

One

Stanley loathed the thought of spending a scorching summer day building fences, because it meant working with the son he despised.

In rigid silence they loaded the trailer with redwood straining posts, rolls of barbed wire and tools. Finally Stanley spoke, his economy of words proof of the resentment smouldering in his gut.

“Go get some water...” Dismissing the boy he flicked a hand towards the bungalow. “...and food.”

Using his teeth, Conway nipped a splinter out of his palm and spat it at Stanley’s feet, the squint of an eye revealing his contempt of the man.

“Move boy. I haven’t got all day.”

Stanley glared fiercely at Conway’s back as though trying to spear the boy. Stiff at his sides, his arms were like the handles of massive hammers; his white-knuckled fists their heads. Heads so hard they could pound that little turd into the ground.

Conway put cold meat, bread and canteens in a box with tin mugs, a billycan, tea and sugar, matches and pot of dripping.

Watching the back door, Stanley waited with undisguised impatience. Beside him the tractor’s diesel engine was running noisily.

“C’mon, tit-sucker,” he yelled as Conway emerged. “You’re wasting time.”

Jerking his thumb towards the trailer where Conway would ride, the man swung into the driver’s seat, selected first gear and released the clutch. The tractor chugged off towards the gate.

Conway gnashed his teeth. Stanley always spoke to him like a dog, but he’d never got used to it.

“Wait up. I forgot something.” Conway bolted for the toolshed and returned with a mattock.

Grinning blackly, Stanley pushed on the accelerator pedal, making Conway run to catch up. Throwing the mattock onto the trailer, he sprang onto the tailgate just as the tractor shuddered over the cattle-grid.

Fangs of energy-sapping mid-day heat bit deep into their weathered skin, and sweat ran down their half-naked bodies. Their tongues were thick and dry and every breath baked red dust in their nostrils. Working for hours without a break, they had finished a few hundred yards of fencing.

Neither man wanted to cede first to hunger, thirst or exhaustion, their undeclared rule that whomever yielded first was the weaker. For him there were silent sniggers, a smug glance, an air of defeat created by something as simple as the winner’s satisfied sniff. So they would hold out with stoic belligerence.

But today Conway had the advantage. While he was inside getting their food he’d drunk two pints of water. Although his stomach had bloated uncomfortably he knew it would give him an edge. Even five minutes would be enough, so it satisfied him immensely when he heard his father’s call. In a sour mood of defeat Stanley threw down the roll of barbed wire he had just hefted from the trailer as though it had suddenly become red hot. All morning he’d not spoken unless he had to, and given that his burning thirst and need for a cigarette had forced him into submission, he strongly resented even this single word.

“Smoko.”

He wiped his callused palms down the side of his moleskins, hawked up a glob of muddy phlegm and headed for the food box in the shade of the old gum tree. The billy was already boiling on the fire.

Desperate for a cuppa, Stanley tried to lift the billy lid using a twig. But, swelled with the heat, it was stuck. Angry now, he yanked the billy up by the wire handle. The water's weight dislodged the lid and the billy fell, almost extinguishing the fire. To save what water remained, Stanley grabbed quickly at the billy, but scalded his hand instead. The skin blistered straight off.

"Son of a whore!" Screaming, he danced around, shaking his hand to cool it. "Conway, get over here. Now!! You had the lid on the fucking billy too tight! My fucking hand's burning off!"

Away down the fence line Conway, who was winding in a new roll of wire, looked up. By Stanley's wild gyrations and yelling he knew something bad had happened. Dropping his tools he came running.

"What's wrong?" His voice was dusty and breathless.

"This is wrong, you fucking useless idiot!" Stanley waved his hand in Conway's face. "Get some cold water. It's burning my fucking hand off!"

Conway saw the upturned billy. "That's all there was. We'll have to go home. I'll drive."

Stanley glared at the boy, his face scarlet with rage and pain. "You're not driving my fucking tractor. Now get out of my way."

Throbbing veins stood out like cords in Stanley's neck and temples. Elbowing his son aside, he marched toward the tractor. Conway followed, and grabbed him by the shoulder as he tried to climb up to the driver's seat.

"What's your problem with letting me drive?" Conway's question, and the courage to ask it, seemed to come from somewhere remote.

"You're my problem you tit-sucking bastard." Hissing through clenched teeth Stanley jabbed Conway in the chest for every syllable. "Don't ever touch me like that!"

