

THE FUNERAL

Josie was eleven years old the summer that Uncle Harry died. There was a notice in the North Queensland Gazette and Josie read it to Old Tom.

"PATTERSON Harold James 19/9/1890 - 6/12/1958
Son of William and Gladys Patterson (both deceased).
Husband of Joyce.
Resting in the arms of Jesus.

"Sixty eight" calculated Old Tom.

"He'll miss out on Christmas" said Josie.

"Yes" said Old Tom.

Josie read the notice again to herself.

"Do you think Uncle Harry is resting in the arms of Jesus?"

"No" said Old Tom.

Josie had never been to a funeral and she waited for Friday with sober anticipation. She wondered how it felt to be dead. With her elbows on the kitchen table she cradled her head in her arms, held her breath and squeezed her eyes shut tight, but it was not death. She could still hear her sister, Judith, throwing a ball against the side of the house and Old Tom calling to the dogs outside; and when her breath exploded she felt it warm and damp on her elbow. Josie placed her hand over her heart and through her cotton dress she counted the rhythmic beats. She was not in charge of her heartbeat. It beat of its own accord, even while she slept. So by what authority, if not your own, Josie wondered, did a heart stop beating?

"Man that is born of woman has but a short time to live and is full of misery". Reverend Harris lowered his eyes, his voice resonant with misery. "He cometh up and is cut down like a flower, he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay".

Josie's nylon dress stuck to the sweat on her back. It was ninety six degrees outside and the relentless December sun baked the faded red corrugated iron roof of the small weatherboard church. Ladies fanned themselves with prayer books and handkerchiefs. Some had had the foresight to bring real fans which fluttered amongst the pews like restless butterflies. Josie recognised some of the mourners – Billy Higgins who delivered the hay, John Crawley who walked with a limp now after being thrown from a horse, and Mike and Elsie Duggan from the pub. There were farming friends of Uncle Harry too, their necks red against crisp white shirt collars and the dark suits, seldom used and ill-fitting, gave the appearance of stiffly upholstered chairs. The women too were dressed in dark colours – black, grey or navy blue. Most wore gloves despite the heat and Auntie Joyce's hat had a piece of netting which covered her face and curved neatly under her chin. Josie's eyes travelled to the rosewood coffin and she wondered furtively what Uncle Harry was wearing. The last time she had seen him he was wearing faded striped pyjamas but that hardly seemed likely today when everyone else was dressed up. Maybe there were special outfits for people in coffins or maybe he had nothing on at all. Josie found this thought disturbing and she returned swiftly to the image of Uncle Harry lying in bed in the striped pyjamas. It had been a strange day. Her mother and Auntie Joyce talked quietly in the kitchen and Josie was not included in this conversation. She had been sent outside to play. To play. At her age. Just the same, despite feeling vaguely insulted, she preferred to be outside. This was serious talk, grown up worrying talk, and Josie knew it concerned Uncle Harry who lay in the big iron bed with the white mosquito net and the green chenille bedspread.

The house where Joyce and Harold Patterson lived was always neat. That was because they had no kids to mess it up Josie's mother said. No kids to leave stuff lying about or dogs tracking

mud inside on wet days. In the lounge room a piano gleamed darkly against the back wall. Josie's mother said that the piano should have gone to her - fancy leaving it to Harry when she was the one with kids who might want to learn to play. But Josie had no interest in the piano. It was the ornaments on the what-not in the corner that always claimed her attention - delicate china ladies, small jewelled boxes, two crystal vases and a statue of a Scottish terrier with a tartan ribbon collar. Josie's favourite ornament was a small glass dome filled with water. It held a miniature log cabin with a pine tree inside it. When it was shaken powdery flakes of snow swirled around before settling on the bottom. Josie liked to imagine herself inside, standing near the tree while the snow fell around her. It thrilled her to think of snow settling on her hair and face. It never snowed in North Queensland. Old Tom said that if it ever did, the end of the world would not be far away. But today Josie did not go to the what-not or shake the dome. The house had a strange empty feeling like the time she came to water the pot plants when Uncle Harry and Aunt Joyce went to Brisbane for the show. She lounged for a while on the back steps and absentmindedly picked at a scab on her knee. When this one came off she would have five scabs in the matchbox at home and that was more than anyone else in her class had, apart from Rodney Ellis. He was always falling over because he took fits and Josie felt he ought to be disqualified for having an unfair advantage. She rose and tiptoed to the door of the bedroom where Uncle Harry lay but, for a reason she could not identify, she did not want to enter. The room held an imposter. The real Uncle Harry would not be lying in bed in striped pyjamas with his eyes closed at 11 o'clock in the morning. The real Uncle Harry would be out at the bails mixing corn meal and barley with molasses. Sometimes Josie helped stir the black pungent mixture while Uncle Harry told outrageously untruthful stories which made her laugh until her sides ached. On Friday nights her parents came to play cards and afterwards there would be scones with jam and cream and you could eat as many as you liked. Then, if pressed, Uncle Harry would sing in his rich baritone and Aunt Joyce would accompany him on the piano that should have been her mum's.

Josie resumed her place on the back steps. Today was Thursday but with a certainty beyond her eleven years, she knew there would be no card game this Friday - or any other Friday.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. Amen".

