

Old Boy

GEORGIA TREE



FREMANTLE PRESS

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REWIND

Dad pushes against the flywire with his shoulder, his arm bracing two mugs of black coffee. The flywire – now banging open against the bricks – is shredded from years of weather damage and scratches from the dogs that lived here before Trevor moved in. I sit in a patch of shade on the faded rattan couch that's been here as long as I can remember, next to Trevor, who is sprawled out in the sun. Dad sets the mugs on the dusty table he built himself and drags a packet of Winfield Golds out of the back pocket of his jeans.

Dad's house is wedged between the main road and the primary school. Across the road is the park where we'd jump off our bikes and walk them across to stop the magpies swooping at our helmets. Walk a couple of minutes towards the beach, and you'll find Nan's old house – salty and bore-water stained – where my oldest cousin taught me how to

rain dance. It's right by the Warnbro Tavern that now goes by another name where Mum last worked before moving up north to meet Dad.

Dad's backyard is overgrown and too green for summer. The old eucalyptus tree that used to shade the side of the house has been reduced to a pile of mulch. Every day he carts a wheelbarrow full of it, taking it from the side of the house to the front lawn. Wheelbarrow tracks are two wet lines which run over the brick paving he did himself when we moved in. It's still intact, save for a sinkhole under the gutter pipe next to the barbecue. I've come from the hairdresser's down the road and my head tingles where the bleach has burnt the psoriasis off. The faintest breeze blows Trevor's ginger fur into the air, and the window of sunlight throws the strands into relief. They look almost still – suspended, midair.

A willie wagtail sits black against the red of the bottlebrush by the car port. Its nest is falling apart. I can hear kids in the cricket nets across the road at the park, where Dad broke his finger playing footy with my brother and ended up in Freo Hospital with a screw in his hand, down a couple of levels from Mum – inpatient at the oncology ward.

There are bushfires on the East Coast. The government refuses to draw a link between the destruction and a changing climate. Volunteer firefighters refuse to shake the Prime Minister's hand.

But it's quiet here for now.

I get my phone out of my bag and pull up the voice-recording app with the flick of a thumb, like I do at press conferences or for radio or TV interviews. All the files are there, saved automatically under the location of the recording. Parliament House 11, Parliament House 10, Parliament House 7, Sky News. All with little grey date stamps in the margins. I tap the red button on the screen and prop my phone up against the marble ashtray on the dusty table.

Dad looks nervous. My whole life he's been telling me that I'll be the one to write his story. Maybe he already knows he will talk for days that stretch on for months. He will say things he'd never even thought before, let alone said out loud. As he goes on talking, the world will change. We'll all be plunged into hibernation. Isolation. Equitably vulnerable. With nowhere to look but inside. He probably knew even then – that by the end of it all – it still won't make sense why he lived. That there's no reason, other than that life is grotesque. Dying can be a game of chance as much as flipping a coin or winning a footy game. And living can be a choice too.

I'll spend hours interviewing Dad, months scouring transcripts. I'll drive through each street, and pull over and stop at the houses where I know he lived. I'll waste time on Cottesloe Beach. I'll pore over the history of this place – our

home. I'll ride my bike around Rottnest Island. I'll fly to the Pilbara and back. I'll learn the story of Charlie – the boy from the other side of the river – and feel compelled to tell his story too. I'll piece together the fragments of Dad's memory – the fallible recollections, the malleable truths. And I'll bridge the gaps in his memory to shape the narrative of his story – the beginning of mine.

But right now, I want to put him out of his misery. Offer to do it another time. But I don't. Instead, I sit here on the couch with the cat and the afternoon sun creeping onto my face, drag a Winfield Gold out of the packet resting on the table, and begin.

To get to know the Old Boy.

ON PAROLE

Peter necked his pint.

‘Are you right to drive, Grant?’ he asked, chucking me the keys.

I wasn’t drunk. But I still didn’t have my licence back. In fact, I thought there was a letter back at Mum and Dave’s about an appointment at the licensing centre for the next week. If I got caught again it’d be another six months. I was still on parole.

‘Yeah, no worries,’ I said.

It’d been raining, but it was that time of year where it was just starting to get warmer and the air smelled like school holidays. Royal Show weather.

Stirling Highway was quiet and getting dark. Everyone must’ve been at the game. Peter lit a cigarette and rolled down the window. I turned on the radio.

With two minutes left of the third term, the Tigers had managed just one minor score after half-time.

‘Swans are killing us,’ said Peter.

I pulled into the right lane but there was a car, and I swerved left just as the road bent at Wellington. I corrected but it was too late, and I collected the footpath and my foot was flat on the brake and my head whipped forward as the car was stopped by a lamppost. I couldn’t feel anything. I looked over at Peter. His body was limp, head face down on the dash. I ripped the car door open and ran to a house where a lady was opening the front door. We weren’t far from Mum and Dave’s.

‘Quick, get an ambulance,’ I think I said.

The lady ran inside. I looked at the car and at Peter limp over the dash. I imagined blood pouring down his face. I imagined I heard sirens. I felt a hot trickle down the back of my neck and tasted metal in my mouth.

And I ran.

I didn’t know where I was running except away from the highway. I thought I was running to the river, but I was still not sure what side of the road we’d been driving on. I didn’t know where I was running until I was banging on the front door. Charlie’s place. Susie answered the door.

‘What’s happened?’ Susie asked, steering me inside.

It smelled like Sunday roast. The leather couch felt cool against my back.

‘It’s clearly an accident, mate. It’ll be okay,’ said Charlie.

‘I don’t want to go back inside,’ I said.

Susie nursed me like one of her Graylands patients, patting my forehead with a damp flannel. Charlie lit me a cigarette.

‘Your old man is a copper, isn’t he? He’ll be able to help.’

‘You don’t know my old man.’

Susie lightly ran her hand along my shoulders, left to right. The touch of her hand tracing lines across my back was all I could feel in my entire body. I held on to that.

‘Is he home?’ Charlie asked, patting his keys in his pocket.

‘No, they’ll be at the footy club.’

‘Hope he’s not a Tigers fan.’

‘He is.’

Charlie laughed, and picked up the cream telephone with the long cord from the desk, carrying it over to the table beside me.

‘Well then, he’s already had a shit day anyway. Give him a call.’

I called the Claremont Footy Club and asked for my stepfather and Dave came and picked me up. He came without Mum. I didn’t say anything as we drove to the Claremont Police Station, but Dave talked at me – telling me what to say, telling me what not to say. He didn’t want me to go back inside either.

‘You won’t be getting your bloody licence back anytime

soon!’ he said as we pulled into the car park, the familiar chequered blue sign waiting for us.

I thought he was enjoying it. It must have been a shocking game. I was glad I called him.

I’ve returned to that place in my mind too many times to count. The cream phone. Charlie’s laugh. Susie’s hand on my back.

Within a year Susie would die in a car accident herself, and Charlie would be on death row.

But I didn’t know that then. That night they really saved my skin.