



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION

2023

Second Prize in the Open Division

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The Eagle

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The Eagle

The bush scares me. I can't get around the spooky noises and tripwire vines and the way the trees seem to have faces, twisting and mean in the paperbark. Gives me the willies something fierce.

I haven't always been afraid. When I was a tiny kid, I'd head into the bush for hours on my own. I searched for bugs and tracked wallabies and caught yabbies with bits of meat on string. How is it I'm turning thirteen and I'm more of a wimp now than when I was a little boy?

"Bombs away!"

Ollie Kettering launches himself off the rocky overhang. He lands in the swimming hole with a gigantic splash, sending waves over the other kids, who shriek and yell. His younger brother, Duke, hoots with glee and follows him. I keep a wary eye on them from up on the granite bank, in the shade. They don't realise how easily something bad could happen. None of these kids do.

"Hey Liam, you're back!"

Caro walks over to me with a smile, all summertime freckles and tanned limbs. Her wavy brown hair is decorated with colourful flowers.

"I was hoping to see you before school starts," she says.

She slings her canvas bag onto the granite surface and sits next to me.

Caro lives two doors down from me but I've been avoiding her since I got back a few days ago. I return her smile, which feels strange, like I've forgotten how. The last time I saw her, over a month ago, we'd both been wearing black. I guess I haven't smiled much since then.

"Hey, Caro. I like the flowers."

She touches her hair. "Thanks. I picked them this morning on a bush walk. The wildflowers are so pretty right now. Have you seen them?"

“Nah, never noticed. What’s new anyway?”

“Hmm, let’s see.” She tilts her head and makes a list on her fingers. “Ernie down at the track broke his thumb in a fight with Hippo. Sandy’s brother tried to rob the RSL with a katana, but the Vietnam vets tackled him and he spent the night in lockup. The katana turned out to be decorative. As in, not sharp. Kind of like Sandy’s brother himself. Oh, and Ollie and Duke got their dad’s old Suzuki motorbike running. It’s a ninety. Goes like a blowfly. Cool, though.”

“You don’t get on the bike with them, do you?”

Caro frowns slightly. “Ollie and Duke aren’t as bad as you make out, Liam.”

“Except I reckon they are.”

My dad hated the Ketterings. The whole family’s crook, he’d said.

Caro’s frown deepens and she fiddles with the zipper on her bag. Immediately I wish I’d kept my words to myself. It’s not her fault she can’t recognise bad intentions.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “It’s weird being back.”

Her face softens. “Yeah, I bet. How’s your mum?”

I want to tell Caro the truth. About how Mum can’t stand to look at me or be in the same room as me, but as soon as I leave she wants me to come right back. About how I don’t know if she blames me. How I feel like I’ve lost two parents instead of one.

I shrug. “She just stays in her room.”

“How was your Aunt Jemima’s?”

“Fine. The city was quiet. Everyone cleared out for holidays. I mostly played Call of Duty.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“Yeah.”

Overhead, a wedge-tailed eagle cruises in a perfect circle. The huge dark wings against the blazing sky feel like a bad omen. Beyond the swimming hole, the dense bush seems to breathe, brown leaves clattering ominously.

“It’s my birthday next week,” says Caro, her eyes on the eagle. “I’ll be thirteen.”

“You having a party?”

“Yeah, at my place. Out the back. You’ll come, won’t you?”

The houses on our side of the street were built in front of bushland. Our backyards meet with the ghost gums and undergrowth. At night, I hear crashing sounds coming from deep past the tree line.

“Of course,” I say. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

Caro kicks off her sandals and wriggles her toes. “My gran reckons that who you are at thirteen is who you are forever.”

“Jeez, I hope that isn’t true.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

My phone chimes. It’s my mum. I stand up, dusting off the back of my shorts.

“I gotta go. See you later?”

“Sure.”

Caro reaches up and grabs my hand before I can walk away.

“I’m glad you’re back,” she says. “I missed you. A lot of people missed you.”

Hearing these words somehow makes me ache worse than hearing cruel ones. Dunno how that works.

