

Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition 2021

Title: The Astrophysics of Love

Just before a tall tree falls in the forest, there's a moment of incredulous hush. Birds take to the air and small wallabies scatter. The canopy tilts and clutches cousin-foliage on the way down. Branches crack. Leaves whistle. The earth groans while a gnarly black placenta peels from a fug of dark soil. A circle of roots lifts to the sky. Straight and hard, the karri falls without bend or crumple to lessen the aftermath.

But if the giant lands on smaller growth, can you see the tiniest bounce? Almost imperceptible, this last defiance. The younger trees, dense hakea and sedge, tree ferns and wattles catch the ancient one just before they are crushed. Ask yourself; is a tall tree's keeling softened by sedge and honey-bush? Ask yourself again; if you have no real proof and the bounce was missed because you looked away ... how do you know the softening happened? The saplings sacrifice themselves to the elder's last grapple to life. But if it falls alone, the boom ripples all the way to the stars.

Norman has been my father's friend as good as a lifetime. Opinionated and inclined to colourful language, he holds forth on random subjects that race and tumble through his head. He and my father have spent years on this back verandah in almost constant exchange. Two old boys brought together by need and circumstance. I watch them quietly through a sideways glance, squinting into the sun while shadows stretch through the afternoon. Stained enamel mugs of tea line up when my father brings another two brews to a sunny corner at the top of worn, wooden steps.

Reclined on the sharp canes of a bamboo lounge, I observe the exchange. Hot, sweet smoke curls through the yellow tips of my fingers. I listen to the two chatting, as I've done in both the short and longer spells at my father's home. Those times I needed to step aside, be quiet and here. He's clever, Norman, sometimes too clever for his own good. A dazzling intellect, is how he describes himself with only half a tongue in cheek. That one who always trumps an argument by whipping out one final, sparkling fact. Of great promise, he said, in his youth. Two old boys at the top of the stairs in the sun. My narrow eyelids frame them in the early evening glow, and I hear chatter that is almost a whisper.

London. A small flat and big dreams. Money is a flood and I ride the waves. The world is high on market fractals and impossible algorithms and we are fireworks over the Square Mile. We swim in champagne and optimism, derivatives and dumb luck. If there is a formula to this good fortune, I channel it daily and nothing, it seems, can go wrong. This is everything I worked toward with the promise I showed. Days are long and grinding, but adrenaline carries us. I am a commodity and a shooting star. These are my days of gold and now, it seems, lithium. Until my feet find the earth again and on a cold night with a clear sky, I wake to a soft burr in every bone, and a calling. And it just says,

You're needed here.

Come home.

A human is not made for immobility; even trees are engineered to move, in their own way. Our body's flesh and blood and bones are not designed to lie and stay down. When we do, saltwater pools in a rising tide around rumbles of slow breaths. I slide my father's mask from his face, snap the neck of a small vial and pour medication in the mask's chamber. My hand finds the nebuliser switch and the small motor purrs. Steam coils to my father's face. His one, grateful hand slides back the mask. His working arm circles my shoulder, and we swing on his good side, on the count of three, beneath warm blankets. Damp cheeks reflect effort or shame and I carry a bucket away. We share a gaze and the apology of a smile. In the dim midnight room, his eyes speak when he cannot.

These are the days of sitting in sunshine and one-sided conversations. The new, slow rhythm of mornings spent in fresh air and peace. Of wry laughter and soft food and finding grace in small things. These are the nights I sleep in a zone between sound and dreaming. I imagine a place where mothers sleep, where they hear a child stir before it cries, or a wild dog rustle nearby grass. I wonder, if I had a child, would I have listened through the night for sounds that may never come, in that liminal place between memories and tomorrow? I sleep there now, in the old bed of my childhood, not knowing when I'll leave.

Norman The Opinionated is good for a yarn at any time, especially under a full moon on a sticky January evening. Sideways, I see him gazing up through a cloud of mosquitoes drawn to the overhead lamp. He draws breath and his chest swells.

'Do you ever miss London, Joni?'

I tap ash and memories.

'Sometimes, I suppose.'

‘I assume they were heady days,’ he muses. ‘But we’re all enormously grateful you’ve returned to field things, in a manner of speaking. You know, your father missed you more than he let on.’

I feel my heart trip. That last comment surprises me, the contrary and combative child, given our history of dancing around battles over everything. When the siblings, it seemed, could do no wrong. But even at our worst, he was my canopy and shelter while I grew up toward the sun, in my own way. I picture the long, dark-haired and sinewed arms blustering another point about my poor choice of ‘commo’ friends, about useless politicians, excessive taxes, council corruption, football teams who couldn’t kick the skin off a custard and the apparent pointlessness of saving whales. And being told there’s plenty of forest left, so just get out of the way and let the dozers do their work. Tall trees, indeed. How hard and straight they fall. With a memory of those windmill arms and floods of expletives, I feel a smile lift the corners of my mouth. I will miss them more than I let on.

‘Well, I often thought of him, despite our history.’

‘You also need to know,’ ... Norman’s voice lowered ... ‘about the times he defended you at gatherings where you were discussed as more than a bit ... fanciful. As if that were a crime.’ His head shakes.

‘You were there?’

He shrugs. ‘I’m not really a party animal, but I was always at those home gatherings. You can learn a lot just by listening.’

His nails press into my hand.

‘You’re OK, Joni. You always were and he let everyone know. He was always proud.’

He scratches the base of his arthritic spine before a small cough flags an imminent meditation. Here we go.

‘Do you ever wonder, given our various relationships, what lies between us?’

‘Not fourteen thousand kilometres,’ I reflect, ‘which is probably a good thing.’

