

## THE FAMILY TREE

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*Some things are not possible to understand.*

**S**ome things are not possible to understand. That has been Eugene Garretson's motto for as long as he can remember. How else could he explain sixty-three years of unanswered questions? Why his parents died before his twelfth birthday, how he had clocked over three decades at a job that brought him so little joy. How he could be married for nearly forty years to a woman who seemed like a stranger.

Walking home briskly from the train station after work, Eugene tugged at the lapel of his coat, his only defence against the autumn chill. There was still light in the darkness but the parade of zombies and vampires was already underway. Surveying the Trick-or-Treaters who spilled onto the footpath, he was disappointed, though hardly surprised, by all the store-bought costumes. In his day, the fun was making a ghoulish paste from his mother's talcum powder and a splash of water, the residue lingering long after scrubbing, as though his face had been dipped in cream.

Eugene glimpsed into the cemetery he would visit later that night, where his parents were laid to rest. New grave-

stones appeared along the perimeter, far from the mighty oak tree that gave the town its name. Planted by his great-great grandfather when he founded the town, the tree stood in the centre of the cemetery, roots embedded, deadwood clinging to its bifurcated trunk. Graves extended in all directions from the historic oak, concrete tendrils marking a trail of lives lost.

Eugene spotted a freshly dug plot, and wondered what would happen when the last available one was taken. Where would the departed spend eternity? Perhaps the ground was swallowing up graves, making room for the latest arrivals, he mused.

The final two blocks were a hard push but Eugene welcomed the daily challenge. Less so the coven of witches spilling from his front porch onto the manicured lawn.

‘Trick or Treat!’ they cried out when Delia opened the door.

‘Just one each,’ he grumbled to his wife and the witches, a shrill echo ringing in his ears.

Delia’s knobbed hand gently dropped a single chocolate into each bag. Eugene breezed past her – no greeting, not even a smile – heartened for a brief moment by the sweet aroma of roast pork.

‘Silly kids don’t even know the meaning of Halloween,’ he muttered under his breath, taking time to smooth the folds of his coat before hanging.

‘What’s that, dear?’ Delia called out, joining him in the living room.

His eyes searched hers for a spark felt so long ago; he was no longer certain of it. And if it came to pass, what then? He eschewed the company of others, his wife included, and lacked the fortitude to behave otherwise. ‘The world’s going to ruin, that’s all!’

Delia’s pursed lips crept upwards in a smile of resignation.

When the pork crackling had crisped to perfection, she served dinner, but not before placing the chocolates on the front porch with note that said *Please take one*. Eugene liked to eat without interruption, revelling in the silence. Goodness knows how they would have ever coped with children, let alone grandchildren.

An only child and orphan, Eugene was long accustomed to the company of adults, though solitude was his only friend. He did not remember much from sixty-odd years, believing the minutiae of life were to be endured, not processed and stored. He recalled only fragments of his childhood. His parents' enviable work ethic. How they rose in the middle of the night to make sure the bread was ready for the morning rush. How his mother would duck home with a still-warm loaf, serving him two slices with a lashing of homemade marmalade to fuel his long walk to school. Eugene didn't know which horror was greater: their bloodied bodies discovered at the bakery early one morning – an inexplicable crime that still mystified the town's residents – or the fact that neither had lived to see their fortieth birthday.

Eugene was proud of the life he had devoted to hard work and sacrifice. To doing what needed to be done. To honouring the institution of marriage. To being loyal to a single employer. A fitting legacy for a lineage soon to end, he thought.

It was after nine o'clock when Eugene drove to the cemetery, but the neighbourhood was still abuzz with sugared-up Trick-or-Treaters. They flitted about haphazardly, pillowcases of sweets bobbing over their shoulders, as if they had just robbed a candy store. Skeletons, mummies and werewolves competed for space on the footpath in uninspired costumes – children too disinterested, too uninventive, to dream up alter-

natives with old-fashioned perseverance and ingenuity. Kids these days want only one thing, he thought: instant gratification.

But Eugene knew the true meaning of the day. It was the evening before All Hallows Day, otherwise known as All Saints Day. In ancient Celtic tradition, it was the time when the souls of the dead could return to this life, when spirits roamed the earth to be reunited with their families. The “Thin Places”, the Celts called them, where the physical and supernatural merged at the fragile boundary between this world and the other one.

Eugene had always been attuned to the spirit world. When he was eleven, he had snapped a series of photos one summer’s evening: his grandmother asleep in her favourite rocker on the porch. She never woke up. The prints were so dark that she was unrecognisable; except for one photo where a golden light illuminated her blissful smile. Eugene was convinced that was the moment his grandmother’s soul had left her body. The experience sparked his curiosity about the afterlife. Over the years, he read endless accounts of near-death experiences. Even more fascinating were the tales from beyond the grave, first-hand reports from people claiming loved ones had visited them within hours of their passing. Perhaps the spirits of the newly deceased lingered in the physical world to ease their transition, Eugene thought. He wondered how long his own spirit would stay behind when his time came.

Eugene parked in front of the cemetery, feeling the cold the instant he turned off the ignition. He could smell the snow that hadn’t yet fallen and wished he had remembered to wear his scarf. As he approached his parents’ plot, he sensed he wasn’t alone. Rubbing his hands instinctively for warmth,

he paced their graves three times to let the departed souls know he was there. A raven landed on the oak's lower branch, emitting a harsh, grating caw. It was his parents, he was certain of it.

*Welcome, son.*

Time stood still, as it always did at the graveside. Eugene hoped the proximity to his parents would infuse his failing memories, yet it only heightened his solitude.

But not for long. The instant he exited the graveyard, Eugene saw him. A tall, pale boy of slight build, who looked to be about sixteen, standing idly near the iron gate as though he was waiting for someone.

