn’t realise was that some of those items came with more than wear and tear. The cockroaches came later.

They had only one car. Jim needed it most days, leaving Mary isolated at home with the children. Groceries were bought once a week, stretched as far as they could go.

Every dollar mattered. Jim’s scholarship covered little. The rest, he had to find. So when a lecturer offered him a job as a lifeguard, he took it without hesitation.

On his first day, he arrived to find... no pool. Confused, he returned to ask.

“They filled it in last year,” the lecturer said casually. “Building residences next year. Until then, enjoy the quiet and peace.”

So Jim showed up each day, sat in the empty hall, and studied.

**

Peter was walking toward the school, wondering why Jack hadn't come home yet. Then he sees him, Jack, sprinting down the street, panic in his eyes, with Greg and Brad following.

Behind them, Tracy and her brothers. Peter barely has time to react before Tracy spots him.

“Grab him!”

Tim seizes Peter's arm.

At first, Peter thinks it's a game, but it isn't.

Jack, exhausted from running, glances back and sees Peter with Tracy

He ducks into a neighbour's bushes with Greg and Brad, hearts hammering.

**

Sandy is trying to ride Peter's bike. He's only five, far too small for it, but that doesn't stop him. He's worked out a system: start from the backyard steps, push off, and ride for as long as balance allows before gravity wins. It never lasts long, but that doesn't matter. For those few seconds, he's flying. Then he hears shouting. Peter's voice, Sandy pushes through the fenceless hedge and onto the sidewalk, and there he sees a group of kids walking towards

him, with Peter at the front. Something is wrong. It would be years later, when Sandy is old and grey, that this image will stay with him: His older brother walking toward him, barefoot, and dressed in nothing but his underwear.

THE FIGHT

Private Craig struggles to keep pace with the marching column, a blister on his toe burning with every step. They have been marching for two relentless hours without rest. The drill sergeant watches like a hawk, ready to punish the slightest weakness. The objective is simple: march seven hours straight under the punishing sun and heat of Fort Edward. This is the final test for acceptance into the Marines. If Craig fails, he returns to the streets.

A father of four, Craig joined the Marines in his thirties. He is no longer a young, resilient recruit like the others. His street smarts help him endure mentally, but physically, he is pushed to his limits. He grits his teeth and presses on. By the third hour, sweat pours down his face; by the fourth, he notices blood seeping through his right boot. Three hours remain. He has to finish.

A young soldier ahead suddenly steps out and raises his hand, he's quitting. Another soldier grabs him, forcing him back into line. Everyone knows the punishment: fall out, and you're stripped to your underwear; falter again, and the sergeant hoses you down. Craig refuses to let that be him. He pushes forward.

**

Jack's house sits on a four-way intersection, divided into two sections. The front is rented to a hairdresser; the back is Jack's family's. It spans three levels, including a basement. Upstairs are three bedrooms and a bathroom overlooking the backyard. The ground floor holds the lounge, kitchen, and dining area. Outside, a single apple tree stands in the yard, bordered by hedges along the side street.

Sandy watches his oldest brother, Peter, walking toward him down the street, glancing nervously over his shoulder. Sandy doesn't realise the group trailing behind is hunting for Jack, and that Peter is being used as bait.

Hidden in the neighbour's bushes, Jack and his friends watch as Peter and the posse pass. When they turn into Jack's backyard, he knows he has no choice. He turns to Greg and Brad.

"We need to do something."

They nod, and together they sprint toward the yard.

**

Inside, Mary is absorbed in American television. Jim had managed to borrow a colour TV from his

office, a novelty, since television back in Australia was still black-and-white. The upgrade at Temple University had made it possible, and the family quickly grew to love it.

For Mary, it became a lifeline. Alone in the cockroach-infested house most days, she filled her time with housework and television. Shows like *Here's Lucy*, *The Brady Bunch*, *Bewitched*, and *I Dream of Jeannie* played in the afternoons when the children returned from school. Linda often rushed home to watch with her.

As Jack and his friends burst into the backyard, Mary hears the commotion but feels reassured, it means the boys are home. She doesn't investigate.

Tim grabs a hose and turns it on Peter. Just then, Jack charges into the yard, aiming straight for Tim. His plan is simple: take out the biggest threat and let Greg and Brad handle the rest.

Tracy has Peter locked in a tight hold, waiting for Tim to soak him. Peter, tall and thin, struggles to understand what's happening, he thought it was a game. But when he sees Jack attack, he realises it's something else entirely.

As Tim stumbles under Jack's assault, Tracy's grip loosens. Peter seizes the moment, twisting free and pulling her into a headlock. She slips out almost immediately. Jack grabs the hose, swinging it wildly

to keep Tim at bay, while Greg and Brad engage the other brothers.

Sandy stands at the edge of the chaos, wide-eyed. To him, it looks like a *Popeye* cartoon. Every punch draws a delighted shout:

“Pow!, Wham! Pow, pow!”

Convinced Jack needs spinach to win, Sandy dashes inside to find a can.

Tracy regains control quickly. If she’s going to teach them a lesson, she has to take charge. She breaks free from Peter and turns just in time to see Jack strike Tim with the hose. Letting Peter go, she lunges at Jack.

Still in his underwear, Peter takes the chance to escape. He runs into the house, slams the door, and races upstairs to the bathroom. An idea strikes him. He throws open the window and calls out:

“Hey, Tracy!”

Furious, Tracy looks up, just in time to be met with a warm and unexpected surprise.

PETER'S REVENGE

Corporal Craig rode in silence toward yet another mission, the engine of the Deuce and a Half droning beneath him. Across from him sat his sergeant, a man he had long since grown to despise. Their orders were simple: assist in the clean-up following the Battle of Hue.

Hue had been the longest and bloodiest battle of the Vietnam War, a brutal clash between South and North Vietnamese forces that left devastation in its wake.

Craig enlisted in 1960, committing to eight years in the Marine Corps Infantry. Assigned to the 27th Marine Regiment, he had clawed his way from Private to Corporal. The climb had been slow, hindered more by incompetent leadership than lack of ability. Being older than most of the men had made him stand out, and not always in a good way. His sergeant, young and insecure, resented the quiet respect Craig commanded.

So the assignments came, isolating, tedious, deliberate. Tasks that pulled him away from the unit kept him alone. The men saw through it. They avoided the sergeant when they could. In war, weak leaders rarely lasted long. Some were undone by the

enemy... others by their own men. The sergeant didn't realise it yet, but his fate was already circling.

Craig, by nature, was easygoing. Most things slid off him. But not this. Not the distance from his family. Not the slow erosion of his mind by what he witnessed each day.

Every clean-up mission carved something out of him. They would arrive at the battlefield, and the stench would hit first, thick, choking, inescapable. Rot, sweat, sewage, death, it clung to everything, seeped into skin and memory. It never truly left.

Most days were spent burning or burying the dead. Sometimes the bodies wouldn't hold together. A limb would come loose in his hands, and for a moment, he would freeze, his mind unable to accept what he was touching. Each time, the same thought followed: That could be me.

The ground itself was no safer. Mines lay hidden beneath the soil, while rats and wild animals fed freely among the corpses. Every step had to be chosen carefully.

Six months. That was all he had left. Six months to endure... and, if luck held, make it back home.

**

Sandy rummaged through the kitchen cupboards, searching for a can of spinach. He knew what it should look like, he'd seen it in cartoons. Finally, he spotted one with green leaves on the label and hurried outside to show his brother.

As he stepped onto the back porch, he froze. A girl stood in the yard, shouting, drenched by a steady stream of water. Sandy followed the stream upward and saw Peter leaning out of the bathroom window, laughing, urinating down on her.

The girl screamed insults at him, then suddenly grabbed the ten-speed bike Sandy had been riding earlier and hurled it against the house.

Sandy's chest tightened. His favourite thing. Without thinking, he threw the can at her. It missed.

Fueled by anger, he charged and swung a kick at her leg, but she saw it coming and twisted away. His foot struck nothing. Then came the sound. A sharp, sickening crack, like a branch snapping in the still air. The yard fell silent.

Jack and Tim stopped wrestling. Brad loosened his hold on Howard. Greg and Wayne dropped their fists mid-fight. All eyes turned. Sandy collapsed.

Sandy tried to move, a wave of pain surged through him, so intense it stole the breath from his lungs before erupting into a piercing scream that echoed through the yard.

Inside, Mary and Linda were watching TV when the scream cut through the house. They froze.

“That’s Sandy.”

Mary had never heard him cry like that, not ever. A cold dread settled in her chest as they rushed toward the back door.

When Mary stepped outside, she stopped dead. The yard was full of unfamiliar kids. Then she saw him, Sandy, on the ground, clutching his leg beside the girl.

Something inside her snapped. The rage rose fast, hot, uncontrollable. The Beast had arrived.

THE BEAST

When Mary sees Sandy lying on the ground, her mind floods with frantic, uncontrollable thoughts. Emotion surges through her, shock, fear, and a rising dread as she struggles to understand how this could have happened.

Before her marriage, during her time in nursing school, Mary devoted much of herself to the Church. She volunteered wherever she could, typing letters for administration and attending every service and function. It was there she met Jim.

Jim had left home at sixteen, finding refuge in the Church community. With no money, he relied on the kindness of others, who offered him food, shelter, and small jobs. His childhood had been unstable, his parents constantly fighting, his father a broken man after returning from the war, lost to alcohol. Though his father loved his children, he was no longer present in the ways that mattered. Jim couldn't endure it, so he left.

Still, Jim was determined. He stayed in school, driven by the dream of becoming an elite athlete and making something of himself. He was handsome, focused, and relentless, qualities Mary fell deeply in love with.

Mary, by contrast, came from a warm and stable home. Her father owned a successful canning factory in Melbourne, and her childhood was filled with comfort, extended family, and frequent holidays. Even during nursing school, she cherished those summers spent surrounded by relatives.

After marrying Jim, that life quietly slipped away. Within four years, she had Peter, Jack, and Linda. Jim completed his degree and became a physical education teacher, but his income was never enough. He took on extra work, often leaving for days or even weeks at a time. Mary resented the absences but endured them, holding tightly to her love for him. She kept her struggles hidden from her family.

When Sandy was born, Jim accepted a two-year coaching job in Papua New Guinea, leaving Mary and the children behind in Melbourne. Over time, his work consumed him, and his distance, both physical and emotional, grew. Mary pleaded for money, for presence, for support. But Jim strayed. His charm and profession drew attention, and affairs followed.

Mary discovered the truth and threatened to leave. But love and hope kept her in place. She believed things would change. They didn't. It's a decision she has never stopped regretting.

Even now, after moving to America, little has improved. Jim is still absent, and Mary is left to carry the family's weight alone.

The life she once imagined has eroded into something unrecognisable. Her frustrations remain buried, but they surface in strange ways, laughter at the wrong moments, forgotten responsibilities, sudden bursts of anger over trivial things. And when that anger takes hold, something shifts in her. Her voice sharpens, her posture hardens, and her face twists into something fierce, something almost inhuman.

“The Beast,” the kids would call it.

When the Beast steps onto the back porch, there is no hesitation. Her voice cuts through the chaos, commanding everyone to leave. Greg and Brad scatter immediately. Tracy and her brothers, sensing the shift, quickly follow and the yard empties.

Linda is already beside Sandy. She examines his leg but sees no blood, no obvious injury. He clutches his knee, writhing in pain. When he tries to stand, he collapses again, releasing another piercing scream. That sound pulls Mary back.

She’s a trained nurse; she never truly practised after marriage. Now, instinct takes over. She examines his leg but finds nothing visibly wrong.

Carefully, she lifts him and carries him inside, settling him onto the couch. Sandy is sobbing uncontrollably. Mary checks his leg again, still nothing she can identify. She considers the hospital. But they have no car. No money for an ambulance. And the American medical system is still unfamiliar to her; they've only been here four months.

Back home in Australia, care was affordable, supported by government systems. Here, every decision carries a cost. So she waits. She tells herself it might not be serious. Jim will be home soon. That he'll know what to do.

