

TREE MAN

He buried the old dog just before sundown. Ever since his parents had died, one after the other, he and the dog had taken to sitting on the back step at the end of each day, overlooking the rows of pots and seed-raising tunnels, the piles of soil, and paddocks filled with trees of varying heights, each in its pot or bag. The dog used to lick his face in a fog of bad breath, stumpy tail wagging, before they both went in to eat.

The dog's brush was just where he'd left it below the step, wiry teeth still matted with fur. Teasing out the coarse grey fibres, he rubbed them between his finger and thumb. There was grit caught in those grizzled hairs, and dirt, seeds and burrs, white flecks of dog dandruff.

He stared out into the shadowed dusk. That dog had been around forever, more than half his life. They'd shared the chores, the silence, the dark nights.

Nothing moved out there now. No lights flickered in the distance. No sound of any vehicle or machinery.

By the time it was fully dark his restless fingers had felted the clump of dog fur into a wad. It weighed nothing, soft on his palm, just a cocoon shape with a prickly head.

Closing his fist around it, he went inside.

The empty house hollowed out more with each footstep. Edging between all that dark heavy furniture, he avoided looking at the greasy dent that remained in his father's armchair, and shuffled past the cabinet his mother had used to store her old finds from around the farm; dug-up medicine bottles, mostly. The glass rattled together.

As he heated up a tin of Irish Stew he leaned the wad of fur against the salt shaker where he could see it. One burr was centred at the top like a crackled eye looking back at him.

Before he got into bed he propped the cocoon against his father's fold-up travelling clock, the one with the glow-in-the-dark numbers. The fur slumped sideways and as he steadied it, just for a moment, he imagined a tiny pulse.

Over the next few days he tucked the cocoon into his pocket as he tended the trees, loaded bulk orders of seedlings onto the ute, mixed up fresh batches of potting

soil. He wondered if he should give it a name, but the dog had only ever been known as Dog.

Each night he placed it on the chest of drawers, each morning he slid it into his pocket, and at dusk it sat beside him on the back step.

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When it was time to get more supplies from town he drove with the fur cocoon shoved deep into his pocket. Going up the steps into the General Store he heard Supermarket Sally's voice, and stumbled on the warped timber floorboards.

She glanced across, smiling as always, all that long thick hair like milk running over her shoulders and down her back.

He groped for a basket.

Tinned meat, bread, tea, enough packets to last the week. As he waited in line he put down his basket and shoved trembling hands into his pockets, fingers closing over the fur cocoon.

Again, that faint whisper of a pulse.

Supermarket Sally laughed as she served the woman before him, delicate wrinkles splaying out from around her eyes like the finest dandelion fluff.

His chest ached.

When it was his turn, he bent down and fumbled with the handle of the basket, lumping it gracelessly onto the counter.

'Hi there, Tree Man, has it already been a week?' Supermarket Sally's grey eyes flashed as they caught the light.

With a bowed back, he began unloading the basket. She leaned over to help and their fingers brushed, knuckles bumping together.

He froze. She smelled of soap. There was a twitch deep in his pocket. Daring a glance at her face he was struck by how close she was. Fever built in his bloodstream.

Slowly, she took his hand in her small one, folding her fingers around it.

'Look at that, you're shaking,' she said. 'Maybe I should take an early lunch break and help you carry your things to the car.'

Deafened by the fuzzy whoosh of blood thrashing through his brain and dimming his vision, he could only stand there like the gigantic fool that he was as she rang up his items. Pushing the milky hair back over her shoulder, she blinked up at him.

'Tree Man? You need to pay now.'

His throat was so dry he could barely swallow, let alone speak. Hands loose by his sides, he simply stared at her.

'Want me to help?'

Stretching over the counter before he could gather his wits, she slid one tiny hand into the pocket of his jeans, snatching it back almost immediately.

'Ouch! Something bit me!'

He staggered backwards. 'Sorry! I'm sorry.'

'What have you got in there? A rat?' Frowning, she sucked her finger, and he wanted to drop to his knees and take it into his own mouth, soothing it with his tongue until her frown disappeared and she was smiling again.

Fumbling, he reached into his back pocket for his wallet and dropped a fifty-dollar note onto the counter.

'I'm sorry,' he croaked again, grabbing his supplies.

In the ute, he yanked the cocoon from his pocket and tossed it onto the passenger seat, where it lay burr-side down.

'That was bad!'

There was a tap on the window; Supermarket Sally's pale face hovered. As he rolled down the glass she held up the packet of tea.

'You left this behind.'

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At home, he lined the tins and packets up on the shelf, put the loaves into the crock, and tossed the cocoon carelessly onto the table.

