

**John Stublely**

## A PERFECT CIRCLE

The man strides along the gravel track. Pebbles scrunch under his boots as he rearranges earth with every step. To his right, the creek swirls and spits in a cacophonous symphony, tumbling over boulders and logs in a warbling turmoil. Above, the eucalyptus swing in an anarchic, rustling, rhythm, sweeping the dust from the giant sky. Birds shoot through the lushness of it all, finding openings and paths where none seem to exist.

He pushes along the track, wary of the miniature valleys that winter's constant rains have formed. Often he has to leave the track to avoid the prickly embrace of blackberry bushes, but he soon returns. Light is scattered randomly among shrubs and fallen branches whilst the water glistens in speckled praise of the sun overhead. He knows he is close now.

He digs in his toes as he climbs the steep hill away from the creek and heads to more familiar ground. He pushes through thick trees and vines until it seems he can go no further. He sinks his hand into the wall of undergrowth that blocks his way — sinks it in and pulls at the seams of things. He tugs and soon has an opening big enough for him to fit. He shoots through and there it is — a near perfect circle void of trees, bar one. A giant jarrah stands in the heart of it all, reaching up and into the blue above.

This is it. What he had come to see. What he had come to touch. To remember. To live. To smell and taste and breathe. What he had come to feel.

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The boy waited patiently on the verandah. He whistled idly and manoeuvred the skateboard beneath his feet. He looked up and out across the valley and along the roof of the eucalyptus until he saw nothing but rich sky.

"Not long now," said his mother. She rubbed her fingers through his straw hair and admired his chestnut face. The boy hardly even noticed her touch. His thoughts were distracted. It was Friday and that only meant one thing.

Soon he could hear the throaty rumble of the Falcon and he quickly leapt from his mother's touch. He ran out through the carport and onto the gravel driveway. He saw the car and a smile warmed his face.

His older brother, James, manoeuvred the old Ford down the gentle slope and glided it into a spot near the pine of the pergola. James looked out through the window and met the joy on the face of his brother. They hugged and said hellos and quickly moved inside.

After their mum had fed them full of polony sandwiches and ginger beer, the two brothers strode out into the afternoon warmth. They spoke of little things that the boy would soon forget. On they talked as they trekked among the golden colours of autumn. They ducked and pushed their way around trees and branches and logs. Under one tree the boy notices a fair-sized stick. He went over and inspected it as his brother continued along the track. It was the perfect size and shape for a machine gun; a long straight barrel; well positioned handle; and good sized magazine. He tucked it under his arm and let off a few rounds into the innocent trees beyond. This must be his lucky day, he thought. He'd definitely blow his friends away with this one.

The boy dropped the stick to his side and turned to find James returning from the way he had gone. He knelt down on a knee to become eye to eye with his brother. "How would you like it if I built you a tree-house?"

"Sure," said the boy. But he wasn't really interested. He was still occupied with the joy of tumbling across such a well-crafted piece of weaponry. James smiled in appreciation. Together they turned and walked back through the change of twilight, laughing amongst the soft shadows that danced swiftly into the valley.

The boy rose on Saturday morning with eagerness and excitement. Today they would go marroning down by the creek. He hadn't been marroning since James came up last time and that always seemed so, so long ago. He sprung from his bed like a jack-in-the-box and raced into the spare room. The bed was empty. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. "James?" He turned and checked the bathroom. "James?" He sprinted down the hallway and into the kitchen. "James?"

James appeared from outside, startling the boy. "Ready to go mate?" He held some *Watsonia* bacon and string in one hand and an old net in the other. The boy smiled and ran towards him, grabbing the net as he raced out the door.

Together they negotiated the steep path down to the creek. Often, the boy's legs would overtake him and the only way to slow down would be to throw out an arm and wrap it around the closest tree or, sometimes, his brother. James seemed to have no difficulty keeping a steady pace with expert footing. The boy admired him for that, but decided he was missing out on the thrill of the run. The out-of-control run. To simply lean forwards and travel wherever your feet

wanted to go. To know that you didn't really have any control over where you were going. To not really care if you came-a-cropper. To just enjoy the ride.

The boy reached the creek first. He surveyed the small trickles of water and the calm pools. All around there were muddy banks and exposed rocks. If it got much lower, he thought, the marron would be sun baking and not swimming. James arrived soon after and they headed off upstream along slippery boulders and shaky rocks.

The boy wasn't wearing shoes. Never wore shoes. James sat briefly and took his off, placing the soft, white, soles of his feet onto the autumn ground.

