

Raisins

Word count 4,976

1

He didn't know I could see them. The first thing I noticed was the blue of the teapot in the china cabinet through the hole in its guts.

"Sam, get that stew out to the dogs. No pudding for you." I don't know how long I'd stared. My mother's voice startled my eyes away from dangling intestines. I didn't mind about the pudding. My mother's cooking often reflected her boast that she 'could eat anything that moved'. Last week I'd found something moving on my mutton and tonight I wasn't sure if the raisins in the pudding were...

I had to pass his chair on the way out the door. My eyes slanted sideways beyond my volition, still wanting to feast on the guts hanging down. When my feet arrested me behind his chair, ignoring the clanging warning from my brain, I was in no man's land.

While my eyes feasted, my nose discovered the source of the smell that had sat down with me at dinner. I thought it was me, from wading in the frog pond but the damp came from them. There was another one behind the first. It had no legs. Its uniform, not ours, seemed to be dripping but when I looked down there was nothing on the floor.

"You wanna biff, dum dum?"

My primordial brain jumped my body away and my legs bunched ready to bolt before the blow.

"He's going out to see Rosy."

My sister Amelia's singsong voice arrived like a Mills' grenade – always killing her or the one she wanted to protect. In a good mood he called her Daisy Cutter and ignored her, in a bad one she never saw the blow. I held my breath to see who would take the shrapnel.

"Ged yer worthless arse out then."

Not me this time.

Beyond the door I hesitated, torn between fleeing with my life and needing to hear if she'd get it. My shoulders were up around my ears listening for her wail.

"You, shudup an go do the washinup."

My breath whooshed out -- no blow this time.

"But I peeled all the veges."

My head dropped and my shoulders folded over – I'd feel her whack and cries like stings across my skin. Amelia had been born without a survival streak. Although, she hadn't needed one before.

"I said..." His voice came out low.

"Fred, take your pudding onto the veranda."

My fists didn't unclench. Kindness from my mum used to unwind him until the day they'd gone to town together and come home

separate. Now she poked and baited him, her words tightened him like a spring.

"Where's Fred, mum?" Amelia had asked that day.

I hoped he'd died in a ditch.

All she said was,

"He tried to register me with his gun."

"Why did he want to register you?" Amelia sat in mum's lap.

"He thought I needed a man. That you needed a father."

My eyes had widened in horror. Amelia burst into tears.

He turned up late that night and slept on the veranda bed. At breakfast, the air crackled. I kept my head down.

He didn't speak to any of us for two weeks. Then as the weather got colder he was in my mother's bedroom again.

Rosy was sitting on her kennel. I climbed up and pressed my face into her warm neck. She took each piece of stew delicately with her front teeth and licked my fingers clean. I disappeared in her warmth until,

"Ged in here to bed, boy."

Lying in bed pretending to be asleep, I saw the first two following him down the hall to my mother's bedroom and then I saw the third. It had one eye, cheek and ear missing. It had a hat like the others with the half moon shining.

2

I hid at the edge of the trees. I couldn't see any of his followers in the bright light but I'd smelt the damp when they passed my hiding place.

I watched him slide his arm in, eyes closed, face lifted to the sun, looking like he might be praying -- his scowl relaxed. I counted to 80 before he pulled his arm out. His eyes opened slowly like they were ungluing. His head dropped to count them. I'd heard other final counts -- 35 including the ones that had died on his face and neck. Last time he'd left them in. At home, he'd made Amelia pull all the dead bums out of his arm and count them even though she was sobbing so hard her body was shaking. Mum had been out riding the lambing beat. Amelia was asleep when she got back.

I watched the bees frenzying around him. He stood and walked slow steps into the trees.

I dropped my head into the leaves. Last night's hopeful dream vision of him blackened dead under a swarm, gone. Although my hopes hadn't been high, he'd been coming here for his 'cure' every three months since he taken over our lives two years ago. At least I got a moment of seeing his face clear of hate.

