

Rock the Chimney

By Karen Bateman, 2023

The dog wasn't mine. If I had a dog, it would be a Tibetan mastiff. Not this wheezing terrier named after a love glove. I'd made the mistake of saying I was bored. The things I normally enjoyed, drawing, model cars, reading comics, left me cold and I was too scared to try anything new.

'Go and walk Trojan then,' she said. I rolled my eyes in response. 'But don't go near the river, it's too far'.

The dog was my Oma's. She'd lived with us, last summer, and I'd loved it. Each bedtime, my nightlight scrolling a galaxy across the ceiling, she'd tell me stories of her childhood. How the Germans would come at night and bomb her town. Bomb the double stacked houses along the river, bomb the factories, the little bread shop on the corner, bomb the bridges and the roads. She would wake to a silent, flattened landscape. The only things visible through the smog were the chimney stacks. In the daylight hours the kids would gather. Seek out the stacks sitting in the middle of fields, in the rubble torn factories and play rock the chimney. Pushing and shoving the towers back and forth, back and forth until something gave and whoosh! The tower would slowly topple. She'd tell me how the kids would scatter like cats to avoid the falling brick missiles.

Now Oma was gone, but the dog was still here.

Outside the air was already hot. The hanging baskets were parched and brown and the road was tar sticky. I dodged the bollards near the short cut, hopped scotched along the cracked pavers, only stopping when Trojan squatted down and pushed out a massive turd in the middle of the path.

'Fucks sake condom head', I muttered to him, sneaking a look to make sure no-one was around to hear me swear.

I pulled on the lead, making him trip and pivot to the side, then felt bad and slowed my pace. Softened my voice. Poor thing. It wasn't his fault he was worn out. 'C'mon you', I coo-ed, 'Come on old man'.

'You talking to your dog, homo?'. Nathan Peters stood at the end of the shortcut. I'd seen Nathan around before. He was two years above me in school. Rougher. Word was his dad was in jail.

'He's not my dog. He's a dipshit', I answered, nudged Trojan with my foot for good measure.

Nathan sniggered, sized me up. 'Coming to the river?'

I thought about home. The idea of going back to the same afternoon. The same afternoon as yesterday. The same afternoon as the day before. I nodded, 'Sure'.

We made our way through the tired suburbs to the river. The water level was low. You could see shopping trolleys on the mud banks, beer cans snagged on tree roots. I dragged a shambling Trojan to the picnic table near the river mouth. It would have been nice, once. Now it was graffitied and sticky. An overflowing bin sat under a lone, scrappy tree. Strips of rubbish lay among the yellowing grass.

Nathan emptied his pockets and laid out a packet of rolling papers, a lighter, and a half bottle of lighter fluid. We scrounged a handful of cigarette butts from the dirt under the bench and nudged out the baccy. Nathan rolled a dart, lit it up, and took a confident drag.

I skittered next to him, picked up stones and pinged them at the trolleys, threw them at the beer cans. Nathan offered me a drag and I pinched the end to my mouth, sucked back clumsily, before coughing out a smoke plume. I tongued bits of tobacco from my teeth and spat them on the ground.

I handed it back to Nathan. 'I'm done'.

He took two more long drags then rubbed the butt out on the table. Flicked the lighter on, off, on, off. Held the hot metal to his arm and smirked at me. 'Doesn't even hurt'. He held the flame against the corner of the table and the wood smoked black. He jumped up and kicked a stone at Trojan who lay, panting, in a small patch of shade at the side of the bench. 'Your dogs retarded'.

Trojan looked up through milky eyes as Nathan stood over him and toed his back legs. Lifting them up, letting them slap back down. He flicked his lighter on, off, on, off. Held it close to the rise and fall of Trojan's belly. 'Bet he doesn't even move'.

I stood, quickly, felt the tremble in my voice. 'Let's have a go'. Held out my hand for the lighter.

Nathan chucked it to me, and I looked around for something to burn. Licked the flame on the leaves of a low-lying branch. Pulled the lip of a plastic bag from the bin and set the lighter to it. Watched it curl and melt, batting away the noxious fumes. I made a nest of grass and twigs and lit it. The small flames caught and burned out and I stomped on the cinders.

Nathan grabbed the lighter fuel. Poured a line along the bench, dripping it up and across the table. Looked hard at me. 'Go on, then'.

I shifted the weight of the lighter from my left to right hand. The background hum of the highway and the spiteful sun. Glinting off the phone tower, crisping the tussocks by the river edge. Trojan in the shade. Hot and bothered. Probably thirsty. Relying on me.

I wanted to go back. Back to last summer. The ease and certainty of the days. My comics, my drawings, my model cars. Oma and her chimney stack stories. The sooty landscape. The noise and motor of postwar industry, and the children, undernourished with their kitchen scissor haircuts and threadbare jumpers. Running the streets, strength in numbers, searching for the towering shafts. The clamber, three or four deep, the heave and shove and that golden moment – that shift in pace, the cusp of danger where life is sharper and the knowledge that things could go wrong only drives you further.