



Future Justice

Published in *Future Justice* in 2010 by Future Leaders (www.futureleaders.com.au)

The Umbrella Tree

Laura McCormack

In the summertime, the people came. Even with the pressure burning behind my eyes, I saw them come from the security of the front porch. Pale, tanned, old, young, in love, spurned in despair they came, sometimes on bicycles, rollerblades, with moth-eaten dogs in tow. I, perched behind an umbrella of a tree, watched them with my skirts folded around me as they moved past my tranquillity and into the worlds that awaited them at either end of my street. Sometimes they would notice the quiet fragility of my presence; other times it was not felt at all. I did not mind, for the intangible nature of my observation meant that I could remain hidden, tucked into the rainforest of the front garden, and watch them come.

The pressure does not cease.

In the summertime, the families came. A young couple swing a laughing toddler between them, tiny sandals glinting in the sun. The woman, not more than twenty-five, pushes a newborn's pram one-handed, supporting both her children with ease. The father breaks the chain of hands and in one swift movement, the child is straddling his neck, swapping the laughter for mesmeric curiosity at his newfound height. Four pink bicycles fly past them, girls no older than ten racing with determined focus, pigtails defying gravity as they fly with the wind. Parents call out behind them to slow down, to be careful of oncoming traffic, but the warm breeze dissolves concerns before they can be heard. Marta and Con from number 47 walk carefully by, chattering softly in their familiar Greek

tongue, shepherding wide-eyed grandchildren home from the creek where the young family have gone to play. Some afternoons, a boy walks from neverland with his younger sister clasping his hand and carefully constructs hopscotch nets from soft white chalk, while the sun blazes overhead and the clouds waste into wisps of blue. The boy teaches his sister to play, a smooth grey pebble serving as a marker, but when I look up from shelling peas, the summertime has folded itself into night and the boy and his sister are gone.

I blink, and the pressure takes my breath away.

In the autumn, the alone came. Bathed in the orange rain of rusted leaves falling from the umbrella tree, lone men shielded by grey windcheaters hurry home from the trains bustling in the distance, their briefcases weighing down their journey like black prisms of misery. A new mother, flushed pink from the sting of the wind, cocoons her infant in a red sling across her chest, clashing horribly with the orange surroundings. The infant cries out, and she moves to quieten it, but the fatigue resting across her face gives away the solitude of the afternoon, of single parenthood. A string of children in a walking school bus brings high spirits and noise, those with gumboots jumping enthusiastically into puddles and those without squealing with mock horror at the splashes. Eyes smiling serenely, an elderly woman pushes her basket of pears up the hill, scarf wrapped tightly under the red snub of her nose. She stops and approaches the table, where I am writing my letters under the susurous sounds of the umbrella tree, and mutely holds a pear out as an offering. I accept with an incline of my head and her eyes smile out at me as she moves her basket on.

The tender flesh of the fruit is sweet; the pressure behind my eyes rages on.

In the wintertime, the lovers came. A parakeet, blushed red even in the cold, shares the disc of her nest with her blue crested mate, beaks burrowed together and wings tucked tightly into each other's sides. Wrapped up in thick coats and gloves, a

newlywed couple smile a secretive smile through the frost, the warmth of each others' hands sustenance enough. A newer couple walk past, arms entwined; a chaste kiss is dropped onto a cheek, and a low murmur of laughter and appreciation emits. Even Marta and Con from number 47, shuffling their rotund, aching bodies down to the creek link arthritic fingers gingerly as the comfortable silence of marital bliss encompasses them whole. The icy wind howls and stirs as I read great novels in the dying light, and the umbrella tree bends and shivers above me. As the winds still and the cold sun dims, a shy teenager sidles up to an even shyer crush, and holds out a tentative, gloved hand in which a candy heart rests. I catch a glimpse of the writing before it is encapsulated by the tongue: 'Be Mine.'

Suddenly, the world is suffocating, and I turn away before the pressure threatens to swallow me whole.

In the springtime, you came. The old lady with the pears told me of your arrival, and the warm peppermint tea cupped in my hands under the umbrella tree shook with well-worn heartache. I remained, as always, folded in my skirts; I shelled my peas, read my novels, folded my washing and wrote my letters, watching in case you came for me. On the day you did come, the first blossoms on the umbrella tree ripened and bloomed, and the shrubs grew in tight coils around each other, bringing to life the rainforest you had remembered.

I said 'The pressure shall be no more.'

And you said, 'I will not let it hurt you anymore.'

And when you kissed me again under that umbrella tree, I soared.



Laura McCormack wrote this in 2009 when she was in Year 12 at Strathcona Baptist Girls Grammar School in Victoria.