3

My guts were in knots my feet lead lumps to drag.

"Hurry up, boy. You lazy bastard."

I couldn't win, if I walked near him he'd cuff me for no reason if I fell behind he enjoyed reminding me my mother never married my father. I sped up. Amelia was chatting away to her doll her voice unnaturally high. I could see his right fist clenching and unclenching.

We were to help him in the garden. At the last minute, mum had stayed in the house. I stepped up beside Amelia.

"Sis, shut up." I whispered.

Her big eyes turned my way, I stared into her deep sad, better than her screaming.

He walked arms swinging, legs in rhythm. I'd heard him tell my mum,

"I could march asleep. They were always moving us to some other place to die."

He had one follower on each shoulder and the third close behind him. I named them: Gutless, Brainless and Legless.

4

"Girl, go to the third row and get the fifth one." Amelia wouldn't look at him but trotted off.

I was certain he'd been awake all night. In bed, warmth had spread through me when I heard mum send him out to the veranda. He'd been muttering and through my window I now heard him clearly, saying over and over,

"Heads, crunchy like sea shells. Heads, crunchy like..."

I decided his followers were there to make him remember all the soldiers he killed. They wanted him to be sorry.

I'd heard him get up before dawn, saddle his horse and trot up the bush track. He turned up at breakfast looking haggard. I'd even resorted to prayer in the hope he'd get thrown from his horse and his brains would spill out in the grass.

"Here it is."

Amelia's plump white arms wrapped like huge slugs around the cabbage. I cringed at her eager face and then felt my guts knot tighter as his black descended.

"Idiot, girl! You got the wrong one!"

Everything seemed to happen too fast. He grabbed her arm; she dropped the cabbage and started to scream. He dragged her to his horse flicked the rope off the pommel, dragged her to the gate and wound the rope around her neck. Her screams made my heart hurt while my feet stuck to the ground. He stepped behind the gate with the rope tight and pulled her up until her toes were off the ground and her heels banging on the gate. My brain couldn't register what was happening and I felt relief when the screaming stopped.

"Damn you to all hell, Fred! STOP!" My mother's yelling made him flinch and my knees drop. I saw Amelia's feet hit the ground and her body crumple. I felt the tears drip down my face - hers was purple. My mother flung out the swearwords she saved for the dogs. Amelia's fine hair had escaped from its bun and formed a slivery halo around her head. My mother's wiry arms drew out of her homespun wool jersey; she picked my sister up in one arm and loosened off the rope. Two steps she shoved her into me and moved around the gate towards Fred. Then Amelia found her voice and the screams made me want to vomit up my own cowardly fear.

My mother came back and grabbed Amelia into her shoulder. I staggered to Dusty tied at the fence, dragged myself on bareback and kicked into a gallop out the gate. I kicked him up the hill-track until it was so steep he couldn't run. This had been my spot to be on top of the world but my world was killed by my frozen terror.

5

Curled into a tight ball I listened to my mother's voice through the wall. He was back in her bedroom after a week. She'd kept Amelia close, putting up with her bursting into tears if he came near.

"There's enough money coming in from the two-tooths and the lamb sales to do the fences and pay for this."

"You wastin money on that feather brained girl."

"She'll do alright with the nuns. She's going to be good at the piano. Why are you arguing for her to stay after what you did?"

"It was only to give her a scare."

"You sure got what you wanted. Anyway, she's going."

The finality in her voice and the grunt from him felt like a lid closing down on me.

She was gone. Mum cranked the old truck, drove Amelia into town and put her on a bus to the city. The nuns would meet her and she'd stay at boarding school until the holidays.

Tears had leaked out of both of us when I'd crawled into her bed the night before.

"You're getting away." I whispered.

"I wish you could come too." Amelia's face leaked faster.

"I need to look after mum."

"Don't let them get you." Amelia's soft hand gripped my arm.

