

## Old Nico

Sunlight breaks the shadow. The amorphous smudge on the far side of the park becomes a person on a bench. I stroll closer. It's Old Nico. I was thinking about him today. A strange coincidence? Coincidence, chance, probability – a conversation for Old Nico!

Lengthening jowls and deepening cheek crags show the years since school. *Should I go the other way? No. I have time. Or is it Old Nico's illusion of time?* I stop in front of him, wondering if he'll remember me, wondering if he'd rather be left alone.

'Hello Mr Nicolich, long time.'

He tilts his face up and half his mouth stretches sideways. A drooping eye, half-face sag, clenched right hand. The asymmetry is new. I look away, wishing I was somewhere else.

He leans precariously, thumping his bunched hand clumsily onto the bench. An invitation?

'Ha-Hannah. I never for-forget a f-face.'

I edge onto the bench. The past cruelties seem even worse now.

I leap up at a high-pitched screech. The tortured cry comes again. Behind us a broken magpie flutters, contorts, legs grasping at air like an upturned beetle. Its wings gouge the leaf-littered ground.

'L-lout, no good louth.' Old Nico nods towards the far shrubs and I recognise the sauntering gait of Tolson, my year's troublemaker, the swagger unchanged by the six years since I'd seen him. I heard he'd been in trouble with the law since leaving school. My gut knots until he moves away, past the distant scrub.

Old Nico thrusts his jacket at me. 'C can you, g get –?' He flops back, breath rasping, his twisted hand now a tight fist.

I crouch and gently enfold the quivering creature in Nico's jacket. Stumble as its long, pointed beak opens to emit another anguished shriek. I ease back onto the bench, the bird nested on my lap. My hands are drawn to its quivering downy back. I pull them back, tuck them away under the edges of the jacket. Old Nico is quiet beside me, his clenched fingers paw his loose shirt. He rakes his other hand repeatedly through his hair. He clears his throat, sighs. When he doesn't speak I turn towards him.

‘What happened?’

‘Sling s-band.’ He raises his good arm, pointing to the bush where Tolson had disappeared.

‘Slingshot?’

Old Nico nods at me. A pool in one eye threatens to spill. *Is it a tear?*

‘L-loouuts. School. Years long gone.’ He grunts and slumps deeper into the bench.

Old Nico was a good teacher. But he endured eggs on his car, a stabbed tyre, taunts. And the butcherbird that had befriended him back then, a frequent visitor to his garden, was struck dead by a stone. Our lessons had been decorated by stories of that butcherbird’s antics, until one day Old Nico slipped into the classroom, subdued. With his accent more pronounced than usual, he told us about finding the bird breathing its last, wings fluttering, a slingshot lying abandoned nearby. We all knew it was Tolson.

I gently adjust the jacket as the magpie flaps one wing. ‘I’m a maths teacher now too. Never thought I’d be back at the old school, but here I am.’

‘G-good math Hannah.’ Nico puffs and wheezes, working his crooked mouth into odd shapes.

‘You were a great teacher Mr Nicolich. Inspiring. Hope I can be half as good.’

I’m not sure I’ll last long teaching, despite no eggs, no slashed tyres. Not yet anyway, although last week I had to contend with chewing gum on my chair, test papers missing, crackling packets competing with my voice.

When I’d finished school, sated on the pleasure of black and white resolutions, shaping young minds had a greater pull than the sludge of engineering or nebulous careers with finance. But some days, I fantasise about sitting behind a desk in an accounting firm. Recent school lessons are like swimming through a rip, wondering if I’ll reach the shore. My idealism is being shunted downstream and I’m losing my grasp on it.

‘You were a teacher for a long time Mr Nicolich. How did you stay?’

Old Nico is quiet. I wonder whether he’s alright. Then abruptly his head jolts up. ‘No good stew fails. Count wins.’ He tilts his head my way, raises his chin.

It’s peaceful sitting on the bench with Old Nico. Magpies warble in the trees, singing me into calm. The low sun glints through swaying eucalypt branches like triangles of beckoning lights in a dream. The silence between us soothes.

‘What shall we do with this poor bird?’

‘You take. M-make good. Last week bird dead. T-to get at me.’

*Is that more water in his eye? A wet cheek?*

I don’t know anything about injured birds. But what can I do? I nudge my bag up my arm until it’s over one shoulder and unwind into standing, cradling the magpie in the jacket. I leave Old Nico, every step peeling free a piece of memory.

A school camp in my second last year of school. They called it a bush camp, but it was a collection of rickety buildings perched on dry grey sand, surrounded by straggly trees and prickly shrubs. We were all a bit on edge; it was stinking hot, too many flies and an old dam so low on water it was more like a puddle. You could see the wrigglers in it. But that wasn’t the worst part. Tolson was strutting about like he was king of the camp, seemed to be everywhere. Careening around the corner from the dormitory he bumped hard against me, sniggered. His grasping talons wrenched up my shirt. ‘Give us a look at ya pancakes!’

Tolson’s hands dropped at a thunderous shout. Old Nico’s eyes, shafts of anger, were on him, lips squashed to a thin line as he strode towards us. Another roar from Nico – the fierce voice incongruous against his slight stature. Tolson slunk away, swearing. Old Nico asked me if I was alright, told me he’d make sure Tolson got punished, but I begged him to leave it. Later, as the class clambered through the obstacle courses, Tolson stood slouched, sneering, against a tree. Making a slingshot. Mumbling, swearing. A dead honeyeater lay by the water tank that afternoon.

