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Junior Short Story Category – 1st Prize 2020

OFF TRACK

By Lila Plunkett

“Tourists!” Dad spat. “Always messing up the town. You just can’t escape them!”

I looked at the two men in bright shirts and straw hats. They reminded me of Summer.

“They seem alright,” I said.

Dad just shook his head and continued walking briskly down the main street of Caplanap. I jogged beside him. We kept going like that until we reached the bush. As soon as town finishes, forest starts. I’d never really been able to go for a walk in the bush – Mum said there were too many snakes and my brother, Timmy, just doesn’t like walking in general. But today Mum and Timmy were in Paris to see an opera, so this gave Dad the perfect opportunity to let me see the bush.

The first thing I noticed about the bush was that it was quiet. Not quiet as in silent, but quiet as in peaceful. The second thing I noticed was a snake. Or at least I *thought* it was a snake. Dad laughed.

“It’s just a plain old lizard! Has Mum got into your head? Trust me, snakes will be a lot more scared of you than you are of them,” He explained.

I pushed ahead of Dad in embarrassment and started following the trail. When Dad had said there was going to be a trail, I thought he meant a nice concreted path, but apparently he meant a line of dirt that the plants swerved around. I gulped. In any of those patches of grass, a snake could be waiting to devour me...I shook my head clear and surged forward. The trail (as Dad had told me) led to a well-known cave. I had forgotten the name of it as soon as he had told me, as I do for everything. All around me gum trees grew tall like there was no limit, but *surely* there was. I heard Dad humming Waltzing Matilda behind me. I liked the way dad spoke – like he didn't care about a thing in the world. Like he was constantly winning the Melbourne Cup. I rarely saw Dad's grin falter.

A few pretty yellow flowers were buffeted about in the wind and I felt like saying sorry to them as I passed.

“Will they be okay?” I asked nervously.

Dad looked about, confused.

“Will *what* be okay?”

I tilted my head at him. Could he not see the flowers?

“That wattle you mean? Of course they'll be okay. Nothing in the bush that can grow as strong and wild as wattle. They're everywhere, see?” said Dad, pointing to a bush with light green, diamond-shaped leaves.

“But where's the flowers?” I asked him.

“This here is knife-leaf wattle, you can tell because it's leaves are spiky. It's not blossoming yet because it's not ready for it,” Dad told me.

I narrowed my eyes at him. Wattle couldn't think, so how would it know it wasn't ready to have flowers? I locked that question up in my head and saved it for later. I knew asking him now would be asking for an hour long explanation. This was good for when I wanted to waste time (so I could be late for school and skip a test), but all I wanted was to get to the cave so I could have lunch.

My legs were feeling like jelly – literally. I couldn't feel them and they were wobbly and weak. I thought about my fitness; did I not exercise enough?

“Here, take this, it'll help you,” Dad said.

He handed me a big stick, about the height of my rib cage. Was this a joke?

“How does it help me?” I questioned suspiciously.

“Use it as a walking stick,” he said.

I actually found the stick rather useful for pushing myself along when I was tired. As we turned a corner I realised we were on a mountain. I looked down and I saw the gum trees way down below. They looked like broccoli. This prospect made my stomach feel like a football had just been dropped on it. I wasn't hungry anymore. We were *so high up*.

"This is a mountain. A really tall mountain," I whispered.

"Rule number one: don't look down," Dad informed me.

I rolled my eyes. If someone says "Don't look down," I immediately look down. Slowly I peeled my eyes away from the many broccolis and continued walking. I knew we weren't far away from the cave, so I forced my feet to keep stomping. I pretended I was an ant on my journey back to the nest. Dad hummed away into his world of music. Finally, after what seemed hours (and probably was), we reached the cave.

I marvelled at it. It looked like a huge lion was roaring and it had been turned into stone at that very moment. There were no stalagmites and stalactites like I was hoping, but it was very wet and grey like I had imagined.

"How far in can we go?" I asked Dad.

He lowered his gaze to my eyes and frowned.

"In the bush you can go as far as you want," he said.

I raised my eyebrows. I decided to give up hopes of arguing with him so I sat down on the lion's front teeth. I didn't even know if lions *had* front teeth, but I sat on the spot where they would be if they had them.

"Don't be scared!" Dad insisted, "Come on, get further in!"

I screwed my nose up at him, sighed and got up. I walked onto the lion's tongue, onto his back teeth, then down his throat. I turned around to look at Dad who gestured for me to go further. I kept on walking and slowly got more desperate for another jumper. I must have been in the lion's stomach by now. Dad and I sat down and I handed him a sandwich. We both munched contentedly in silence for a while. We were taking last sips before the walk back to town when everything went wrong at once.

