

The Caretaker

‘What do you mean you *took* the boy?’ The woman’s eyes are icy with disbelief.

‘I had to,’ says the old man. ‘Just like I had to take the house. It was broken. Needed fixin’.

The boy, he knows, is fast asleep in his swag, oblivious to the fact he is alone and about to be betrayed. Still, the old man hadn’t wanted to care for anyone. Reliance fuses with guilt and tightens the lead band that strangles his chest, all of it due to his snap decision to keep the blasted boy.

The image of the child’s face from three days ago burns in his mind, his hunger for approval like a branding iron on the old man’s skin.

‘I think we’ll like this one, Grandad,’ the boy said, craning his neck to scour the old man’s eyes. ‘Maybe we can stay longer this time?’

The boy’s dark shaggy thicket needed a cut and the old man brushed it aside. ‘Go on, pick up your case, son. You can be first inside.’

Puffed with pride, the boy raised the handle of his wheelie case and sang as he dragged it toward the farmhouse.

It had been a lifetime since the grey weatherboard had been loved by anyone or loved in return. Her tin roof held a rusty glow and panels were missing, blown off by storms summers

ago. The rest—absent trimming—would be easy to fix. But what of the house’s soul? If broken, it would require intricate and persistent care. Sometimes there was no fixin’ it and you had to walk away. The old man wondered what he would find, as he warned the boy of the incomplete flooring beneath his small, sneakered feet.

The screen door screeched a welcome, but the shucked wooden door behind it required a more direct approach. The old man turned, surveyed the gravel track that had led them here. No dust flew into the air at any stage along it, in either direction, and aside from a waist-high sea of quavering browns, yellows and greys staring them down, they were completely alone. The boy waited, chewing the end of a fingernail, while the old man’s boots defeated the door.

Inside, the air was thick and musty. Spores clung to his throat, and the smell of rotting possum made him retch. But as his hands felt the waxy walls and he rolled the grime between his fingers, he smiled at the prospect before him. ‘This’ll come up real nice,’ he said, and the boy’s eyes brimmed with delight.

The child noticed none of the mouse droppings on the floorboards or the ravine-sized cracks in the walls. ‘I love it, Grandad,’ he said. ‘It’s perfect.’

The boy claimed the front room as their bedroom, and he unrolled their swags while humming the tune of a Tom Jones song he’d heard on the radio. The wind whistled as it gusted down the chimney, and the boy pulled his coat in around him. He dragged the swags closer to the empty fireplace and the old man realised there would be no room for subtlety in this house: tempering the draught would be essential if either of them was to get any sleep.

The old man wrenched the window down, watching the boy open his suitcase as he took care not to force the zip. The boy took out his possessions and placed them next to his swag. A tattered copy of *The Magic Faraway Tree* was leaned up against a balding teddy bear. A parachute-laden army man swung over the corner of a photo frame (inside of which a dark-haired woman drank too many glasses of wine while smoking an endless supply of cigarettes).

‘Gonna be a bad frost tonight, son,’ the old man said. He nodded to the empty hearth. ‘Go see what you can find outside, will you?’

The boy rested the frame on the ground and looked up and smiled. ‘I’m gonna find loads for you, Grandad,’ he said.

The old man sits on the highbacked chair as if the slightest movement will sully the wood. As he waits for the woman’s answer, he scans her kitchen: the homemade olive oil infused with thyme and garlic; a Kent pumpkin with its stalk still attached; roses in a cut-glass vase that fill the room with fragrance.

The woman pulls her dressing gown even tighter. She pushes her hair back from her face and rubs an eye. ‘And now you want me to take him from you? Just like that?’

He says nothing at first, his request more need than want, and runs his hand along the edge of the smooth wooden table. ‘He’s a real hard worker. Never gives any trouble. A rare child, you’ll see.’

He smiles as he thinks back to the day they arrived, when the boy had first begun his earnest search for firewood. The old man snuck around back, as quietly as his rickety knees would allow, to watch him work. The child sang as he foraged beneath the gangly gums of the boundary: The Beach Boys and some John Denver. His bounty of wood was impressive, and he dragged each branch back one at a time—enough to fuel their fire for days. Three neat piles were assembled: kindling, small branches, and logs that required a chop. The old man’s eyes filled with warmth as he hid behind the warped upright of the verandah. How well the child had learned. The boy kept surprising him, as did the tears which had eluded him, until now, for the greater part of his life.

