

Darkness

When Rohan was five, he deliberately smashed the koala-shaped nightlight that glowed on his bedside table. He knew it was wrong to break something on purpose, especially something that plugged into the wall, but it had to be done. His mum had been mystified and Rohan had never found the words to explain why he'd knocked the little light onto the floor and stomped on it. The fact was though, Rohan already knew with the incurious certainty of childhood that he needed darkness.

Rohan slept best with his curtains tightly closed. The night skies blazed with slowly spiralling stars and each month the full moon shone through the windows of the house like a huge floodlight. In the darkness behind his heavy curtains, Rohan's breathing was always quiet and steady until Helen opened her son's door on her way up the hallway to bed. The hall light would sneak in with her and the little boy would instinctively turn to the wall and pull his bed clothes over his head before settling back into sleep. Helen would smile ruefully and close the door, reminding herself that disturbing Rohan with a final goodnight kiss would be both silly and selfish.

By the time he was eight, Rohan had learned that other kids, and even some grownups, were scared of the dark. Even his mum who wasn't scared of snakes, spiders or storms would glance over her shoulder and walk faster than usual when they were coming in at night after parking the car in the shed. Rohan would trail behind her, dreading the moment when the veranda light would flick on and spoil everything.

Rohan's best mate Tim brought an army torch to Rohan's tenth birthday sleepover. It was the first time Helen let the two boys camp on their own down behind the car shed. Tim was fascinated by the power of his torch, relishing the way the light sliced through the darkness.

Rohan shut his eyes and managed to stay quiet as Tim stood at the fence flicking the beam around the next-door paddock searching for the tell-tale shine of animal eyes. It was only when the boys were back inside the tent and Tim shone the torch straight into Rohan's face that he lost his temper, smashing the torch out of Tim's hand and knocking him onto his back with a shove that was almost a punch. Rohan scrambled out of the tent into the darkness, slipping through the fence and across the paddock to where a mature brigalow tree hulked over a patch of impenetrable moon-shadow. The contour of the tree trunk was familiar and stable as Rohan leaned against it and waited.

Tim ran back to the brightly lit house with his torch beam flailing wildly. Rohan got into trouble when Helen found him half an hour later sound asleep under the tree. He woke to her nudging him with her boot and a stern instruction to come back to the house. Rohan wondered how she'd found him – probably just Tim's torch and a mother's instincts – but he didn't ask, preferring to stay silent as Helen chided him and Tim sat sullenly at the kitchen table flicking his torch on and off. Tim spent the remainder of the night sound asleep in Rohan's bed with the door open and the hall light shining in. Rohan had asked his mother if he could go back outside and sleep in the tent but she hadn't answered and instead, he lay awake for hours on a camp stretcher with a clear view of Tim's feet sticking out from under the bed covers.

The boys' friendship survived into high school and by the time they were thirteen, they were spending most summer afternoons down at the river, taking it in turns with the other boys to bomb-dive off a high rock ledge. After hitting the water, Rohan would swim down into the cold depths far from the sun's light. With his eyes wide open, he would hold his breath until panic overrode his love of the darkness. The first few times, the other boys waited

silently for Rohan to explode gasping through the bright surface but they soon lost interest, distracted by the next bomb-diver and the need to compare the red marks that the water had slapped onto their skin.

As the heat went out of the day, the boys would lie like lizards on the river bank, making ridiculously crude comments about the girls at school and swapping stories of their parents' latest purchases and squabbles. Some of the boys still idolised their fathers and boasted cheerfully about four wheel drives and fishing trips. Others hated their fathers with the transitory absoluteness of adolescence. Lying face down on a warm rock with his eyes pressed shut against his forearm, Rohan would listen in silence with the shadow of his own father's absence weighing heavily.

On a warm evening in early autumn when Rohan was nearly fourteen, he asked Helen about his father. It had been stuffy in the house so after dinner they'd moved outside. Helen sat on the veranda with the lights off to deter the moths while Rohan lay a few metres away on the old trampoline, face up to a starless, overcast sky.

'There's not much to tell.' Helen's voice was weary and Rohan pictured the lines on her face deepening as she gathered her thoughts. Rohan knew that much already – it had been her standard answer to his questions on the days he'd come home from primary school full of awareness that most boys had dads who mattered even more than they let on. 'We didn't really know each other. I suppose you're old enough now for me to explain how it was.'

Helen paused and Rohan waited.