BANG! CRASH! BANG! The lion's mouth closed up. I screamed and Dad just stood there. Boulders were falling down everywhere. I grabbed Dad's hand and ran. I almost ran to the tip of the lion's tail before we stopped. We were trapped in the cave. We panted for a bit, then Dad started running his fingers through his hair. His 'winning the Melbourne Cup' smile vanished. When Dad freaks out, everyone around him does too. Right now, I was around him so I began panicking. What were we going to do? How would we escape? Would we starve? Would we die of thirst?

“Dad?” I asked.

It was the only thing I could think of saying. Dad always has a plan.

“I don’t know!” he cried.

I stepped back. Dad was stumped? How was that possible?

“Dad, sit down. Don’t waste energy,” I commanded.

He sighed and obeyed.

“Sandwich?” I offered.

“No, save it, in case we’re here for a while,” Dad replied.

I slumped down. Dad thought we were going to be here for a while. That wasn’t good.

I sat down for a bit. Dad did too. We didn’t know what to do. I tried to cheer Dad up by creating a game of naughts and crosses with sticks and stones. He refused immediately, which I thought wasn’t a great sign.

“Does wattle grow in caves?” I asked.

“No, they need soil,” Dad replied.

“How many different types of rosellas are there?” I tried.

Questions were the only thing that could make Dad speak.

“Six species and nineteen subspecies,” Dad said.

“What’s your favourite type of bush tucker?” I continued.

Dad opened his mouth to speak but before he could answer a boulder was pushed out of the wall.

Dad and I rushed over. Two men with bright shirts and straw hats poked their heads through. The tourists! The ones we had seen in Caplanap!

“Hello! You’re stuck, are you? We’ll save you!” one of them said.

“Yes, we’re trapped! Can we fit through there?” Dad asked.

He had seemed to have forgotten his hatred for tourists.

“Oh! Almost forgot! I’m Luke, and this is my buddy, Benny.”

“Yes, but can we fit through?”

“Oh, Luke *is* right. We forgot to introduce ourselves. As he said, I am Benny.”

“You’ll fit through,” Luke said, regaining the topic.

“Yes,” Benny agreed.

Dad let me crawl through the small hole in the wall of boulders first. It felt like finally taking off a huge backpack to be free. I’d only just fit through. I was a bit worried about Dad’s chances. It turned out that there was only one fully blocked place of the cave – the place where we had been, and the rest of it had boulders just scattered about. Dad got his head through fine, but his shoulders were stuck.

“Come on, Dad!” I encouraged. “You can do it!”

Dad wiggled and wiggled but couldn’t fit through.

“Luke, you pull. I’ll help,” Benny said.

“Right you are,” Luke agreed.

I found that Benny and Luke were glass half-full people. I’d never really understood the saying until I actually filled a glass up half way then studied it for a while. Glass half-empty people were people who found the negatives in things, for example: a glass is filled up half way and they would say “The glass is half empty” because they are negative. Whereas a glass-half full person would say “It is half full” because they always look on the bright side. Benny and Luke were glass half-full people because they made me feel okay about my situation.

Dad wiggled and wiggled while Benny and Luke pulled. I joined in occasionally if they needed help. We did that for almost ten minutes, but I couldn’t tell because my wristwatch was smashed. I didn’t know what Mum would think – it had been pretty expensive.

“We all pull hard on three, yes?” Luke confirmed. “One, two, THREE!”

We all tugged harder than we had ever before, and Dad slowly got further out until...POP! Dad popped right out of the hole and we all fell over. Benny and Luke were at the bottom of the huge heap we had fallen into. I coughed and spluttered under Dad’s weight. He got up and brushed himself off, then helped me up. Dad scowled at the tourists.

“We’ll be off, then. And...your help may have been required,” he admitted, leaving them sprawled on the ground.

I glared at Dad. How could one person be so infuriatingly ignorant?

I glowered angrily at Dad. He met my eyes and opened and closed his mouth like a fish.

“And thank you, we’d be dead without you,” I told Benny and Luke.

They glowed with joy. I helped them up and looked meaningfully at Dad. He bit his lip.

“I - I’m really grateful too. Would you like to walk back to town with us?” Dad offered.

I could tell that he was still a little cross at them (for simply being tourists) but at least he wasn’t treating them with open hostility.

“We’d love to, wouldn’t we, Benny?” Luke said.

We worked our way through the boulders lying about and made it to the end of the cave. The rest of the walk home disappeared quickly, as the journey was very interesting – I listened to stories about Benny and Luke’s travels. I think even Dad began finding it interesting. I was almost sad when we got back to Caplanap, but I knew that Benny and Luke had very tight schedules, so we let them go.

As we walked back home, Dad leaned down to me and whispered to me “Would you mind not telling Mum or Timmy about this?”

I thought for a moment.

“Only if you let me come back another time.”

Dad laughed.

“Of course we’ll come back another time!”