

The Nets

Amanda Robinson

Its spindly little legs are scurrying as it weaves its way through the deep grooves of the dark bark. I watch the ant, with its food on its back, returning to its home. It walks straight past another ant that has been caught in the sap of the tree, cocooned in a crystal amber cage; it doesn't spare it a thought. I follow it with my eyes down to its home in the ant-hill on the ground. How long does it take to build a home? Do ants ever run away from home? I stamp the ant-hill down until it is only sand and rubble. Where do the ants go when their home is gone? Do they leave and just never come back? I sigh, a deep sigh that mixes with the growing breeze. There'll be a storm tonight for sure. I see the approaching clouds through the canopy of the gum trees and head for home.

I traipse out of the bush and have the sense that I always have of being exposed. The land stretches long and flat. The dam to the left

ripples with the approaching storm. Dad used to tell me that there were crocs in the dam to keep me away. I don't bother with the dam much anyways. I can see the silhouette of the Johnstone's windmill as the sky becomes a blend of deep yellow, soft orange and shadowy reddish-purple. The sun is setting quickly these days. My feet beat a dusty path across the red earth as I hustle toward the stack of timber that is our house. Every time I head home, the house seems to be set further and further back on the horizon, like it's running away from me.

The TV's on as I creak the door open.

'Where you been?' Dad calls.

'Bush,' I tell him.

'Dinner's on the table. Do the washing up when you're done.'

It's sausages and mash again, but I don't say anything. I just sit and eat it and listen to the clock ticking, and the muffled TV, and the leaky tap as it drips rusty stains onto the porcelain sink. My finger finds its way into the ridges that edge the Formica table, running over the tiny nails that hold it in place. My eyes follow the swirls on the table that remind me of a marble I found at the back of the school oval where I was drawing in the dirt. A treasure from the land, no doubt leftover from some of the older boys who always called out after me, things I didn't understand. The treasure to be found, trodden into the dirt after a scuffle, whose members had long forgotten what they were fighting about and had already gone home and had their mothers sew the buttons back on their school shirts.

Dad comes in half way through dinner, during the ads. He stands in the doorway.

'OK mate?'

‘Yup.’

He stares at me awhile. Mum always said he had real sad eyes. Big, sad eyes. That’s where I got mine from. I see what she means now. He fixes me with those eyes but says nothing. And then he’s gone, back to the TV. He never used to watch TV.

I fill the sink with hot, soapy water. I used to love the feel of the hot water lapping at my arms, scalding my hands. I would leave them in there while Mum washed the dishes around them, until there were enough dishes to begin drying them. I sat on the bench in those days — I was so small. She sang songs in those days; songs she remembered from when she rode bareback. The bubbles in the sink are like the lacework of Mum’s yellowing costume, all beads and tulle, in the box under the bed. She only brought one costume with her when she gave up riding bareback and came to live with Dad out here.

I used to stick my fingers in the holes of the lacework costumes but my fingers are too big now. And my fingernails are dirty. I know this because the ladies that dropped around the pies and pasta bakes in the first week said so. They said the least she could’ve done before she nicked off was teach the child to wash, and what a shame it was and how Dad should have guessed it would come to this. I heard them say so in whispers on our porch where I was hiding underneath, whilst Dad shuffled around the kitchen trying to find where all the tea stuff was kept.

I don’t care if my fingernails are dirty.

‘You done in here?’ Dad comes into the kitchen.

‘Nearly,’ I reply.

He comes over and grabs a tea towel and begins drying with me.

I can feel the heavy weight of words in his chest trying to find a way out. Instead he says,

‘Have a bath.’

I just nod.

I hate the bathroom the most. The tiles are cold. The giant bath is like a monster submarine, perched in the corner on its clawed feet, its slippery ledge like a lolling tongue. I think it’s going to eat me alive. I drag the stool over even though I’m big enough now. That’s what Dad says; I’m big enough now, big enough to have a bath on my own. I wrap my own towel around my own shoulders and cuddle it to myself ‘cause I’m big enough now.

‘You done in there?’ Dad yells through the door. The sound echoes off the tiles and up the timber panelling, down the corridor, out the front door, across the land, into the bush and beyond, filling the silences.

‘Yup,’ I say.



I wake to the horses. Rat-a-tatty, thin, slicy rain hits a rhythm on the roof and the horses are the bass thumping and thundering across the land. When I open my bedroom door my eyes adjust to the dark corridor. Dull moonlight flows through the open front door. My bare feet creak on the timber floorboards. Dad is on the porch, his collar up against the wind, watching them. They’re beautiful, slicked black with the rain, manes flaring, running in a pack, wild. He senses me but the burning amber bud sending up smoke signals is his only communication. The horses are gone, passed through and it’s only me and Dad and the rain.