But beneath that reasoning lies something deeper: uncertainty, fear, and the quiet weight of being on her own.

As Tracy walks home with her brothers, her composure breaks. Tears spill freely as the shock settles in. Tim places an arm around her, his voice low but certain. They will have their revenge.

DOBBLER SHIFT

After three days, Mary finally relents and takes Sandy to the hospital. In a reckless attempt to kick Tracy, he'd missed and ended up breaking his leg instead. The doctor explains it's a greenstick fracture.

That evening at dinner, Mary tries to make sense of it for the boys. She picks up a string bean from her plate and bends it gently.

"Sometimes a bone bends like this," she says. "Other times, it snaps clean in two." She pauses, then bends the bean until it splinters but doesn't fully break. "And sometimes, it cracks like this, splintered, but still holding together. That's what Sandy has."

Jack winces, imagining the jagged fracture inside Sandy's leg.

"Eewww!"

The next morning, they sit at the breakfast table with bowls of Frosted Flakes, Sandy's reward for enduring the cast. After three days on the couch watching television, he's been thoroughly absorbed into the world of commercials: roaring Matchbox cars, elaborate racing tracks, plastic armies, and sugary cereals.

His favourite, by far, is Tony the Tiger.

“They’re Grrr...eat!” he declares, grinning.

Friday arrives, and Jack feels a mix of excitement and dread. The weekend is close, but so is Tracy.

Word has spread. Tracy has made sure of it. Jack is now a target.

Although she attends a Catholic school and rides a different bus, they both get picked up at the same bus stop. Every morning this week, she and her group have been waiting.

Monday, he spotted her from a distance and avoided the stop entirely, missing the bus and walking three miles to school. Tuesday was no better. By Wednesday, the long walk had worn him down.

Today, he has a plan. He’ll hide in the bushes and time his run perfectly, darting out only when the bus arrives.

As Jack and Peter head out the front door, they’re met by something unexpected: fog.

Thick, suffocating fog blankets the world, swallowing the yard whole. Visibility stretches no more than a few feet ahead.

For Jack, it feels like a gift.

A grin creeps across his face. Today might just work. They walk together until they reach Ridgeway Street. Jack glances at Peter.

“Let’s cut across the railway tracks instead of taking the bridge.”

It’s faster, despite the risk. Peter nods.

The tracks run parallel to the road, trains thundering through at high speed. A fence lines the perimeter, but Jack knows a way through, something Greg showed him. Even so, navigating it in this fog isn’t easy.

When they reach the tracks, they stop. A distant rumble. Headlights glow faintly through the mist.

“It looks clear,” Jack says.

Peter doesn’t move. Something feels off. As Jack steps forward, Peter grabs him sharply, and the train explodes past them in a deafening blur of steel and wind.

Jack stumbles back, heart pounding.

“How did you know?” he asks.

Peter shrugs.

Peter had been fascinated by the trains ever since they arrived. He would often wander down here just to watch them thunder past. It wasn’t the trains themselves that captivated him, but the sound they carried, the way it shifted and changed as they moved.

He had become absorbed in the pattern of it: the rising pitch of an approaching train, sharp and urgent, climbing higher as it drew near. Then, at the

very moment it passed, the sound would peak before falling away, stretching lower and softer as it disappeared into the distance.

On that day, Peter looked up toward the distant headlight and listened. The sound had already reached that familiar, piercing pitch, the one he knew meant the train was closer than it seemed. Alarmed, he reacted without thinking and reached out to stop Jack.

Peter has always been... different, quiet and distant. Lost in thought more often than not. Sometimes it's as though he's only half in the world, drifting somewhere else entirely. Yet somehow, he knows things. Jack doesn't question it anymore.

They cross safely once the tracks are clear. At Peter's stop, Jack turns to him.

"See you tonight... and thanks for saving my life."

Peter gives a small smile.

"No worries. I owe you."

Alone now, Jack approaches his stop. The fog still clings to everything, muting sound and swallowing shapes. It feels eerie, like walking through a dream. Then he hears them, Tracy.

Her voice cuts through the haze. Jack freezes, hidden just out of sight. If the fog lifts, he's done for, and he's not walking another three miles today. Then, the bus.

It hisses to a stop, and Jack runs.

He bursts from the fog and leaps aboard just as Tracy spots him.

“I’m going to get you, Jack!” she shouts.

But it’s too late. He’s on.

Relief floods through him as he makes his way to the back, where Greg is waiting.

“Well, Kansas,” Greg grins, “I’m *mist*-ified how you pulled that off.”

Jack laughs. “Yeah... I smoked them.”

Greg chuckles. “You should just get on at my stop next time.”

“Nah,” Jack says confidently. “I’ve got it covered.”

Greg leans forward. “So, what are you wearing tomorrow night?”

Jack frowns. “What do you mean?”

Greg stares at him. “Halloween! Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of it.”

Jack shakes his head.

Greg laughs. “Man, you Australians are hopeless. It’s when you dress up, go door to door, and collect candy.”

Jack’s interest sparks immediately. “For free?”

“Yep.”

Greg continues, “It’s tied to All Saints’ Day, November first. That’s when all the demons are

driven out. The night before, Halloween, they come out to spook everyone.”

Jack leans in. “So what’s the third day?”

Greg smirks. “Cabbage Night.”

Before he can explain further, the bus pulls up.

“I’ll tell you later!” Greg calls, jumping off.

Jack sits back, his mind racing, Halloween.

Costumes, lollies and no cost.

A slow smile spreads across his face as an idea begins to form.

“YOU BETCHA”

Jack walked the school halls with a quiet confidence. As class president, he'd taken charge of the Glenolden hall monitoring program, and today he'd volunteered for the last two periods. Friday afternoons were the busiest, plenty of movement, plenty of chances to catch someone slipping. Without that, the job was dull.

On his third circuit, he spotted an older student heading his way. Jack raised his hand to stop him. The boy was a grade above.

“Hall pass?” Jack asked.

“Oh, I was just heading to the bathroom,” the boy replied.

“You need a hall pass, mate.”

The student nodded, apologised, and turned back the way he'd come. Jack fought back a smug grin as he continued on.

At the next corner, another boy appeared, bigger, older, unfamiliar. Jack gestured for him to stop.

“Hey, mate. Got your hall pass?”

The boy smiled, reaching into his pocket. “Yeah, sure.”

In one swift motion, his hand came out swinging. The punch landed hard, dropping Jack to the floor. The boy loomed over him, arms spread wide.

“THAT was my hall pass, mate!”

Then he walked off.

Jack lay there, staring at the ceiling, dazed. The irony wasn't lost on him; he'd gone all week without trouble, only to walk straight into it. Ironically, he smiled.

After school, Jack caught the bus home with Greg. As usual, they took their seats at the back.

“What're you wearing tomorrow night?” Jack asked.

Greg smirked. “Maybe I'll dress as a squirrel and knock on Tracy's door.”

They both laughed.

“Nah,” Greg continued, “Brad and I will hit Logan, Boon, and Stuart Ave. Best candy, every year. Y'all coming?”

“You betcha,” Jack said. “I'll meet you at your place.”

**

Upstairs, Tracy stood in her room, getting ready. She'd already planned the night, meeting her friends at the park, just like every year. Everything was set.

She opened her door and crept quietly downstairs.

Her father was home, and lately, that meant trouble. Ever since his last trip, something had changed. He used to be warm, present. Weekends together, church gatherings, laughter. Now, he was distant, tense, and easily angered.

Her hand reached the front door.

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING?”

She froze.

“I’m just heading out with my friends,” she said, turning.

“No, you’re not. You’re coming with me to the church hall. We need to set up for All Saints’ Day.”

“But Dad, my friends, ” she begged.

“It’s not up for discussion.”

She swallowed her frustration. The church meant everything to him. The upcoming fete at the park, planned after Sunday Mass, had become his focus. He’d even decided to sell off his collection of army figures. She’d hoped they’d do it tomorrow. Lately, nothing waited.

She missed who he used to be. Now, he snapped over small things, waking suddenly from sleep as if he were running from something unseen. It scared her. So she tried to keep the peace, but the tension in the house had started to change her, too.

“Fine,” she said sharply. “I’ll go.”

She walked past him. “Just tell me when.”

Back upstairs, she paused at the top of the stairs, her mind racing. Then it clicked. She crossed the hall and knocked on Tim's door.

“What?”

She opened it slightly. “Dad's not letting me out. Are you going?”

“You betcha,” Tim said.

“Do you know who the target is tonight?”

“You betcha.”

She nodded, satisfied, and quietly closed the door.

CABBAGE NIGHT

When Jack gets home from school, he asks his younger sister, Linda, to help with his costume. Linda loves dressing up and has a natural flair for design and colour. Her reaction is immediate and full of excitement.

“Wow! I love dressing up!” she exclaims, spinning around the room with delight.

When Jack explains his costume idea, she laughs.

“Okay... that might be a little tricky, but I’ll see what I can do.”

She then asks if she can come along, but Jack tells her he’s already going with Greg and Brad.

“Never mind,” she replies, brushing it off. “I’ll go out with Peter and Sandy instead.”

Halloween still promises fun, and Linda throws herself into preparing costumes for everyone. Sandy, with his leg in a cast, becomes the perfect mummy. Peter decides on a cowboy, and Linda quickly forms a plan. That night, she rummages through the house, gathering bits and pieces. By the end of it, everything is ready for the next day.

Later that night, Peter and Jack lie in bed, waiting for sleep. Their room is at the top of the house, just off the hallway leading to the bathroom. Linda and

Sandy's rooms line one side of the hall, while theirs sits opposite.

Inside, Jack's bed rests against the inner wall, while Peter's sits beneath the south-facing window overlooking the street. Between them is a small bedside table with a lamp, now switched off as the room settles into darkness.

Peter enjoys this part of the night, the stillness. It's when his quiet game begins.

At first, when they moved into the house, the faint clicking sounds had frightened him. But night after night, they returned, until fear gave way to curiosity... then obsession.

After a few minutes, the clicking begins.

Peter listens carefully, tracking the sound as it shifts. He tries to pinpoint its location using both ears, narrowing it down like a hunter in the dark. When he thinks he's tracked it, he flicks on the light, hoping to catch it.

Eventually, he figured it out. Cockroaches.

They were fast, too fast to catch, but the challenge kept his mind busy when sleep wouldn't come. Most of the time, the sounds echoed from inside the walls, but occasionally, they ventured into the room itself. Lately, the noise seemed strongest near Jack's bed.

Jack, however, slept soundly, completely unaware.

Tonight is different. A sudden noise breaks the pattern. Jack jolts upright.

“What was that?”

Peter switches on the light and points to the floor.

“That.”

Jack looks down just in time to see a cockroach disappear beneath the door.

“That little bugger ran across my face!” he snaps.

“What the hell? I hate this place.”

Then, narrowing his eyes, he adds,

“Wait... how did you know what it was?”

Peter just shrugs, the same familiar, wordless gesture.

Jack studies him for a moment, puzzled, before finally lying back down. The light clicks off again.

Earlier, Jack had told Peter about being punched at school. Now Peter lies awake, thinking about it. Jack’s week has been rough... and tomorrow might make it worse if that costume draws attention.

Peter is relieved his own costume is simple, a cowboy.

Then,

a THUMP! and another.

Peter sits up. The sound came from outside. He leans toward the window, peering into the darkness, but the street appears empty.

Then,

BANG!

Peter jumps out of bed.

“What was that?” Jack mutters, half-awake.

Still staring out, Peter notices something splattered against the glass, a clump of goo faintly lit by the streetlight.

“Come look,” Jack says, now fully awake.

They kneel on Peter’s bed and peer outside together.

Two figures sprint down the street.

“Who was that?” Jack asks.

Peter pauses. Then quietly,

“I think we both know.”

At the same time, they say it,

“Tracy.”

Peter turns toward Jack, his face barely visible in the dim light.

“That girl’s dangerous. You’d better fix things with her... or else.”

Jack sighs.

“I know.”

The next day, Greg rings the doorbell. As he walks up, he notices eggshells scattered across the steps and streaks of dried yolk splashed against the house. He’d seen the same mess on other houses along the street.

