

The Oak Tree

Alex McKinnon

Jack pedalled slowly down Ryder Street, trying to be quiet, hoping she wouldn't be there.

He would just say, "No thanks, Mrs Simmons, I've got to go. I'm running late".

And her face would drop, and she would silently turn and shuffle back to the front porch of her little fibro house, gnarled hands clutching the newspaper Jack delivered.

He couldn't do it.

Poor Mrs Simmons. Old, old Mrs Simmons.

Jack knew that when he rode past her house, she would be there, at the front gate, in her dirty white dressing gown and slippers, waiting eagerly like a kid under the Christmas tree, about to unwrap a present.

She would ask him how he was, how his mum and dad and brothers were, how the paper round was going, what he thought of the weather and the new azaleas in the front garden, and ask about the parsley she gave him last time for his mum's cooking.

And she would listen intently to all his hasty, one-word answers, and bustle him inside and give him tea and scones with cream on top, and sit him on the sofa.

And she would talk about Frank.

Jack knew the story backwards by now. How she had met Frank at the Cowra Dance Hall. Her shyness, his charms. The wonderful, warm feeling of knowing you're falling in love. The man of her dreams on one knee, asking her the question she'd

never dared imagine. The wedding under the big oak tree in the park. The happy days. The days she never wanted to end.

Then her eyes would cloud over, and she would tell Jack about Frank going off to war, and how he looked so smart and brave in his soldier's uniform and slouch hat.

She'd begged him not to go, not to leave her, but he'd just given her one of those dashing smiles she loved so, and promised her he'd be safe. He had a duty.

And how she sat in his favourite chair and listened to the radio almost every day, the wonderful warm feeling slowly turning into something cold and heavy, as she heard about brave young men dying for Queen and country and praying that Frank wasn't one of them.

She would talk about the letters from the front. They had been jovial and cheerful at first, he seemed to be having a lovely time. He was stationed in Egypt, and saw all sorts of wondrous things. She laughed at his jokes, and wept at his misfortunes, and it seemed like he was right there with her. And at the end of every letter, the same words of love and reassurance. He'd be home soon, and it would seem like he'd never been gone.

But then the letters became strange, and frightening. He'd been moved to somewhere called Gallipoli — "wherever that is" — and he started writing about horrid things — things he'd seen. Sometimes she didn't even finish the letters, the things he wrote about were too awful. Things she hadn't really believed he could do. He was such a dear, sweet man, he'd never hurt a fly. He'd never do those things.

He'd never kill someone.

And then the letters stopped coming altogether, and she would tell Jack about how she had waited at the mailbox for the postman every day, trying to fight the cold, heavy feeling in her stomach that rose up every time no letters came.

And how one day, there had been a knock at the door, and there was Vicar O'Brien and a man with three gold stripes on his shoulder, and they told her Frank was dead. And they'd

given her a little package with his hat, and some medals and everything else that he'd taken with him.

And it wasn't enough. It wasn't him.

And she'd screamed at the two men, screamed like she'd never speak again, and the whole street had come outdoors and whispered behind their hands as she followed them outside screaming and screaming, not caring if the whole world saw her because they didn't matter and the only thing that had ever meant anything was gone and there was nothing for her to live for any more.

And her eyes would move to the photo of the young man and a beautiful young woman, under an oak tree.

And she would stop talking, and moving, and tears would begin sliding down her wrinkled cheeks.

And Jack would silently get up, and get on his bike, and continue his paper round.

Jack knew he shouldn't. Mr Jones from the newsagency would cut his pay again if he was late.

He slowly rode towards number 135, and saw the azaleas in bloom.

Just keep riding.

There she was, in her dirty white dressing gown, looking so happy to see him.

"Morning, Jack. How are you today, sprout?"

He took a deep breath and looked into her watery blue eyes.

"Good, Mrs Simmons. How're the azaleas?"

And he slowly got off his bike.



Alex McKinnon wrote this essay in 2007 when she was in Year 11 at St Joseph's High School, Port Macquarie, New South Wales.