Like a big engine running out of kilter, Stanley's whole body shook. Barely contained inside him since Conway's birth, the man's crazed demons picked up the reins and whipped him into a full gallop of loathing. Driven by their manic cries, and oblivious to the pain in his scalded hand, he lashed out with those great hammer fists.

Instinctively Conway crouched, protecting his head with his hands. A hurricane of blows rained down, each finding a mark across his back. He felt ribs crack, muscle tear, the hot sting of blood seeping into flesh. The pain in his kidneys was excruciating. The fists winded him, yet bent over as he was, cowering, he could not draw breath. Bolts of white-hot torture shot up and down his spine.

Conway's mind tried to free him from reality, tried to shut down all those parts of itself that caused his body to feel, to see and hear. Gradually the swish of those great arms slowed to quarter speed as they swung through the air. Their boom and thump echoed lazily through the vessel of his body, to linger in his ears.

Hot blood trickled through his nose, collected in fat drips and fell to the ground in slow motion. With an audible fump each hit the dirt, raising a tiny crown of dust. Then, as they cooled and shrank, each drew the dust over itself like a shroud, as though trying to hide from the horror above.

New pains caused by fresh blows were absorbed by existing pains, masked and muted by his mind's shielding mechanism, until all the pains were one.

Semi-conscious, Conway sank to his knees.

Tiring despite his demons' strength, Stanley stood back a pace and kicked his son in the face, sending him sprawling on his back. The impact force fractured his nose, ruptured blood vessels. His face and throat flooded. Blinding stars burst in his eyes. An explosion of ringing went off in his ears. His head swirled in a maelstrom of giddiness that translated into nausea and retching.

"Fuck off turd, and leave me alone!" Like the booming blows, the monster's voice echoed as though from afar.

Inside Conway the resilient energy that had stretched until it had no more give, snapped. His mind escaped from his physical being, like it had stepped out of his skin. It looked down on its pathetic host hugging his knees to his chest, sickened by the sight of him bloodied, broken and quivering.

The object of his suffering just stood there, towering above him like a great bear, across whose face a vague expression of gloating triumph wandered. Rhythmically its fists knotted then relaxed, its jaw tensed then eased, its weight shifted from one foot to the other and back again.

Bit by bit Conway's mind willed his battered body to action. Slowly he rolled onto hands and knees. Then stood. Stretched to his full height, disregarding the pain. Turned to face his father. Locked onto those eyes morbidly glazed with the joy of victory. His hands reached, touched what they sought, picked it up and raised it, way back behind his head. Bruised muscles gathered their youthful strength.

Conway's inner heat, to date no more than a childish smoulder, was now fully stoked. Fuelled by a lifetime of rejection it raged inside him, roared in his ears, flamed in his belly, glowed red in his eyes. Streaming down his face to mingle with his blood, stinging his broken mouth, Conway tasted all the bitter tears of his life.

Now was the moment to prove himself, to release his tortured mother, the moment of his metamorphosis from boy to man. And he knew he would do it right.

His lips opened. His teeth clashed. His ears stung as he bellowed his hatred at the despicable swine standing before him. Using every shred of strength he could muster, he swung the mattock.

Unlike anything he had ever heard, the sound of the impact made him tremble. He wanted to run from the awful noise, but something bound his hands to the mattock handle. For what seemed an eternity he stood, connected to Stanley by that piece of wood, staring into the man's cruel eyes.

Conway's hands began to burn, scorched by a potent energy surging from the man. It poured down the wood and shuddered into him, shaking him, terrifying him with its brutal force. His skin rose to gooseflesh, lifting his hair. The energy electrified him, and still his hands gripped the handle. He felt it in his belly, settling like a poisoned meal. Then it spread its disease, infecting his lungs and heart, forcing itself into his legs and feet, to the tips of his fingers, up into his neck. Finally it held the essence of Conway at bay in his last sanctuary, his head. He tried with every skerrick of will to resist it, to retain control of his brain. But the energy, its might and persistence, was relentless. The marauding horde of Stanley's demons conquered Conway's mind, squeezing out the last vestige of innocence, which exploded from his mouth in a hideous scream.

With their transmigration successful, the demons were satisfied. They had a new home.

The face into which Conway stared was a wreck, warped by hatred, reddened by anger. He despised that face, yet in a way he also loved it. His inclination was to take it between his hands and kiss away the pain so clearly reflected there. Yet just then the light in Stanley's eyes died and the connection was severed. Conway's hands flew from the mattock handle and his body was thrown backwards as though kicked by a rogue horse. The last thing he would clearly recall of this moment was the surprised look on Stanley's face as the mattock blade smashed into his head.