Definitely not a neighbourhood you want to upset, he thinks.

His mother waits in the car, ready to take them to their soccer game. Jack and Peter had recently joined Greg's team, organised by the Boys' Brigade through the local Presbyterian Church.

They were new to soccer, having only played Australian Rules football, but they'd made an immediate impact.

Last year, the team hadn't won a single game. This year, they hadn't lost one.

Jack controlled the midfield with ease, while Peter, tireless and left-footed, covered the flank. Together, they had transformed the team.

The front door opens.

"Wow," Jack says, stepping outside and taking in the mess.

"You guys got bombed," Greg remarks.

"Yeah," Jack replies. "We heard it last night."

Greg grins.

"Good old Cabbage Night. Gets you every time."

Jack frowns.

"Cabbage Night?"

Greg shrugs.

"Night before Halloween. People go around trashing the houses of anyone they don't like."

Jack raises his eyebrows.

“Wow...”

“Sometimes they hit mailboxes with cherry bombs,” Greg adds. “Light it, toss it, boom, lid’s gone.”

Jack chuckles, picturing it like a cartoon explosion. For a moment, he imagines the Road Runner blasting the Coyote into the air, *beep beep*.

Right on cue, Greg’s car horn sounds. Greg rolls his eyes.

“That’s Mum. Come on.”

As they climb into the car, Greg nudges him.

“So... what are you wearing tonight?”

Jack gives a sly grin.

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

STRANGER THINGS

Tracy woke the next morning with a lingering thought already forming; she hadn't heard Tim come in the night before. It was the first thing on her mind as she opened her eyes.

She got up and made her way to his room, tapping lightly on the door.

A muffled voice answered, "What?"

She pushed the door open. Tim was still buried beneath the covers. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she reached over and shook him gently.

"What do you want?" he groaned.

"Well? How did it go last night?" she asked.

Tim blinked at the ceiling, buying himself a moment. The truth was, Tracy's issue with Jack hadn't meant much to him. There had been plenty of targets, and her grudge felt like just another in a growing list.

She hadn't been like this before.

Lately, something had shifted in the house. Ever since their father returned, everything felt... off. He was home all the time now, out of work, restless, and quick to anger. Their parents argued more than ever, and no one really understood why.

Tim, being the oldest, felt it most. His father seemed to zero in on him, as though he carried the weight of everyone's frustration.

He'd managed to skip church the night before with a weak excuse about studying. Somehow, it had worked.

Sensing Tracy's impatience, he sighed. "Yeah... I got Jack's place."

She smiled, satisfied. "So, who are you going out with tonight?"

"You know... the boys," he muttered, hoping she'd leave.

She hesitated. "Can I come with you?"

"Yeah, fine, just go," he said, waving her off.

She left with a grin.

**

Linda twirled into the lounge room, her dress flaring.

"What do you think?"

"Cindy Brady!" Peter called out.

Linda rolled her eyes. "No, you idiot, it's Shirley Temple."

She'd done her best, carefully curled hair, a white frilly dress, black shoes with knee-high socks. The old black-and-white shows had fascinated her.

America fascinated her. She wanted to belong to it somehow.

By six o'clock, the sun still hung in the sky as Linda, Peter, and Sandy set off down the street.

Sandy struggled along on crutches, his mummy costume wrapped too tightly around his legs, but the promise of lollies kept him moving.

Peter walked beside them in his cowboy hat, inspired by *The Alamo* and John Wayne. He still remembered something his mother had told him:

“Where you are is what you become.”

He wasn't entirely sure what it meant, but tonight, he was a cowboy.

At the first house, Linda hesitated before ringing the bell.

The door opened. A woman stood there, waiting. Peter and Linda glanced at each other.

“Well?” the woman prompted. “Aren't you going to say trick or treat?”

“Trick or treat,” Linda whispered.

The woman smiled and held out a basket of Apples.

Peter's shoulders sank. “Apples?” he muttered under his breath. Jack had promised lollies.

Still, he thanked her, and they moved on.

The next house was silent. Peter rang the bell once. Then again, and nothing.

The street stretched around them, empty.
No other kids, no laughter, and no distant voices.
Just the soft scrape of Sandy's crutches.

Linda slowed. "Where is everyone?"

Peter didn't answer.

The third house stood apart. It didn't just look old, it looked forgotten. The grass had swallowed the path. The porch sagged like it was tired of holding itself up. The open screen door creaked faintly, though no wind stirred it.

Linda stopped at the base of the steps. Something about the place felt... wrong. Peter, drawn in despite himself, climbed anyway.

The house seemed to watch him. Peter knocked. The sound disappeared into the wood.

Behind him, Sandy reached the top step, breathing unevenly. Linda followed, her eyes fixed on the doorway. Footsteps, soft and slow.

Then, silence lingered too long.

Linda turned, instinct pulling her back toward the street. For a second, she thought about leaving, just walking away. But Sandy couldn't run. So she stayed.

A sharp *click... clack* snapped through the stillness. The door unlocked. It opened just enough for a thin, twisted hand to appear.

The fingers curled around the edge like they didn't quite belong to the body behind them. The door creaked wider, and a woman stood there. She was small and pale, wrapped in a nightgown that hung too loosely from her frame. Her hair fell across her face in tangled strands. Her eyes were too wide. They moved, but not like they were supposed to.

Sandy grinned. "Trick or treat!"

Linda flinched. "Sandy, "

The woman didn't react, didn't blink and didn't speak.

Instead... she raised her hand, slowly and beckoned them not only once but twice.

The motion was wrong. Too stiff. Too deliberate.

Peter felt it then, that pull. Like the house was breathing in... and waiting for them to follow. Sandy stepped forward first. Of course he did. Peter hesitated, his chest tightening. Then he gave a small, uncertain shrug and followed. Linda was last. Every instinct screamed at her to run. But she stepped forward anyway.

The moment she crossed the threshold, the light from outside seemed to shrink behind her, and the door began to close.

THE ABANDONED HOUSE

Corporal Craig sat by the window as the aircraft carried him home from Vietnam. Below, the rice fields of Cambodia stretched endlessly, calm and indifferent. Somewhere down there, he knew, someone was being shot.

He was grateful not to be among them. *Good luck to them*, he thought, though the words felt hollow.

He had seen too much. Too many bodies. Too many wounds that no one could fix. He closed his eyes, not to sleep, but to escape. His body was exhausted, yet his mind refused to rest. He remembered the advice: *If you want to survive out here, you go numb. Don't think.*

But he had thought. He had seen everything: mines tearing men apart, rockets lighting the sky, graves filled too quickly, order collapsing into chaos. And now, the war followed him anyway, living on in flashes behind his eyes.

He had survived, somehow.

Soon, he would finish his service, receive a medal, and be sent home. People would call him lucky. The only thing that mattered to him was seeing his family again.

**

Jack waited until darkness settled before heading to Greg's house. Greg had insisted Halloween worked best at night, though Jack still wasn't entirely sure how any of it worked.

The walk took over twenty minutes. Normally, it would've been half that, but his costume made it awkward to move. Linda had crafted something impressive, too impressive. He carried most of it, only putting it on once he reached Greg's porch.

When he was finally ready, he rang the bell. Greg's mother opened the door, already holding out a basket of candy.

"There you go."

Jack hesitated. He had expected a reaction, shock, maybe even fear. Nothing came, just polite confusion.

After an awkward pause, he admitted he was there to see Greg. Pulling off his furry mask, he revealed himself.

"Oh, Jack! Well... come in!" she called, turning toward the stairs. "Greg! Jack's here to see y'all!"

Footsteps thundered above. Greg appeared, peering around the doorway.

"Aah, Kansas! What are you supposed to be? A giant rat?"

Jack frowned. "No... I'm a kangaroo."

Greg blinked. “A can-ya-row?”

“It’s a kangaroo, son,” his mother corrected.

Greg grinned. “Oh. A can-ya-row-some.”

She sighed. “It’s an Australian marsupial.”

Greg laughed it off. “Never mind. Let’s go.”

Out on the sidewalk, Jack asked, “What are you?”

Greg pulled on his mask. Its scorched face and jagged fangs caught the light.

“What do you think?”

“The devil?” Jack guessed.

Greg laughed. “Hell, y’all.”

At the corner, Brad waited, clutching a guitar. He wore a shaggy fake beard and a long coat. When Jack asked, Brad opened it to reveal a stuffed sock hanging absurdly from his waist.

“I’m Jim Morrison,” he declared proudly.

He’d seen something on the news, some scandal, something outrageous, and decided this was the costume.

Greg and Jack exchanged a glance. “Real flashy.”

“Looks like it’s going to be a *long* night,” Greg added.

Jack smirked. “Yeah... right to *The End*.”

Greg grinned and sang, “He won’t light anybody’s fire tonight.”

Brad collapsed in laughter. He couldn't match their wit, but he didn't need to, laughing was enough.

When he finally caught his breath, he looked at Jack. "So what are you again? A rat?"

"Yeah," Greg added, "a giant rat."

Jack's smile faltered. The costume suddenly felt ridiculous. "I said, it's a kangaroo."

Brad nodded enthusiastically. "Oh yeah! Those hopping animals from *Wild Kingdom*! That's cool."

Relief washed over Jack. "Let's bounce."

**

Inside the house, the air felt wrong. The hallway was charred, its wooden frame exposed like bones. Each step drew out a long creak from the floor, as though the house itself were breathing. Somewhere deeper inside, a dull rhythmic sound echoed, like distant drumming.

At the far end, an archway flickered with firelight. The old woman moved backward toward it, silently beckoning.

Sandy focused on the light, pushing forward on his crutches. Each step drained him. He needed to sit.

Beyond the archway, the space opened into a lounge room lit by a low, steady fire. Shadows crawled along the walls. A large couch faced the flames, with a heavy slate table before it.

The woman gestured for them to sit. Sandy didn't hesitate. Peter followed. Linda stayed behind. Her eyes flicked back down the hallway toward the door. Something wasn't right.

On the table sat a large bowl, and the woman pointed to it. Peter lifted it, peering inside. Sandy leaned in, and his face lit up. Lollies and piles of them.

Candy cigarettes, Necklaces, Lemonheads and Red Hots were dressed in the bowl.

Sandy grabbed handful after handful, stuffing them into his bag. Peter quickly joined in. Linda didn't move. She watched.

The old woman turned toward the fireplace. Slowly, she picked up a long iron poker. Linda's stomach tightened.

She rushed forward, whispering urgently for the boys to get up. Peter stood. Sandy struggled under the weight of his bag, now too heavy to carry. Linda grabbed it and hauled him upright. The woman's back was still turned.

Still... poking the fire.

They didn't wait. Sandy led, thumping hard down the hallway. The front door burst open under the force of his crutch. They stumbled out onto the porch,

BANG.

The door slammed shut behind them. They froze, then ran. Down the steps, across the yard and into the street.

Behind them, the house sat in silence, dark, empty... as though it had never been occupied at all.

"That place gave me the creeps," Linda said.

"Me too," Peter admitted.

They turned for home.

Near their driveway, they spotted Jack, Greg, and Brad approaching.

"How'd you go?" Jack called.

Linda shook her head. "Halloween gives me the creeps."

"Why?" Greg asked.

"We just came from this house... tall, with steeples, like rockets on the roof. And this old lady, she let us in..."

Brad's expression shifted.

"Oh," he said quietly. "You mean the abandoned house."

Linda frowned. "It wasn't abandoned."

Brad shook his head. “It used to belong to Mrs Wene. My old teacher. She died when it burned down.”

He paused.

“It’s been empty ever since.”

A silence fell, Greg and Jack smiled at each other, their faces tightening.

“Hollow Wene.”

CORPORAL CRAIG'S NIGHTMARE

As he scans the room, his eyes settle on a mound of potato sacks piled high in the centre of the darkness. One by one, he hoists them onto his shoulder, trudging across the floor before tossing them into a yawning pit that swallows each with a dull, hollow echo. He works without pause, repeating the motion until time begins to blur.