'It was only one night and by morning he was gone. I didn't even know his name. He never found out that we'd made a baby. I only realised a couple of months later and there was no

sign of him in town after that first night. Or even before that night, if I'm honest. He was just passing through.'

Helen paused again while Rohan gazed out into the quiet darkness.

'What did he look like?' Rohan's voice hadn't fully broken yet, but Helen could sense a change was coming.

'This will be hard to hear, Rohan, but I can't tell you that either. I'm ashamed of what happened but you deserve to hear it.'

The pause was longer this time.

'There'd been a big storm and the power was out. He turned up here at the house in boots, a raincoat and a head torch. He said he'd been hitching and he'd rolled his swag out for the night just across the way then the storm'd hit and he'd got washed out. It was still pouring so I wasn't going to send him back out in it.'

Rohan found himself picturing the rain deluging through the darkness and the bright beam of a head torch bobbing up the path as his mum stood on the veranda and made a decision. The torchlight would have been dazzling making his father a dark silhouette, all but invisible in the glare.

'Are you okay, Rohan? Sometimes the truth isn't easy. I'm really sorry.' She loomed in the darkness next to the trampoline and reached out to squeeze his shoulder.

Rohan lay silently until Helen sighed and went inside. Then he slipped out of the house yard, past the car shed, through the fence and across the paddock to the brigalow tree. He waited, breathing deeply until the cool night air had calmed him enough to face it.

His father was a drifter who didn't even know he existed. His mother had had sex with a man she didn't even know – a man whose face she had never seen clearly enough to recall. And this was how he'd come to be. He was the accidental consequence of sex between two strangers, one he'd never met and one who'd kept secrets from him for fourteen years.

The injustice enraged him. He deserved more than this. She had to tell him more – his father's voice, his smell, the shape of his body - even the sordid details should be his to keep because he had nothing else.

The car shed was a black square just visible as a deeper shadow. Rohan felt the dew starting to settle as he left the brigalow tree, crossed the paddock and climbed back through the fence. It would be daybreak soon and nothing would be as clear to him once the night had retreated.

He paused next to the wall of the shed, imagining the strangeness of barging into his mother's bedroom and waking her up. She'd put the light on for sure, but that the last thing he wanted. He knew that light would take away his courage. He needed to speak without seeing the impact of his words on her face.

Rohan groped his way into the shed and flicked off the main switch on the power board. The house would stay dark now and he'd be able to find the words he needed to say to his mother. He stood there for a few moments in the oily dust. Four filthy glass louvres covered the shed's only window and something drew Rohan's eyes to that slightly brighter rectangle. Through the smudgy glass, filtered moonlight was highlighting a patch of the overcast sky and suggesting a darker shape beyond the fence that could have been the silhouette of a man.

'Dad?' Rohan realised he had whispered the unfamiliar word. The second time, he shouted it as he stumbled out of the shed, through the fence and across the paddock as the cloud window closed and the darkness returned.

Dawn was creeping over the eastern horizon when Helen joined Rohan under the brigalow tree. He stayed curled into himself with his eyes closed as she sat down in the dirt. He felt her waiting but he needed her to speak first.

Eventually her words came. 'Your dad won't be coming back.'

Rohan opened his eyes and stared at her. 'I know I saw him last night – he was here.' Helen could hear the utter conviction in her son's voice. 'He must have run off because he knows that you don't want him here.'

Silence built a wall between them and a deep dread chilled Helen's blood.

'You shouldn't be at this tree, Mum. This is my place.' Rohan was sitting up now, his hands making claws in the dirt.

Helen couldn't meet his gaze. 'It's also my place, Rohan. And it's your father's place too.'

The boy snorted with angry confusion.

'He wasn't a good man, Rohan.'

'How would you know, Mum? You didn't even ask his name.'

'He didn't ask my name either, Rohan. He didn't ask me anything at all.'

Something in her tone made Rohan pause. She lifted her eyes and looked at him squarely.

'He told me what I had to do and when I'd done it, he told me what he was going to do to me in the shed.'

Helen's breath caught as she brushed at a patch of soil between the tree roots.

'His torch was in my eyes but the shed was so dark.'

Her fingers scratched harder.

'He didn't see the hammer.'

Rohan scrambled to his feet as something that could have been the rubber strap of a head torch poked through the dirt. Helen stopped digging and looked up at her son. He stared back at her, his face in deep shadow as behind them, the rising sun sent shafts of light into the eastern sky.