Stanley remained standing for what seemed hours, but in fact was only a second or two. Slowly he opened his mouth. No words came. His eyes turned upward, inward, as though trying to see the cause of the agony in his head, then, with his body rapidly bleeding its life's vigour, he toppled like a great stone pillar.

Two hours had passed since Conway killed his father, yet to him it was just a split second lost in the timelessness of creation. Hugging his knees, he sat with his bruised back against the tractor wheel, rocking from side to side. Like dust in a cyclone his mind whirled, unable to formulate ideas of any relevance.

He could only think of strawberries. Under the leaves. Nanette planted them. Under the leaves. They waited for signs of red. Under the leaves. In summer they were there. Sweet, like her. Hiding. Under the leaves.

Even though his heart was still pounding hard he felt woozy. Fractured ribs made each breath hell. Through blackened eyes he could barely see, his legs and arms rubber, his whole body shaking.

Two hours ago his brain stopped and now Conway was just beginning to conceptualise what he had done. Gradually his mind focussed. It saw Stanley's corpse and terror struck it, yet it couldn't flee without taking Conway with it. There was no place to run, no corner to hide. It was stuck inside his head, and had to bear the knowledge, the consequences of what it had made his body do. He had killed his father and would at least go to jail for a long, long time. They might even hang him.

Yet a small part of Conway felt absolutely calm, like a great weight had been lifted off him. Now he and Nanette could live fearless, without violence, because he had freed them from Stanley's tyrannical oppression.

Conway started to laugh, a horrible hyena's cackle that surged from his throat in waves, like sour vomit. Without thinking, his lips began to form words.

"It took balls to kill me, Connie. I'd almost say you're not a pissant any more!" Conway felt his swollen face drain. That voice was all too familiar. He'd grown up knowing it; fearing and hating it while trying to love it. *"Guess what I found in here?"* Was the voice...inside his head? *"Something you did when you were eight."* The voice burst into coarse laughter. Conway's heart pumped wildly. *"If it didn't make me sick to my gut I could almost say I was proud of you, Connie. Wanna see?"*

Whether he wanted it or not, a picture of the town park played behind Conway's eyes. A thick mosaic of coloured leaves blanketed the ground. It was after school. Conway and his cronies were having leaf fights around the fountain, hurling handfuls at each other, rolling around in them. It was getting dark and they were soaked to the skin. The old gardener was trying to rake the leaves into piles for burning, swearing abuse as the boys scattered them again. When the other boys had tired of the game and left, Conway hid in one of the piles, barely containing his laughter as he watched the old man pour on a puddle of kerosene and take a matchbox from his pocket. As he bent and struck a match Conway burst out of the pile, hurling leaves everywhere, screaming like a madman. Scared out of his wits, the gardener fell backwards in shock. While his breathless victim lay clutching his chest Conway pranced around him, laughing, chanting:

"Got you, got you, silly old goat you. All down, fall down. Die and go away. You fell, you smell, and you're gunna burn in Hell. All down, fall down. Die and go away! Fart arse, smart arse, all bad things'll come to pass. All down, fall down. Die and go away."

Conway was proud of the secret song he'd written for his father. But, believing that Stanley was just too mean to die, the boy was pleased he could test it on someone else.

The stark fear on the old man's face, his struggling breath, his blue mouth, all gave the impression he was dying. And the cause? Conway. Whose face would the gardener take to Hell and remember for eternity? Conway's. What song would he to hear over and over until he went crackers? Conway's, of course!

When Conway heard that the gardener had died, he felt frightened, but he also sensed the empowerment of determining another's fate where he was impotent to determine his own.

Conway began to dream of shadowing the streets at night, hunting for victims; the frail, elderly and vulnerable. He'd lie in wait in a bush or dark doorway, then jump out and scream at them. They'd collapse in fright. He would perform his victory dance; sing his clever verses. The victims would die soon after, in agony, with gruesome death mask faces, bulging eyes, blue lips. Just like the gardener. He ejaculated in his sleep during these dreams, and learned to prevent its evidence by wrapping a handkerchief around his cock.

Almost every night these dreams reinforced the association between death and pleasure.

Interrupting the vision, distant laughter returned him to the moment. In panic Conway's eyes sprang open expecting to see Stanley lurching towards him. But the big man still lay face down in the dust. The laughter came closer. Cruel. Harsh, but infectious too, making the boy titter. Strong, invisible hands grasped his own, tugging, insistent and firm. Hauled him to his feet, coaxed him towards the body. The battered boy tried to ignore the spearing pain that seemed to come from everywhere at once. He heard cheering and whistling, like he was expected to perform, and this source-less applause his audience.

