

salvation

by

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It was a brisk morning. The faint smell of eucalyptus hung in the air, leaves damp with the morning frost. Overhead, hidden birds chirped merrily, greeting the sun's first rays that gently warmed them. Grevilleas and wattle flowers bent in harmony with the weight of dew, and everything shimmered majestically in the grey light. This was an all far too familiar scene for Patrick Morris.

He stood stooped over a worn shovel, one hand on the handle, one casually tucked into his musky jeans. As much as he tried, he never quite got used to the cold and even now he shivered as the crisp air found its way through his coat. "Shoulda stayed up north", he muttered to no-one in particular, rubbing his prickly chin with a knuckle. Mulling over hazy memories of a sunburnt past, he pulled out his dad's old tobacco tin and some paper, rolling a cigarette and lighting it with a match. *Funny how the smallest things outlast everything.*

The smoke plumed from his mouth, rising to the heavens and dissipating on the breeze. Patrick peered in dull amusement at the smoke twisting as it rose, morphing into fantastic shapes on high. Sun rays seemed to caress his cloud with love, light bouncing joyfully through the haze. He took one last draught of the cigarette and threw the butt on the earth below, stubbing it out with the heel of his boot. Morning smoke complete, he pulled the blade of the shovel from the soft topsoil and headed off to work framed in dawn light.

Years of experience had taught Patrick to take it slow. Going too fast meant he was left too much of the day to himself, and that could be dangerous. He was prone to

melancholic episodes, and on those days he would sit by the fire, drowning whatever sorrow he had in a bottle of the strongest liquor he could get his hands on. But today was a good day, and he paced himself, prying open the earth one shovel load at a time, digging the usual 7 x 2.5 x 6 ft hole.

The morning was getting on and Patrick began to warm. He removed the coat, dabbing his damp forehead with an old hanky and pausing for breath. Again he took up the trademark stance: hands atop the shovel, leaning slightly forward and gazing at the undug earth before him. Behind him, long shadows were growing short, but where he looked only the swaying trees and hopping kangaroos kept him company. For a fleeting moment he forgot about it all and savoured the odd flavour of wet bush that still hung in the air. But that condiment was short lived as a squawking cockatoo ordered him back to work.

Patrick brought out an old leather cap and pulled it over his matted graying hair, providing good protection from the strengthening sun. The cap was an old favourite, but he couldn't recall where he'd picked it up. Quite possibly it was a relic from his days meandering wild through the bush, but it could just as easily be something that caught his eye in a shop on one of his rare trips to town. The trivial distraction was welcome and took his mind off the endless digging, his sinewy arms mechanically going through the motions without requiring conscious thought. *God I've been doing this too long.*

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By mid-day the hole was done, and only Patrick's shoulders and pate could be seen protruding from the deep opening. He took a moment to appreciate the neat box he'd carved in the land before making a few foot holes in the wall and clambering out. Perched above the hole covered in brown dirt, he now took in the vista to be had. Stone crosses and headstones rose up from the leaf litter spread over the wild grass, some in neat rows, others placed sporadically in an illogical manner across the landscape. These were the oldest graves in the area, and probably the original settlers. But a good dose of weathering had removed their names from their archaic monuments, wiping the very memory of their existence away like night swallows day. It was cruel evidence of a vicious cycle painfully omnipresent for Patrick. Life really did seem a flickering flame waiting anxiously for that breath to blow it into oblivion.

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Patrick was sitting on his lopsided porch with tea in hand when the procession arrived. It moved like a big black caterpillar, wobbling slightly but managing to pull itself forward, however unwilling. Taking a sip of tea, Patrick peered over the brim of his teacup at the expensive cask, a rich mahogany lined with silver rails and bits of gold leaf forming ornate decorations at each end. *Ya still gonna rot mate.* The cynic inside. Death had become an intimate part of his life, and he had no respect for the man. And as the procession came to a halt around the hole he'd dug, he bet with himself. *Fancy coffin,*

big turnout, rich Catholic...full mass. He'd seen enough funerals to recognize the rich devoted Catholic folk from town. But this time he was wrong. Only a eulogy.