Then, movement. Subtle at first. A shifting from within the pile. He freezes, watching. The sacks tremble faintly, as though something inside is stirring. Curiosity draws him closer. He presses his hands against the coarse fabric, feeling along its surface, searching for a seam, an opening, anything. There is none.

The movement continues, uneasy now, he lifts another sack and drapes it across his back. As he carries it, something inside writhes. He feels it, alive.

Then comes the scratch. A slow, deliberate scrape against his shoulder, then another, sharper. Like a claw forcing its way through the canvas.

With a shout, he drops the sack. It bursts apart on impact. What spills out is worse than anything he imagined: skeletal rats, their bodies half-rotted, slick with decay. Flesh hangs in strips from their bones as they scatter in every direction. Instinct tells him to

contain them, but he's too late. They're not fleeing. They're coming for him.

They swarm his legs, a tide of claws and teeth. He stumbles, trying to shake them off, but they climb higher, knees, thighs, waist. He swats, kicks, and panics, but they keep coming closer, faster, and more relentlessly.

His scream tears through the darkness, never stopping.

Terry Craig jerks upright in bed, scrambling backward until his shoulders press against the headboard. The scream is still ripping from his throat when his eyes finally open. Reality crashes in, the room, the bed, it's night. The dream loosens its grip.

Beside him, Tina is already awake, pulled from sleep by his violent tossing. She reaches out, placing a hand on his shoulder, but he recoils instantly, flinching as though her touch burns.

For a moment, she wants to escape, but she stops herself. This isn't him, it's the nightmare.

Still, the fear lingers; these episodes are getting worse.

Since leaving the Marines, Terry hasn't been the same. Not just jobless, but detached and distant. Whatever he carried home from Vietnam, he hasn't

put it down. He's no longer Corporal Craig. He's just Terry, and he doesn't seem to know what that means.

The strain is spreading through the house. The boys keep their distance. Tracy feels it more than the others. Tina watches her daughter change, harden, carry something she doesn't understand. There's anger there, something unspoken.

Sometimes Tina wonders, quietly, guiltily, if something followed Terry home, something unseen, something wrong.

She hates herself for thinking it, but she can't ignore it. By morning, she decides, she'll speak to Father Owen after church.

In the next room, Tracy lies awake, staring into the dark. She heard everything. This isn't new. She's seen it before, her father thrashing in his sleep, waking with that look in his eyes. Not confusion, not just fear, but terror. The kind that stays.

Her mother says it's rodents. That they trigger something in him. That's why she always insists: *If you see any, tell me. I'll take care of it.* Keep them away. Keep him calm, but Tracy isn't so sure it's that simple.

Last night lingers in her mind. She came home from Halloween to hear her mother on the phone,

recounting what happened. Kids in costumes, laughter, nothing unusual.

Until one of them stepped forward dressed as a giant rat. Her father opened the door, saw it, and froze. Then dropped the bowl of candy and walked away.

Just... left.

Tracy can't shake the thought. "Jack."

Earlier that week, he and his friends had been in her yard, playing around. That's when she saw the squirrel. The way it moved, too close, too fast. Something in her snapped. She grabbed a bat and killed it before she could think.

Jack had stared at her like she was a stranger.

"A thug", he called her.

He didn't understand. She used to think he was cute. Now she can't stand him. Lying there in the dark, the idea takes hold, growing stronger by the second. The rat costume, it had to be him.

And if it was... Then maybe this wasn't over.

Her thoughts begin to sharpen, twisting into something colder. Something more deliberate.

Sleep finally creeps in, Tracy is no longer afraid, she's planning.

REDEMPTION

The next day, Tracy and her family sit in a pew, looking up at Father Owen. Tracy knows the rhythm of the Mass well, the readings first, then the Homily. At first, she found it unbearable. Every service felt identical, an unchanging cycle of gestures and words. She had once complained to her mother about it. Her mother had taken her aside and explained gently.

“We’re used to it because we were raised this way. Church, in a sense, is like a meal.”

“A meal?” Tracy had replied.

Her mother continued, “When people gather for a meal, they talk, they sit together, they share food, and eventually they leave. Mass follows the same pattern. We gather, we listen, we share, and then we go, carrying something of it with us into our lives.”

After that, Tracy stopped resisting it. She no longer questioned the routine, she simply followed it.

Father Owen steps to the altar and begins the first reading from Hebrew scripture:

“The Lord’s spirit departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. His servants said to him, ‘We know this spirit troubles you. Command

us, and we will find a man skilled in playing the harp. When the spirit comes upon you, he will play, and you will be made well again.” (1 Samuel 16:14)

He continues with the second and third readings, but Tina barely hears them after the phrase *evil spirit*. It lingers in her mind, repeating itself like a warning she cannot dismiss.

“The evil spirit is tormenting him, the evil spirit is tormenting him.”

Then, hope flickers; there is mention of music, of a harp that soothes the afflicted. Perhaps, she thinks, that is what Terry needs. Something to calm whatever has taken hold of him.

Father Owen begins the Homily, drawing meaning from the scripture. He speaks of Saul, chosen and anointed, yet disobedient to God’s command. Saul spares what he should have destroyed, and in doing so, loses favour. As punishment, he is tormented by an evil spirit. Only David’s harp can bring him peace, and even then, only for a time. David soothes Saul, but envy grows between them, and their bond fractures.

The Homily concludes with a reflection for All Saints’ Day: that faith and obedience lead us to those “Davids” in our lives, those who may bring healing or restoration when things fall into disorder.

Tracy, usually disengaged during sermons, listens closely. Something in the story holds her attention. Order, obedience, consequence, these ideas settle in her mind. She begins to believe that she, too, needs a “David” to put things right.

After the service, St George’s Catholic Church hosts its All Saints’ Day fete on the school grounds. The church and school share the same site, and the grounds are transformed with stalls, tables, and activities. Volunteers sell food, handmade goods, and donated items to raise money for the parish. It is a long-standing tradition, always well attended.

This year, because All Saints’ Day falls on a Sunday, the crowd is even larger than usual.

Tracy’s father has set up a stall displaying his army figurines, arranged in detailed dioramas across several tables. The miniature battle scenes draw attention, especially from children. Tracy is left to watch the stall while her parents move between other booths. She has told her father she intends to join the scavenger hunt later, the highlight of the fete, with sweets and small prizes hidden across the grounds, often leftovers from Halloween.

For now, she waits.

Tina, meanwhile, drifts through the fete in a daze, still preoccupied with the scripture from earlier. She stops at a stall selling music records. A transistor

radio beside it plays a Christian station, WIBG: “*I Believe in God.*”

A song catches her attention, one she has heard before but never understood.

*For I know that it's hard to see,
All the things we ought to be,
Many things we cannot see are there,
The Son died for you and me that we may live
eternally...*

Through Him, there is a peace we can share...

The chorus repeats softly:

Come and see me, brother... come and see me,
sister...

When the song ends, the announcer identifies the artist:

Glass Harp.

The word *harp* strikes her sharply, and something clicks.

Maybe that is it, she thinks. Not just ritual, not just habit, but something she has been missing. Terry has always been the one to bring them to church, to hold the family together in attendance, even if the meaning had always felt distant. Perhaps she would understand it one day. Perhaps this is that moment.

It feels as though something lifts from her chest, light, sudden, unearned. She repeats the lyric in her mind:

Come and see me, sister...

She decides she must find that album. Perhaps it is the beginning of something changing.

**

Jack, meanwhile, sits bored in a pew in a different church entirely. The Presbyterian service is nearly over, and his attention is already elsewhere, on the fete waiting outside.

Greg sits a few rows ahead, glancing back and grinning. Jack grins back, earning a sharp look from Mary, who silently urges him to behave. He cannot sit still. He waits for the final words, the benediction that signals release.

“By the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope.”

The congregation responds in unison: “Thanks be to God. Amen.”

The organ swells. The service is over. Jack is already moving before it finishes properly, slipping into the aisle, trying, always, to be the first out. The minister reaches the door before him, standing there as a final greeting to the departing congregation.

Jack slows just enough to nod, then slips past and breaks into open air.

The Presbyterian church lies only two blocks from the Catholic school grounds. Mary had not driven that morning; Jim had left early for work, preoccupied with unfinished commitments at Temple. Their lives had become like that, shared routines that rarely aligned.

When the family gathers outside, Mary, Peter, Jack, Linda, and Sandy begin walking toward the fete.

Sandy moves carefully on his crutches but says nothing about the strain. Mary, too, looks forward to the event; she knows the stalls well and hopes to find useful bargains for the house.

As they cross the street and approach the school grounds, the noise and density of the crowd hit them at once. Stalls fill the playground and hall, bright and busy.

Jack immediately spots Greg and asks Mary if he can go with him. She agrees without hesitation, and he disappears into the crowd.

Sandy, however, drifts away unnoticed, drawn toward the army figurine stall.

He studies the miniature battlefields, absorbed. The scene feels alive in a way he cannot explain. Then he looks up.

He recognises the girl behind the table instantly, the same girl who threw his bike back at him last week. He freezes for a moment. The girl also notices him and leans in slightly so no one else can hear. She snaps, “Get lost, you little twerp.”

Sandy says nothing. His expression hardens, but he turns away and limps off through the crowd.

As Tracy watches him leave, recognition flashes across her face. She looks around instinctively for Jack, but he is gone.

The anger she feels is not new; it has simply found a target. Without thinking, she has directed it at his younger brother.

When Sandy is out of sight, a faint unease follows. He had not deserved it. He had done nothing.

But her conflict with Jack feels larger than him now, something unresolved, something spilling over into anything close enough to bear it, collateral damage.

THE SCAVENGER HUNT

At the edge of the playground stands a hot dog stand with a large sign reading “*Frank’s Frankfurters.*” Frank is busy serving wieners to a long line of hungry customers. Greg and Jack wait patiently, full of anticipation.

Jack had a hot dog at school last week and is already looking forward to another. Ten cents buys a bun, a foot-long sausage, and plenty of tomato sauce. He can’t wait.

An announcement comes over the loudspeaker: a scavenger hunt will begin soon in the park across the road. Greg tells Jack it’s like an Easter egg hunt, except instead of eggs there are all sorts of candy. Even better, every find is a surprise. The two boys glance at each other, hesitate for a moment, then step out of the line and head toward the park.

When they arrive, at least a hundred children are already gathered. Jack scans the crowd for Peter, Linda, and Sandy, and feels relieved when he spots Sandy. He knows Sandy struggles to keep up, so he plans to secure a stash for him.

The park is bordered by an avenue of trees and contains a toilet block on one side and a jungle gym in the centre, plenty of places to hide treasures.

An organiser stands at the centre, explaining the rules. The main rule is simple: you cannot take more than you can carry, and the hunt ends when the siren sounds.

Jack tunes out, already calculating his advantage. A few good hiding spots stand out, but speed will decide everything.

The organiser raises her hand.

“Ready... set... hunt!”

The crowd erupts. It’s like an explosion of movement as children scatter in every direction. Jack sprints toward the jungle gym, convinced that’s where the best prizes will be.

Sandy starts last and is already far behind. His disability slows him, and weaving through the crowd only makes it harder. He looks for clues, clusters of kids, suspicious activity, but finds nothing. He checks the trees, scanning upward, but sees nothing there either.

Finally, he spots a small nook behind the toilet block and heads for it. As he arrives, he notices something beneath a fallen branch beside a tree. Before he can reach it, another child darts in, snatches it, and runs off.

Exhausted and frustrated, Sandy collapses onto the ground.

Jack, meanwhile, has filled his pockets and even his shirt with lollies. He feels like Yogi Bear carrying a stolen picnic basket.

He notices the toilet block and runs around the corner. There, he spots a small concealed dip in the ground.

“There’s bound to be something here,” he thinks.

As he moves in, he fails to notice Sandy sitting nearby on the other side of the structure.

In the hollow, Jack finds a large rainbow-coloured lollipop.

“Wow!” he shouts.

He turns, and his stomach drops. Tracy is standing between him and the only exit.

She has been watching him since the hunt began, keeping her distance. Now she follows him in.