'Are you lost?' Eugene asked, drawn to the boy's soulful eyes. 'Is your family in there?' He nodded to the graves, thinking perhaps he should specify he meant above, not under, ground.

The boy shook his head so vigorously that his entire body started to shake. Eugene soon realised he was shivering.

'Come, you'll catch your death of a cold,' he insisted. 'I'll drop you home. My car's right here.'

Eugene barely recognised his own voice. It was late and he longed for the comfort of his bed, yet had just invited a stranger into his life. The boy followed without question.

'Where do you live?' Eugene thought to ask only after pulling his car onto the road. Oakvale, he hoped, fumbling with the uncooperative heating controls. The boy reached in his pocket for his driver's licence, handing it over without a word. Eugene scanned the address, relieved that his good deed could be done quickly, then noted the boy's name: Diego Ralston. It sounded vaguely familiar.

Dry, hot air pumped through the vents, fogging the windows from inside. Eugene used his sleeve to clean the

glass, relying on the defroster to do the rest. The first snow of the year disappeared on contact with the windscreen. Still shivering, the boy shoved the licence back in his pocket.

‘Here, put this on,’ Eugene told him, reaching into the back seat for his cardigan. It was big, bulky and bright green – too eye-catching to wear in public but perfectly acceptable for the car and home.

The boy’s arm poked through the soft wool, jerking straight ahead as if possessed. Eugene thought his hand, a ring perhaps, was caught on the cardigan, but he soon realised the boy was pointing to the sprawling Colonial house on the corner. Eugene was pleased the destination was even closer than he had thought.

‘No, it’s awfully chilly outside,’ he insisted when the boy struggled to take off the cardigan. Even Eugene found the small buttons difficult. ‘I’ll pick it up tomorrow on my way to work.’

When Eugene woke the next morning, he couldn’t believe nearly six inches of snow had fallen overnight – a record for the first day of November. There had been only a light dusting of snow by the time he had arrived home the previous evening. But it was enough to make the roads slick, perilous even, he thought, recalling how his car had swerved to avoid a black van that came out of nowhere.

Warming up his car for five minutes – his morning ritual – Eugene’s mind wandered to the mounds of mundane paperwork that awaited him at the office. Just two years until retirement, when he would finally start enjoying life. Perhaps he would venture overseas to visit the medieval castles of France and England. He had read volumes, intent on achieving a level of mastery before embarking on any such journey. For years, Delia had longed to travel but it was never the right

time, Eugene recalled, though lately she had turned her attention to their rambling garden.

Within ten minutes, Eugene had pulled into the driveway of the house where he had dropped off the young boy the night before.

The door opened on the third knock. A man easily twenty years Eugene's junior stood on the other side.

'Good morning, my name is Eugene Garretson. I drove your son Diego home last night.'

The man's eyes darted left and right, searching into the distance. Eugene followed his gaze, uncertain what he was looking for. 'I came to pick up the cardigan I lent him,' he added.

When the door closed, Eugene knocked again, this time more urgently. He stared at the man who refused to acknowledge him, trying to summon his patience. Granted, he had turned up unannounced at half past seven in the morning but that was no reason for the man's steely silence.

'It's bright green, you can't miss it,' Eugene blurted, but the awkwardness still hung in the air. 'My wife knitted it for me years ago.'

A bone-chilling wind blew wet leaves into the house. In the sliver of hallway he spotted a trio of candles on a credenza, rosary beads strewn across the largest one in the centre. He squinted into the dim space, convinced his eyes must have been playing tricks on him. There, mounted in a substantial frame, was a photo of the same young boy – he was sure of it – alongside a Mass card and dried flowers.

At the same moment Eugene found himself behind the wheel, racing to the cemetery, though he knew it must have been longer. He didn't remember leaving Diego's house. He didn't remember anything. Except finding his neatly folded, bright green cardigan on a gravestone tilted at an odd angle,

giving the impression it was sinking into the soft soil. The inscription: *Diego Ralston*.

Eugene seized the garment, moving so fast that his feet barely touched the ground yet he seemed to cover no distance. A gnarled branch swayed in the harsh wind, dancing low to the ground as if possessed, hurling him to his parents' graves. He tracked the seemingly infinite branch to its source, shocked to discover it was a new trunk on the mighty oak tree, the three limbs now intertwined from the roots. The latest branch cradled his parents' tombstone, obscuring the letters 'G-a-r-r-e-t,' leaving a single word: *son*. He caressed the tree, the cells of his fingers seeping into its knotted surface, a golden light emanating. Snow was piled along the base except where the new growth had emerged. There, the ground remained bare and warm.

Eugene heard his name but no one was there. A single thought weighed him down as an inexplicable lightness seemed to give him wings. He needed to go home, to tell Delia. 'What an incredible story, dear,' he was certain she would say, but her car was gone. He snatched the newspaper from the driveway, but could not feel the folds of paper between his fingers. Or his feet on the pavement. By the time he stumbled inside, he was gripping the walls for support, his body and mind no longer communicating. The outside world disappeared in the shock of a brilliant light, leaving him floating. Detached.

Strange images invaded his consciousness: a heartfelt embrace from Delia, beaming smiles from children, a hand extended in friendship, pristine landscapes from far-flung lands. None of the memories registered. Only the newspaper headline that screamed: *Road Accident Claims Life of Local Man*. Then the "Thin Place" revealed itself, ushering Eugene's

spirit into Oakvale's namesake, where it joined the countless souls that had offered nourishment for so long.

When time had lost its relevance, Eugene abandoned a life of scrutiny and became one with those before him, leaving behind the unknowable. That the true horror was not the manner or timing of his departure from the world.

It was the life he never lived.