For the rest of the afternoon he worked with his trees, pricking out seedlings, pressing fresh soil around tender roots, teasing out others as he potted them into new, larger containers. The seedlings and saplings whispered among themselves as he worked, as he remembered Supermarket Sally's pink mouth, the gap between her front teeth, the soft fleshy buds of her earlobes.

Back in the house, as he waited for the kettle to boil, he picked up the cocoon.

'I want you to be nice to her.' It fluttered beneath his thumb. 'I mean it.'

Propping the cocoon against the sugar canister, he made tea and opened one of the tins to heat on the stove, blushing as he recalled Supermarket Sally reaching in through the window, all that bare skin on her arm. He'd wanted to take her hand and hold it against his heart.

In the morning, when he clambered out of bed, he saw the cocoon had fallen into one of his shoes. He put it in his pocket and went about his chores, sliding his hand in frequently to check it was still there, reassured each time to feel the warm, rhythmic flicker of life beneath his thumb.

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He loaded his basket with supplies; vegetables and oranges, biscuits and coffee; things he'd never tried before.

Supermarket Sally served him with the same friendly smile as always, making no comment as she tucked potatoes and beans and carrots along with the tins into his cloth bag, setting the crackling biscuit packet carefully on top.

'There you go.' She grinned. 'You might have to ask me over to help you eat all that food, Tree Man.'

His heart lurched. He gave her the money and she fiddled in the till for change. Her hair was tied back today, caught into a milky rope that flowed down the channel of her spine as she occupied herself straightening the other notes in the drawer. A massive heaviness tilted in his chest.

Another customer began loading things onto the counter and Supermarket Sally slid the cash drawer shut with a clatter.

At the ute, he stowed his bags and paced up and down the gravel car park. He sweated and dragged his fingers through his thick, messy hair, ruffling it into feathers.

Did she like him?

Maybe he had only imagined her sweet smiles, the special attention.

Leaning his forehead against the cab of the ute, thoughts rattled like the coins in her cash drawer. He craved the quiet of the trees, the calm of the sheds, but he couldn't go yet. He didn't want to wait another week to see her.

The feeling in his chest splintered wide open as he turned and went back to the shop. The narrow aisles and high shelving, the dim muffled silence and aura of calm all reminded him of the seedling sheds. He took a slow breath. The other customer had left, and Supermarket Sally was sitting on a stool behind the counter, hands between her knees, staring into space.

As he stepped forward, she looked up.

'Forget something?'

He curled his fingers around the cocoon in his pocket, cradling its responsive squirm.

‘Tree Man?’

Dragging out his hand, he showed her.

‘This is what bit you.’ The cocoon convulsed once and then lay still, playing dead.

Supermarket Sally stared at the thing in his hand. One knee jiggled.

‘What is it?’ The crease deepened between her eyebrows. ‘I’ve never seen anything like that before.’

‘All that food I bought?’ His voice felt rough in his throat. ‘I can’t eat it all.’

‘Then why did you buy it?’

He stared helplessly into her grey eyes. The smile spread slowly like the sun rising above clouds. ‘Do you want me to come and help you eat it?’

The cocoon flinched on his flattened hand and her gaze shot to it before he stuffed it back into his pocket.

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As he drove back to the farm he thumped the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. The wind from the open window caught his grin and dried his lips and still he grinned, thumping the wheel again.

He barely noticed the cocoon on the seat beside him, its prickled eye wide open.

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He opened tins and boiled potatoes, set out the biscuits and filled the kettle. Emptying the teapot out the back door, he scrubbed two mugs clean of ancient tannin stains. He showered. Scrubbed his fingernails and sliced the washcloth back and forth between his toes. Shaved until his jaw was raw and smooth as the trunk of a lemon-scented gum.

The cocoon sagged on the ledge above the basin, precariously balanced against his mother’s tin of violet-scented talc. Nudging it back into place to stop it falling into the soapy water, he brushed his teeth and combed his hair, buttoned on a clean flannelette shirt.

‘You’ll see,’ he promised, catching it when it toppled again. ‘You’ll like her too.’

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Supermarket Sally was not wearing her pastel blue supermarket uniform. His mouth loosened and his belly clenched. Long hair loose over a red dress, plump knees visible below the hem, she waited on the verandah with a cake balanced on outstretched palms, lipstick framing an uncertain smile.

Blood rushed in a torrent through his whole body. His dick stiffened and his cheeks were on fire. He stared until the cake wobbled in her hands and he realised she hadn't come inside yet. Stepping back, he opened the door.