They came across little rapids and some blackberry bushes that James said would one day take over the whole area. The boy didn't really mind the sound of that. He plucked a berry from a tree and sucked on its juices.

Soon they came across a broad pool with large rocks jutting out from the banks towards its centre. James dropped the gear and explained to his brother, in hushed tones, that when he was a boy this was where he had almost caught the biggest marron he'd ever seen. "It was smart too," he said. "I had it out of the water, but as soon as it saw the net, that was it."

The boy had some string wrapped around a piece of bacon and into the water before James could finish his story. He let it sit for a while before moving on. The day drew out. The boy received only little bites as he worked his way along the bank. Eventually he found himself back at the original spot. "No good," he said.

"Okay, we'll head back then."

"Just give me one more go." He plopped his line a little way into the smooth liquid and waited patiently. And patiently. And patiently. Then the line became tight. "Quick, James, get the net." The boy pulled slowly on the line whilst James held the net at the ready. The boy eased the line from the water with a gentle motion. Soon he could see the giant marron as it reached the surface.

"Struth."

"Shh." The boy delicately worked the line from the water as a claw pierced the surface layer. "Easy." He tugged a little more. Then the eyes and abdomen came. And then the tail. That deliciously long tail. "Now." James whipped out the net but the marron let go of the line as the net drew closer. And with one giant kick of its huge tail, it was gone. Woosh. Gone. Into the cloudy depths below. Gone. The boy stood in stunned defeat for a moment.

"Do you reckon that was him?"

"I reckon it was." Still they stood. Too shocked to move.

Around midday James returned from town with a whole swag of timber and bolts and corrugated iron loaded into the trailer. The boy greeted him by the pergola. "No money for ya this time mate, but we've got ourselves a tree-house to build." The boy wasn't sure how to react. He really hadn't put much thought into the idea. All that came to mind were images of tree-houses he'd seen at his cousin's place. They were all little wooden boxes stuck half-way up a jarrah tree with busted planks and serious-looking rusty nails. Still, he was glad to be able to spend some time with his brother.

James loaded up a wheel-barrow and they headed off along the track they had taken last evening. They continued on past the spot where the boy had found the machine-gun and on into a clearing. The boy had only ever come to this spot once or twice and had never remembered it being like this. It was like somebody had cut a perfect circle out of the heart of the bush. There were no trees except a heavy, robust looking jarrah in the centre. It rose forcefully from the ground and then separated into two equally strong-looking trunks.

"Wow," he said, dropping his sheet of metal to the ground.

"Well don't just stand there gawking, we got some work to do."

"Work?" The boy dropped his head.

The afternoon drew out into a sing-song of hammering, sawing, carrying and lifting. The boy tried to lend a hand where he could but everything seemed so heavy and big and unbalanced. Later in the day, as the sun marched its final steps, the boy felt the weight of his eyelids too. "I'm going to go back James." But James was too busy hammering sheets of metal onto the top of the roof.

Exhausted, the boy turned his back on the construction and scrunched his way along fallen leaves back to the house. He was asleep before he hit his bed; dreaming of a wise old marron playing in the shadows of the liquid night.

The boy woke when darkness was thick. Somewhere out there he could hear the faint sound of hammer upon nail. And he could feel the saw sink its hungry teeth into the helpless wood.

On Sunday he rose and James was still at it. He threw on his Spiderman undies and strode out into the clear morning. He wove his way out to the site and felt the spiky grass on the ends of his toes.

"James, I was thinking about going marroning and later on we ..." But he was cut short by the warbled song of corrugated iron as James threw a sheet to the ground below.

"What was that mate?"

"Never mind."

"How do you like it so far?"

The boy didn't look up. "It's good." He stood a silent moment, staring at the patheticness of his feet.

James looked down at his brother. "Everything all right, mate?"

"Yep." The boy turned and started back towards the house, his chin resting on his chest. Behind him he heard the plonking of jarrah upon jarrah. He threw a honkeynut somewhere into the bush and trudged along.

Back at the house he switched on the telly and a non-remarkable game played itself out on a dying M.C.G. wicket. Australia had the Poms sown-up already. And every time willow struck leather it was echoed somewhere in the morning by hammer upon metal. He dozed.

The boy awoke to the umpires drawing stumps at the end of the day's play. He could hear his brother still at work. He walked to what now resembled a building site. All sorts of tools and construction paraphernalia were strewn across the flattened grass. He stopped and stared up at the thing before him.

