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PAPERBARK

Sometimes everything converges, in one moment, at one place: thoughts, memories, emotions, from the deepest, darkest corners of your mind; intertwining for an instant, like vines, many different kinds of vines, suddenly finding each other, twisting themselves around one another to form something more vigorous, a more potent force that wraps itself around you, lifts you into the air and shakes you, moves you, overwhelms you; and you surrender to it, knowing that you have no choice.

Art stared out the window of the 747 at the dark, mushrooming mass of thunderheads, imagining the cane fields below: imagining a crusty, warty old cane toad springing onto a pot-holed road into the path of a car that flattens it, squeezing everything out of it, so all that is left is a carcass that will grow tough and leathery, baking on the sticky bitumen under the tropical sun. He could hear the engines throttling back, feel the thrust weakening.

Lightning flickered on the horizon. Then, suddenly, darkness. Art felt the jet lurch as it entered the cloud. Wisps of moisture streaked over the curve of the wing. The city began to appear through a veil, growing clearer, sharper, brighter. There it was. Cairns. He recognised the harbour, the wide streets, the looming escarpment of the Atherton Tablelands. He saw the coconut palms, the sprawling rain trees, the old weather board Queenslanders, with their wide verandahs and lattice screens, half buried in bougainvillea, perched high on stilts.

The jet banked on its final approach, screaming over the muddy Barron River, skimming over mangroves, cane fields, a shed. Art saw the end of the runway rushing up to greet him. The terminal flashed by. Coconut palms waved their fronds around madly in the strengthening wind ahead of the storm, as if they were trying to warn him, to scare him away. As the jet lumbered slowly towards the terminal, he leant back against the head rest, closed his eyes and swallowed, trying to feel whatever it was he thought he might feel, bracing himself for what might happen.

"Gimme one?"

"Nup"

"Aww ... come on Newt."

"No way."

"Why not?"

"Never give me any."

"Do too."

"Do not."

"I'll twist your arm."

"Piss off Art."

"Just gimme one ya little prick."

Art had the afternoon free. In the evening, he was having dinner with the conference delegates. Then, in the morning, the conference would begin at eight, continuing until about six in the evening. He was booked on the eight ten back to Sydney. So this was his only chance.

He cruised away from the terminal in the hire car and turned right onto the Cook Highway, heading North through the cane fields with the steep, rainforest-carpeted slopes of the Atherton Tablelands on the left and the hazy Coral Sea horizon on the right. He drove slowly, steadily. He wanted to absorb everything around him, to see how it is now and then remember how it was. He was also afraid: afraid of how he would feel when he saw the beach, the old house, the corner store, if he saw someone he knew, someone who remembered him: and what happened.

Art drove that afternoon, curiously, courageously, into the past.

"Dad! Help!"

"Didn't touch ya."

"Art, don't!"

"Ya little ..."

"God sake Art! Leave 'im alone will ya?"

"He's lyin' dad! Promise!"

"Come 'ere ya mongrel."

He pulled over. It was the sign. Palm Cove. Pointing to the right. He stared at it. He stared through it. He slipped into a kind of trance. Felt numb. It was only for a few moments and then he was back. He flicked the blinker arm down and drove off to the right, kicking up a small cloud of dust behind him on the gravel shoulder.

The road down to the beach used to cut a swathe through the cane. That's all there was on either side: thick forests of stalks, juicy with sugar, teaming with cane toads. Art and Newt would ride their bikes here, dump them on the side of the road and disappear into this other world, losing themselves, finding themselves, with only the cane and the toads and the sun peeping through the canopy of fleshy green to see them, to know that they were there. Now, it was gone. The road was lined with a mix of houses, holiday apartments, hotels, shops, bars, restaurants, car and bike rentals. Couples strolled to and from the beach, towels around shoulders, clutching the latest Grisham, wandering in and out of shops, pausing to peruse menus that boasted barramundi, red emperor or coral trout.

The road dipped on its final approach to the beach. The pale turquoise of the Coral Sea flashed behind swaying coconut palms, flirting, gradually revealing itself.

Art slowed right down, trying to drink it all in. Then he pulled over, knowing that if he really wanted to see and hear and smell everything, to absorb it all, he would need to walk.

"Do' wanna."

"Be better."

"But dad."

"Art. Just go will ya?"

"Where?"

"Dunno. Maybe Brizzy. Find some work."

"Doin?"

"Mate. Y'seventeen. Gotta make y'own way."

"S'not it."

"Nah. Guess not."

Art strolled along the road behind the beach, drifting between the now and the then. There was a café with tables and chairs on the footpath. It was where the old corner shop used to be: with its banging fly screen door and grimy lino floor; the oven with the lonely, dried out meat pie; the bubbling and spitting of frozen chips dropping into tired, days-old oil.

To the right of the road, there were neatly landscaped parking bays, complete with white lines separating the angled parallel spaces, guttering, and natty little interlocking pavers on the footpath. Back then, there was just the jagged edge of the gravelly bitumen, then sand, stones, shells and faded fragments of coral, beneath a carpet of fallen palm fronds and husky old coconuts.