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It was probably an hour before dawn Patrick guessed when the birds started their morning routine. The cockatoos and kookaburras sang in sweet cacophony, voices filtering through the bush until first light broke through the darkness. Patrick stumbled out of his hard mattress and piled a few logs on the glowing coals and working with tinder until a small flame ignited and grew into a good fire. He warmed his hands and fetched a heavy cast-iron pan, frying an egg and a few strips of cured ham. Next he pulled on the dirty pants, coat, boots, venturing into the cold air outside. A short walk into the bush he came to a small freshwater stream, filling his kettle with the cool water. Having used a tree as a lavatory, he walked back to his hut and entered. Patrick was met by the warmth of the fire and set his kettle on the hook perched above the flames, allowing the tin to swing gently and boil.

A good cup of tea was an essential part of his day, and after taking small sips and rolling the liquid over his tongue, he was satisfied. Warmed inside, he ventured back to the cool air, gathering the shovel from a collection of tools placed in neat rows under a stand-to he built years ago at the back of the hut. His axe collection was his favourite, but the reason why he knew not. Patrick walked, shovel mounted shoulder. At the usual slow pace it would take him ten minutes to reach the graveyard, where he'd wait, perched on the

hillock facing east, watching that golden orb break through the darkness, pending an ecclesiastical messenger.

“Mornin’ Padre”, Patrick said flatly to the figure that emerged behind him. He’d heard the footsteps coming a mile off, the crunching leaves unmistakable in the stillness of the morning dawn. “Good morning Patrick.” Silence. “Lovely morning” Patrick didn’t know whether to take that as a question, or an attempt at small talk. The Padre and he had had their differences – on one morning not too dissimilar to this one, the Padre had again pressed the importance of the Lord Almighty on Patrick, ever trying to bring Patrick salvation. *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans chapter 3 verse 23”*. Patrick usually let the Padre’s jibbering wash over him, but a good dose of melancholy and drink fueled a fire in his belly. *Damn you Padre, go a preachin’ at some’n else!! I’m goin’ straight ta hell an’ ‘less you leave me be, I’ll take you with me you cloaked dog!*

The memory of the Padre standing dumbstruck brought a smile to Patrick’s tired face, but he quickly swallowed it and turned to face the Padre. “How many you want dug today?” Their conversations were short these days, evidence that the Padre had long since given up on Patrick. “They shall be two, God rest their souls. Alas, they are at peace alongside the Holy Father.” The Padre paused, waiting in brief curiosity to see whether Patrick would react to his religious quip, but Patrick stared at him with vague disinterest. “One in the Catholic precinct.” The Padre paused again. “An’ the other?” The Padre’s pausing was beginning to irritate Patrick. “Chinese. Start a new patch.” He quickly

anointed Patrick with the sign of God, more for entertainment's sake than anything, and turned, cassock swishing behind him, walking back to town.

Patrick stood there a little longer, musing over the Chinese person the Padre told him about. It was the first he'd heard of to be in the area. *Perhaps they struck gold some place near.* He picked up the shovel and walked off to the Catholic precinct still pondering the news. Patrick began the ritual. Pace out the measurements. Put sticks at the corners. Dig. Dig. Dig. Dig. Six foot down. He made good time, finishing well before midday. A thick sweat had formed on his forehead, and he now pulled the cotton shirt off his torso, fighting the wet that tacked it down.

