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Queensland Branch

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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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## THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION

2023

First Prize in the Open Division

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*Catachresis*

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*Catachresis*

The tree was dead. It had expired like the yoghurt growing mould in the fridge. Picture waking up one day to find your tree, like a seventeenth-century pirate, had packed up and gone on a trip to Davy Jones's locker. It was a tree whose dirty deeds had been discovered, carefully wrapped up in a tarp, poured into concrete and was now sleeping with the fishes. It had bitten the dust, gone into the light, kicked the bucket and was now food for worms.

I had woken up on Christmas Day, a month ago now, but there was no present wrapped up and waiting, standing and waving to me excitedly in all its shimmering glory. Instead, the wildebeest of disappointment was running through my heart as I realised that having a boyfriend who railed against the commercialisation of holidays seemed interesting intellectually but could be rather dull on the ground. An excuse for a lack of effort rather than an ideological consideration.

After staring at the top of the mantelpiece where the basic Christmas presents of soap, tea and socks were usually left, I busied myself by making a mug of coffee and waited for him to finish his shower. I leaned against the kitchen counter and listened as the hot cup burned my hands. Every spurt of water that I heard was a knife through my heart, which the wildebeest had already vacated, gone to seek his fortunes elsewhere. Sipping my coffee, I wondered if it was time I should follow.

He came down the hallway with his short brown hair still wet and slightly dripping. His plain brown eyes locked onto mine. His hands were behind his back. A sly smile on his face.

"Don't bother looking anywhere for your present," he said teasing. "I couldn't leave it out. Didn't want you to spoil your own surprise."

My eyes widened in owlish incomprehension. Something I couldn't see. A surprise not to be spoiled. My thoughts started to run away from me. I imagined the small, square box sitting in his hands. The dazzling jewel inside that would soon be sitting on my finger. The photographs and phone calls and screams of "finally!" appeared in my

immediate future while the gibbon of anticipation swung around in circles inside my stomach.

“Close your eyes,” he said. This was the moment. It seemed a bit clichéd but I followed along knowing that it was all part of the ritual of courtship, letting him take the lead for once.

“Open,” he commanded in a small voice. In his hands was a ceramic brown pot out of which grew a bonsai tree, its small leaves green and fresh, dripping with water droplets that had been carefully sprayed on with love and attention.

“A bonsai tree?” I asked, confusion spreading across my face like a blush of embarrassment.

“Yes,” he kept grinning. “For us both to nurture. It takes careful study and practice to master the art of bonsai. I thought we could work on it together. Slow down. Take care.”

I wasn’t slow. I wasn’t careful. I was a person who took up space, whose words filled a room, whose excitement knew no bounds. He was asking me to be all the things I wasn’t. Trying to mould me into his perfect version of a partner.

I looked closer at the bonsai, my eyes narrowing, taking in every leaf and twig, and I realised it wasn’t really a tree but a metaphor. A tree seemingly twisted and truncated by outside forces was really just restricted by the size of the pot that limited the reach of its roots. A tree that isn’t able to grow to its full potential. A partner that isn’t able to reach her full potential. Trapped, restricted, suffocated by a partner under the guise of nurture and growth. The tree represented everything he thought of me. That I wasn’t good enough. That I needed to be restrained. That I needed to be crafted into the perfect model of a girlfriend if I wanted to someday be a wife and mother.

I had tears in my eyes, but I couldn’t let him see. “It’s beautiful” was all I managed to squeeze out and he put it on the kitchen bench to embrace me.

He was flying out tomorrow. A spiritual retreat in India that his mother had paid for in the hopes he might reach enlightenment. Four weeks to realise that he could be something more than someone whose day was restricted by four walls and fluorescent lights. Four weeks to realise there was a world out there he should wander and explore. Four weeks to realise there was someone out there better for him, someone with less exuberance, I thought I overheard her say once on a phone call to him late at night.

I planned to show them both. I could be caring. I could be a nurturer. I could be a perfect wife and mother. An excellent addition to the family. One they could be proud of.

I would look after this bonsai: water it every day from the miniature spray bottle he had left me, prune its little branches with tiny scissors, clear away the leaf litter around its roots to give it room to breathe. When he got back, he would see that I was good enough. That our relationship was good enough.

But now, I held the heavy pot the bonsai sat in, all brown and withered, its small branches like bones whose once supple flesh had decayed and left it exposed. It was a corpse of a tree, not the bright leafy thing that had been handed to me weeks earlier. “Make sure you look after it while I’m gone,” he said, placing it in my capable hands. I wondered if he had forgotten it like he seemed to have forgotten me.

A car door slammed outside. Wheels reversing. Footsteps treading hard up the stairs. I placed the tree on the kitchen bench in front of me then realised it would be the first thing he would see as he walked through the door. A spotlight beaming down on my failure, on our incompatibility. I could hear the key shaking in the front door. I grabbed the pot, the evidence, and jammed it into the corner of the couch. Placing a large cushion in front, I turned just as the door opened and he stood in silhouette, the sun burning the air around him.

He looked different. His usual black suit of ambition was replaced with an almost smock-like robe of freedom. The tie that had choked him into submission was gone, a colourful woven scarf now embracing him like an old friend. And his face. The once smooth cheeks and chin, so soft when I kissed them, now covered in bristly prickles. A bushranger beard, long and defensive. To hide from the enemy.

I stood awkwardly in front of the couch so he couldn’t sit down.

He stared at me.

“Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“I knew you were coming home today,” I tried to smile, my hands writhing behind my body. “I wanted to be here to greet you.”

He walked past me, slowly putting his bag on the table, his eyes moving around the old house as if looking for something. I instinctively moved myself between him and the tree. I looked at him for a sign, but the thick hair around his mouth made it impossible to read his expression. A beard of invisibility.