Art walked onto the beach, squinted into the breeze and took a deep breath of warm, salty, moisture laden afternoon air. He rewound to the Palm Cove Surf Carnival: a bizarre event considering there was never any surf at Palm Cove, except during cyclones. He remembered the tanned, muscular men pulling on panty hose, an early form of protection against the dreaded box jellyfish, before plunging into the sea, arms slapping, legs flapping, begoggled heads turning rhythmically, fish-like mouths gaping, gasping, churning up a trail of foam and spray in their wake: a flurry of watery humanity.

He fast-forwarded. Thunderheads were sprouting all over the sky, like wild, gassy mushrooms, their caps amber and mauve in the low afternoon rays. He could feel the familiar build up of humidity, the approaching tempest, and he shuddered.

"Newt!"

"What!"

"Over here."

"The hell's that, Art?"

"Shark egg."

"Sorta like a cork screw."

"Yeah."

"Storm brought it in eh?"

"Yep. Wannit?"

"You found it but."

"Ts' okay."

"Sure?"

"Yeah."

The only way Art could tell that he was looking at where his house used to be was the position of the creek. The house bordered the south side of a creek that flowed into a small lagoon behind the beach. Now there was a small holiday apartment complex, surrounded by lush, landscaped gardens. He closed his eyes for a moment and saw the ramshackle fibro and fly-screen beach-hutch that was his house; the unkempt garden strewn with bikes and toys. He saw himself. He saw his brother. Newt. They were chasing and jabbing and tripping each other aimlessly, wrestling and frolicking like lion cubs. Art had the upper hand, as he always did, being the older one, the stronger one.

"Give up?"

"Piss off Art. Ya hurtin' me."

"Give up then?"

"Yaaarrghh! Dad! Help!"

"Just give up then."

"Get off me!"

"Say it."

"Okay, okay."

"Go on then."

"I ..."

"Yes?"

"I ..."

"You?"

"I ... give ... up. Now lemme go will ya?"

"And who's the boss?"

"Eeeiish! You are! You're the boss, Art."

"An' why am I the boss, Newt."

"'Cause ya bigger than me. An' stronger."

"An' what else."

"Err ..."

"Yaaaargh! Smarter! Ya smarter, Art. Much smarter than me."

"Art! Get off ya brother! Now!"

"Only muckin around dad."

"You okay Newt?"

"Me elbow dad."

"E's actin' dad. Can't ya see?"

"Am not!"

"Come 'ere ya little bugger. I'll get you."

"Just playin' dad! Don't!"

Art ventured into the gardens, following the neat, paved paths, looking for any remaining evidence that he once lived there. There was a monstrous hibiscus bush roughly where his room used to be, its letterbox-red trumpet blooms dangling, gently bobbing. There was a barbecue a few metres away. His parents room, he thought.

"Hey Newt. Check this."

"Giss a hold."

"Careful."

"Whoa. Pretty 'eavy."

"Shit."

"What?"

"Dad's back. Quick. Out the window."

"Let's take it Art."

"Awright."

The storm was due: the air thick, heavy, pregnant with moisture; the dark, ominous monsters labouring, grumbling, about to give birth again, as they do every evening.

Art wandered towards the creek, recognising a palm here, a paperbark there, sometimes holding out his hand and letting his fingertips skim across their trunks. He knew where he was heading. He could see it now. It was still there. It was still the biggest, the fattest, the tallest.

He stood in front of it, just looking at it, feeling numb, almost dead inside. He held both his hands out and lay them flat on its flaky, papery body; feeling the familiar soft, layered, woody sponge of its bark; remembering how he and Newt used to peel it away to reveal worlds of ants and spiders and webs and eggs underneath. He looked up at the gnarly knobs they used as hand and foot-holds. A huge glob of rain, one of the first, fell through the canopy. For an instant, he saw it streaking down towards him before it exploded on his forehead with a crack that reverberated through his skull. He reached up, gripped the first knob and began to haul his body up the trunk.

"Reckon he heard us?"

"Dunno. Geez, hurry up Newt."

"Gimme a boost."

Art was now standing in the fork that divided the massive girth of the paperbark into two lesser yet still substantial trunks. His hair lifted and

fluttered in the whirls and gusts that warned of the imminent deluge. Another blob of water thwacked on his skull. His eyes moved slowly upwards, following one of the trunks, inspecting it, looking for signs of what used to be. Nothing, he thought. Then, calmly, deliberately, he reached up, hugged it and began to haul himself up; gripping his progress with his knees and his feet, his cheek flat against the bark, skin on skin, embracing it with every square inch of his body, his whole being; moving closer to the place he had been drawn to all day.

His right hand came down hard on the branch. He pulled, lifting his right knee to a knob, and levered himself the rest of the way. Art nestled into the fork, collecting his breath, his face and neck itching with dirt and bark and sweat. The storm clouds brooded and swirled overhead. A whiff of something familiar wafted beneath his nostrils: rich, thick, syrupy. He looked instinctively up the creek towards the back of the property. There was a flash of orange in the distance, flickering behind paperbarks. The cane fields. They were burning off. Dark toffee plumes of smoke billowed above the trees, blending with the charcoal underbelly of cloud. This was how it was, he thought: the storm, the burning cane, the paperbark.