It was a hot day for this early in the month, but the heat was a welcome change. Patrick hammered the shovel blade into the grave's wall, forging a way out before gathering his things. He stood now, surveying the land, wandering here and there looking for a good spot to start a new precinct. Eventually he settled on a natural clearing he'd never found before, just beyond the bush on the outskirts of the southern end. Patrick measured and began digging, only to stop shortly afterwards at the sound of voices. He put the shovel down and emerged half naked from the brush calling. "Over 'ere. You're early." But as he pushed through the brush back onto the cemetery, he saw no-one. *Too long in the bush.* Patrick turned to head back to work, and a flash of red caught his eye. He stopped mid turn, casting a querying gaze down the cemetery.

As he looked on, the flash of red darted into view again and he was off. He ran fast, dodging the edifices forcibly erected in the earth. Sucking great gulps of air into lungs. Hair flying loosely behind. Patrick was alive. Running past black, the red darted in and out of the brush, as if toying with him, moving at startling pace and with great fluidity. But Patrick was up to the task. The exhilaration urged him on, chest pumping up and down piston-like, legs hammering anvil ground.

Suddenly the red changed course and instead emerged from the brush in full view, standing motionless amongst the headstones. Patrick stopped in his tracks, puffing, amazed. A little girl in a flowing red dress stared back at him, breathing life into a colourless world. Her innocent face and the blazing light in her eyes cracked the wall around Patrick's heart. For a fleeting moment he remembered the warmth of a child pressed against his bosom, the pride and love overwhelming. Yet the harsh cold stone that imprisoned him in his maze slapped his face and ripped the joy from his heart with its talons, and she was gone.

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That night Patrick didn't sleep. He tossed and turned and lay shaking in an uncontrollable sweat, hugging his knees. It was a pathetic sight. The fire in the hearth was all but gone, the black embers smearing dirt. Shards of a broken rum bottle lay strewn about the fireplace, thrown at the cold rocks in rage. The iciness of the night strode in through the splinters, and the moon sent a ghostly light darting through the

window to taunt him. Trees whistled outside as wind battered bush and shack, their trunks bending in submission sending loud cracks thundering like enraged horsemen through the night.

* * *

The next morning Patrick did not rouse, opting instead to lay curled up and vulnerable on the floor, barefoot and filthy, downing the last of his alcohol. The storm had left a path of destruction in its wake outside with colossal trees lying dead on the bush floor. It made the trek to Patrick's cabin all the more difficult for the portly Padre who struggled as it was to find breath. Eventually the Padre was standing at the door, and the smell of urine and rum wafted to him. The Padre screwed his face up in disgust, peering upwards in short prayer. He pushed open the door to find Patrick asleep in a heap.

At first he didn't know whether to rouse Patrick. After much deliberation he decided it best to wake him, fetching some water and dousing Patrick with it. The frosty liquid had its desired effect and Patrick bolted upright, cursing as he went. His eyes were wild with the images of night terrors and the last effects of the rum, fire imprinted on his brain. The Padre offered Patrick rare words of comfort, calming him thrashing arms with that educated tone usually reserved for his congregation. The Padre pulled a blanket over Patrick and quickly placed the cabin in some sort of order, before making a quick breakfast of tea and damper.

“I don’t wanna talk about it.” Patrick muttered after he’d had something to eat, unwilling to acknowledge his inner demons. He knew the Padre would offer some words of advice, but he surprised Patrick by sitting calmly, fondling a crucifix. And so they sat basking in silence all morning. Patrick secretly urged the Padre to stay as he did not wish to be alone, but at mid-day the Padre rose. He seemed to mull over a thought, shifting slightly on his feet. At last he made up his mind and left as unassumingly as he’d arrived.

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Patrick decided some work would be therapeutic and might help him put his mind at ease, so he dug all day and had five graves done before he set off back to the cabin. The work had done its job and he was back to his state of anaesthetized wandering. Patrick never felt alone in this place, and he looked around briefly, assuring himself of his isolation. A shape shifted in the bush, but disappeared. He remembered how the self-imposed exile had helped him, just as the work had done now, to build a wall around the chasm that filled him so. Reassured, Patrick slept lightly that night.