Her expression is cold, furious. Without hesitation, she lunges.

Jack is caught completely off guard. He tries to speak, but there is no time. She is on him instantly, striking him across the head several times before he manages to block her.

He shoves her away and scrambles to his feet, but she grabs him again and locks him with her hands around his throat. They crash to the ground, and she

gains the upper hand, pinning him down and tightening her grip around his throat.

Jack struggles for air. Fear takes hold. Tracy finally has him where she wants him. She stares into his eyes, expecting arrogance, but instead sees fear. It is a look she has seen before. It unsettles her.

A memory surfaces: her father, the look in his eyes after waking from a nightmare in the lounge room. Not the look she expected. Not the look she wanted to see now.

Fragments of thought rush through her mind: Father Owen's homily, talk of evil spirits, of deliverance. For a moment, doubt breaks through her rage. Her grip loosens.

Then suddenly "WAM! she collapses.

Jack gasps for air, barely conscious. As he comes to, he sees Sandy standing over them, holding a crutch, smiling as if he has just hit a home run.

Sandy had heard the struggle from the far side of the toilet block. He came around the corner and saw Tracy attacking Jack, the same girl who had bullied him before, thrown his bike against the house, and left him with a broken leg.

Pain and anger surge through him. Without thinking, he swings his crutch and strikes her. She drops instantly.

When Tracy wakes, she is still lying on top of Jack. Confused, she holds him tightly, whispering apologies and refusing to let go. Neither of them moves.

Just then, the siren sounds to end the scavenger hunt, and the children return to the centre of the park.

Tracy has no memory of what happened. Her head aches, but she seems changed, calmer, distant from the anger that consumed her before. She gets up and reaches for Jack's hand.

Jack can hardly believe the transformation, as if something has left her, something dark, replaced by silence.

It was as if Sandy's blow had shaken something loose, something dark, and now she stood different, lighter.

Then Greg's words came back to him. All Saints' Day... the one day when demons can leave you.

Had something really left her? He didn't know. He didn't care. All that mattered was that it was over.

He took her hand, and together they walked back toward the centre of the park.

Sandy liked striking Tracy. The dull ache in his leg had faded, but it felt good. He looked down, and the bag was empty. Sadness crept in. He lagged behind the others as they made their way back. By the time

he arrived, Linda and Peter were already there, their bags filled to the brim. The organiser noticed Sandy's bag. She called everyone in, and she asked Sandy to step forward. Her voice softened as she spoke about how difficult it must have been for him to take part, only to come away with nothing. Then, with a warm smile, she thanked him for trying and handed him a large basket of candy.

The crowd erupted into applause. A few kids came over, patting him on the head.

Jack stepped forward quietly and tipped most of his own lollies into Sandy's basket.

Sandy looked down, surprised. Among the pile, he spotted the large, rainbow-swirled lollipop Jack had found earlier. He picked it up, turning it in his hand, a smile spreading across his face. Jack reached over and ruffled his hair, and Sandy grinned.

PART 3

FOUND

Sandy peers through the café window and spots Peter sitting alone at a table. His black hair is streaked with white at the shoulders. With a surge of nerves, Sandy pushes open the door and steps inside. After six months of searching, he's finally found him.

The café sits in the Midlands, a worn suburb of Perth. The surrounding streets look washed out, as if dusted in pale sand. The shopping complex is tired and crumbling, its windows cluttered with *Vacant* signs.

The door creaks as Sandy enters. Peter looks up, startled, then smiles.

“Little brother.”

He stands, and they embrace. Sandy feels how thin he is. There's a faint, stale smell about him, like he hasn't showered in days. They sit. Up close, Sandy notices Peter's freckles, just as prominent as when he was young. His right foot taps restlessly against the floor, keeping time with something only he can hear. His eyes flick constantly around the room, as if even the ordinary might be dangerous.

Sandy forces a smile.

“So... big brother. Where have you been?”

The moment the words leave his mouth, he regrets them. Peter had been strange the last time they met, three years ago, and nothing has changed. Sandy didn't spend six months tracking him down just to scare him off again.

He quickly pivots.

“Do you want a coffee?”

Peter blinks. “Ah, yeah. Thanks.”

Sandy heads to the counter, orders two cappuccinos and a pair of banana bread slices. As he waits, he glances back, reassured to see Peter still there.

When he returns, he sets the tray down.

“So... what have you been up to?”

He already knows part of the story. Peter had been living in an apartment in Kenmore Square, Boston, with a friend, until he vanished. The friend had said, “*He went crazy. Thought I was spying on him. Said I worked for the government.*”

It wasn't the first time.

There had been rumours when Peter left university, stories of strange behaviour. When Peter visited Sandy in Canberra years later, the change had been undeniable. He couldn't separate what was

real from what wasn't. Sandy had tried to explain, to ground him, but Peter couldn't follow.

Now, sitting across from him, Sandy wonders how it ever got this bad.

Peter shrugs. "Not much, little brother."

Sandy raises an eyebrow. "You'll have to do better than that."

Peter drifts, as he always has, lost in thought, tracing patterns no one else can see. Like staring into a *Where's Wally?* page, searching for something hidden. It's unsettling, but familiar.

Then Peter leans forward.

"I've got something on my mind. I need to get it off my chest."

A waiter arrives, placing the coffee and banana bread on the table. Peter grabs the food and eats quickly, almost desperately.

"Do you remember Fadel?" he asks. "The boy from the Franklin Street duplex?"

Sandy does, vividly.

They'd moved there after Glenolden, when their father took a job at Boston College. Money had been tight, so they lived twenty miles out, in a cluster of eight duplexes surrounded by forest. Franklin Street was the only way in or out.

The woods had defined their childhood. Two places stood out: Indian Rock, a granite spire riddled with crevices, and Indian Pond at its base, no bigger than a basketball court. In summer, they chased frogs and minnows. In winter, they skated and played hockey across the frozen surface.

The families there had little, but the kids had each other. Next door lived a family of five from the Middle East. Fadel was the eldest and Peter's closest friend.

Sandy frowns. "Yeah... I remember. Why?"

Peter's voice flattens.

"He died. A few weeks ago, cancer."

Sandy exhales quietly. He finds himself wondering about Fadel's younger brother, Yasuf, his age, and where life has taken him.

"How did you hear about that?"

"I've kept track of them," Peter says. "They moved to Cleveland. I visited Fadel after I finished uni. He was in a rundown apartment, working at a RadioShack. He wasn't doing well even then."

"How long ago?"

"Six years."

"And now?"

"I saw his obituary. Someone wrote about him." A pause. "Not everyone gets that."

“I’m sorry,” Sandy says.

Peter looks up sharply.

“You shouldn’t be. He ruined my life.”

Sandy nods, encouraging him to continue.

“It was something he said. Years ago. Got me into trouble.”

Sandy frowns. What could a teenager say that would change everything?

“What did he say?”

Peter studies him.

“Do you remember when I got into real trouble?”

A flicker of memory surfaces, Linda’s voice:

“*Peter’s done a bad thing.*” But no one ever explained what.

“Does it matter now?” Sandy asks.

Peter shrugs. “No... not really. Just been thinking about it. With him dying and all.” He hesitates, then continues.

“There was this girl. Betty. Did you ever meet her?”

Sandy shakes his head.

“She wasn’t pretty,” Peter says bluntly. “But neither was I. We met at a party. Her hair... it was strange. Straight, but it curled in opposite directions on each side of her face. I couldn’t stop looking at it. She had freckles too, darker than mine.”

He pauses, lost in the memory.

“She went to a different school. Thank God. I couldn’t face her after... after what happened.”

Sandy stays silent.

“We got drunk,” Peter continues. “Left one party for another. In the car, she sat on my lap. We started kissing... clumsy, awkward. Teeth knocking against her braces. But it felt... good.”

His voice softens.

“I remember glancing at Fadel. He was with another girl. When we got to the house, we kept going. Basement couch. More drinks. Same thing.”

“And?” Sandy prompts gently.

“Fadel got bored. Wanted to leave.”

Sandy shrugs slightly. “Sounds like a normal night.”

Peter shakes his head.

“No. That’s not it.”

He leans back, staring into his coffee.

“The next week, Fadel was joking about Betty. Said I should be careful, might get her pregnant.”

Sandy frowns. “From kissing?”

“That’s what I asked.” Peter lets out a hollow laugh. “He laughed at me too. Then he told me how it really worked... and what to do to avoid it.”

He falls quiet.

Sandy studies him. “Sounds like Fadel thought he was an expert.”

“We were good friends,” Peter says. “Until then.”

Sandy hesitates. “So... condoms weren’t easy to get back then?”

Peter stiffens, uncomfortable. He looks away, searching for an exit from the conversation.

“How’s Jack?” he asks suddenly.

TROUBLE

The final school bell rings, and Jack sits on a weathered bench in the schoolyard, watching the gates with quiet anticipation. His youngest son will be out any moment. He's just returned from a four-week business trip, long, exhausting, and arranged for his wife to meet their son here without mentioning he'd be waiting. He wanted the surprise.

He arrived early and didn't mind. The place carries a familiar weight. The smell of the air, the distant chatter, the scrape of shoes on concrete, it all pulls him back. Back to trouble.

He remembers Henry, a tall, gangly kid, sitting on the ground, ringed by bullies. Jack had watched from a distance, feeling the urge to step in, but he was new then. New kids don't interfere. He told himself it was just lunch money. That Henry would be fine, but Henry didn't look fine.

The bell had rung before anything worse could happen. Or so Jack thought.

They had English next.

Ashland was nothing like Glenolden. And Mr Polar was nothing like any teacher Jack had known. He was strict, cold. and unforgiving. If you were late to class? You were punished.

Speak out of turn? Punished.

Homework missing? Punished.

And his weapon of choice is a ruler. Jack had heard of belts back in Australia and hated them. But this... this was different, sort of personal.

Jack made it to class before the second bell. Five seconds after it rang, Henry slipped in.

His clothes were dirty. His head low. He shuffled past the teacher's desk and sat down without a word. Mr Polar watched him the entire way. The room tightened.

Henry wasn't a troublemaker. Everyone knew that. But Mr Polar... he didn't need a reason. The students had a name for him, *Psycho Michael*. He seemed to enjoy finding someone to break. Today, it was Henry.

"Henry."

The word cut through the room. Mr Polar stepped forward.

"Why are you late?"

Henry flicked his long hair forward, hiding the flush creeping across his face.

"Sorry... sir."

Mr Polar exhaled sharply.

"If I had a dime for every time I heard that..."

Jack could see it, Henry was barely holding himself together. His hands trembled. His body stiffened, as if he were bracing for impact.

“Stand up, please.”

Polite words with cruel intent. Jack thought.

Henry rose slowly.

“I want you to place your hands on the desk.”

The word *please* didn't soften anything. Everyone knew what was coming. Even the boys in the back, usually loud, usually laughing, had gone quiet, though a few snickers slipped through.

Mr Polar turned his head sharply and silence fell.

Then he reached into his jacket... and pulled out the ruler, like drawing a pistol.

“Hands on the desk.”

Henry obeyed. His fingers shook as they touched the surface. His head dropped. The room held its breath.

Jack felt it again, that pull. That instinct he'd never been able to ignore. The same one that made him step in for his brother, no matter the cost. This wasn't right.

Before he could think,

“STOP!”

The word exploded out of him. The class jolted. Even Mr Polar flinched. All eyes turned to Jack. He was already on his feet.

He crossed the room, grabbed the ruler straight from the teacher's hand. For a second, Mr Polar just stared, too stunned to react.

Jack realised what he'd done and ran out the door. Down the hallway. Through the school gates. Gone.

Back on the bench, Jack exhales softly. He can still see it like it happened yesterday. He wonders, not for the first time, if his own son would ever do something like that. The kid's cheeky enough.

Back then, Jack hadn't fit in. Most of the kids were cliquey, closed off. They mocked his accent, his words. He missed his old life, his friend Greg, the easy way they talked.

But after that day... Everything changed.

He wasn't the new kid anymore. He was the kid who stood up. Word spread fast. The stories grew. And when Mr Polar was dismissed, not just for that day, but for a long list of complaints, Jack's outburst became the final push. He became something else.

