

Young Writers Award 2020 – Callum Brockett

Runner up

Bunya Pine

There isn't much left of the old Texan in the corduroy armchair. His eyes do not wander, instead straight and fixed. Dribble sits on his lips and sandwich crumbs in his white beard.

Dad leans in close to tell him that we are here. His eyes flicker at the familiar voice as he goes backwards, his mind lifting the dusty white sheets off all the furniture. As we wait, my stomach turns and I become very conscious of how stuck I am, as if cemented to the floor, in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Finally, he looks up at Dad, but doesn't smile.

Grandad is here, with us now.

He sits in an extended armchair, his pant legs rising just enough so I can see the blue and purple spider veins crawling around his ankles, twisting like highways on a road map. We face the verandah, with the glass doors locked shut. The white-plastered walls trap stale air and Dad tries to open a window but gets told off by a nurse. The view is a cluster of empty tables and chairs, and a long stretch of Bunya Pines, bowing from the weight of the rain. Grandad once said that evergreen trees are boring and don't do much. Dad had asked him what he wanted the trees to do. Grandad said he wanted the trees to flourish in the summer, turn the colour of maple in autumn, die in the winter and be reborn in the spring. He would never admit it, but I think he liked knowing that the world around him was still moving, even if he wasn't.

Grandad calls me a name that isn't mine. He isn't even close.

'This is Lachie. Your Grandson. He's come to see you,' interjects Dad, unable to hide the pink in his cheeks.

Grandad just grunts and tells me to turn off the TV. I notice others watching so I don't get up. On the TV, a soldier moves through a forest, his rifle slung over his shoulder. He opens fire on an unseen enemy, but no sound accompanies the muzzle flash.

Little is said. At first, I struggle with the silence, but soon realise that if I stay deadly still, it simply sits at our feet. But that doesn't stop Dad from trying.

'Dad, tell Lachie about the Nurse. The one that you were telling me about on the phone,' says my father.

'Eh?'

'The nurse.' says Dad, leaning in towards Grandad. 'The nurse,'

'What about her?'

'On the phone, you were telling me about her son. He's the cricketer.'

'Eh?'

'Never mind, Dad.'

Silence fills the space between us again, Dad picking at the pilling fabric of the couch. It is only here, in this place, that I notice Dad's posture slackens, as if his spine has been left in the car.

'Tell the boy he can have my jelly,' says Grandad, pulling the fluoro plastic container from his sweater pocket.

'He doesn't want your jelly, Dad.'

'It's lime.'

'He doesn't want the jelly, Dad.'

'Oh.'

The soldier on the TV lies motionless, blood seeping into the earth. His lips are moving but no words come.

We dig into the ground with pickaxes and shovels. It is the only nature strip on the street where no grass grows. Dad and I turn over the soil, as grey thunderclouds roll in on a sticky afternoon. We swing high and bury the sharp edges as deep as they will go, before uprooting the soil. But after only a few centimeters, we run into hard rock. This is the fourth or fifth time we have upset the ground, to try and get something to sprout.

'Is dementia hereditary?' I say, interrupting the rhythm of metal chipping away at rock.

'Huh?'

Dad takes two more swings, the wood handle sliding through his grip and pulling up blisters. We could only find one pair of gloves. I took the right; he took the left.

‘I think I read somewhere that it is.’

‘Wouldn’t worry about it.’

I take breaks regularly, but Dad doesn’t stop ploughing. The man can’t sit still, conjuring chores out of nowhere on weekends. There are always fence posts that need repainting, or lawn that needs mowing. I know it kills him, to not be able to get grass to grow on the nature strip.

‘I hope I never get to an age where I find out,’ I say.

‘Oh, I’m sure you’ll grow nice and old just like him, eating mush for breakfast, lunch and dinner before you know it.’

‘Jesus Christ, if I ever get put in a hole like that, I’ll hang myself from the ceiling fan,’ I say, giving it a bit of an edge. I’m not sure why I want him to know that I’m serious. But it gets him to stop digging.

‘Do you think you’ll come out this Sunday, to see your Grandfather?’