The old tree house began to form around him. Fat globs of rain tapped and splattered on the rusty, corrugated iron roof. He was sitting there with his brother, Newt. He unwrapped the gun they had found swaddled in an old t-shirt in a shoe box on the top shelf of their dad's wardrobe and felt its smooth, heavy coldness in his hands.

"Lemme hold it Art," his brother said.

"Be very careful Newt," he warned, cradling it gently in both hands and handing it to him, as if it was a baby.

Newt held it for quite a while, quivering with fear and excitement, his face illuminated by flashes of lightening. Then he started to explore its shape, its surface, slowly turning it over in his hands, looking at it from all angles. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he held it up and aimed it at Art.

"What are you doin' Newt?" he asked, trying to stay calm.

"Just playin' Art," Newt replied with a wild look in his eyes.

"Put it down mate. Might be loaded."

"Make me."

"Just put it down."

"Give up then?"

"Sure. Happy now?"

"Say it."

"I give up!"

"So who's the boss now Art."

"You are Newt. You're the boss."

"And why'm I the boss?"

"Cause you got the gun."

"Wrong. Cause I'm smarter. That's why. You might be bigger an' stronger. But I'm smarter."

Art chose to end the game, there and then, if, in fact, it was a game. His right hand shot up, gripped Newt's wrist and pushed it to one side, while his left hand snatched the gun away. Newt was stunned by the swiftness and precision of Art's action and became instantly enraged, like a baby whose toy has been taken away. He dived for the gun in Art's hand. Art held it up and away from him, swinging and waving it in all directions, to keep it out of his reach. Newt swiped and scratched and slapped at Art's arm and wrist, straining to reach the gun in his hand.

"Give it back Art," Newt squealed.

"Sorry mate. Can't trust ya."

"I was just muckin' around."

"Were ya?"

"Yeah, course!"

"I dunno."

"Give it back!"

For what, now, in Art's mind seemed like an eternity, the two brothers struggled and wrestled for the gun on the patchy floor of the tree house in the paperbark by the creek, while the thunder growled and snapped and the cane fields crackled with fire in the distance.

When the gun went off, neither Art nor Newt heard it. Nobody did. It coincided with a thunderclap, so loud, so close, it shook everything and everyone in Palm Cove. But they felt the recoil. It threw them back against the flimsy masonite wall of the tree house.

Perched on one of the branches that once supported the old tree house, with the whole world raining down on him and sugar cane smoke drifting through the canopy of palms and paperbarks, Art now saw the bullet leave the barrel. It cruised across the inside of the tree house. He saw it pass through the masonite wall, splashing out tiny fibrous fragments, leaving a clean hole. From there, it whistled past the trunk of the paperbark, past branches and leaves, through leaves, over the garden, the bikes, heading down towards the house. He saw it penetrate the fly screen wire enclosing the front verandah, his mother sitting inside on a cane chair with her eyes closed and a book laying open, upside down on her lap, butterflyed, blissfully unaware of the projectile that was about to rip through her flesh. At that point, Art consciously dissolved the bullet into the air. He would look no more.

There was something else, something new. Back in the tree house, where he and Newt were still recovering from the shock of the recoil, he saw the gun, their hands frozen in the position they were in when the gun went off. His mind zoomed in closer and could see the trigger, a finger in the trigger, not his finger as his father and everyone in Palm Cove came to believe afterwards, but his brother's finger.

It was Newt's finger. It was Newt.

This was when Art was taken. The storm was upon him. The forces converged and picked him up, thrashing him around, as if he was in the grips of a giant octopus, its powerful tentacle wrapped around his waist, shaking him, waving him to and fro, squeezing the pain and hurt out of him; and he let it, he surrendered to it, because that's what he wanted, that's why he was there. His body twitched and kicked. He gasped and moaned. His whole being seemed to convulse and throb with poison. It was a sore; a giant, festering cyst full of pus, the pus of anger and jealousy and grief; and as the clouds released their load and the cane field spewed its sweet-smelling smoke, Art, still sitting high in the paperbark by the creek, lanced the membrane of guilt that was still holding it all back. It began as a trickle, an ooze, but as he urged it out, more came,

thicker, faster. Then something inside him, something that was blocking the way, gave way. He rumbled and shook like a volcano. Deep down, in the bowels of his soul, the pain swirled and bubbled, rising, expanding and finally exploding, gushing out of him, into the space around the paperbark, where it dissolved into the rain and the smoke, into the ether of his memories.

Art walked barefoot along the steamy bitumen back towards his car, carrying his soggy shoes, overcome with a feeling of lightness. The rain eased. Clouds pulled away from each other.

He suddenly became aware of a woman strolling along in the same direction just ahead of him; a curvaceous, almost plump looking woman with long dark hair tied in a knot. As he passed her, something made him turn back to see her face. It was his mother. It was the face of his mother. It was her hazel eyes, her olive skin. It was that dimple just above her chin.

In Art's mind, it was her: and for a moment that wasn't a moment but a lifetime, she looked at him and he looked at her and they smiled.