After the evening camp meal, as my group set up the quiz questions, Tolson darted past the window. A crash echoed through the wall. Thumping, banging, the tinkling of broken glass. Overturned chairs filled the kitchen, empty beer cans lay scattered outside. Tolson’s parents, otherwise known as the Toxic Tolsons, arrived late in the evening. Tolson stood, hands on hips, in the headlight beam of his parents’ car, his face, as always, marred by the forward thrust of his jaw underlining his upside-down-bow mouth. The same look as his father. He’d scrambled into the back of the car, slamming the door, hunching into the seat. The eyes of the whole camp followed the Tolsons down the track.

Following that camp, once Tolson was through a long detention, he and his reprobate mate waited for me on Wednesdays after school at the lockers – nudging, pushing, slinging off. They were hard to avoid until Old Nico started Wednesday

after-school maths tutoring, by invitation only. He called it a Master Class. Old Nico made numbers sing, opened young minds to question – to see that numbers were the questions. And the answers. That's when numbers became my new favourite language. I was lucky to have Nico as a teacher two years in a row.

I minister to the magpie at home, keeping it in a box in the laundry, cancelling my plans for the weekend. Initially it hardly moves, and I wake many times through the first night to check it, see it's still breathing. I try not to think about how I will tell Old Nico if the bird doesn't survive.

After consulting a local vet who splints the bird's wing, I take the magpie to school. I catch a group of students peeking into the office while I'm placing small balls of mince in the bird's crate. I transfer the crate to the corner of the classroom. A student calls out. 'Should you be teaching biol instead of maths, miss?' I ignore the smirks. I describe the slingshot, the magpie writhing on the ground, left for dead. The smirks transform into expressions of disbelief, indignation.

The class calculate decreasing quantities of bird feed remaining over a given number of days, the proportion of feed weight to bird weight, the growth rates of magpie chicks. Frowns of concentration, small smiles when the answers are correct. The students compete to come up with a name for the bird – Maggie, Pippie, Oreo, are called and whispered. I wonder which name Old Nico would prefer, if any. A girl who was always late to class comes in early, offering to help with the magpie. Her homework is completed with a new attention to detail. Count wins, not stew fails.

The magpie sings a gentle flute-like lullaby. I learn magpies sing softly when alone, call louder duets in pairs, and live in large groups. They look out for each other.

The magpie regains strength, able to fly short distances once the splint is removed. I stop taking it to school, instead leaving it in my house while I'm at work. The students beg for progress reports. The reports are accompanied by more maths worksheets – all relating to birds. Every one gets completed.

I rush to the park after school the next week, but the bench is empty. I need to return Old Nico's jacket, tell him about the magpie. And I have so many stories about my class. I sit alone on the bench. I go back the next day, the next week.

I am on the bench looking out for Old Nico when a dishevelled man, a tatty backpack slung over one shoulder, emerges from the bush lining the park, swinging a piece of wood. He has Tolson's strut. My breath catches. His eyes find me, his

glance like an icepick. He picks up a stone and flings it at a tree. I shift to a bench facing the other way until I realise I might miss seeing Old Nico. I move back, tap time on the bench, think about binomial equations. Tolson throws more stones. I check my lesson plans.

I keep the bird longer than necessary, waiting for Old Nico to share in its release back to freedom. Reluctantly, when Old Nico hasn't appeared after two more weeks, I let the bird go on a warm day when the soft wind will offer no threat, and there is no one lurking by the trees or in the distant scrub. It paces circles on the grass by the bench, eyes on me. 'Fly away magpie,' I whisper. I break eye contact and instead focus on the eucalypt leaves dancing in the breeze. A soft melody carries over the nearby jarrah as I stand to leave.

I detour to the park after school most days. The muddy grass squelches underfoot, releasing scents of new growth. Flocks of magpies sing at me, drawing me to the bench where I wait, marking school papers, willing Old Nico to return. The rescued bird frequently appears, watching me, tilting its head while I talk to it.

Tolson appears multiple times, getting closer each time, hood up, accompanied by a faint tuneless whistle. I focus on my work. At first, my heart thumps, my stomach clenches. But I don't turn away. I slow my breath and soften into the bench. The balming lemon scent of gum leaves rains on me.

The lengthening days become weeks, a month. The shrubs burst into flower. The equinox passes, reminding me of Old Nico calculating the rate of change of the days; he connected mathematics with the world around us.

One afternoon while I'm wishing Old Nico was there to see the eucalypt leaves fragmenting the sinking sun into shapes and patterns, he appears from behind a tree, stride-limping towards me clutching his cane. His mouth stretches to a half crescent and his eyes crinkle as he collapses onto the seat by my side.

'Been s-sick. Better now. Back to normal.' His head lifts. He nods at the light glimmering through the tree canopy. 'Geom-etry. Nice.'

I tell him about the bird as magpies carol and chortle nearby. Nico nods and chuckles when I describe my class – their worksheets and progress.

A shadow looms. It's Tolson, a slingshot raised, aimed towards the trees. I stand, shoulders back. His sly eyes land on me, slide away. He lowers his hand, mutters, 'Thicko Sicko Nico.' He swaggers off, sniggering, swinging the slingshot.

The sniggers abruptly morph to 'Eff off beakhead!' Tolson drops the slingshot and windmills his arms as a magpie swoops close.

I turn to Old Nico. 'What are the chances that's our magpie?'

He points at the bird as it glides in for further attacks. 'Magpie. Never forgets a f-face.' He smiles a wide half grin.