"You can see them?" My head shook slowly from side to side.

"Yes, but I don't look at them. They're cold."

"They won't get me. They're after him. I'm going to help them."

I felt Amelia nodding in the dark.

He was in a good mood the day she left, even though mum was going into town by herself.

"Boy, ged on yer horse we're gunna check the rushes paddock." He saddled Pronto, a Palomino and the nicest horse on the farm. He'd taught him to walk on as soon as his foot was in the stirrup. He'd told my mum,

"You don't wanna be a standing target."

His mood lasted four days. On the fifth morning, I woke to him yelling at his dogs and a thwacking sound. He had the willow sapling out for Pronto. I wanted to burrow deep into the earth, find a magic sword and chop his head off with it.

Then I remembered, today Mum was going into town to a Farmers Co-operative Meat Co meeting. She'd talked at dinner about the room full of men; all the wives were at the shops. Some of the men stood when she came in but wouldn't sit anywhere near her, except for one neighbour. She'd saved his bull from a bog when it came onto our farm.

He made us leave with no breakfast; I figured he didn't want to watch her go off first. I was behind Pronto. I saw his followers when we passed through a patch of dark bush. One came up alongside his saddle. I saw him flinch and flick his willow sapling at it. Pronto danced away and got a boot in the ribs. My plan was born.

6

He kept his shaving brush, strop and razor in that order by an enamel bucket on the veranda. I swapped the brush and the razor.

I was throwing old mutton to the dogs when I heard,
"Where's that boy? Touching things that ain't his. I'm gunna..."

"You've got him too terrified to go anywhere near your things. You just didn't put it back right." My mum sounded ready for a fight.

"It wasn't me it was..." His voice dropped away.

"Oh, yes crazy? Going to blame who?"

I almost smiled.

I moved his bridle one hook to the left. I heard his curse from the chicken coop where I was collecting eggs.

That night he started pacing and muttering. Mum went out to get him to stop but he ranted at her about getting rid of everything that bothered him and she might be first. That made me put my head under the covers; I hoped mum could look after herself. I enjoyed hearing his slaps at the mosquitoes.

I put salt in his porridge. He spat his first mouthful all over the table. My mum called him, 'worse than a pig in a trough'. I forced down a huge bowl. I hadn't left any in the pot.

Next, I was collecting plums from the orchard.

"Bloody hell!"

"What is it now?" My mum yelled too.

"Your bloody tea scalded me."

"Perhaps you shouldn't fall off a chair like a baby."

I flinched when I heard a crunch and rushed to the house. He'd punched the wall.

I'd loosened the leg off on his veranda chair.

At dinner, I felt heady with the success of my campaign. I looked at my mum and said,

"Can you smell something?"

"Only the damp but we know where that comes from..." I almost missed her eyes flick to him.

She knew. I felt my thrill might fly up from my guts out my mouth and flap around the room, and get me killed.

7

My room was cold at 3am. I'd left my window open to avoid the squeak. I lowered myself down into the hydrangeas careful not to snap any branches my mother loved her garden.

Creeping around to the small door leading under the house I tried not to think of the... spiders.

I'd oiled the door when he'd gone to shoot rabbits. I wanted to go in six feet to the middle of the veranda.

Cobwebs pulled at my hair and face but I forgot them when I heard his snores. I reached for the little bag tucked in my pants. Arm outstretched the puff made my eyes stream. I shuffled away fast.

I was back in my room pushing dirty pyjamas under the bed when,

"You bastards ave brought that smell now! I'll kill with my bare hands!"

I listened to him swear and stomp around until mum got up.

"What's wrong now?" She sounded exhausted.

"Can't you smell em?"

My breath stopped. Would she figure it out?

"Smell who? I can smell... is that lime? From the outhouse? The door must be open..."

"You can't smell that from ere! It's them they're covered in it, sticking to em like mud." His rising voice pushed my head under the pillow.