Unaware of the old man’s presence, the child snapped the branches into smaller pieces, scattering rabbits and kangaroos in all directions, and sending cockatoos screeching high into the air. Only the magpies stayed behind with their eyes keen, warbling as they bathed beneath a dripping tap, picking at the worms that offered themselves up for dinner.

‘But surely his mother?’

The woman unfolds her arms and clasps her hands together in front, one thumb rubbing the other. She watches as the old man takes another scone from the plate.

He breaks it in half and butters it, allowing the word ‘mother’ to ricochet in his head. It leads him to a place in time best left forgotten—before the boy, or even the woman, was born. Taking a bite, he begins to chew. ‘The most generous thing his mother ever did for him was die.’

He closes his eyes, banishing his own past by replacing it with the memory of meeting the boy’s mother for the first and only time. He smelled her, long before she came into view.

Hiding behind the heavy, mildewy curtains of the dilapidated caravan, she was sprawled on the bed. By now she was grey; dried vomit stuck to her mouth and face like old cornflakes to the side of a bowl. Rum had leaked onto the mattress, but it still couldn’t disguise the smell. He stood there staring as the boy’s sobs pierced his ears, glad he had asked him to wait outside on the step.

Every inch of him screamed *don’t*, to ring the authorities, but he took the boy with him anyway. He’d regretted breaking open the caravan door for this dead stranger’s child ever since.

He pictures the boy sleeping in front of the fireplace, exhausted after days of working tirelessly to shape them both a home. By evening, the floors of all four rooms of the farmhouse had been swept and the walls scrubbed clean—well, as high up as the boy could reach anyway. A running supply of chilly water let them wash after eating their tins of braised steak on fire-roasted toast. The boy fell asleep shortly after, before the old man could finish the part of Dick, Fanny and Moon Face’s adventures they were up to. The old man smiles, recalling the small pile of clean clothes stacked next to the boy’s swag.

Sweeping aside a messy weave of webs with his hands that morning in the shed, he unearthed a twin tub which gave them both enormous grins.

‘It’ll be fresh clothes tomorrow, son.’ The old man chuckled, his bowed legs doing a strange kind of a jig.

Celebrating their 'find' consisted of using the gennie to boil the kettle for a cuppa while they watched their clothes spin round.

'Worthy causes,' he said, winking as they clinked their tin cups together.

The boy shimmered as he jiggled on top of his stool, the old man realising the boy was trying with all his might to stop his happiness from exploding outwards and knocking them both over with force.

The woman leans forward and takes a scone for herself. Unlike the old man, she refuses the butter and jam.

'I've read about you,' she says. 'You're that guy.' She seems more astonished than afraid.

His eyes dart to the door.

'I thought you were just a story. Travelling all over the country, fixing up them old houses, and for no payment. What do they call you again?'

He stays very still. 'I wouldn't know.'

Her face lights up, chuffed she's found the right word. 'The Renovator.' It falls as her memory completes. 'They say you're dangerous. Shouldn't be approached.'

He folds his hands in his lap and leans back in the chair. 'Bit late for that now, isn't it, Natalie?'

A familiar ache clenches behind his breast as he considers the woman and the task before him. How stupid he was to let her find them. Gone for only a few hours, he'd left the boy home so they wouldn't be spotted, even behind their masks. Yet in that short time, everything had unravelled. One bad decision was all it took to pitch them down the wrong path despite his desperate hopes.

Earlier that afternoon, on the open road home, he'd smiled as he rattled by scrubland, the razored paddocks with pale shattered stalks. The truck kicked up mud, as he hummed along to the crackling radio, before the wheeze in his chest forced him to stop. The pain was getting

worse. Much worse. Casting the discomfort aside, he shifted gears and glanced at the hope sitting next to him on the front seat: winter seedlings, a bag of crunchy apples, more tins and matches and toilet paper. He grinned at the most important item—a colourful activity book he'd bought for the boy, the words *discount bin* written across it in thick black marker. For once he was thankful the boy couldn't read. His belly churned, worried the boy wouldn't like it.