‘Is it?’ I catch a small pivot of his head. ‘London’s long gone, girl. The wunderkind, perched on a back step in a caravan park on the edge of a desert. One ear out for a nebuliser’s hum and the hiss if it runs dry. Drawing on a deep well of compassion. Listen... exactly how long do you think you’ve got,’ ... he leans into me ... ‘until it all runs dry?’

I pull slowly on my roughshod rollie and wish it were something stronger. This wine-soaked conversation has kicked off way too early and threatens a long and excessively profound night. Norman has a way of reeling me into circular exposition that exhausts rather than enlightens. He takes my silence for consent and continues.

‘You need to think about that. Here you are, freshly disembarked from flight QF10 and already taken the helm of a listing ship, if I may mix my metaphors.’ Almost Norman-like, I can’t resist pointing out the error.

‘That’s only one metaphor.’

A shrug, and he is back on track.

‘Small matter. Semantics. What really fascinates is how you’re here at all, don’t you think?’

What really fascinates, I think, is Norman dismissing semantics as trivial, when he’s been known to torture streams of words for hours. Round and round and round and ... you get my drift.

‘Given that you’ve left bright lights and, dare I say, a stellar career for long nights and even longer days ahead ... don’t you ever wonder what, and how, you find yourself returned?’ He’s heading somewhere with this discussion and I sense convoluted self-congratulation.

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ I grimace a return question and shudder, perhaps from the cooling breeze on my bare shoulders. Sucked in. Norman shifts his weight in “huzzah” mode, and I’m trapped.

‘Not obvious at all.’ I hear a quiet chuckle. ‘Which makes the mechanics of your apparently unprompted ping back to home a delicious mystery. Well, to you at least.’

The warm must of my cab merlot slides down and I admit defeat.

‘Go on ...’

‘It all rather proves my theorem,’ he murmurs, ‘about our bodies as remnant stardust; not a new theory, mind, but one that works well within the laws of physics.’ I almost risk the fatal response, “which are?” but pull back from the precipice to draw in more smoke. Fruitlessly, it seems, when Norman bounces swiftly back on point.

‘Well, we already know that, on an atomic level, our consciousness mirrors properties of quantum entanglement.’ I sink inside. It’s already too late. I study his moonlit profile while it waits for the inevitable response. There’s no dodging anymore and it tumbles from me, helpless.

‘Which are?’

‘Manipulation.’ His voice is almost conspiratorial with glee. ‘Protons and electrons in perfect states of spin, creating a state that connects distant particles. Two objects affecting mutual behaviours, wherever they are!’ I sit speechless, more stunned mullet than helmsman. Norman swings to me, but seeing my expression, calls on the big guns. ‘Einstein called it “spooky action across vast distances.”’

I squint at his face, locked on mine with a rapture that’s almost obscene and decide to bring him back to earth.

‘Esoteric, Norman, and really quite interesting, but I’m not sure what it has to do with us.’ I nod toward the cask. ‘Have another drink.’ I see a silvery jaw tighten.

‘It’s everything to do with us,’ he said, ‘and you don’t even know it. Bloody philistines. How do you think you knew of your father’s fate? Think back if you can bother to.’ There’s a pause before a pointed reminder. ‘It was me that found him on the floor.’ I hear his voice quaver and feel as big as the woodlouse crawling near my left foot. Talk about back to earth. And who knows how long my father lay there while a sun rose and probably set. He’ll never tell us.

‘It was me,’ Norman repeats, with a new note of determination, ‘and it took a truck load of triangulation to let you know, girl. Nearly burned my bloody brain out.’ At this point, I rest my ancient tumbler on the boards and whistle softly to stay calm. This so-called science is turning weird. Or perhaps that’s just the old boy alongside. I recall enough calculus to throw a wild guess at where we’re going.

‘Triangulation from where?’ I see him rock back joyfully and nod to an incandescent light in the night sky.

‘Sirius, of course!’ He takes my stunned silence for curiosity and continues. ‘If we accept old mate Albert’s premise of spooky action, there’s no refuting my ability to access your neural networks.’ A sly turn of his head checks my reaction. ‘But to connect, I must first bounce to and from a point in the celestial sphere. A booster station, as it were, to your brain. Which is made, incidentally, of elements flung from the Big Bang.’

The whistling’s louder but it doesn’t stop old Norman in full flight.

‘So ... I correlate the wavelengths between us, reduce the partition between our neural synapses and fire off the SOS that boomerangs you home. Bloody hard work, girl, but job done!’ There’s silence while my head implodes to a sad black hole for our old friend. Then for a fleeting and utterly miserable moment, I consider telling him he’s finally lost the plot.

‘For God’s sake, Norman, that’s ridiculous. Anyone else would just use a mobile phone.’

‘Anyone else wouldn’t have found him on the floor.’

I can’t argue with the logic. Norman’s been there for my father in his long years alone. But I’m here now, for my long years alone, and that counts too.

‘Settle down, old boy. At least you didn’t fight like two cats in a sack, so why on earth *wouldn’t* you have stuck by him?’

‘For God’s sake, Joni, he had me spayed.’

He cocks a bristling brow to me, dark eyes sparkling. Top that.

I can’t, of course. In the awkward silence that follows, I ruminate on the nature of loyalty. I look sideways at the old fella sat between me and the big bang in my head, just

before a galaxy of thoughts race and tumble. Was Sirius truly bright the night I understood, “come home”? Just how much of me is stardust? And I ask myself, in all sincerity ... should I really listen to someone who still cries for Laika? Questions make my head spin on its axis, but my hands hold it steady, and I smile. There is a certainty that carries me, these days. Love is a knowing, and a tangled cord in the icy void of space and time. That’s as good a hypothesis as any, according to Norman. And who am I to disagree?