Supermarket Sally prowled through the house with high heels clacking on the lino. Her fingers brushed over the backs of chairs as she studied his mother's bottle collection, his father's display of rusted saws and other farm implements mounted on the wall. She peered into the rooms he never used.

'It's like a museum.' Lifting her chin she sniffed delicately. 'And smells like old books.'

They ate in the kitchen. He'd put the cocoon out of her way on the sideboard, and as he watched Supermarket Sally eat her fill he didn't notice when it overbalanced and fell silently to the floor.

When she'd finished eating, Supermarket Sally reached for his hand across the table. Stars prickled all over his body. His neck felt weak and his back zinged with unexpected energy. As she lifted his hand to kiss his knuckles he groaned, an animal sound of agony, anticipation. He didn't want her to stop. He wanted more, although he didn't know what more meant.

Supermarket Sally knew what it meant.

Leading him by the hand to the bedroom with the dark timber wardrobe and tufted chenille bedspread, the Holland blind down over the window, she began to undress him.

He exploded beneath her hands.

The way their bodies fitted together was a miracle, bringing a pleasure so intense he didn't want to let her go. He clung to her soft white flesh, terrified she'd somehow be taken away from him as well.

As soon as it was over he was ready to do it again, until finally Supermarket Sally fell asleep in his arms.

Blinking in the darkness with her thick hair spread across his chest and caught between his fingers, he could barely believe that she was here, like this, with him. He'd never known such ecstasy.

Or such peace.

Eyes flickering to the luminous dial of the travelling clock, he suddenly remembered he'd left the cocoon in the kitchen.

Carefully detaching himself from Supermarket Sally's trusting weight, he crept out. Something soft squashed underfoot. As he snapped on the light his own naked reflection was the first thing he saw in the black window, before he looked down and realised he'd stepped on the cocoon.

Throat closing with a stab of fear, he scooped it up and held it in his cupped palm.

It lay flattened, still and cold.

Stricken, he rubbed it over and over with his thumb, desperate for a response, but the scruffy fibres only frayed and grew thinner the more he rubbed.

Supermarket Sally appeared in the doorway, yawning, wearing his discarded flannelette shirt.

'What's wrong?'

'I can't...it's not...'

Peering at the misshapen thatch of dog fur, her breath felt warm against his skin.

'Let me try?' Gently, she took it. Her eyes were dark as she dragged her fingers through her own hair, removing several loose strands, before carefully wrapping them around what remained of the cocoon.

Fists by his sides, he could only watch as she combed her hair again with spread fingers, adding more strands to the tiny object in her hand.

Chafing it between her palms, as if she was rolling out a lump of clay, he caught her wrist.

'Don't hurt it.'

'I won't.' Her smile flickered. 'I promise.'

After more rubbing, she opened her hands to reveal a cocoon rounded and fatter than before, with a silky sheen overlaying the dog's dull fur. The burrs had shifted and it looked both different and the same as before.

It didn't move.

'Maybe you should hold it now.' Supermarket Sally tumbled the lifeless cocoon into his hand.

Maybe, that's all it had even been; a tuft of dog fur.

The pain was a prickle in his throat, a burr in his chest, a stifling inability to breathe.

Supermarket Sally trailed cool fingers over his shoulder. 'Come back to bed.'

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When he woke there was daylight shafting in around the blind. Supermarket Sally was sitting on the other side of the bed with her back to him. He couldn't take his eyes off those rounded hips and bare thighs, the blue-milk tumble of her hair. He longed to brush it, the way he used to brush the dog.

As his body stirred he shifted restlessly and she turned.

'Look what I found on my pillow.' She held out the cocoon.

Jolting upright he reached for it, and the purring vibrated so strongly against his fingers that he sagged back against the pillows in relief. Supermarket Sally laughed and climbed in beside him.

'See? I told you I wouldn't hurt it.'

As he caressed the fur around the prickly wide-open clover burr, its contented hum increased. Supermarket Sally stretched out warm against his side.

'What's its name?'

'Hasn't got a name.'

'It needs a name.' Slowly, she trailed a finger down his arm. Nerve endings fizzed and bubbled all the way to his toes. 'Surely, everybody needs a name?'

He held his breath as her mouth pressed against his chest.

'Even you, Tree Man.' Her breath was a warm mist. 'Unless you want me to keep calling you that...?'

It had been so long since anyone had asked for, or spoken his name, he'd almost forgotten he had one.

'I'll call it Dog,' he said.

'And you? What shall I call you?'

'Boy.' The word dropped clumsily from his tongue. He swallowed. 'They just called me Boy.' Setting aside the cocoon, he buried his face in her hair.