Turning into their driveway some fifteen minutes later, his heart made a play for his throat. A vehicle was parked out front—a mud-flecked Land Rover. *Where the hell was the boy?*

Hurtling through the house, he cried out until finding himself in the midst of a strange tea party. A steaming billy rested on top of a popping fire, tiny pots of UHT milk on the ground next to it, their plastic lids recoiling from the heat. A mountain of scones was arranged across two milk-crates and an open jar of raspberry jam was next to it. The boy lathered a scone with jam as he sat opposite a stranger and giggled. She had her hands wrapped around the old man's tin mug. The boy looked up and rose to hug the old man's legs, spilling his tea.

'Grandad! Come meet Natalie, our neighbour.'

With one arm around the child, the old man mopped at the spill with his shoe before throwing a nod to the woman.

She smiled as she stood to shake his hand. 'Sorry about the intrusion. Brandon offered me tea while we waited for you to come back.' Her words were nervous, but she smelled of neither welfare nor police.

The old man studied the boy as he enjoyed what was left of his drink, hoping he hadn't let anything slip. 'Been good have you, son?'

The woman rubbed the boy's arm. 'He's been just wonderful.' Her smile faded. 'Such a long time since anyone's lived here, I was surprised to see someone at home.'

The old man stood in silence while he searched for the words, any words, that would save them. Only nothing came.

The woman's arm extended in the direction of a farmhouse he'd passed earlier, two kilometres to the west. 'My husband and I live across the road. We've been wondering when this place would be taken up again. So many empty houses around these parts. They keep saying there's a shortage, that city people want to come, but no-one can be bothered putting in the work.'

'Friend of the family's asked us to do up the place.' As he finally spoke he realised she had stopped listening.

A heavy shadow drifted across her face, and her mouth twitched, then tightened. 'Will Dale be returning soon then? Or have they finally agreed to sell up? We would be interested in putting in an offer if they have.'

Too many questions came way too fast. It was at this moment the old man knew they couldn't stay. 'Go and fetch some wood for the fire, son,' he said.

All three looked to the large log pile waiting next to the hearth. The boy headed outside into the cold.

The man creaked down onto the old milk-crate chair, its plastic warmed by both the child and the fire. Through the smoky haze he looked into the woman's eyes. 'Dale isn't ever getting out, but I have a feeling you know that already.'

The drop in her shoulders confirmed she did. He looked at his feet. He knew how hard it must've been for her to step foot inside this house today, or any other day, but never as hard as it was that time, years ago, she had been made to come.

Still, he needed to buy time for him and the boy.

'What they're gonna do with the place hasn't been decided yet. Keep it under wraps that we're here, will you? Till the family decides.'

But his new neighbour wasn't listening again.

She gazed into the fire, one hand stroking the other. 'I can hardly bear to think about what happened here. Still, everyone deserves a chance to be forgiven, don't you reckon?'

He kicked at an ember that had fallen from the fire, its orange glow pulsing in time with the drumming in his ears. ‘I reckon that depends on the sin.’

They sat in silence until Brandon returned, firewood clutched in his little hands.

‘Wasn’t she the nicest woman in the world, Grandad?’

The boy was like a darn puppy, so easily impressed. Though, when the old man considered both their lives so far, he judged the declaration probably correct.

The boy went on. ‘You know, Natalie had a son my age once. He’s in heaven now, like Mum.’

‘Did she say what happened to him?’ the old man asked, leaving the discussion of who gets into heaven well alone.

The child nodded. ‘The man who used to live here accidentally shot him while they were out hunting roos.’

The old man cast his mind back to the younger man he had lived with in prison and tried to keep his eyebrows steady.

‘Are we gonna plant out the veggies today, Grandad?’ the boy asked, keen to divert the old man’s attention to happier things. He was always so bloody eager to please. But by now the old man had lost all of his smiles.

‘You know, son,’ he said. ‘I’m feeling a bit tired. I think we’ll leave that job till tomorrow.’

The woman sinks back into her chair, her breath sharp and shallow.

‘But what will I say when people ask who he is? Where he’s come from.’

The old man turns his hands in his lap, inspecting the dirt-engrained lines. ‘Tell them he’s your miracle. A reward for having the guts to forgive.’

He wants nothing more than to teach the boy this lesson—after all, it is the only thing that can really fix him. But the man is old, and it is way beyond his skill set. Too much for his worn-out, failing heart.

The old man pushes the ute along the crunchy gravel driveway, the light from a half-moon showing him the way. Above him a canopy of stars glitter, as he hops into the driver's seat.

The boy sleeps on, unaware that the second swag has long been rolled up and taken away.