

Vanishing

In the days of bread and dripping when beds were shared with bony siblings and clothes were patched and darned, my father shared a bicycle with his younger brother. They called it the halfway bike because wherever they went together they'd only ever ride halfway. One brother would set off on foot and the other on the bicycle. At the midway point the cycling brother would leave the bike by the side of the road and continue on foot. When the brother who started on foot reached the halfway point he'd retrieve the bike and cycle the rest of the way. Provided they'd estimated the halfway point correctly they'd arrive at their destination more or less simultaneously. My father explained that the primary benefit of this arrangement was that he only ever had to walk half the way to anywhere. He's always been a 'glass-half-full' sort of bloke my Dad.

Now my father's stories are fading, evaporating into the ether of unclaimed memories, filtering through our conversations in a last gasp to be told. They come in dribs and drabs as he remembers. My mother interrupts, telling me something I've heard before. Her stories have defined my growing-up years and twirl round and round inside her head, forgetting they've already been told. The thread is lost. Like an unravelling jumper, my father's stories are left dangling in mid-air.

I know so little about my father, disjointed scraps and snippets here and there. In my early years he is the breadwinner in overalls who leaves for work before I wake up and returns shortly before I go to bed. As I grow occasionally he reads stories from my little golden books. On Friday nights, after he's been to the pub, he comes home with fish and chips and bags of lollies. During summer he disappears all weekend to play cricket. Sometimes Mum bundles me up with my younger siblings and we traipse across town to join the other cricket orphans left to dangle upside down on monkey bars at remote parks in the outer suburbs. We have little interest in watching our fathers swelter in the midday heat so we scan suburban streets for sixpences to buy icy poles at corner shops. Mum resents all

the cricket trophies Dad brings home and sticks them in the back of the linen cupboard. She complains that Dad loves cricket more than he loves her.

These days my father's stories blurt out like Morse code, in disconnected fragments during long distance phone calls. We are talking about the latest test match when he remembers his cricket story. It happened in primary school. One lunchtime, he and his mates had been chucking clods of dirt over the roof of the toilet block, practising their bowling. Of course they didn't have money for cricket balls back then. One of the clods landed smack on the principal's head. When he raced round to catch the culprit, everyone else had scurried off, leaving Dad to cop the blame. Then he tells me how he'd stick his chewing gum on the window sill when the teacher told him to spit it out, so he could retrieve it at lunchtime.

When he met my mother, my father's rural aspirations were squeezed into a suburban block. I grew up in a backyard filled with home-grown fruit and vegetables. Throughout the year we'd feast on carrots, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, silver beet, beans and sweet corn. I'd ride through the rows of ripening corn on my imaginary horse singing *O What a Beautiful Morning*, mimicking Gordon MacRae of *Oklahoma* fame. I had a herd of imaginary horses grazing around the yard. My fastest, *Quicksilver*, was tethered at the front gate so that I could ride him to and from school. Being imaginary horses, they were never much trouble. Occasionally I fed them buckets of air. I never told anyone about the horses in case they thought I was mad. I found a big nail in my father's workshop and carved *Ride-em* above the entrance to my hide-out under the house.

The years have settled like dust under my parents' house, each sliding gently, almost undetected, on top of the one before. I stand in the once sacred space of my father's workshop, remembering. In the softened light, I glimpse my childish reflection peering through the slats outside among the fish bone ferns. My father's vibrancy ignites the air as sparks flicker like fireflies around his welding iron. To my dazzled eyes he is a mighty warrior wrestling a dragon with his bare hands.

Now the burden of accumulating years drags at his shoulders like a weary overcoat. He is blurring at the edges, his pigment dissolving into the sepia shades of our ancestors. His faithful companions wait idly in their rigging above the work bench, the grit of years etched in their impending fate – a pair of crazed goggles once used to ward off welding sparks, the trusty hammer that fastened pictures to my teenage walls, a key to who knows what, a spring that might have come in handy before it rusted to its hanging spot, a length of neatly coiled string still measuring the distance around his sturdy fingers, the adjustable spanner that always reminded me of a grinning dog, blunt nose pliers wedged open around an imaginary bolt, a long handled socket for a car he can no longer drive, the speckled screwdriver that prised open decades of paint tins for my mother's redecorating whims.

These reminders of his cascading years have grown old with him. Patiently they wait for the touch of his unswerving hand to ease their rusted joints. With unflinching loyalty they refuse to acknowledge that he has abandoned them. Little do they know that he can barely see as he shuffles beside them along the path. When he is gone will their industrious endeavours become the useless mementos of someone else's cluttered life? In the solitude of my father's workshop I watch a cornerstone of my life crumble before my eyes.

On the last day of a recent visit to my childhood home, my mother flaps around making cups of tea while my father disappears up the backyard. My horses have long vanished into the rationality of adulthood and now the backyard seems so incredibly small. My father returns with a bag of beans.

'Here love,' he says, 'I've picked some nice fresh beans for your dinner tonight.'

I look at the beans and then at my suitcase. I don't feel like rearranging things to squeeze an extra bag of beans inside.

'Thanks Dad,' I reply, 'but maybe next time. My suitcase is jam packed from too much shopping. It'd be a shame to squash them.'

Later that day I watch miles of coastline reel beneath me as the airplane hurtles towards my adopted home. I long for the sanctuary of my independent life but am forever bound to the soil where my roots first grew. Amid flashes of my father's shuffling feet and ageing bones, the image of that bag of beans finds my tears. I have created a comfortable life for myself. These days there is very little that he can give me that I don't already have. But that bag of beans is worth more than anything I own. How could I not recognise the true value of his gift? In my heart I open a file marked 'Humility' and place the story of my father's beans inside.

Enough remembering. Ensconced once more in the self-assurance of my current life, I stroll down to the local pub for a drink. Conversations float between chortling magpies and my afternoon drifts into the decadence of a pleasant red under the elms, relaxing, biding time, watching grasshoppers skip on the wooden deck among the first sprinkle of autumn leaves.

An ancient bicycle languishes by the fence, leather seat contorted around a skeleton of springs, a ladies bike made for the modesty of skirts and petticoats, showing its age. Its frame has rusted through neglect and the years of rain that used to be. If it could speak, what stories might creak from its stiffened chain? Would it sing of bygone rides past russet paddocks of shimmying wheat, or moan about the miles it rode each day to school on a meagre breakfast of bread and dripping? Would it recall mellow afternoons between the silhouettes of flickering trees or whine about those grinding uphill climbs? Perhaps it even knows the story about my father's halfway bike.

Back on the deck a magpie swoops to snatch an unsuspecting grasshopper. In a single gulp, the grasshopper is no more. Then in a brazen gesture, the magpie turns to me and cocks its head as if to ask for a dash of wine to wash it down. I spend a few moments contemplating the fragility of life, then look back towards the fence. The bicycle is gone.