

Cremation – Owini, Year 12, VIC

Festering high above the veranda is the sweltering stench. I know what lies under these floorboards. He, however, does not.

“God, this heat, it doesn’t feel real,” he says, glancing sideways at the thickened bush. He’s been eyeing it nervously for the past twenty minutes but has now relaxed a little. His shirt is crumpled, it looks expensive. The collar is pointing up on one side the same way it was when he left some time ago.

“Yeah, the summer’s been worse than usual. We try to burn up the trees before mid- November hits, but it slipped my mind this year.” It hadn’t slipped my mind. It was a very conscious decision. “Now with the fire ban and all...” I trail off, but he knows. I mean, he doesn’t, but it’s suspended in the air above our heads, nonetheless. The thought leaves the air long enough to be replaced with the dreadful smell. He notices. I think of the Poe poem. Dad repeated it in his moments of quiet sobriety.

I think about what would happen should he hear the beating heart. He won’t. I’m quite sure of it.

He's getting distracted by the smell, now, and he’s trying to avoid discussing it. ‘Outback smells,’ he’d emphasise, pretending to understand life out here. As if he hadn’t vanished very suddenly, loudly and with too much yelling. I watch him intently as he adjusts in the wooden seat, tilting in and out of various incorrect positions before, finally, resorting to his original attitude. The wood is elderly, rings having stood the test of time before being killed prematurely to be birthed as a chair in this new life. Now, it is old once more. The seat squeaks in defiant victory. I let it have its triumph – celebrating a little myself – if not for rooting for the chair, but for the value in defeating an old foe.

“So, Lachie, how’s it been lately?” He needles, and it’s a simple question but there’s a subtlety there that I don’t think even he recognises – which is almost funny.

“I mean, really, how has it been?” Oh. Maybe he does recognise it. He shouldn’t have asked that, because now it feels like someone has cut a part of my throat out and is ready and willing to serve it to him, with my tears as a refreshing wine. He’s a monster enough to treat me like a delicacy. He’d serve me with a side of camembert. Probably from one of my own cows.

I choose not to answer, giving him an opportunity to let his words hang from the small veranda roof. It’s an interesting feeling, knowing the answer to all your questions linger within another person entirely. So, whilst you put your heart out, tied securely by rope and hanging off the ceiling, the other person watches it choke and bleed out, bruising at the neck and all the other rabid responses to an untimely death.

“Good. It’s been fine.” I answer, flicking at imaginary dust.

“Which one?” he raises, uselessly debating semantics to make a joke of me, “good? Or fine?”

“It’s been fine. Which is good,” I state shortly through gritted teeth, glaring at him with enough fire to warm a corpse. I soften my eyes. “Everything is as it was ten years ago, Don. Nothing’s

changed since *you left*." I say the last two words with enough emphasis that he looks away. I smile lightly, finding solace in making him uncomfortable.

"Nah, look, I- I'm sorry. I had to go. I mean, I guess I didn't need to go that loudly, but I needed to leave."

"Don't apologise to me," I sigh, a futile attempt to retain a moral high ground.

"Yeah, well. Dad's not in, is he? At the bar again?"

To him, at this point, it seems as though I look at the floorboards.

In reality, I stare intently between the *gaps* in the floorboards and noiselessly, with the most minute, unrecognisable emphasis of the corner of my eyes, I silence the already silent.

"Yeah," I say, unconcerned, "some hell or other. D'ya want a tea or something?"

"Sure. D'ya remember how I like it?"

There's a scintilla there where I feel like a younger brother again. A fleeting moment where I'm not entirely sure whether he'd Chinese burn me or pat me on the back. A bygone memory flashes of us down by the Rutherford's lake, where we'd hung up a half-broken swing and he pushed, and the clouds tickled my toes. A moment where he and I are hiding in his closet whilst alcohol wreaks its havoc elsewhere – somewhere close by but huddling together in that closet made me feel lands away. For a moment, I'm given back the childhood he gently protected, before deserting me and forcing me to exchange a preserved childhood for a blackened adulthood. A life that became ashy and grey, a smoke ridden ruin, captured by broken moments of more fire and more alcohol and more destruction. Only this time, the closet itself was lands away and I was in the firing zone.

Dad cut the rope off the swing. It's all under the veranda now-

"Lachie?"

The veranda which I almost fall onto with the way my reverie is suddenly shredded.

"Actually, *Don*, we don't have tea." I say firmly, out of spite, sitting down as I spit it out.

"Ach, come on, Lachie. Don't make me apologise to him- look, the guy's a drunken maniac, a train wreck. Everyone talks about him like-" He pauses, staring at the bush. He shifts his weight again and the seat shrieks before he begins tracing the rings on the arms. His fingers trace them delicately, the way he used to trace my bruises, for the times I didn't reach the closet quickly enough. The golden-brown rings, an insignia of age and decay. I feel like a younger brother again. Sitting in the kitchen when the sun would stream in, turning the floral wallpaper more pink and more flowery, and Don's silhouette would perfectly imprint the surging of sunlight, making him look like an angel. I feel him trace my palm and predict my future.

'Lachie, your big line says you're a slow runner and a bad swimmer, and the little line here says you're the next great Australian writer.'

'Like Poe?'

'He wasn't Australian, idiot... yes, like Poe.'

“Look, Lachie, I came here ‘cos Lucy Gray called – you know, the new girl who moved in, up the road,” he finishes. Lucy Gray has hair the same colour as the rings, and a mouth two times the size of a Eucalyptus tree.

“What’d she want?” I ask, thinking of it no more than a passing question, but Don looks away again, hitting the arms of the chair lightly, with just his right palm. “What, Don?” I press.

“Where’s Dad, Lachie? Like, where is he? ‘Cos she says you two haven’t been out of the house in a few weeks.” He looks flustered now, and I earnestly hope Lucy falls under a tractor at some point, and he looks at me more keenly, his brows furrowing in concern and frustration, and some beating pounds the back of my head.

I point to the floorboards. But he knows now, I am not pointing at the floorboards, I’m pointing at the gaps between them. His knuckles yellow then whiten as he grips the arms tightly. His face falls. I visibly see his face collapse and take all the life with it.

Then, I point to the edge of the veranda roof, where I’d found the scene, right as Dad left it, the swing-rope swinging his body round and round, rather than up and down. Don’s knuckles look like they might explode. I see the sweat outline and glimmer along the side of his face. He looks like he is viewing the harrowing picture, as if he were seeing what I saw. I’m momentarily angry – not quite angry; maybe mutedly frustrated – that he was acting like he could see the scene. But then he looks directly at me, in my eyes. For the first time in ten years, neither of us look away. I acknowledge the telepathy we shared- share. I feel like a little brother.

“I didn’t burn the bush, ‘cos,” I begin, but he remains silent, turns his head, and looks harder through the gaps between the floorboards. “Like, as soon as the fire ban is let up, I’m gonna burn it, and let it keep burning. Burn the whole place down, really.” I nod in the direction of the house. I peer through the windows at the floral wallpaper, and notice that the sun had started to boundlessly cascade in. I stand up and grab Don’s hand, if only to feel like I’m nestled in the closet again.

“It’s the cremation he deserves.” I offer, straightening the collar that bothered me for ten years.