"Fred! It's in your head!"

"How can I sleep with em hanging over me? I'm going to get rid of em. I know how." His voice dropped. "Fellas who came back after they'd been on leave talked about em. One lost his foot cause he blew em up. He didn't care, got to go home again."

"Fred, you're talking crazy. Don't let the neighbours hear you, they'll send someone for you." My mother's words flew like knives.

"Not before I get em."

8

"Mum sent me. We need a hand drenching the ewes."

I felt the sweat drip down my ribs as I lied to our neighbour.

He'd come out onto his verandah at the dogs barking, his wife smiled at me and brought out a plate of home baking that made my mouth water.

"Come on boy eat up. You look like a stick ready to snap in the wind."

I'd already eaten a piece of Louise cake with icing so pink I imagined candyfloss, and a huge slice of chocolate cake filled with homemade blackberry jam.

The Barretts were our closest neighbours -- four miles. They owned the bull mum saved. They were old, had lost two boys in the war. The one left was a lawyer in Wellington. They hoped one of their nephews might take over the farm. I could see by the state of the falling down fences it needed to happen soon. The sweat of my lies dried on my ribs when I swore to myself that once he was gone, I'd quit school to work on our farm, and theirs.

"Son, we're a bit pressed ourselves but I guess Fred will come up and help us out."

"Yeah." Came out of my lying mouth.

I stood on the second to top rail looking down on the ewes. They looked good, fattened up through a wet summer. Fred stood on the opposite side with his piece of blue raddle-chalk. He wanted the weediest one -- our meat for the month.

"Ged down to the willow and wait, boy."

He knew I hated the smell of the kill spot. The dogs loved it. They'd all come home later with blood dried coats. Rosy's white neck ruff dyed pink.

I watched him drag the unlucky one down the hill. It didn't struggle in the magic shearer-hold. When he stepped under the shade of the willow, I saw his followers.

Gutless seemed the most curious, leaning over Fred's shoulder. I figured he'd been a farm boy.

"Ged over here, learn how to do this."

My guts tightened and my heart jumped, beating like a drum. Probably the same speed as the sheep's...

"Boy!"

He couldn't drag me because he'd have to let the sheep go. The neighbours would be here soon. Mum was at the house getting lunch together. She'd been a bit surprised when I said they were coming.

"Dum, dum. Ged ere!"

My feet unfroze.

"I'll hold it, you do the cut. Fast, deep, put some weight behind it."

I looked at the sheep's wild eye and felt bile rise. He was offering the knife towards me.

I thought my teeth would crack but at least my hand wasn't shaking.

My hand seemed to move without my brain until I felt warmth gushing over my hand. I jerked it back.

"You little bastard!"

I jumped away my eyes whipped to his face.

"You cut me."

My feet started shuffling me backwards.

"Fred. Let me look at that."

I almost sagged to the ground it was Mrs Barrett

"I saw that happen Fred, it was an accident." She was talking quietly.

There was so much blood. Maybe she thought he was dying... My heart flipped. If I'd cut an artery...

"Boy, ged your stupid-face off and ged those sheets over the carcass before the flies ged it."

They weren't the words of a dying man.

9

"See Fred, it's only a nick."

The sheep was shrouded in a pink floral sheet slowly turning red. The neighbour's dogs were circling.

"You alright, Sam?" Mr Barrett touched my arm.

I nodded.

"Let's get this sheep hung, then."

He did a few cuts around the tendons in the back legs explaining it to me as he worked. My longing pulled up from my guts. If only my father hadn't drowned..

"Righto, you help me pull."

We hoisted it into the tree. He could have done it with one pull, alone. Mr Barrett's face strained red.

"That'll keep the dogs dancing all day." The words rushed out with his breath.

"We'll have a cup of tea before we start, get antiseptic on that cut." Mrs Barrett smiled at me as she spoke.

