

‘Ugh!’ He wiped his cheek and I pulled my arm out from under Kirk, knocking the knife from Steve’s hand. Steve tried to take hold of my ankles but I kicked my legs too fast for him to get a grip. Our faces were red and hot, our breath hard and fast as we fought and struggled against each other as if it was the same war Pop and Sandy fought. If you lost what was it flowed in your veins, for what reason?

Kirk pinned my arms under his knees; I could only wriggle like a worm under the weight of his body. I pushed and grunted against him.

‘Enough,’ said Kirk and suddenly, as fast as we started, we stopped. Kirk put his hands in the air. ‘Smoko,’ he said, climbing off and sitting beside me.

Steve let go of my ankles and looked for his knife in the leaves. The knife only had one small blade, eaten with rust, but Steve said Dad gave it to him. That the knife could kill. Steve carried it with him everywhere. I sat up and we shook dirt from our hair and faces and out from under our clothes. We pulled off our shoes and tipped out the stones. I lay beside Steve, his shoulder against mine.

Kirk stood, hands in his pockets, looking up. The red gums leaned towards each other, as if they wanted to touch, the same as the banks of the river at The Choke. Kirk, Steve and me were held by the trees and their branches in the shapes of heads, faces trapped inside, pressing to see through the bark. Our three worlds joined. Our mothers were different but we all had the same name—*Lee*.

Kirk walked into the triangle of our hideouts, where there was a ring of stones like the one around Pop’s fire. Steve and me followed. Kirk sat and pulled a wad of White Ox and a crumpled cigarette paper from his pocket. Steve and me sat too, watching as Kirk licked the shiny edge of the paper and

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After I had taken the dinner plates to the sink, the telephone rang, its sound cutting the quiet. Kirk sat up straighter in his chair. Steve turned towards the house. Pop grumbled as he got to his feet. 'Al-bloody-right,' he said as he walked slowly back to the kitchen—Pop had to keep his gut in one straight line or he woke the bug. The telephone kept ringing. Kirk and Steve and me waited to see if it was Dad. 'Right,' said Pop. 'Where are you? When do you . . . Yeah, son . . . Reckon? Yeah . . . Yeah . . . How's she running? Check the fanbelt? You looking at three hundred mile you want to know it's tight . . . Yeah, son, see you Friday.'

Kirk said, 'It's Dad.'

'What day is it?' I asked.

'Tuesday,' said Kirk.

Dad hadn't been home since July and now it was nearly the Christmas concert. I had lost my two top and bottom teeth since he last saw me, and there were no new ones at the top yet. I was the last one in my class. If I showed my teeth there was a hole. I stuck my tongue in and out of the gap, feeling the sides.

Steve took out his pocketknife and pulled out the blade.

He turned it in his hands before closing it and putting it back in his pocket. There was only one blade, smaller than the one Pop used to cut my fingernails. Relle said it used to be Dad's but Dad said bullshit. Relle said, *It was yours, Ray, don't you remember?* and Dad said, *I'd remember a knife as useless as that.*

Pop came out with a can of beer. He sat down on his chair and pulled back the ring. The can hissed as if a small snake had escaped. He said, 'Your old man's coming home.'

*Your old man's coming home.* When Pop spoke the words I felt our worlds—Kirk's and Steve's and mine—shrink and separate. The mother half was different. Ray had left one for the other. Relle found Ray and Donna in the truck. Donna was in Relle's seat, with her arm on the handle where Relle's arm went, her feet up on the dash where Relle's feet used to go. Relle knew what Donna and Dad had been doing before she found them, as if her eyes had stolen away, climbed through the window into the cabin, hidden behind the mirror and seen everything that happened, then went back and told the head. I was eating Weet-Bix at the kids' table not long after I moved to Pop's, when I heard Pop and Dad talking.

*You should have been more careful, Ray.*

*Accidents happen.*

*Yeah, and now I'm stuck with your bloody accident.*

The table was so low it kept me at the height of their knees. If they didn't look down they forgot I was there.

*I can take her.*

*Not where you go, son.*

*Where do you think I go?*

*I know where you go.*

*Where's that?*

*Leave it alone.*

*Just saying, I can take her.*

*Drop it, Ray.*

Where would he take me? Where would we go? Nobody knew exactly where Ray went or what he did.

Behind us, the back-house stood dark and locked. The flames of Pop's fire and the lights from the kitchen didn't reach far enough to show it, but you could see its outline. It was another sort of black. The back-house was where Ray lived when he was home. The only thing missing was a shower. Ray filled up a bucket with warm water from the tap at Pop's sink, then he hung it over a pipe with a funnel. When Ray was away the back-house was locked, the curtains closed. If you looked in the window you saw your own reflection. After the phone call the back-house seemed to grow bigger, as if Ray was pressing out the walls from the inside, reminding us, like the heads inside the red gums.

After dinner Relle came by to pick up Kirk and Steve. 'Ray's on the way,' said Pop. Relle didn't look at me. She never had. Not once. *Any kid but Donna's*. She couldn't identify me, as if I was an accident that hadn't happened. I felt the hole in my mouth with my tongue. Who is born on their knees? Who doesn't know the right way out?

Relle had black hair in a ponytail and her eyes were narrow like Steve's—she kept the edges tight. Every day she drew dark green lines around them. 'Oh yeah?' she said. Her eyes gleamed. 'When's that?'

'Friday,' said Pop.

'He's going to teach me how to shoot,' said Kirk.

'No, he's not,' said Pop.

'He said he would.'

'No, he didn't.'

‘Danny’s uncle is going to show us if Dad doesn’t. When he gets back from Gympie.’

‘Bloody Gympie,’ said Pop. ‘Want a beer, Relle?’

‘No, Dean’s at home. And I’m on the early shift tomorrow.’ Relle worked at the bakery in Nullabri. She started at four thirty in the morning when it was still dark. Just before the bakery opened she painted all the tops of the donuts with the flavours. But she never ate a single donut. The donuts could sit in shining rows—pineapple, lime, chocolate, strawberry—and she didn’t care. She didn’t even need a taste.

Kirk said, ‘Damn.’ Dean was Relle’s new boyfriend.

‘We got to go, boys,’ said Relle, jangling her keys. ‘Get in the car.’

‘Can we stay here?’ said Kirk.

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because there’s shit to do at home. Dean wants you to help him move the rubbish from down the side.’ Kirk and Steve groaned. ‘Get a move on,’ said Relle. ‘I want to pick up dinner for Dean on the way.’ The boys got up and followed Relle through the house. They wanted to stay the night at Pop’s, closer to where Dad would be coming to, closer to where he would park his truck, closer to where he would sleep and drink and be.

After they left I went down the back and checked on the chooks. I hooked my fingers through the wire of the run, leaned in close and saw the shadows of the girls sleeping on the roosting bars. Cockyboy was keeping guard at the top. He made a small warning cluck in his throat. I breathed in and smelled them there, the Isa Browns alive behind the wire, heads turned into the warmth of their feathers.