I hesitate.

‘I was thinking of going to this thing with Katie,’ I say, but I’m too slow, feeling paper thin in the breeze. Dad turns back to the soil.

We finish digging as it starts to spit, breathing steadily as drops of rain wash away the dirt. Dad says he will plant the grass seed tomorrow. He takes a moment, troubled by how much rock is mixed with the soil. I want to move inside, but my father’s brief stillness teeters on brooding, stranded in the turned-up ground as thunder snaps.

‘You alright?’

‘Yeah,’ he says, his eyes stuck on the ground.

I ask Dad if he wants to go inside. But he doesn’t seem to hear me.

I tell him I can move some things around on Sunday, and this gets him going.

‘What do you mean, he doesn’t want to see us?’ says Dad, a little louder than was probably acceptable for the reception of the nursing home. It’s a popular area, with patients

congregating around the digitally locked entry point. ‘Does he even get a choice?’ says Dad, and the Nurse raises her eyebrows.

We wait thirty minutes in reception. Dad flicks through a Men’s Health Magazine, stopping at an advertisement for a hair clinic, claiming they have a 98% success rate re-growing hair. But Dad’s hairline is still perfectly intact.

We are finally allowed through. Grandad sits in the same corduroy armchair, looking out towards the Bunya Pines. Dad begins like he always does, making sure that Grandad is eating enough and taking all his pills. This talk starts to dry out, and Dad gets desperate. He tries to rope me into the conversation, bragging about my success at school and talking about the girl I’ve started seeing.

‘A bit of a ladies man,’ says Dad, forcing a chuckle. ‘Just like you were, hey Dad?’

But Grandad only stares and breathes, the lines of his face printed in dark greys. His eyes give nothing away, like staring at wet concrete. I find it hard to imagine these are the same eyes that once gazed upon my new-born father. The same eyes that watched Dad marry in the spring of 87’. The same eyes that watched Dad bury Mum ten years later. I start to feel nauseous, as Dad chips away.

Time crawls along the stained, mustard-coloured carpet. Finally, I can hear Dad shuffling for the keys in his pocket. As we get up to leave, Grandad turns, the first words he says to us are barely a whisper.

‘Is she coming to see me?’ he says, his voice softer than anything I have ever heard.

We stop at a McDonald's just off the highway for lunch. I move through a Big Mac and Dad sips on a coffee. One of the few times Dad does sit still is to enjoy a storm, even now sticking his head from the undercover area to check on the state of the clouds.

‘Nothing good today,’ he says, as if I would share his disappointment.

‘Why doesn’t Grandma visit Grandad?’ I ask.

Dad steals one of my chips.

‘I think she just needs time. It’s difficult for her. To see him like that’

‘But not for you?’

Dad just shrugs. ‘We all handle things differently.’

‘What about Uncle Paul? Does he ever visit?’

‘He’s a very busy man.’

‘So, you’re the only one stuck with this?’

‘And you, of course,’ says Dad, giving me a wink.

I carefully fold the burger wrapper in triangles and take a long sip of Coke. When I was younger, I worried that parents could read their kids' minds. It was the only way I could explain how my father always seemed to have an answer to all my problems, all the little things that kept me awake at night. I hope he can’t read my thoughts now. For the briefest moment I think about how it would be better if Granddad weren’t around anymore. That it is selfish of him to hold on like this, like a disconnected garden faucet that still drips in the night. The thought doesn’t last long, but my bones still shiver and tingle.

‘He always was a strange man. Even when he was all there,’ says Dad. ‘When Paul and I were younger, we would play out in the park behind our house. Your Grandfather would just run laps around the field. Every time he came back round to where we played, we would ask him to throw a ball or skim rocks out over the mangroves along the creek bed. All the other fathers were playing with their kids. But your Grandfather would just keep running. I couldn’t tell you why. And some of the kids would start to whisper, that he was a CIA spy or the guy who shot JFK, on the run, hiding out in suburban Brisbane.’ Dad laughs now, but he does it without smiling. ‘I don’t think he ever really wanted children.’