I walked with my head down, my brain numb not wanting to think of later. I smelt the damp as he leaned in.

"You are going to ged it now, boy." His voice grated my ear and pieced my knotted guts.

I'd hoped the Barretts could help me but the old man wouldn't bat a fly.

Mum stood at the house gate.

"Hello, Mrs Chapman, Sam did a good job getting that sheep covered and into the tree." Mr Barrett sounded... cheerful.

Too late. I thought at him.

"We're doing our sheep tomorrow. I could use Sam's help early. How about he comes back with us today and we'll send him home tomorrow?"

My eyelids drooped in hope.

"That sounds like a fine idea."

I wanted to hug my mother, first time in a long time. My shoulders dropped from around my ears, a reprieve but this was a battle till the end.

10

At the verandah steps I decided to risk it all. "What's that smell?"

My mother narrowed her eyes at my, 'manners in front of others'.

"What smell is that, dear?" I wanted to hug Mrs Barrett.

"It's kind of like a damp smell, maybe guts and I think lime too..."

"Sam! Go and wash up." Mum's look was ice cold.

I didn't miss the glance between the Barretts.

It took everyone some time to get cleaned up and sat at the table. Gutless, Brainless and Legless were shuffling around behind his chair – more restless than usual.

Mum put hot damper out and I slathered mine with honey. Mum had whipped cream from my milking. I put it on everything and in my tea. I liked the adults talk flowing over me. He didn't talk, as usual, until,

"Fred, what regiment were you in?" Mr Barrett could face a firing squad with a smile.

"I was a gunner."

"He killed Turks, thousands of them at Gallipoli." He flinched. I almost looked over my shoulder sure the words hadn't come from me.

"Boy..."

My leg twitched under the table.

"Oh, Fred, we know all our boys were very brave. Gallipoli was a massacre; the Turks deserved everything they got."

The three swirled around Fred's chair.

"Arrogance should be punished."

I didn't look at him, my legs jiggling under the table. Tomorrow would come, right now, I didn't care.

"I have something." Spilled out of my mouth.

"Look." I placed in front of our guests.

On the last day of school, I'd 'borrowed' a newspaper article with a photo of Turkish soldiers in the trenches.

I slanted my eyes at Fred. His eyebrows almost touched his nose.

I spoke my death warrant.

"How many of our ghosts must be living over there, in Turkey -- needing to be buried?"

Everything seemed to still. I could see the dust particles in the light coming in from the high window. The followers became motionless. I took a chance and glanced around at the faces. The Barretts looked a bit confused. My mother seemed to be drilling my face. Fred's eyes were narrowed to black. He looked like he might slit my throat with

the butter knife in his grip. I held his gaze and then looked over his shoulder. I saw the muscle in his jaw jump.

"Let's go and get these sheep drenched."

Mr Barrett's chair scraped, I hated that I jumped.

Later, sitting in the back of the Barrett's car bumping down the road, felt like heaven. They'd told mum I could swim to clean up in the river below their house. They'd drop me back after dinner tomorrow. I felt floaty freedom ease my limbs.

It was all I could have hoped. Mrs Barrett fussed over me. Mr Barrett talked to me about farm stuff like I was an adult. I slept in their spare room - thankfully the room of the son in Wellington.

I rushed around doing everything for them with the sheep. They were so grateful.

Fear pushed back in on me at dinner. I didn't taste the lamb roast, could only think that my accidental cut changed the battle to war.

11

"Your little holiday's over, boy. We're bringing the steers in, from the back paddock."

The Barretts had dropped me back late. I felt ragged from no sleep. He'd paced the veranda with a rhythm, paused to turn each time beside my bedroom window.

Mum was gone already, up in the yards finishing the drenching.

But I thought he still looked worse than me. And this morning it'd be him or me, a solution either way, except it wouldn't go either way. My plan had been to drive him mad in front of the neighbours, now I had nothing.