I nod, unable to speak, and feel my face flush. She lets go of my hand. I mumble goodbye and climb over the granite to the well-worn path leading to town.

On my way home, I think about the funeral. Nanna had clutched my hand and told me that Dad lives on in me. My first thought was, *I hope not*. It shocked me, how that reaction came up out of nowhere. I try to forget about it and I can’t. I feel like a traitor. My dad had flaws, sure, but I always worshipped him. He knew everything.

Well, almost everything. He didn’t know how to stick around. I wish he’d told Mum and I what that was about.

The sun is brutal. Waves of heat distort my view of the neighbourhood, making me feel like I’m in a dream. The houses are all closed up to keep the cool air inside. As I round the corner into our street, a familiar dread creeps into my gut. I wish I wasn’t turning thirteen. I wish I was turning eighteen, so I could fly away from here.

Our lawn is yellow and crunchy from lack of water. I trudge up the driveway and turn my key in the door. Mum’s obsessive about keeping our house locked. She never used to be. I think she got sick of the visitors constantly coming around. You can kind of understand that part – it was like our home turned into a never-ending wake. The visitors

never knew the right thing to say, because there is no right thing, and they seemed to expect something from Mum she was incapable of giving. To fall apart in their arms, maybe.

Mum's in her bedroom. I hang in the doorway, feeling like a ghost. The curtains are drawn, and she sits on the edge of her and Dad's unmade bed, her back to me. It smells like cigarettes and perfume. The flowery one she used to wear when Dad took her on dates at the Criterion Hotel.

"I'm home," I say.

"I need you to chop some wood," she says, without turning around.

I pause. "But Mum, it's summer."

She slowly raises her chin until she's looking at me in the dressing room mirror. Her face is all dark shadows and valleys. The glass of the mirror is uneven and warps the room I see in the reflection.

I want to hug her, but I also don't want her to yell at me again, like she did last night. I know I look the same as him. Dad. I know that's hard on her. It's no picnic for me either.

So I don't argue with her. I go and chop wood out the back. It's hot work, but once I get into a rhythm and the sun gets lower in the sky, I'm happy for the distraction. Sweat dampens my shirt and my muscles burn. I split wood on the stump with satisfying *thwacks* of the axe, and make a big pile of cedar.

I'm so caught up in what I'm doing that I don't notice the Ketterings until they're right on me.

"Oi," says Duke.

The axe was mid-swing and comes down at a bad angle, taking a chip off the stump and sending it into my shin. A trickle of red runs down my leg. The wound stings, but I check and it's only skin deep.

Ollie stands next to his brother and I take in the sight of them. Jeez, what a pair. All broken teeth and bulging eyes and hair sticking up.

"This is my yard," I say. "Rack off."

The Ketterings look at each other and silently make a series of minute facial expressions. They're doing that thing kids with siblings do, where they communicate telepathically. It makes me feel small and invisible.

Duke, the younger one, hasn't taken his hand off the knapsack hanging over his shoulder. The alarm system in my body goes off, sending my thoughts into overdrive. They're up to something, I know it.

"What, are you deaf?" I say, louder this time. "I said rack off."

Ollie and Duke seem to come to a silent agreement. Duke gives a small nod to his brother, and Ollie steps towards me. The axe is still in my hand and I raise it, just enough to make him stop in his tracks.

"Nah, come with us," says Ollie. "Into the bush."

I laugh, and it comes out sounding ugly. "So you can tie me to a tree? Or use me for target practice? I know what your family's like. My dad told me everything."

Ollie frowns. "We heard about ya dad. Tough break, hey."

The worst thing in the world happens then. My anger switches instantly to sadness, and tears want to come pouring out of me. I grit my teeth and stare at the grass, willing the Ketterings to go away.

Eventually they do. Through my rapidly blurring vision, I see them slope off down the yard, crossing directly into the bush. The skeletal brown trees swallow them up. Only then do I drop the axe and let the floodgates open. My tears come out in stuttering gasps, which fills me with frustration and shame.

Real men don't cry, Dad used to say.