A hero.

Jack smiles faintly at the memory, and then the bell rings again.

Kids pour out of the school. Jack stays seated, scanning the crowd. Then he sees him.

"Hey!"

The boy turns. Spots him. Breaks into a grin, and runs. They meet halfway, wrapping each other in a tight embrace.

When they pull back, Jack looks down at him, waiting. The boy's lips twitch with excitement as he tries to speak.

“W-when... d-d-did you get h-home?”

ANXIOUS

Responding to Peter's question, Sandy explains that Jack still lives in Massachusetts and that his internet company is doing well. When Peter asks about their father, Sandy hesitates before answering.

“Peter... Dad died two years ago.”

Peter hadn't been to the funeral; no one even knew where he was. Still, Sandy is caught off guard by his reaction. Peter's eyes fall to the floor. Sandy follows his gaze, drawn back into memories he would rather leave buried. But he knows he has to say it.

Their parents, Jim and Mary, had settled in the small town of Woodville in New South Wales after Jim retired from Boston College, forced out by declining health. Jim had always been a heavy drinker, and Mary believed it was the root of it all. Doctors repeatedly warned him, but he ignored them. Every evening, like clockwork, he would open a bottle and drink until sleep took him. Days blurred into one another.

Eventually, his body gave in. His liver failed him more than once, forcing him to stop drinking, but by then, the damage was done. His final illness would be the one he couldn't recover from.

Despite his condition, Jim refused to slow down. Even in his seventies, he continued attending coaching conferences. The constant travel wore him down, but he wouldn't listen. His last trip was meant to be to Scotland, with a stopover in Bangkok, a city tied to one of his many past affairs. Mary tried to stop him, but after years of the same battles, she had nothing left to give. After more than fifty years of marriage, they had come to an unspoken understanding: Jim would live as he chose.

Somewhere along that journey, he picked up a virus. By the time he reached Scotland, he was bedridden in a small B&B, never making it to the conference. Instead of seeking treatment there, he forced himself onto a flight to Boston, where he still had lifelong medical coverage. Jack met him at the airport and rushed him to the hospital.

Sandy remembers the phone call. A doctor's mistake with an IV nearly drowned him. Jim spent two weeks in intensive care, followed by three months in rehabilitation. The days dragged on, and the confinement ate at him. Whenever Jack visited, Jim would ask the same question:

“When are you going to get me out of here?”

Jack could only repeat what the doctors said: “When you're well enough.”

But in Jack's eyes, that day would never come.

Eventually, Jim forced the issue. Against medical advice, he signed himself out. Jack arranged the flight back to Australia. At first, he planned only to see him off, but seeing his father so frail, he couldn't leave him alone. He boarded the plane with him instead, arranging for Sandy to meet them in Sydney. Jim never made it. He died halfway over the Pacific.

Sandy looks up as he finishes. Peter sits in silence, his face tight, tears slipping free despite his efforts to hide them. Sandy pauses more than once as he speaks. Their father had always been distant and hard to reach, but the loss still cut deep. All his life, Sandy had searched for something from him... and now that chance was gone.

Trying to shift the weight of the moment, Peter finally asks, "How's Mum?"

Mary had been beside herself with worry over Peter. She had searched relentlessly for him. In the end, it was only a bar fight in Fremantle, one that led to his arrest, that gave Sandy a lead.

Until then, he hadn't fully grasped what Peter had been going through.

"My paranoia was terrible when I was indoors," Peter had once said.

Sandy tries to imagine it, the constant unease, never feeling safe. Sleeping on park benches,

drifting between shelters, carrying everything you own, always moving because no one wants you around. Peter had been pushed from place to place, unwelcome everywhere. Eventually, he ended up in Perth, for the weather, and for the faint hope of opportunity.

Sandy still struggles to understand.

“How did he end up like this?”

Peter had always been different, seeing things others didn't, interpreting the world in his own way. But this... this was something else. The paranoia had taken hold completely. You couldn't reason with him anymore; it was like trying to reach someone who no longer saw the same reality.

Sandy wonders: Is being rational the norm? To have empathy, to question your own assumptions?

Or can someone become so lost in their own mind that they no longer see the damage they leave behind?

The bar fight was just one incident, one symptom of something much deeper. There must have been others.

Peter shifts in his seat, pulling Sandy out of his thoughts. Sandy blinks, refocuses, and looks at him.

“Well... she worries about you.”

LONG LOST RELATIVE

Mary stood at the sink, waiting for the kettle to boil. Beyond the glass, the crabapple tree stirred in the breeze, violet and white blossoms trembling, their scent faint but familiar. It was a soft, living thing, carefully planted, carefully tended.

Not like Auntie Elma's tree. That one had been beautiful too... until it wasn't. Until it dropped everything and left decay behind.

Mary frowned slightly. There might be a photo somewhere. In the garage, maybe.

The smell reached her before the thought did, gas.

She turned sharply. The flame had died. A thin hiss filled the room. She leaned over and twisted the knob. Whoof.

The burner ignited in a sudden burst. Mary jerked back.

"Gee..."

Her hand lingered over the stove.

"That was dangerous."

The words hung there, and something else came with them.

A memory.

Not gentle, sharp, intrusive.

An envelope pinned to a door. It read,

“For Elma. Don’t open the door.” Mary’s throat tightened.

It had been three years since Uncle Tim first wrote to her. Pages and pages, longhand, uneven, written by a man who knew time was slipping, but memory wasn’t.

He wanted her to type them up. Turn them into something lasting, and she had agreed.

At first, it was simple, stories of farms and dust and horses walking in slow circles. Of wool spun by hand, of long days and harder nights. His words carried a rhythm, almost comforting.

But beneath it... something else lingered. Pieces of a past no one had ever spoken about. Tim wrote of his siblings, Tomas, Andrew, and Jasmine.

Jasmine, the name had always felt distant, closed off. Mary had only ever known one thing: she died young. No one had ever said how.

She travelled to Alexandra to see Tim. Tim was smaller than she remembered. Thinner. But his eyes, sharp, searching, missed nothing. He spoke for hours. Drew diagrams like he always had. Laughed at things she didn’t fully understand, and always, somewhere in the telling, Jasmine returned.

She was bright with laughter. Close to her father, closer than the others. Too close to forget, and Mary listened. Waited. Until she couldn't anymore.

“What happened to her?”

Tim stopped, not just paused, stopped.

His eyes lifted to hers, searching her face as if expecting recognition.

“Don't you know?”

A cold weight settled in her chest.

“No.”

Something shifted in him then. A decision made too late to take back.

“She married Frank,” he said quietly. “One of the men from the factory. Good man. They were happy... for a while.”

Mary leaned forward.

“They had a daughter,” Tim continued. “A beautiful girl.”

A faint smile touched his lips.

“She still is.”

Mary's breath caught. “Still is.”

“Then there was another baby,” he said. “Didn't make it.”

The words fell flat and heavy.

“Jasmine... broke after that. Couldn't come back from it. Your mother looked after the baby while she saw doctors. Tried to get better.” He swallowed.

“She didn’t.”

Silence pressed in around them. “She turned the gas on,” Tim said at last. “In the kitchen.” Mary didn’t move. Didn’t breathe.

“She made sure no one could stop her.”

The smell of gas seemed stronger now. Mary blinked, back in her kitchen, hand still resting on the stove. Her chest felt tight.

“Mary?”

Tim’s voice, echoing from memory. She forced herself to speak.

“What happened... to the child?”

Tim looked at her again. And this time, there was something else in his expression. Not hesitation, but recognition.

“She was three,” he said softly. “Frank couldn’t cope. Not back then. Not alone.”

A pause.

“Your parents took her in.”

The room tilted.

Mary’s thoughts stumbled, then raced, scrambling over half-remembered moments, small inconsistencies, and questions she’d never quite formed.

“You’re saying, ”

“He gave her up,” Tim said. “Thought she’d be safer. Better off.”

Another pause.

“I thought you knew.”

Mary shook her head slowly.

Everything inside her felt... misaligned. As though her life had been built slightly off-centre, and she was only just noticing.

“Oh my God...” she whispered. “Why didn’t they tell me?”

Tim didn’t answer straight away. Because there wasn’t an answer that mattered anymore.

The kettle shrieked. Mary flinched violently, dragged back into the present. Steam curled into the air. She turned it off with unsteady hands, poured the water, barely noticing as it sloshed into the cup. In the garage, there’s a box. She knew where it was.

Dust hung in the air as she opened it. Old papers and photos. The weight of years pressed into cardboard. Her hands moved faster than her thoughts until they stopped with an envelope.

For Mary.

Her name. Written by someone who had never watched her grow. Mary sank to the floor. Her fingers trembled as she opened it.

Mary, my love... The words felt alive.

They spoke of love, but also fear. Of a childhood shaped by violence. Of a mind slipping, cracking under pressure.

Of moments where kindness turned suddenly into something else.

'My precious baby girl, my dearest, you will probably read this letter far into the future. You won't understand this until you've grown up, and maybe never, but I need to express my love for you so that you will always feel loved. Your father and I love you very much. Your father is a wonderful man, and he has treated me well. He was born in England and came from a village called Deeping Gate. He came to Melbourne by boat 10 years ago. His father was a painter, and his mother was a seamstress. I believe they still reside in England. My family's upbringing wasn't so good. Our father was drunk and hard on us. The years of carting goods from Ballarat to Melbourne took their toll. When I think of him now, I feel no love. His temper was ruled by the drink, coming home late at night, demanding respect and leaving the next day with none. Your Uncle Tim received the most abuse, and I worry about him. He appears to be pleasant, but I know he has ghosts. I'm saying this because it was hard on all of us. I was too sensitive and broke down many times during my childhood. The thought of having children is too much for me to cope with.

However, I'm overwhelmed with love for you. There are moments when I become my father, the mean old fart who beat you for looking the other way. My emotions are out of control, and I need to do something about them.'

Mary's breath hitched. She thought of her own children. The times she had lost control. The name they had whispered. "The Beast." Her grip tightened on the paper.

The words hollowed something out inside her. She pressed the letter to her chest, crumpling it, as though holding it tighter might bring something back. But it didn't.

Sandy watched Peter from across the table. There was no easy way to say it. No version of this landed softly.

"Do you remember Grandma Liz?"

Peter shrugged. "Yeah."

Sandy hesitated. Then,

"We're not related to her."

Peter blinked.

"What?"

"Mum was adopted," Sandy said. "Her real mother... was Jasmine."

Peter's expression shifted, confusion, then focus, like something snapping into place.

"Wait. So, Grandma isn't, "

"Not by blood."

A pause stretched between them.

"She killed herself," Sandy added quietly. "Gas stove."

Peter leaned back slowly.

"Wow..."

For a moment, he said nothing more. Just stared, processing.

Then, almost absently,

"I always thought Mum looked... different."

Sandy nodded.

"You should see the resemblance."

Peter exhaled.

"Mum must've been wrecked when she found out."

Sandy looked past him, out the window.

"Yeah," he said. "Something like that."

But the truth was, it wasn't just something you *found out*.

It was something that rewrote everything that came before it. And nothing ever quite sat right again.

“I’m not sure,” Sandy says. “By the time I spoke to Mum, she’d already known for a while, so I never saw her initial reaction. She told me she was in a daze for days afterwards... though she laughs about it now.” Sandy gives a faint smile.

Peter leans back in his chair, letting the information settle. His foot starts tapping again as he stares out the window to his right, lost in thought. Sandy watches him closely. Peter has always had a distinctive way of drifting off, completely still, eyes fixed, as if the world around him fades away.

Once, Peter tried to explain it: “I see shapes and angles in everything. The rest just... blurs.”

After a moment, Peter blinks and returns to the present.

“How’s Linda?” he asks.

ON THE EDGE

Linda stared down at her phone, waiting for a reply. The haze of the drugs dulled her thoughts, leaving her suspended in a quiet, drifting calm.

The wheelchair's movement jolted her slightly. The nurse behind her guided her down the hallway, back the way she had just come. Her left foot, wrapped in a cast, jutted out awkwardly in front of her like a battering ram.