"I'll go saddle up then." At least mum and Amelia would be safe with me dead, he'd hang. The followers could watch.

We rode for an hour to reach the back paddock at the border of three farms: ours was the smallest 1200 acres the other two were 3000 and 4500 acres. This was rabbit and goat country. The dogs would work hard to get the steers out of the bush.

"Over there boy, in the shade. We'll boil the billy." He almost sounded cheerful.

My shoulders felt like they might crack, he ridden behind me the whole way. I was glad to get off my horse wanting it done -- him kill me now.

I managed to get up the fire and the tea on while he tied the horses and dogs in the shade. He dragged a log over to sit on, I sat on my haunches chewing stale damper.

"You know how I killed that one with the guts hanging out?"

The bird song disappeared. A part of me wanted to hear their stories. My eyes shifted. I couldn't see them, but the damp smell wrapped around us.

"He tried to sneak past me when I was on guard duty. I could have shot him in the head but the day before I'd listened to my mate scream in the trench beside me all night from his guts on the ground. I thought I'd do that one for him."

I wanted to see Gutless. Would he react to the story of his death?

"That one with the face gone, I found him when we walked the fields shooting survivors -- theirs and ours. He sat up right in front of me. I nearly shit my pants. He must ave been unconscious when his Abduls left him behind. I shot him before I even looked. Saw his brain hit the rock behind."

I waited wondering why, before I died, I was desperate for these stories.

"But that one with no legs, he was left behind on purpose, probably had some disease they couldn't fix. We were moving the guns forward. The riflemen were in front of us. He popped out of a ditch and shot my mate I was pulling with. I grabbed my knife looked him in his eyes, stabbed him, and cut off his legs."

I felt riddled now with his word bullets. Infected by his... I stopped.

"You don't know them."

I was on my back before I felt the punch.

"You miserable little mummy's boy. I've decided. I'm gunna to leave you here, bring the steers down and watch you trampled. You think I saw any of those Abdul bastards close up? Gunners never did. We couldn't hear or see anything when those guns were going off. All I saw was afterwards, the fields of dead. These bits and pieces bastards following me around don't have anyone else to drive insane because I'm the only one left. All the gunners are dead, Bob shot himself, Jack jumped in front of a train and Larry walked off a cliff." His words sounded muffled. My head rang my left ear throbbing. I rolled to my right side, not wanting to let him out of my sight. He moved to the bags near the dogs. I wondered why my last scenes should be him shovelling mum's cake down. When an end is close, you can't shut your eyes on it.

My mum's words from earlier drifted in as he shoved in another piece.

"This is for you Fred, I made it just for you."

The hurt had turned my ears red. I'd walked away from the kitchen.

The old pale orange tea towel she'd wrapped it in was lying on the grass. He wasn't looking at me. He'd never had to look anyone in the eye and I was only one more on his field of thousands.

The throbbing beat me. My eyes closed.

I grunted at the weight hitting my chest. The first steer must be on me. I squeezed my eyes shut not wanting to see their hooves before they broke open my face and pushed my brain into the ground. Except, I couldn't understand, the rasp and wetness... My own blood?

I forced my eyes open. Rosy's face pushed into mine.

I heard in my right ear,

"Sammy?"

Rolling Rosy off and sitting up, I saw mum striding towards me.

"Can you stand, son?"

I raised my hand confused. I didn't think I'd ever nod again. Was he in the bush rounding up the steers?

"Sammy, we need to make this look like an accident." She turned and behind her was him, on the grass, curled up tight, his arms wrapped around his guts, unmoving.

"Rosy, get in behind." My mum's growl made me cringe and Rosy slunk back.

"We'll have to clean that up first, before the dogs get it."

That's when I saw the raisins and brown muck all around him on the grass. I slumped to my knees.

"Son?"

When I looked up my mother was backlit by the sun, her hair flying out from her bun in a halo around her head.

Word count 4,962