‘Go back to bed,’ he says in a strained voice.

I know that he is thinking of her, being wild like those horses, being free, being away from all this, from us.

It must be the weekend. Darren’s lorry appears as a dusty dot on the horizon, then a billowing cloud with a roo bar and then a skid of tyres and a slab of beer. I don’t like Darren. He is like a dingo— they look friendly but would bite you before you could say hey. Mum didn’t like Darren either.

They start early on the beers. Darren calls Mum a one night stand that wouldn’t go away and I don’t know what he means but he is laughing and I think of a dingo snarling. *She finally did though, eh?* And my dad says nothing and finishes his beer and lines it up next to the other ones and goes to the esky for another. Dad has that look that the old guys at the pub get when the barkeep is too slow; hungry and almost angry. Without looking at me Dad says, ‘Nick off’. And I wander off into the bush.

Mum would tell me tales in the night. Of lions and elephants and other useless stuff as Dad says. She would snort at him and flick her hair that was as black as the crows but as soft as the new born pups that Dad drowned in the dam last summer ‘cause there were too many. I can’t imagine there being too many of anything out here, ‘cept for trees and the space between them. We got plenty of that.

They met at the Hamilton’s monthly pub do. The circus had been in town for only three days. Dad says she was laughing louder than any other girl and that he couldn’t help but notice her.

Mum says that he stalked her out like a lion and it took him a good few beers to come over and fall in love with her. She rode bareback for three more nights then got off that ride and never looked back.

‘Came with nothing but a wooden box and that’s what I’ll leave in,’ she used to say. Dad would scowl and ask her what kind of thing was that to say and she would scowl back and ask what kind of thing did he want her to say, ‘cause he seemed to know exactly what was right and wrong. He would scowl more and the anger was like a wind that you can’t see but it’s there; getting under the doors, rattling the dishes, stoking the fire.

I go down by the dam for a change, since everything is changing anyways. The water is still enough to see my own murky reflection. I lay down by its bank and make creatures out of the clouds.

My eye catches a fleck of colour glinting through the trees. I squint against the sun and try to make it out. Dark clouds are approaching overhead. I creep up to the bush line like a lion on the hunt. I stalk past palm fronds that push up through the leaf litter and discarded bark that the trees have shed like a layer of clothing. And there she is, swinging in the sun. She smells musty and her hair is dirty.

‘Hi,’ she says though she hasn’t even looked over and I’ve been careful to creep quietly. I say nothing.

‘Do you want to hear a story?’ she asks and stretches her arms towards me. ‘It’s about a caged lion, I know you like the lion stories.’

I don’t move.

‘The lion couldn’t find a way out and he paced and paced and paced for days and weeks and years...’ the hammock begins to sway as she places a foot onto the ground and rocks herself.

‘I miss you,’ she says. I don’t believe her.

‘I’ll catch up with them,’ she says dreamily, the breeze tugging her hair and I know she means the circus, ‘I can ride bareback again.’

‘No,’ I say, ‘you can’t.’ It’s the first thing I’ve said and I don’t know

where it came from or why it's true but it echoes across the bush like a roar.

'Sure I can, I am,' she replies. I turn and run, beating a path through the bush, kicking up leaves and sticks. Tears make the world blurry. I can hear her yelling behind me.

'Hey, come back, come back,' and I think, '*you* come back'. The dam comes into view but I'm suddenly lying beside the dam and the world is still blurry and the bush is silent and still; I am alone. I rub sleep out of my eyes and sigh like the wind. I get up, dust myself off, wipe my face and head towards home.

It's almost dusk. The heat makes the distance a blur of searing sun despite the approaching storm clouds. And I see the horses. Blacker than night, glistening with nervous sweat, stamping and rearing. My heart stops. Their nostrils flare and their eyes widen to the whites. I can see Dad just sitting on the porch, watching. Darren and another mate of Dad's play the circling drovers kicking up dust with their utes. Their kelpies bark madly in the back and the whole thing is in slow motion. And the nets. Hovering. Ready. The horses rear up; and it's beautiful. The net catches it all like a photograph and Darren is licking his parched lips, his rough, blistering hands struggling. The kelpies bare their teeth and circle back on themselves.

I run across the land but my feet are like lead. I can't run fast enough. I hear, rather than see, the first horse fall. The gun smoking. And they keep casting the nets, again and again and I'm close enough to see their big, leering grins like circus clowns. The kelpies are barking like mad. But it's all over. The horses lay in the red earth, still. Rivers of red make the dry dust into mud. My father won't meet my eyes.

Now it's dusk. The crimson moon towers over the gums, casting hideous, foreign shadows. Big, fat droplets of rain kick up the red dust as they fall from the clouds. I sit on the porch in silence. The silence will not console my father as he sits next to me and cries for my mother— wherever she is.