A message alert chimed and she smiled.

Neil!

“I miss you, Buttercup,” it read.

For a moment, everything else faded. The worry, the pain, the uncertainty, they all slipped into the background. She wondered how he would react to the news, but that could wait.

Looking up, she spotted Rebecca, the *Disney on Ice* program manager, standing further down the hall. Rebecca waved with her usual polished smile. Linda rolled her eyes in response, a silent *Can you believe this?*

The nurse slowed to a stop beside her.

“Thanks,” Linda said, glancing back.

The nurse nodded and walked away.

Rebecca stepped closer. “So, what’s the prognosis?”

“It’s not broken,” Linda replied, “just badly sprained. The doctor thinks a cast will help keep it still... thanks.” The sarcasm in her voice was unmistakable.

She already knew what this meant. Months off the ice, and she knew exactly why Rebecca was here.

Rebecca moved behind the chair and began pushing her toward the café.

Linda clung to the warmth of Neil’s message, but it faded quickly under the weight of reality. The fall replayed in her mind, sharp, sudden, unavoidable.

For six months, she had been skating in Disney’s *Crystal Palace* Down Under Tour, travelling across New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. They had just arrived in Johannesburg.

The fall had happened during practice. Her costume, something they didn’t usually wear in training, had caught on her blade. Rebecca had invited guests to watch, wanting everything to look perfect. The fabric snagged. Her ankle twisted. She hit the ice hard.

Rebecca loved presentation. And Linda... Linda had always delivered.

She had a natural eye for detail, especially when performing as Minnie Mouse, her favourite. It drew attention, admiration... and clearly, Rebecca had noticed.

They reached the café. Linda braced herself, expecting the worst. Rebecca sat across from her, smiling.

“I’m not worried about the skating,” she said. “I actually have a better offer for you.”

Linda leaned back slightly, narrowing her eyes, her head tilting in cautious curiosity.

“I’ve always admired your artistic ability, your attention to detail with costumes. Jill’s leaving next rotation, and I need someone to step into the costume designer role.”

Linda blinked.

Jill had been with the tour for two years, but long stretches away from her husband had taken their toll. It was time for her to go home, to fix what distance had strained.

Linda understood that all too well.

Tour life made relationships complicated. Too many attractive, talented people in close quarters, all searching for comfort in the same restless spaces. She had seen it happen again and again. She thought of Neil.

“I’m not being sent home, I... I thought you were here to let me go,” she admitted.

Rebecca smiled. “Not yet, kid.”

Relief flooded through her. She was staying. Staying on tour. Staying with Neil.

Later, after she was discharged, Rebecca drove her to the Northgate Ice Rink so she could see the team before heading back to the hotel.

As they drove, Linda looked out at the city differently now. She wouldn't be skating tonight, and that stung, but she wasn't losing everything. Not even close.

In fact, this might be exactly where she belonged. Her phone chimed again.

How's the ankle? Sweetie pie!

The warmth drained from her body instantly.

Her eyes flicked to the windows, scanning the passing streets as if he might appear out of nowhere. A tight knot formed in her chest.

She looked down at the sender. It was Henry.

Rebecca glanced over, noticing the shift.

"Everything okay?"

Linda forced a crooked smile. "Yeah... everything's fine."

She slipped the phone into her bag, but the past had already clawed its way back.

Henry was a Canadian hockey player from Burk's Falls, Ontario. Tough, reckless, and always pushing limits, on and off the ice. He had played in the Ontario Hockey League before being dropped after clashing with his coach.

Australia had been his second chance. He landed in Sydney, then found his way to the Newcastle Steelers, and that's where she met him.

At the rink, back when everything still seemed simple. Back before she knew what he was capable of.

After years in the United States and a return to Australia, Linda had even picked up traces of Henry's accent. What began as a one-night stand soon deepened into something more. They lived together for a time, and her feelings grew. He called her "*sweetie pie*," and for a while, she believed she was loved.

But Henry's behaviour unsettled her. He chased other skaters, flirted openly, and dismissed her concerns. One day, she caught him in a corner of the rink, speaking far too intimately with another skater. When she confronted him, he denied everything, but she saw through it. That was the end.

Henry didn't accept it.

The confident, stubborn Canadian, raised on small-town values and used to getting his way, became obsessed. He bombarded her with messages, appeared uninvited at her home and the rink, and followed her relentlessly. Fear crept into Linda's life. Eventually, she fled Newcastle for Sydney, chasing

an opportunity with the *Disney's Christal Palace* Down Under Tour.

But distance didn't stop him.

While staying with a friend, Linda noticed small things going missing, first a bracelet, then clothes. It escalated until she received a photo of the very bracelet she knew she had taken with her. Her car keys disappeared, only to reappear later. The message was clear: Henry was still there.

Even after securing her place on the Tour, the unease followed.

Across Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Auckland, Christchurch, and Perth, she searched for signs of him. Hotel rooms were shared, schedules were tight, yet somehow, traces of his presence lingered. She changed her phone number. Then changed it again. Still, the messages came.

No proof. Just certainty.

She imagined him watching, from across the rink, from hotel windows, from the shadows of crowded arenas. Each city became another puzzle, another quiet dread. Henry clung to her life like something that wouldn't wash away, a stain, a parasite. Day or night, on or off the ice, she felt him there.

Then she met Neil, and at first, she resisted. She didn't want to repeat the past. But Neil was different, gentle, steady, sincere. Where Henry was

loud and possessive, Neil was calm and thoughtful. Slowly, cautiously, she let him in. She needed that sense of safety again.

When the Tour extended to South Africa, Linda allowed herself to hope she'd finally escaped Henry. A new phone, a new country, this had to be enough.

Then the message came.

He had her number. He knew about her ankle. He was close.

“How could he know?” she thought. “It only happened this afternoon.”

Fear sharpened into resolve.

She had to end it, properly, decisively. She should have done it long ago. No more hiding, no more running.

Hands trembling, she typed a message:

Northgate Ice Rink. 20 minutes.

Linda chose a bench overlooking the ice, positioned where she wouldn't be alone. The rink sat in the centre of Northgate Mall, surrounded by balconies where shoppers drifted past, unaware of the tension below.

On the ice, skaters rehearsed under the choreography coach. She recognised the formation immediately, the *Windmill*. Two lines crossing,

spinning, building speed until the outer skater was flung forward into the next sequence.

Once, she had loved that move. Now, she barely noticed it.

Her eyes scanned constantly. Years of growing up in rough neighbourhoods had made her alert and watchful.

Twenty minutes passed; if Henry were here, he would come.

She took some comfort in spotting Neil on the Zamboni, circling the rink. The skaters cleared off, and she watched him work, grounding herself in something familiar.

Then the bench shifted, and a man sat beside her. He was bearded, heavier, and looked ragged.

Henry stared down at his feet, suddenly unsure, like prey caught in its own trap. This wasn't how he imagined it. He had always been the one watching, controlling from a distance. Facing her directly unsettled him.

Still, he forced a smile.

“How’s the ankle?”

Linda studied him, really looked. He’d changed. The strength he once carried as a hockey player had faded. He looked worn.

“What do you want?” she asked coldly.

“You,” he replied. “Of course.”

For a long time, she had feared him. But now, sitting beside him, she saw something else, weakness. He had never touched her, never truly acted. Just watched, waited, and hoped she would break.

“You don’t get to follow me,” she said. “It’s over, completely.”

“I love you.”

She paused, measuring him.

“I don’t love you. And I mean that.”

He leaned closer, desperate now. Words spilled out, apologies, excuses, twisted justifications. He claimed he watched her out of care, that he wanted to help, that he stayed hidden because he feared her anger.

“I couldn’t stop,” he admitted.

For a moment, she saw the vulnerability in him, and it threw her off balance. This wasn’t the confrontation she had imagined.

She placed her hand lightly over his.

Then something caught her eye, the Zamboni had stopped, and Neil was gone.

A presence shifted beside Henry.

“Hey, sport. What’s going on?” Neil pushed.

Linda pulled her hand back immediately. This wasn’t part of the plan, but maybe it didn’t matter anymore.

“This him?” Neil said, eyes fixed. “The one who’s been following you? Let’s take this outside.”

“No,” Linda cut in quickly. “It’s okay. I can handle this.”

Then, without hesitation, she said:

“I was just about to tell Henry, I’m pregnant. It’s Neil’s.”

Silence.

Neil’s expression snapped from anger to shock... then something else, hope, confusion, disbelief.

Henry, looking for the opportunity, ran; he was gone in seconds.

Linda watched him disappear into the crowd, the tension draining from her body as he vanished.

She turned back to Neil.

“Well?”

“We’re... having a baby?” he asked.

She smiled.

“Yes.”

Everything else faded for him in that moment: the confrontation, the fear, the confusion. Only that remained. He pulled her into an embrace.

On the ice below, the abandoned Zamboni churned loudly, circling aimlessly. Linda laughed softly at the chaos of it. Then she kissed him, fully, completely.

Her phone buzzed. She pulled away and glanced at the screen. A message from Henry.

Watch out for strangers, sweetie pie.

Peter glances over at Sandy. “That’s a strange thing to text. I mean, I get what he’s saying... but where is Linda now?”

“She followed the Tour until the baby was born. They’re in Philadelphia now,” Sandy replies. “I think they’re expecting their second child. Neil’s working as a sound engineer, a perfect fit for him.”

Peter raises an eyebrow. “Did she ever hear from that sleazeball again?”

Sandy chuckles. “No, I don’t think so. She hasn’t mentioned him.”

Peter rubs his beard, thoughtful. “Wow... my little sister, the ice princess. Do you think she’ll ever go back on the Tour?”

“I doubt it,” Sandy says. “I think she’s done with that life.”

Peter drifts back to their childhood in Glenolden. He’s glad they left that place, though the memory of the abandoned house they dared each other to visit on Halloween still makes him smile. Linda had been terrified, nearly losing it, while Sandy clomped around on crutches, adding to the chaos. They’d lived off that adrenaline and the pile of lollies they collected for days.

Things were simpler then. No worries, no constant edge of suspicion, just easy, carefree days.

He snaps back to the present, curiosity tugging at him. “So, crutch man... what have you been up to?”

NOT A PLACE TO BE

Sandy feels a surge of relief as he grabs the hose. The fire is one street away. He can hear it. He wants to soak the back fence, to put something between his family and what's coming. The sky is black at two in the afternoon. Wind drives the gum leaves sideways. Embers drift down like dark snow, and wherever they settle, the ground catches. He sweeps the yard for spotfires, heart thumping. Overhead, Elvis, the crane helicopter, hammers through the haze, dropping its hose into the neighbour's pool. He shouts to his wife to turn on the tap.

"It's already on!"

He looks down. A thin trickle runs from the nozzle.

Just a trickle.

He stares at it for a moment, not quite believing what he's seeing.

"We're f*cked!" he screams.

He spins toward the house. His two boys are pressed against the sliding door, faces white, staring out at him. His wife is waving, wide, frantic arcs, trying to reach him through the glass. The bushfire has jumped the street. The house next door is already gone, swallowed in a roar of orange. The power is out. No water. Smoke claws at his eyes, and

the air burns going down. He's wearing a T-shirt, shorts and thongs. That's all. A sharp whistling overhead makes him look up, and he watches a fireball the size of a basketball drop from the sky and punch through the roof.

He doesn't move for a second.

Then he runs.

The fire had started in the Falkland Ranges, a hundred kilometres to the west, ten days ago, a single lightning strike after an electrical storm. For a while, it held. Then a savage weather front tore through. Winds hit a hundred kilometres an hour. The blaze stopped crawling and began to sprint, covering kilometres in minutes. It had grown large enough now to make its own weather, tornadoes, dry lightning, walls of superheated air that killed everything they touched. Within hours, it had reached Epping Drive, the last street before the suburb. Residents had been warned. Most hadn't believed it. None had been ready. Nobody is ever ready.

Sandy grabs what he can and throws it in the car. His hands are shaking. His two boys are in the back. His wife is behind the wheel, engine running, door open, waiting. He leans through the window.