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand. The tears slow, then stop, and I'm left with a lump in my throat and sore eyes and a heavy block of concrete in my chest. An eagle flies low overhead, something red and dead in its beak.

Am I always going to feel this way? Confused about my parents, my future, myself? When you become an adult, you're meant to know more. Be sure of things. Feel better. But if that were true, why did Dad walk into the bush with a length of rope and never come out?

The familiar sound of Caro's laughter reaches my ears. I'd recognise it anywhere, anytime, because her laugh sounds like singing.

She's down the end of her own backyard, talking to the Kettering boys. Duke still has the knapsack with him. Fear shoots through my spine. Before I can yell out, the three of them disappear into the thick tree line.

I call her mobile but she doesn't have reception. There's no choice except for me to go after them. Caro's so naive and trusting she doesn't even know she's in danger.

At the tree line, I falter. The ground seems to tilt, like I'm on a boat. I haven't set foot in the bush since Dad died.

Bugger it, I think.

I take it at a run, hurtling over crunchy leaf litter and through the trees.

Soon I'm deep in the bush and it's even worse than I remember. Vines hanging from branches like rope. Razor sharp spinifex snatching at my ankles. Dust-coloured dirt everywhere, like dried blood.

I trip on a rock and land hard on the ground, where I stay, because my vision is spotty and I can't feel my hands or feet. It's hard to breathe. This happened before, after Dad's funeral. Anxiety attack, Aunt Jemina had called it. Now it's happening again, at the worst possible time.

I can't do this. I have to go back.

Then I hear Caro. A frightened squeal this time, somewhere close by.

It's enough to kick me into action. I take several deep breaths, as slow as I can, like Aunt Jemina showed me. Some of the feeling returns to my limbs. I scramble to my feet and head in the direction of her scream. My panic begins to dissipate and I ready myself for a fight.

The three of them are in a huddle on the ground, half concealed by a thicket of bushes. Ollie's holding Caro down, and Duke's taking something out of his bag. I got here just in time.

"Get off her!" I shout, lurching towards them.

Ollie and Duke scoot backwards over the dirt, pure shock on their faces.

"Liam, where did you come from?" says Caro, looking up at me in amazement. "Are you okay?"

My chest heaves as I struggle to understand what's going on.

She moves towards me slowly, like I'm a wild horse. Ollie and Duke are frozen on the ground, gazing up at me. Next to Duke, a pair of binoculars sticks out of his knapsack.

"What are you doing?" I demand.

Ollie and Duke glance at each other.

“Mate, we came to take a look at the eagle nest.” He jabs his thumb over his shoulder, past the thicket.

Sure enough, there’s a massive, intricate clump of sticks at the top of a gum tree in the clearing. A wedge-tailed eagle nest.

“Keep your voice down though, yeah?” says Ollie. “The parents will abandon the nest if people get too close.” He grins at Caro, shaking his head. “This one already squealed when she saw them.”

“I can’t help it,” says Caro, clasping her hands together. “They’re adorable.” Then she reaches out and rubs my arm gently. “It’s alright, Liam. You’re alright.”

Caro’s worried about *me*. How have I gotten it all completely wrong? I was so sure she was in danger. I don’t know whether to cry or scream or run away.

Instead, I surrender. I stop trying to figure everything out. I allow myself to be led behind the bushes. Duke pushes the binoculars into my hand.

At the top of the nest, a baby eagle tears strips of meat off a carcass while the parents look on. The eaglet straightens up to swallow the food and shake its tiny wings. The little bird is covered in snowy down, which makes it look like it’s wearing fluffy white trousers.

I laugh. I can’t help it. It’s the best thing I’ve seen in a good long while.

“Cute, eh?” says Duke, nudging me.

I pass him the binoculars, and think how wrong I’ve been about the people around me. Today I’ve learned something about Ollie and Duke and myself. Maybe even my dad.

And Caro’s right about the flowers. They’re everywhere in the bush. Orange and yellow and purple blossoms, splashed about like nature’s paint.

This time, on my way back through, I notice them.