In the morning he felt well enough to rise and eat a small breakfast of yesterday’s damper dregs, and he rolled a cigarette and put it to his cracked lips. He watched the paper wilt and disappear as the flame moved toward him on each breath, and he watched the smoke rings bob up through the air as he blew them. The pit in his stomach began to fill, giving him strength enough to spend the day cutting firewood from the broken trees around his cabin. When that was done, he headed out to the endless rows of cemetery stone.

It appeared fate that he'd dug those five graves, as three of them were occupied when he arrived. The loose brown soil looked out of place amongst the green leaves littered about the place. *That's what the Padre came for.* Patrick meandered through the cemetery as he'd done a million times before, reading the worn names. Growths had begun to take over, further removing the memory of those swallowed in earth. Patrick extended his hand and pried some of it loose, feeling the grain of the stone and the cold weather it captured within. And as he stood trapped in stone, he wished to be free.

* * *

The months went casually by, hours and days melting together, coming and going as quietly and as surely as the tide. The vacuum he'd come to expect and the isolation he desired lingered on, and the stubble on his chin grew into a long graying beard. Even in the bright summer sun he couldn't feel satisfied, and where the warmth should have been enjoyed, he only felt the rays burn his flesh. But still he dug. 7 x 2.5 x 6 ft.

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This morning he filled his drinking pouch and set off to the back of the cabin, shouldering the shovel and heading off toward the cemetery. A few weeks ago the shaft snapped in a sharp point, cutting Patrick's hand savagely. He remembered the blood as it gushed forth, red as desert sand, dripping, pooling, then drunk by the parched brown

earth. He'd fashioned the new handle from a sturdy gum-tree limb, and it felt smooth in his hand today. He arrived at the hillock, watching the grey light climb laboriously over the horizon. The Padre's footsteps could be heard in the distance a little while later, the sound of his uneven, waddling strides unmistakable. Suddenly he was upon Patrick, and with a nod, mouthed the task. "Three more. Chinese."

The Padre's words hung in Patrick's mind a long time after the Padre had vanished.

Chinese. He'd worked closely with them once on a rail line up north that ran to the desert goldmines. *Good workers.* He set out to the plot he'd sectioned off previously and began the endless digging. The morning had been hot, but now, with the digging, it was unbearable. Even the black figures that moved in the background were still. The earth was hard in the clearing and the work was tedious. He had to push harder on the blade to pierce the next load of dirt, and before long his water pouch was empty. Patrick threw down the shovel and headed to the creek exhausted.

Patrick's body ached with every step he took. His back was stabbing with pain, his legs and arms weary. The torment was alleviated slightly by the shade of the bush as he walked, but the real snake oil lay before him. The stream was clear and small fish populated the banks. Eucalypts stood paternally nearby, huge limbs stretching over the flowing water, offering protection. Patrick took no time collapsing into the creek, the cold taking him by surprise. The water was icy and it took his breath away.

He dipped his head under, scrubbing vigorously at his face. Underwater he tasted a sick concoction of sweat and dirt. The flavour was thick even with the current, and so he came to the surface, floating on his back instead of washing. Patrick was in a pensive state today, and he stared blankly into the sparse canopy, losing himself in the past. The water, lapping gently at his sides, took him downstream some distance. He barely noticed the light filtering through the canopy, or the kangaroo chewing quietly by the bank. Instead Patrick saw her face, soft and caring, eyes alive with colour and warmth. Then the smoke – huge thick black columns of it – rolled in on itself, obscuring her, and the flicker of fire licking the edges of his mind.

He snapped out of his trance. Something hit the water very close to his head. He sat upright, scanning the bush irritably to see where it came from. Then, as he fixed his gaze on a bird above him, another missile slammed the water. It was a pebble about the size of Patrick's thumb. His head whipped around to see a bush shake as the perpetrator retreated, and Patrick was in hot pursuit, fuming. He hunted the shaking bush, getting closer to his prey with each step. Underfoot the leaves cracked, and all around the air hissing in Patrick's ears. The water flew off him as he ran. Eyes wild. Mad.