"There's an evacuation centre at the high school. I heard it on the radio. Go. Be careful."

She looks at him.

“Why are you still out there? Get in.”

He turns back toward the house. The smoke is a wall now. His eyes stream, and he can barely see. The roof eaves are burning, small, creeping fingers of flame working their way along the timber. He watches them for a moment longer than he should. Then he swears, turns away, and drops into the passenger seat. He doesn't look back.

Outside, the world has turned orange and black. Embers tear sideways through the air. The visibility is almost nothing.

He checks the back seat. Oscar, his brown Cocker Spaniel, three years a part of the family, is curled on the floor between the boys' feet. Sandy exhales. There had been another Oscar, back in Australia, before the move to the United States. They'd had to leave him behind, and that loss had stayed with Sandy longer than he'd expected. He'd decided then that every dog he ever owned would carry the name, a small, quiet act of loyalty. Oscar Junior, a miniature German Schnauzer, had come along during their years in Boston. Now Sandy watches his long-eared companion breathing calmly on the floor of a smoke-darkened car, and feels, for just a moment, something close to peace.

His wife floors it.

A hundred metres down the road, they stop. Brake lights. Dozens of them. Stretching away into the smoke. Nothing moving.

“What the f*ck?”

She catches herself, flicks her eyes to the mirror. The boys are glued to the windows, silent now, buckled in and watchful. Taking it all in.

The car in front edges forward. Just a metre. Then another.

On both sides of the road, houses burn. No firefighters. No engines. Nobody. Just homes being eaten from the inside out, walls glowing, roofs caving. Too many fires. Not enough of anything. Sandy watches a front fence buckle and fall. A child’s bike melts into the driveway. They keep moving.

To their left, the nature reserve is a wall of fire. The gum trees go up like torches, one after another, each one feeding the next. Heat pushes through the car windows like an open furnace door. The only thing standing between them and the blaze is the width of the road. Flames from the verge reach out toward the car ahead. Sandy watches them. Closer. Closer. Then the car ahead accelerates and pulls away.

He feels it then, the fear. Not panic. Something colder. The quiet certainty that they might not make it out.

He should have left hours ago. He'd told himself the fence would hold. That the water pressure would be enough. That there was time. There wasn't. There never was. At this heat, the tyres could blow. The windows could buckle. The roof could come in without warning. He looks at the back of his sons' heads. They are watching the fires with the wide, uncomprehending eyes of children who don't yet know what danger feels like.

He has to get them through.

His wife stamps the accelerator. The car punches forward. The road opens. The smoke thins. Pale daylight bleeds back into the sky. The streets around them are empty and still, as though the suburb has simply ceased to exist.

Sandy twists in his seat and looks back.

Their house is burning.

He stares at it until it disappears behind a curtain of smoke. The wedding photographs. The albums from before children. The toddler years, caught in fading prints. All of it. The boys were five and three, young enough that this day would leave no mark on their memories. To them, right now, it is just an adventure in the car.

Tears run down his wife's face. She doesn't speak. She wipes them away, once, then again, and drives.

Sixteen kilometres east. The inner-city high school, the evacuation centre, the end of the road. The whole town sits under a lid of smoke. They pull into the car park. Families stand in clusters beside their cars, staring at the ground or at nothing, the look of people trying to understand what has just happened to them. Volunteers move quietly between them, pointing the way.

Inside, the auditorium is full.

People sit in rows, pressed together, barely speaking. The parents are hollow-faced and still. The children dart between the chairs, laughing at something, oblivious, they don't know yet. They won't know for a long time. The school has become a refugee shelter in the space of an afternoon, still improvising, still finding its shape. The air is thick with the particular anxiety of people who have lost something and don't yet know how much. Outbursts snap across the room. Settle! Whenever a child gets too loud. Then silence again. Watchful eyes. Held breath.

Sandy stands in the middle of it and feels the pull of the door. Every instinct says go back, go back, go back. He knows what he escaped. He knows what that means. And yet he wants to climb somewhere

high and watch the fire move, to see it with his own eyes, to make it real. His wife stands beside him, just as restless, snapping at the boys in short, tight sentences. Sit down. Be quiet. The boys whine back. Can we go to the playground? Can we go to the gym? She pulls them close. She needs them near and needs a moment of silence, and they cannot have both.

They find four seats facing the stage and sit.

After a moment, she turns to him and says she needs to walk. He'd been about to say the same. He looks at the boys. He nods and lets her go.

Volunteers bring in cardboard boxes and spread donations across folding tables, clothes, toys, and the quiet generosity of strangers. A woman with a kind face picks up a battered stuffed dinosaur and makes straight for his eldest, leaning across the seat-backs to press it into his hands. She smiles at Sandy and moves on. His eldest turns it over, measuring it. Calculating. Before he can act, his younger brother lunges forward, snatches it from his hands, and locks it tight against his chest. His eldest waits, coiled. No counter-attack comes.

Sandy is about to intervene when something wet nudges his palm.

He looks down, Oscar. Sitting quietly at his feet, looking up with calm, dark eyes, waiting.

Sandy's hand finds the dog's head. The noise of the room recedes. He sits there, in the middle of all of it, and breathes.

Maybe, he thinks, they'll be all right.

From the stage, an announcement: families are being assigned to classrooms. One adult per family to come forward and register. Sandy looks up. His wife is already at the front of the queue.

He lies on the classroom floor in the dark, staring at the ceiling. He cannot sleep. Oscar is pressed against his side, warm and still, completely content. This, Sandy thinks, is the dog's idea of heaven. He kicks the sleeping bag down to his waist. The hallway light falls in under the door. Somewhere in the room, someone coughs. A child murmurs in sleep.

The house is gone. He knows it without needing to see it. He has known it since the fireball hit the roof.

He stares at the ceiling tiles. "What now?"

The memory surfaces years later, in a café. They had gone back to find a slab and ash. It took two years to rebuild, two years of debt, of delays, of inflation biting into every quote. The fires had taken five hundred homes, and the cost of everything that followed, labour, timber, time, had ballooned beyond reason. The housing market had locked up.

Selling made no sense. Buying made less sense.
There was no choice but to stay and rebuild, piece
by piece, from nothing.

So that is what he did.

And slowly, the house came back.

RESOLUTION

Sitting across from his long-lost brother, Sandy felt the pull of old memories, the years they'd spent in Glenolden with no money, in rough conditions and rougher company. Somehow, they had all come through it. There was a bond between them forged from that shared hardship, the kind that only survives when people have been through the fire together. And now, years later, here they were, battered but still standing, still finding their way back to each other. Sandy smiled at the thought.

Peter noticed and asked, "What's up?"

Sandy recognised the flicker of suspicion behind his brother's eyes, that old paranoia, still alive. Peter was already misreading the moment. Sandy shook his head gently.

"Not everything is about you, Peter. We've all got our battles."

He let the words settle before changing course.

"Do you remember that haunted house we visited on Halloween? Back in Philadelphia?"

Peter squinted, reaching back. He did remember. He and Jack had returned to the house not long after that first visit and found it abandoned, no sign of the old woman, no explanation for what they had seen. They had written it off as a local prank, though

neither had really believed it. The following year, they returned and found the house rebuilt, with a new family living inside. Peter had wondered, more than once, whether the old woman still moved through those hallways, drawing people toward her. He was quietly surprised that Sandy still carried the memory.

“Yeah,” Peter said. “What about it?”

“I've been thinking about it for years,” Sandy said.

“I only held onto it because you and Jack kept bringing it up at the kitchen table. But I have a theory now.”

“We had plenty of theories back then,” Peter said with a dry half-smile.

“This one's different.” Sandy leaned forward.

“We all saw her together. We walked into that house without fear because nothing in us told us not to. We assumed it was part of the night. The old woman didn't frighten us, she invited us in, and we followed. There was even popcorn on the table. We ate it like guests. But Linda knew something was wrong before any of us did.” He paused. “She's always been the sharpest one in the room.”

“That she has,” Peter agreed quietly.

“There's a pattern,” Sandy continued. “A thread running through things, moments where something steps in just before it goes badly. I never told anyone

this, but when I was four, I went looking for you at the shops. A man took my hand. He was trying to get me into his car."

Peter stopped tapping his foot.

"Oscar bit him. Just appeared out of nowhere and latched onto his leg. The man got in his car and drove off. I was too young to understand what had happened. It wasn't until Mum found the leaflet that she pieced it together."

"What leaflet?" Peter frowned.

"It doesn't matter now." Sandy waved it off. "The point is, there are things that happen around us that we'll never fully explain. Forces we didn't ask for and can't control. Maybe the question isn't why. Maybe it's just that we're still here." He held his brother's gaze. "You're still here, Peter. And you don't have to keep running from us."

A long silence followed. Peter sat forward, elbows on knees, eyes fixed on the floor, his foot resuming its quiet rhythm. Then he looked up.

"There are things I need to say."

Sandy waited. He recalled vaguely Peter's falling-out with Fidel, something that had shadowed his brother for decades without explanation. "Was it Fidel?" Sandy asked. "Is that what started all of this?"

Peter lowered his eyes again and began.

‘Well, it was some time before the next party, and Betty and I caught up again. Things didn’t go well at first, but once we got into the booze, it loosened things up again. Someone turned off the lights, and the next thing I knew, Betty was on my lap with her mouth on mine. After a while, I felt the urge to stick my penis into her. So I suggested that we go out in the car. I was concerned about getting her pregnant since Fidel told me. She was pretty flirtatious with me, so we went into the back seat and started to make out again. Our hands explored the area we hadn't been to before. She grabs my hardness and wants to play with it. I wanted to explore, so I pulled down her pants and then, for the first time, I saw a girl’s crutch hair. She didn’t indicate that she wanted me to stop, so I turned her over so I could see her bum. Then, as Fadel said, I grabbed her by the sides and put my penis into her butt hole. Oh, man! She reacted straight away, and she screamed at me to stop. I was confused and stopped right away. Before I knew it, she had her pants on and was out of the car, running back to the party. By the time Peter walked back into the party, every face had turned toward him, and he had felt the floor open beneath him. He had lived inside that moment ever since.

Sandy sat with the weight of it. He remembered Linda's words from all those years ago, "Peter has

done a bad thing", spoken with the certainty of a child who understood more than she let on. Thirty years later, he finally held the full picture.

"What happened after?" Sandy asked.

"She told her parents. They came to Mum and Dad. It was difficult." Peter exhaled. "Fidel thought it was funny. Said it was normal, where he came from. He walked away without a scratch."

Sandy turned toward the café window, watching the street outside without really seeing it. He thought about Peter's years of restlessness, the sense of being followed, the sudden disappearances, the inability to stay still in any life he built. It had never been paranoia without cause. It had been a man who never found a way to put something down.

Perhaps this was the beginning of that. Not absolution, Sandy wasn't naive enough to offer that, but acknowledgement. The first step toward carrying it differently.

He turned back to say as much, and the seat was empty.

Sandy scanned the café. The door was still, the street beyond it unhurried. Peter had slipped away the way he always did, quietly, before anything could be resolved. Sandy sat for a moment longer with his coffee going cold, turning the conversation over in his mind.

Some things, he thought, take longer than a single afternoon to come right. But Peter had spoken. And for the first time in a long time, that felt like enough.

End

AUTHOR

If you listen to my American accent, you will detect a Boston and an Australian pitch. I was born in Melbourne and dragged to Philadelphia when I was 3 years old. My father pursued a doctorate at Temple, and we lived there for 3 years. After my dad finished his studies, he landed an associate professorship at Boston University, which led us to move to Massachusetts. Having spent most of my formative years at elementary, middle, and high school in Framingham, MA, I decided to exercise my right to a free College education in Australia. Yes, further education was free back then, but not now. I never became an American citizen; I only had the status of a resident alien. So I was brought up as a Yankee, as some Australians would say, a “septic tank” rhymes with Yank. Go figure? I finished my education and have lived in Canberra for 40 years. Currently working as an Electronic Technician in Canberra. I’m married with two children.

Andrew Cheffers