It was evening, the time of night that Old Tom called "thinking time", when your tea had settled but not yet bedtime. Old Tom had lived in the shed ever since Josie could remember even though he was not related by blood. He did odd jobs, helped her father with the milking and grew watermelons at the back of the outhouse. He also knew how to desex tomcats using only a Wellington boot, a piece of string and a pocket knife. Old Tom's head was as bald and smooth as an egg and when he laughed his four tobacco-stained teeth hung down like fat brown screws. It always amazed Josie that he could eat chops or corn on the cob just like anyone else. Old Tom bent down and lit a mosquito coil. He used the same match to light his pipe and in the half glow Josie watched him. Her eyes travelled to her sister who lay in the wicker chair languidly swinging her legs. Judith was eight years old and sometimes Josie loved her and sometimes she hated her. Mostly she hated her. Old Tom flicked the used match in half with his thumbnail and sucked hard on his pipe.

"It gave me this kind of feeling", Josie said at last.

"What did?"

"The funeral".

"Oh".

Old Tom reached into the box for another match.

"I had a feeling like that once before. At the library".

"The *library*?"

The match flared in the darkening shed as Old Tom took the lantern from its hook, expertly lifted the globe with one hand and lit the wick.

"I saw a book on the top shelf. You know the one at the back wall that goes up to the ceiling?", and Old Tom, who had never been in a library in his life, nodded wisely.

"I asked Mrs Quince if she could get the ladder and get it down for me".

"And did she?" Old Tom knew the size of Mabel Quince and thought it highly unlikely.

"Well she got the ladder but I got it down. Mrs Quince said she had better things to do with her time than go up and down ladders all day long. And she told me to be careful not to fall off because then there'd be paperwork and she couldn't see why I'd be wanting a book from the reference section anyway".

Old Tom hung the lantern back on its hook and eased himself into a chair.

"I don't see what this has got to do with your Uncle Harry's funeral".

"Well when I opened the book it gave me the same feeling". Josie paused and examined two warts on her right hand. She couldn't remember touching a frog but obviously she must have.

"The book had a picture of a girl on the cover. She had long brown hair and she was riding a horse through a sugar cane field. I wished I looked like her, especially her hair. She had lovely hair." Josie's hair had been cropped short because of an outbreak of nits at school. She ran her hand over her head and the ends stood up in sweaty spikes.

"Rodney Ellis says you look like a pineapple", said Judith, her words muffled by the thumb in her mouth.

"Shut up," hissed Josie, her voice tight with rage. "Rodney Ellis has the brains of a gnat ... and so do you". This exchange would normally have led to a scuffle with Old Tom having to separate them into different corners of the shed. But tonight was different and Old Tom could sense it. To her dismay Josie felt tears stinging her eyes and she blinked them away rapidly. Only babies cried and Josie was proud of the fact that she never did - not even when Patch died of a tick bite. Old Tom opened the biscuit tin and held it out. Josie shook her head. Judith took four and settled back into the wicker chair.

"I wanted to know more about the girl", Josie continued, "but when I opened the book it was all about the sugar industry in Queensland – full of diagrams and graphs and stuff I couldn't care less about. The girl wasn't even in it".

Old Tom laughed and in the dim glow of the lantern he seemed to have no teeth at all. "You judged the book by its cover. There's a saying that warns against that".

"I know that," said Josie impatiently "but what I mean is - I had the same feeling at the funeral, like I was expecting something and the thing I was expecting wasn't in it".

"What did you expect?" Old Tom knocked his pipe against the side of the chair. "A funeral's a funeral. They're all pretty much the same from my experience".

Josie paced the shed impatiently, knocking the mosquito coil as she went. Old Tom retrieved it silently as Josie began to speak. "I suppose I thought I'd know something extra about being dead.

Reverend Harris says Uncle Harry is with the angels but I don't believe that. Do you believe that?"

"No", said Old Tom.

"Then do you think he's anywhere – apart from the coffin in the ground?"

"I don't know", said Old Tom.

Josie sat down and reached for the biscuit tin. Trust Judith to have taken all the custard creams. She selected a ginger nut and put the tin back on the table.

"It seems to me that if you've been alive and then you die, the bit in the middle becomes just a story that other people talk about. You're not real any more. And if you're not real any more, then what's the point of being alive in the first place?" Josie nibbled around the edges of the biscuit then put it down again. "There's stuff I don't know, but I don't know who knows it. Reverend Harris doesn't. He says he does but he doesn't. I'm starting to wonder if anybody knows".

Judith was asleep in the wicker chair, her baby mouth hanging slightly open. A line of dribble ran out of the corner of her mouth and down her chin. Old Tom eased the sleeping child into a more comfortable position before moving to the open door of the shed. He sat on the step, silently refilling his pipe. Josie handed him the box of matches.

"What you're asking", he said, withdrawing a match but not lighting it, "is who's in charge of this living and dying business? Is there a point to it all? I don't know. Who's in charge of those stars?" He pointed at the night sky with the stem of his pipe. "I don't know. But whatever it is, it's bigger and smarter than me". Old Tom extracted another pinch of tobacco from the pouch and pressed it into the bowl of his pipe.

"But don't you *want* to know?" Josie persisted. The world's been spinning for millions of years and nobody knows the important stuff".

Old Tom closed his tobacco pouch carefully. "I don't have to know. I just have to trust it - with life, with death, and everything in between".

He struck the match and held it to the tobacco, savouring the aroma of smoke on the night air. Josie sat silently on the step beside Old Tom. In the distance a sheet of lightning lit up the sky and seconds later thunder rumbled. There would be a storm tonight. It would rain on the fresh dirt of Uncle Harry's grave and on all the other graves. From a faraway place in her head she heard the sound of the piano that should have been her mum's and Uncle Harry singing. Already it felt like a memory from an awfully long time ago. Treacherous tears returned. They ran quietly down her cheeks, into the corners of her mouth and dripped on to the ginger nut in her hand. She cried for Uncle Harry and she cried for Patch.