Branches were smashed from his path, birds taking to the air petrified. Patrick was a runaway train, hell-bent and detached. Now he bolted, as if from the past, chasing the shimmering black shapes ahead. Dodging a callistemon, he saw red. Rage dissolved as he remembered the girl he'd seen months before. *Is it you?* He ran with renewed

determination, quickening his gait. He could almost hear her child breaths. More red.
Her.

Patrick was a wild bull charging the matador, the fantastic colour inciting in him such emotion he hadn't felt for years. She darted in front of him, brilliant as his first sighting, red dress swishing and brown hair flowing. The child looked back at him smiling, and she changed course. Now he toyed with her as she looked back to see if he was following, hiding and jumping out when she least expected it. Her giggles made him yearn, and he grew not tired of the childish game. They ran together through the bush as wild creatures, courting. But as Patrick jumped from behind a tree, he saw her disappear in black through a wall of thick scrub.

He stopped for breath, considering whether he should follow. An unseen force decided for him, and he got on his hands and knees and crawled through the dense bush. The scrub clawed at his face, so he closed his eyes, using one hand to see. Feeling the ground fall away and become soft, Patrick pushed through the last of the bush and opened his eyes. Before him was a fantastical sight.

Row upon row of exotic overgrown fruit trees stretched out through a clearing, the wild weeping grass suffocating the woody trunks. At the edges, the bush threatened to take back the land, repelled only by the strange vines that strangled everything in a twisted knot. Patrick moved slowly down the mystical alleys. Apricots were thick with melanoma. The apples were bitter-sweet, lusterless and grotesque. Everywhere the

trunks were swollen, boils protruding from their thick hide. Even the air was heavy with the stench of rot and steam, and no animals ventured near.

As he walked mesmerized, Patrick searched for the girl. She was nowhere to be seen, as if she'd dissolved in the marshy air. There was something sinister about this place, and he wondered why he was brought here. And as the stars began to arrive, invisible, above the orchard, Patrick sat down on a soft mat of grass and vine. His eyes closed unknowingly and soon he was sleeping.

The next morning he awoke to the calling of a kite, the raptor circling no doubt on high. A light haze sat between earth and canopy, unflinching. Patrick got to his feet and pulled a piece of fruit off one of the trees, biting into the hairy flesh. Juices seeped into his beard, the taste acidic. He remembered the fantastic dreams he'd had in the night, and recalled mythical stories of pioneers farming experimental crops. *They were true*. He wondered why no one had discovered this place – “it can't be too far from town”. After yet more wandering he sat down in the midday heat and fell back into dreary sleep.

He dreamt of her feet hovering over the ground. Her flowing locks pure. The red dress possessing him. Obsessed. When he woke, she was standing, red as ever, looking questioningly at him. *Still sleepin'?* Patrick felt her eyes were judging, staring through his façade and stripping away his barricades. They locked eyes and looked into the pools, in silence, before he spoke.

“Hello. I’m Patrick. Who are you?”

No answer. He waited a little before trying again, softening his tone even more.

“This is a lovely place you’ve found. Do you come here often?”

He watched to see her reaction. The girl angled her head to one side, seeing if he looked different from there. Then a smile formed on her face.

“Hello Mr. Patrick. I’m Clare.”

“Pleased to meet you Ms. Clare.” He smiled back at her, teeth beaming. His face crinkled as it remembered how to smile, the cracks deep and obvious. Patrick opened his mouth to say more but she disappeared again into the black shapes of the orchard.

“Wait!” he called desperately. But she was gone.

