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## The Loquat Tree

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### Abstract

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## The Loquat Tree

There we are for the last time, Grandpa and I under the loquat tree. He is sitting on the highbacked oak chair and his expression, captured forever in black and white, is one of mild surprise.

I feel myself on his lap again and smile and the long shadows of the loquat tree angle out behind us. His warm flannels prickle my cheek and the strong beat of his heart pulses in my ear.

Grandpa's top teeth are in for a big smile for the camera. I feel with my finger but no; no bottom ones. I cup my hands around his big fuzzy ears, 'all the better to hear you with' and snap his fireman's braces.

'Be a good girl now. Sit still.'

He blows a raspberry on my neck. I laugh. Click! A big hug for Grandpa's girl and a pink and white boiled lolly. My uncles come home from the pits and pose, arms locked around each other's shoulders.

'How about taking our picture?' They laugh and their teeth shine white in their coal-dusted faces.

'Get along with you. You're as black as arabs. Come on, help Dad inside.'

My mother and my aunt fuss about and Grandpa puts his arm around my uncles' shoulders and they dolly-walk him up the path.

The wire handles of the kerosene-tin buckets chatter as the water heats for the men's baths. Droplets spit and dance on the black-leaded stove top and on the side, in a cream enamel basin, camphor oil vaporizes as it warms for Grandpa's legs.

I watch the big boys through the kitchen window. They leap at the overhanging branches of the loquat and slap the heavy orange clusters with their rulers. My aunt taps on the window at them, and Grandpa blows on his strong black tea. No sugar. My grandpa is sweet enough.

'Let the children be, Mary. What's a few squashed loquats on the foot-path.'

In the holidays, they play in the street and I sit on the fence post and talk to them. I give them windfalls, all washed and clean in a big

dipper. They bring their balls and home-made bats and play cricket, a butter-box for a wicket. And we watch them, Grandpa and I all the sunny afternoons.

Sometimes the ball comes over the hedge.

'It's a sixer Grandpa,' I tell him.

Grandpa cheers and claps and passes his bag of boiled lollies over the fence to them, while I fox the ball.

They come for a week maybe. Then a policeman comes. He knocks on the back door and stands on the low step looking out into the yard. He speaks very softly to my aunt.

'.....doesn't want to upset ..... a job to do ..... complaints.'

'Complaints!!' My aunt's voice is loud and angry. She calls to my mother. They stand close in the door-way.

'An old man ..... giving children sweets ..... fruit ..... only doing my job.'

I cannot tell who is speaking: my mother's and my aunt's voices are one.

'Trouble-making ..... bad minded ..... old cows ..... he's..... crippled ..... half blind!'

The policeman's ears are very red. He doesn't even say goodbye to me at the gate.

They whisper in the kitchen, my mother and my aunt.

'How will we tell him?'

They don't have to. Grandpa has big ears to hear you with.

Now we sit on the other side of the house where the violets border the onions and the spinach. If I stand on the top of the coal heap, I can see right down to Payne's paddock. I can see the pit ponies. I jump up and down and sing.

'I'm the king of the castle and you're the dirty rascal.'

'What's wrong Grandpa? You've got coal dust in your eyes? I'll kiss you and make you better.'

The boys come back and rob the tree. They take all the fruit from the loquat near the fence. The broken branches hang down, dying.

Sweat runs down the coal dust on my uncle's arms as the axes bite and the wood-chips and wedges fly. I dance about among their legs, hitting at them with balled fists.

'It's my Grandpa's and mine tree.' Screaming for them to stop.

'Bad girl. Do as you're told. Go inside.'

I rush up the hall to a barricade of white aprons and restraining arms.

'No. No. Not now. Grandpa is sick. His legs are hurting.'

I watch him round the half closed bed-room door. The light is on. He is reading with his magnifying glass. The white and blue enamel candle-stick holder is balanced on his chest and the flame of the candle wavers with his breath. I slip around the door and climb up on the little stool beside his bed and unscrew the brass bed-knob. I take out the little white paper bag. One sweetie for me and one for Grandpa. My book is under my arm and my hair curls, still damp on my neck.

I lean on the side of his bed and whisper in his big sea-shell ear.

'When I'm a big girl I'll read to you Grandpa. I will. Every night.'

He kisses me on the forehead. 'Who's the best girl in the world?'

'Once upon a time .....' He reads slowly.

'Don't forget your prayers.'

The lino is cold and I pull my nightdress under my knees.

'God bless Mummy and Daddy and keep him safe. God bless back-yards.' All you have to do is put a Dac-pot in them and pick up the wind-falls, like any other fruit-tree. They're back in favour now. Maybe it's the federation colours.'

What do you give to friends who have everything?

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