I want to ask Dad if he thinks the same man who ignored him then, is the same one ignoring him now. Or is it different.

‘Do you think there is any point visiting him?’ I say instead.

But Dad just shrugs, sips on his coffee and cranes his neck skyward, staring at the clouds.

‘He’s still there. Bits of him, anyway.’

The highway is flooded, and large puddles mark the bitumen. Dad usually tells me to slow down when I reach large sections of standing water, but I leave my foot off the brake and he says nothing. At the next bit of flooded road, I accelerate, trails of water spitting up around the windows. Dad still says nothing.

‘It’s your son, Peter,’ says Dad, resting his hand on Grandad’s shoulder. ‘Lachie is with me.’

But Grandad swipes the hand from his shoulder, not meeting Dad’s eyeline.

‘You aren’t my son,’ he says, trying to wriggle out of Dad’s stare.

‘It’s Peter. Your son.’ Dad looks over to me, smiling, as if this is a joke. To prove it, Dad pats Grandad on the head, ruffling his hair. But Grandad isn’t having any of it, swiping the hand away. ‘What’s put you in a mood?’

‘I don’t know this man,’ says Grandad, looking desperately out across the room. Dad also looks around with a goofy smile on his face, as if to assure everyone that everything is fine. But no one moves. No one cares.

‘Lachie drove here. He’s getting quite good at driving, although he can’t reverse parallel park to save himself. Hey?’ says Dad, trying to move on and inviting me to join the conversation. I offer a forced smile. I know there isn’t any point. The distance between me and the old Texan in the corduroy armchair is vast, verging on interstellar. I would need a rocket ship to find him.

‘I don’t know these people.’

He is yelling now, but at no one in particular. Dad tries to lean in and hold Grandad, maybe to thaw him out in his grasp. But Grandad just yells louder, striking at Dad as he reaches in. He even manages to get a good shot across Dad’s jaw. Finally, Dad leans back, raising his arms and hands in defeat. Dad kicks my foot and nods towards reception.

In the car, Dad just holds the steering wheel and looks out across the empty car park, as if he is about to take off. But the keys aren’t even in the ignition. I want to say something.

‘Should we turn on the heaters?’ I say.

But Dad doesn’t hear me.

No, something else.

‘You’re trying. At least you can always say you tried.’ The words come out slower than I would have liked, and the sincerity seems to evaporate with my visible breath.

‘Yeah I can say that. But to who?’ says Dad, not taking his eyes off the car park. ‘You don’t have to come back inside if you don’t want to.’

We sit in silence again, not addressing the outburst. We stay still for about twenty minutes, just looking out across the verandah towards the Bunya Pines, which move with a wind that threatens another storm. Rain falls in light, slow bursts, as if in no rush to reach the ground.

Grandad places his left arm next to mine, his palm facing upwards. He doesn't acknowledge the movement, but the placement of the arm is too awkward not to be deliberate. I let his hand sit, empty but reaching. His wedding ring is loose around his finger, as if he has stolen it from someone else and claimed it as his own. I think about him washing his hands, and it sliding off, slipping through his fingers and down the drain, lost forever. Would he cry out, slam his fist, and desperately start pulling apart the pipes beneath the sink? Or would he just be confused, and wonder what the gold band was doing around his finger in the first place?

The guilt starts to build, unstable and threatening to topple. It's one of those things that if I don't do, I'll think about for the rest of the afternoon. I grab hold of his hand and he shakes it slightly. I'm surprised by how much heat still moves through his palm, expecting the touch of a marble tabletop. His palm even starts to sweat. I turn slightly, watching tears build up across his lower eyelids. All I can think about is how he is holding the wrong person's hand.

We leave without saying a word, slowly prying ourselves from the couch. It's here that Dad notices me slowly pulling away from Grandad's grip.

'You're leaving?' says Grandad, his voice cracking slightly.

'We better get moving.'

'Oh. Will you be back next weekend?'

Dad offers a slow, tired nod. It is only in the carpark that he smiles at nothing in particular, his teeth yellow, coffee stained.