“How was India?” I found myself trying to break the silence. “Did you find your spirituality?” It was something his mother would say. The trip was to help him find himself. Well, his demeanour suggested he sure had found something.

He still hadn't replied. I fumbled around the lounge room, straightening football trophies, stacking books in neat piles. Making a concentric circle around the tree. I knew if he saw it, it would be the final nail in the coffin. The permission he needed to finally let go. But I couldn't let that happen. We needed each other. Despite all our differences, we fit together. His yin to my yang. My Bonnie to his Clyde.

I kept smiling at him, trying to get him to relax, be himself, open up to me. I knew if we could just continue with our usual routines – me making him a cup of tea, him putting his arm around me as we watched TV – it could all go back to normal.

"You must have been busy," I continued, trying to break through as he took various objects out of his bag. "I haven't heard from you since your second week there. Was it hard getting an internet connection in the rural areas?"

His head bowed, his eyes staring at the ground. "Look about that. I think we need to talk." He gestured to the couch.

"No." I yelled. "You look tired," I cooed trying to act calm, touching his arm and turning him around. "Have a shower, wash all the dirt and jetlag away." I patted his shoulders, trying to be comforting, wifely. The beard brushed against my hand and I shivered. Its coarseness rubbing salt in my already open and bleeding wounds. He didn't seem like himself at all. The beard looked so wild and untameable, I wondered if I would ever find him again underneath.

He looked down at his filthy clothes. "Yes. Yes, that would be good. I'll take a shower." He paused. "Then we can talk." He left the room, the heavy piano notes of tension hung in the air.

When I heard the water running, I rushed to the couch and pulled the cushion away, revealing the heart buried underneath the floorboards.

As I held the dead tree in my hand, looking at its brittle branches, the metaphor became clearer. The tree wasn't just me. This tree was both of us. It was our five years together. Something that started so young and green, with the potential to bloom, had slowly begun to disintegrate and all that was left were the last few remnants of hope, sticking together out of necessity, out of fear. But this wasn't a relationship with a future. It was dead too. He already knew it. It was time I woke up and faced the music lingering around me. My eyes welled up with flooding realisation.

The door of the bathroom flew open suddenly and I shoved the tree behind my back in the vain hope I could drag this relationship out a little longer. As if ignoring the

symbol might be the catalyst for him to ignore his feelings. A symbol isn't a symbol if it isn't noticed.

He hurried through the hallway wrapped in a towel but stopped when he saw my crumpled mess of a body on the couch. He came over to sit beside me, grabbing my hand.

"I'm sorry." He took a deep breath. "I know I haven't been treating you right." His eyes looked down at the floor. "That's why things need to change. We can't continue like this."

"We can't?" I stammered, dreading the finality.

"No. We can't. Being in India, having all this time to think about myself, about us. I've realised your brain works in a different way to mine. You're out there – you say these ..." He stopped, grasping for his words. "... things. Making pictures with your voice. These over-the-top metaphors come out of your mouth, these exaggerations that I can barely follow. I'm too plain and simple to appreciate someone like you."

It was true and he had spoken it and now we would fall apart and return to earth. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

"I think that's why Mum made me go to India. To realise this about myself. That I needed to open up more. That I needed to free myself." He paused again, then said softly, "That I needed to change so that I didn't lose you."

I wasn't sure if I heard that last phrase correctly. "Didn't lose me?" I said each word slowly, looking for the hidden message. "What do you mean?"

"Things are going to be different. I'm going to be different. No more suits. No more office. More time for the things that matter. More time for you. Think of me as ... as ..." He searched for his words again.

I couldn't help myself. "A butterfly ..."

"Of transformation," he finished sounding pleased. His fingers clicked in the air as he foraged for more words around him. "The wolf of renewal, tearing off my skin and exposing my true self." He laughed and his eyes bored into mine.

We embraced on the couch. A long, loving embrace. A thousand connections being made through our skin. Our bodies remembering each other. Our souls joining together once again.

I didn't want to interrupt the moment, but something was bothering me in the distance. "I think I can hear the water still running," I said, breaking the silence.

“Oh right. I was on my way to get something. Wait here.”

I heard him rustle through one of the drawers in our bedroom then watched as he hurried back into the bathroom, still holding the towel around him.

I turned and looked at the bonsai hidden behind me. Its bareness no longer frightened me. Its bleakness no longer showed hopelessness. Its death no longer represented a death in me. I thought of all the tangents my mind created, turning objects and animals into symbols of my own inadequacies, extending their lives into my own. My catachresis enabled me to give colour to my life and everything around me. But now I realised that not everything needed an extended meaning. Not everything had to be a portent of doom. Sometimes a tree is just a tree.

The door to the bathroom opened again and he walked out, this time dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. He wasn't quite back to normal though. The beard was not gone, but mowed, shaped into a moustache and goatee. I stood up and went to him, rubbing my hands over his stubble, breathing in the subtle scent of his aftershave.

“Do you like it?” he asked, rubbing it himself. “I thought it looked better this way.”

Then it hit me, like a wave of relief. Of course, it wasn't the bonsai. It was the beard. The beard represented us. It had been repressed for so long, and finally it had a chance to grow, to mature. It was a metaphor for his change. For our change. Something new that had come of something old.

I smiled. It was so obvious and I missed it. Wrapped up in my own whirlwind of self-pity, I hadn't seen a true sign even when it scratched up against me. My faith in my insights restored.

“Hey,” he said, looking over my shoulder towards the couch. “What's the bonsai doing there?”

My eyes widened, watching him carefully as he moved towards it. Its limbs disintegrating as he touched them gently. Its ghostly figure haunting the room. He laughed. “I don't know why I got the urge to buy that.” He looked into my eyes. “Those things never last.”