With the toe of a boot he prodded Stanley's corpse. No reaction. Jabbed a bit harder. Still no movement. He kicked the prostrate form. The bane of his life was definitely dead!

With his own laughter verging on hysteria, Conway circled Stanley's body, kicking, and kicking, and kicking...

Conway stood under the old gum tree, whispering to the great mute witness as though expecting an answer. "What am I going to do?" Beyond tears, he closed his eyes, rested his forehead against the ancient monolith's silver skin and willed the tree to export an answer to his mind. As the kernel of an idea sprouted, Conway looked up into the massive structure of limbs. "Could I make it look like an...accident?" He envisaged several scenarios before accepting that the only way to mask the awful injury in his father's skull would be to crush it. He ran his hands over the hard wood skin. It was smooth and warm, like his mother.

To remove the mattock blade held fast by bone, Conway had to sit with his feet braced against Stanley's shoulders. After an agonizing pull the tool came away with a horrible squelch. Pulp and gore gushed.

He tried to ignore the dizziness, the nausea, the hot daggers of pain accompanying every movement. Above the pain, his life depended on the job he had to do.

Dragging Stanley to the tree, Conway sat him against the bole and cleaned off the dirt as best he could. Shuddering at the task, he closed his father's eyelids. Frighteningly, they sprang open again. He couldn't do it a second time.

He shovelled up the bloodied earth and scattered it widely. Using dry grass and dirt he cleaned the mattock blade and handle, burned the grass, then searched the ground for any remnant, any evidence. All the while he kept looking at his father, whose eyes, unglazed even in death, seemed to follow him with a hideous, accusing stare.

Although he'd decided to crush Stanley's head with the tractor, it was hard even to think about it, let alone prepare for it. This was his father; the man who'd housed, fed and clothed him. The man his mother had once loved enough to marry. How would she react if she found out her boy had killed her husband then tried to disguise the crime? Would she hate him beyond forgiveness? She had forgiven the man who'd raped and beaten her more times that Conway could recall. If she learned what her son had done, would she forgive him too, or hand him in? Because he couldn't survive without his mother's love Conway believed he had to keep the truth of the murder from her.

With his stomach in knots, Conway cranked the tractor engine to life. He measured the bumper height. Adjusted the body to match.

The time had come to climb into his father's seat. It was high and safe there, and warm from the sun. The big diesel grumbled as he reversed it a way. Stanley looked very small from back there. Unable to look, Conway squeezed his eyes shut, held his breath, and slammed the accelerator pedal down.

It was happening.

Too late to rethink.

To cover the distance and collide with the immovable tree it took seconds and hours.

Thrown forward on impact, Conway's face smashed into the steering wheel.

There was unbearable pain.

More nausea.

More blood.

He saw stars.

It rained leaves and twigs.

With the engine still running and gear engaged, the rear wheel blades churned up a rooster tail of dirt and stones.

Then the engine stalled and, like it had just expired, the tractor shuddered and stopped. For a moment there was utter silence, then small sounds returned; a furtive twitter; a last falling twig; a hesitant breath of breeze.

Having sat, not wanting to move for what seemed an eon, Conway slowly climbed down from the helm, stepping onto the earth as though it was thin ice that would crack beneath him. For a few moments he could not let go of the grab-rail.

Inching forwards, hanging on to the tractor like a lifebuoy, Conway forced himself to look towards the tree and his mangled father. To the side lay the scalded hand, palm-up, cupping gore. The right arm was blood red. And the shoulder. There was no head to see, only a gooey mess oozing down the majestic trunk.

The boy responsible spewed across the dry ground, and retched until his gut ached.

To convince himself it appeared as though an accident had really happened, Conway had to look again, take it all in, then decide what he would tell Nanette.

It happened at lunchtime, he'd say. Stanley told him to park the tractor in the shade, but it stalled, which it did a lot. When Stanley cranked it over the engine suddenly fired and the tractor shot forward, hitting the tree. The impact slammed Conway's face into the steering wheel and knocked him out. When he came to he staggered down off the tractor. Seeing his father squashed, he'd fainted. He didn't know how long. He tried to run to the creek, where Nanette would be. But he was groggy and it took ages to get there.

"Sounds okay to me, Connie. You'd better hope the cops buy it." With his heart in his mouth Conway spun around, but again there was no one. He thought he was going mad.

With a last reluctant look at the vile sight, Conway started off towards Nanette's favourite spot down by the creek.