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The night was clear and nothing dared to move. The stars were magnificent and the silky moon shimmered with brilliance. She painfully tore herself away from the view and went back to the child. She glowed as she saw her small chest rise and fall rhythmically, rosy cheeks and thick brown hair. Stealthily, she lifted the covers and slid in beside her,

wrapping herself around the child, offering warmth and love. As she lay, child in arms, she remembered her husband. They used to do this so often. "Come back soon", she whispered.

* * *

All night Patrick dreamt. For the first time, his terrors were at bay, and he recalled his wife's face. He called her name in the silence, waiting for her to reply. But she wouldn't speak to him. She smiled instead, blowing kisses and mouthing words. He felt himself waking and fought hard to stay asleep, but her form faded into the blackness and soon he lay awake. His neck hurt from the odd angle he'd slept in, but the pain disappeared as he obsessed about Clare. *Who are you?*

As he pondered, she appeared again, this time holding a picnic basket. He greeted her, but she ignored him and walked on through the orchard. Patrick rose and followed humbly, curiosity threatening to split him open. Clare picked a spot in the middle of the orchard where the trees separated and twisted off in all directions. Their limbs seemed to avoid this spot, and as Clare unpacked the food onto the mat she'd laid out, Patrick sat, waiting for her to speak.

"Why are you sad?" She asked gently.

Patrick didn't know how to respond. Flashes of heat ran over him, and he felt the Goosebumps prick up on his skin. Sweat began to form on his brow, and the melancholy gargled in his stomach. The black that stalked him seemed to finally get the best of him. But Patrick calmed himself for her sake, and after a short while responded.

“I used to have a family. I lived up north with my wife and daughter – she was about your age.” He stopped again, considering how to say the next bit. “But I wasn't a good father, and spent too long away from home. One day when I got back, I found them gone on to a better place.”

“They died?” She had a puzzled look on her face.

“Yes”.

“How?” Patrick thought her curious little mind might jump there.

Now his heart began to hurt as he recalled the memories. A light on the horizon, bolting through the night on horseback, flames devouring wood, smoke billowing into black night. Smell of burning flesh. A great sense of loss gripped him and he began to cry, wailing as he finally faced what he thought he hadn't the strength to. Uncontrollable grief swept over him as the tears rolled down his cheek, leaving a trail through the dirt caked on it.

He cried until he could cry no more, and finally he felt as though he had found the opening of the black cave. His broken face looked up at Clare, who stared back undisturbed.

“I know of death.” She said detached. The words startled Patrick. *But you’re so pure.* His disbelief must have showed on his face, and she spoke again.

“You’re sitting on me.”

Patrick took a while to comprehend what she’d said. He stared puzzled at her, looked down at little mound they were on, and looked back up. Shocked, understanding finally hit him. He stood up fast and pulled the grassy mat open, revealing a small collection of stones buried in a word in the earth. *Clare.*

Horror gripped him. He’d heard of the gruesome murder of a child thirty years ago, drawn and quartered, butcher-like, body parts never found. The only remnant of her was a bloody dress lying in the back of the town church. Patrick felt sick and he looked up at the girl. For the first time he saw *through* her. And as he peered, a cloaked shape jumped from the bush and a blade pierced his flesh.

The impact burnt as the axe smashed through bone, the force knocking him down.

“Don’t you wish you prayed now!” Patrick recognized the voice, and as his body was flipped over, the Padre stood over him, blood soaked, brandishing the axe. The Padre’s

eyes were shiny and black, the thrill of the moment running through his veins. As Patrick lay there waiting for death, he saw Clare.

“You’ll see them soon. They’re calling.” She said smiling.

And as Patrick felt his body grow light, the sorrow he’d felt for so long dissolved into the world he’d left behind. Now only joy filled him, soothing his soul and dousing the flames that had burnt in his heart. The Padre was his saviour. *I’m coming home.* He said, as he soared above the orchard and through the wind that took him higher. And as his eyes closed and the lifeblood left his body, the sun gently blinked as it accepted another into the eternal light.

Salvation.