

Rooted

A small, brown-haired girl walked solemnly across the main street. The night was open wide. Empty of sound but for the steady, swollen rumble of crickets that padded out the corners of the dimness. The whole town was asleep bar the nightshift, who hadn't come in yet. Despite the cold, the girl wore only a pale cream night dress, and it fluttered lightly in the breeze against the dark like a paper moth. She planted her feet firmly on the bitumen, turned towards me, and smiled.

I sat upright in a cold sweat, sheets in knotted lumps around my feet. The room was too bright. Dad hadn't woken me when he came in, which was strange. Everything swam – for a moment I squinted, lost in the lurch between waking and awake, unable to make sense of the familiar shapes around me. I forced my way into the kitchen, wading through the dreamy fog that still surrounded my limbs and clung to my eyes.

Amy grabbed my backpack off the bench and shoved it firmly into my chest.

“Dad's late. The office called: there's a delay. I'll take you.”

The morning was already stodgy and warm. It was only early spring, but things had begun to heat up earlier this year than I remembered. My shirt stuck to my back against the car seat, and I wondered about Dad.

Amy swore. We stopped abruptly behind a line of cars and trucks on Main Street. Traffic was unheard of around here. People began climbing out of their cars and craning their necks to get a look at whatever was blocking the road.

I hopped out.

Elly was up ahead, standing next to her mum and their blue station wagon – her bright white-blond hair glistening in the sun. I waved and pulled a face, but she was transfixed on something in the opposite direction. I followed her gaze, and my breath caught hard around my tonsils.

A tall, ancient red gum stood broad and proud in the middle of the road. Its branches arched up and over the post office, and its strong roots buckled and blistered the bitumen all the way down to the bakery carpark. The canopy already housed a ruckus of screeching black cockatoos, who thought the whole thing was a very good time indeed. That day, we walked to school, with the smell of freshly turned earth hanging in the air around us like cotton wool.

It was News Day. Elly brought a dead bee in a jar to share with the class, but was interrupted by Mrs. Johnson's knuckles, which rapped sharply on the door before her drawn face appeared and she proceeded to very slowly and deliberately announce that Elisa Thompson, from Year 6, was missing. We were not to walk home alone.

That afternoon, in our art lesson, Mrs. Jones played us a video of koalas in bandages with blackened feet, and Elly cried and wiped snot on her school shirt. I pushed the fluttering in my chest down into my stomach and swallowed hard. Dad said it was bullshit. There have always been disasters, as far back as you want to look. Coal is good jobs and the heart and soul of this town. Coal puts food on the table. Coal's good as gold.

The gum was still there on the way home.

That night, I had the dream again. Cloud formed a ceiling that stretched on for miles, veined with flecks of moonlight. It was the kind of sky that made you feel as if the world were a backlit pantomime and expected to find that we're all just hanging on strings. This time, the girl was white haired and wore worn blue cotton pajamas. I watched the soles of her sun-hardened feet pad lightly across the warm cement on Mary Street. She stood at the mouth of the dirt road and hummed softly to herself – swaying as her hair glowed with a ghostly luminescence in the moonlight. I saw only the back of her.

The next morning, Amy was speaking in hushed tones, urgent words spilling quickly into the phone receiver as I came down the hallway. Elly was gone. I heard 'bloody tree-huggers' and 'hippy morons'. She was frowning, hard. Dad was late again. There was something on Mary Street and the trucks couldn't get through.

I walked to school with Amy alongside, dragging my heavy legs up the hill, one at a time, bag stuck fast to my back.

When I opened my desk tray, I found a crumpled brown paper bag. The words 'make them listen' lay in messy red marker on the front, their edges bleeding slowly through the paper. I opened the bag tentatively. Inside lay one rough, brown seed, about the size of my thumbnail. I studied it carefully, running my fingers over the jagged surface, then folded the bag and placed it in the pocket of my shorts.

More knuckles on the door, and more kids were missing. Elly was gone, and George from Year 7. A rep was coming in from More Mines Ltd. to talk about safety around disused mine sites.

Ignoring the warnings, I walked home the long way, past Mary Street, and stopped in front of the blue gum, which now stood tall in front of the dirt road next to the old fire station, as if it had been there for a century or two. Its flowers were in full blossom and swarmed with bees. I remembered the girl with white hair in the blue pajamas, and the breath feathered in my chest again. Inside my pocket, I held the seed tight in my fist until it warmed against my skin. Drawing in one long, unsteady breath, I placed it on my tongue, and swallowed.

----- *Two weeks later* -----

It was on the news on all three channels, but there was no-one around to watch it: A small town - all but owned by one rarely seen gentleman in a crisp blue button-up shirt, pockets heavy with the spoils of a town's work and all that stuff buried deep down in the red dirt - had been turned upside down.

Black blistered streets now rumped with the roots of a hundred mighty, ancient gum trees, canopies stretching up and over tired old rows of weatherboard houses and shops. Their branches swayed softly: sad and triumphant. Their trunks stood tall and proud. The air was cleaner, gently brushing faces like a cool wet sheet hanging out in the summer heat.

Homes sat forlorn and empty, while a fully-fledged spectacle of grown adults wailed and clung to the broad trunks of the blue and red gums, facing off the bulldozers with desperate cries for justice and something about 'saving the children'. The usual crap. Men in suits threatened lawyers and police, and boomers and miners held fast and yelled alike that it was the kids. It was always about the goddamn kids.