It was giant. It had shape. Hell, it had all the basics of a proper house — well a large room at least. There was a balcony and spaces for windows. Iron covered most of the roof and James had built a timber ladder. It was all sunk between the fork in the huge trunk. It was bigger than his room. Bigger than all his friends' rooms. He stared, mouth open, in wonder and respect.

"G'day mate. Wanna come up?" Before he could respond, James had thrown down a rope with a harness tied in the end. The boy slipped his legs through as James gripped the other end. "Hold on," shouted James.

"You bloody hold on."

The boy felt his feet leave the ground and dangle through the air. He swung and turned and rose and spun as James effortlessly lifted him closer. He rose up

and past the branches and leaves, his perspective changing all-the-while. He was taller than he'd ever been. Could see further than he ever had. His world spun slowly in a sweet dance and he laughed with it all. He could have dangled there forever.

James reached over the balcony and pulled him onto the tree-house floor. The firmness felt strange as it gradually reverberated up his body, settling his thoughts. He could see above the tree line up here. Above the magpies and cockies. Above the spitfires and snakes. Above the shadows and everybody else. Up there. Where few honkeynuts fell.

And suddenly he was no longer disappointed that he hadn't spent more time with his brother this weekend — that they couldn't go marroning again. Everything settled as the sun prepared to level out.

He picked up a rare honkeynut and ditched it into the sky above. There it stayed — a tiny spot growing smaller, until it fell down into the depths of the greenness below. He hugged his brother.

"I'll come back and help you finish it next weekend," James said. The boy grew sad at the idea of having to wait so long. Wait as he did, every week, for Friday to come. Sometimes James couldn't come. And the weeks that followed those occasions were the toughest of all.

James looked down and saw the faraway look in his brother's eyes. He picked him up and started twirling him around like a drumstick. The boy's disappointment faded into a swirling daze of green and blue and laughter and light.

James eventually stopped, too dizzy to go on. The boy looked up at him. "You're pretty strong. Do you reckon I could wrap my hands around your muscles?"

"Nup." The boy reached up and tried to wrap his small hands around his brother's bicep. His thumbs joined, but his fingers came nowhere near meeting. The boy let out a breath of amazement.

"You try." James put out a single hand and wrapped it, completely, around the boy's arm. There was even space to move. The boy was silent in wonder.

"One day mate." And they stood and watched the sun sink into the tree-tops far beyond — happy and warm and content in their togetherness.

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The man stands at the edge of the clearing. He looks up at the decaying skeleton, remembering the short weekend that had come to mean so much. He wipes away a tear and swallows something the size of an apple. In his chest there's an aching which has been there for days now. Weeks even. He sees sheets of iron and fallen timber littering the ground in places. He walks across to the base of the mighty jarrah. He reaches out and lays a moulded hand onto the nearby ladder.

The wood is coarse and faded. Generally, though it is still in pretty good condition. He lays a foot on the ladder and starts his gentle climb. Step by step he grows closer. So close he almost becomes a part of it. He reaches the top and places a wary foot onto the landing. It all seems a bit smaller to him now.

The tree-house didn't get any closer to completion after that weekend. James had received a job on the iron-ore mines up north. Big money. He had missed him. They had kept in touch over the years until their lives had grown so different and so far apart they barely spoke at all.

He had received a phone call two weeks ago from a woman. She was someone he didn't know. She asked if he was the James' brother. He said he was. Her voice was sombre and calm. James had died.

The man leans on the railing and looks out through the canopy. Other trees have swallowed up the jarrah. Height-wise, it's just one of many.

He notices his bicep as he leans on the hard wood. He tries to wrap a coarse hand around it. It doesn't even make half way. He smiles and listens to the burbling creek in the distance. He bends down, picks up one of the many honkeynuts and launches it into the desert blue above — launches it towards the creek which runs ever forwards, cutting its own path through the earth.

The aching in his chest seems to fade. It spreads itself throughout his body and disperses into the afternoon light. He closes his eyes and sucks on the day's air. He feels as if he could fall, carefree, into the arms of the trees below. But he doesn't. He descends the ladder, one solid step at a time. And he walks, walks to the edge of the clearing. And a gentle wind sweeps across the surrounding grass in a sweet and clear whisper.

He turns for one final look at the tree-house. At that weekend. At his brother. At his youth. Looks hard and decides that it'll be something he'll carry with him forever. All of it. For all his days. And finally he smiles and turns and disappears into the bushes and the waiting world beyond.

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