

Little Bells

by Luke van Wyk

I

Our home was a weatherboard place, built in the 1950s, in one of those suburbs with a mix of older established homes and new estates. We moved there in the early sixties before I had started school.

The house was up on stumps with a dirt floor underneath, which Dad eventually had upgraded to a concrete floor, as the years went by. Behind the house was bushland, with gum trees, lantana bushes, and long grass.

Dad worked in Sales and always enjoyed making a pitch about something or other, whether it was persuading Mum to see all the advantages in getting a new car, or simply why takeaway Chinese food was the better option for dinner tonight.

He seemed to move jobs a lot and would come home telling us stories about a house he had sold, and then a few months later, it was about a car, then a bit later, a stereo system, and then it was vacuum cleaners. He even brought me home a little model vacuum cleaner, that you could disassemble, like a little toy kit.

I watched him getting ready for work one day. This would have been in the early seventies. He was at the basin just finishing shaving. He had a moustache, but clean shaven elsewhere, with his hair grown a bit longer these days. He used to have short back and sides, when I was little, but now he made sure it was long enough to cover his ears.

He was wearing a short-sleeved body shirt, sky blue in colour with little paisley patterns all through it. This was accompanied with a paisley tie. Then dress business shorts, with a belt, long white socks, and brown desert boots.

He looked at himself in the mirror, smiled, flicked his hair lightly, and turned to me, saying "I look the part, hey!" I smiled at him, he brushed my head as he left, and I wondered about what part was he playing.

Dad liked to laugh and tell jokes, and on those occasions when the house was full of people, he was always the loudest. You always knew where he was and he always had a drink in his hand. He drank a fair bit, I'm not sure how much, but enough that I made sure I avoided him.

Often, way too often, he would get into an argument with Mum. There was a lot of screaming and yelling, which, as I lay in my bed listening, was really hard to take.

Mum ran the house. She washed and ironed like a demon, was always cleaning and vacuuming, and when unable to convince Dad to mow the grass, she was onto it herself. Mind you that only lasted until I was deemed old enough to take on that responsibility.

She took a lot of pride in her personal appearance and was a regular client at the local hairdressers. She liked people coming over, whether it was the neighbours or other friends, or friends of friends. There were always people coming and going, with glasses of wine in hand, and records on the turntable.

I had the impression that Mum and Dad got on pretty well together. They seemed to chat together amicably, and enjoyed going out to the shops, occasional dinners, and the local Drive-In. Weeknights at home watching television was a typical way of spending the evening.

Sometimes though, Dad didn't come home from work as expected, instead he'd arrive late, usually when I was in bed. Sometimes they had a fight then, and on more than one occasion, I found Dad out on the lounge when I got up in the morning.

II

I first encountered Jonathan Smith in the first grade. I remember it well because he had a big smile and was laughing at me as I was eating a cream bun, managing to get the cream over half my face. I laughed too, and somehow then we became friends. He lived a few streets away from us, down a shady street with big old homes.

When I first went to visit, I marvelled at the beautiful lawn and clean edges out the front of his house, and then the house itself, with ornate stairs leading up to a massive veranda, all set under large shady trees. His mother was nice to me with a big smile and sat us outside overlooking their backyard with afternoon tea of scones with butter and jam.

While we were eating, she called out from the kitchen, "Tassie, would you and Peter like a cool drink?" I looked at Jonathan with a questioning look, and he replied, "Yeah, sure Mum thanks." He said to me, "that's my name, Jonathan Tasman Smith, I kinda prefer Tassie."

So, Tassie it has been ever since. While we sat there talking and laughing as good friends do, there was a light breeze, and I could hear the tinkling of little bells. I looked over and there by the back stairs, near the door, was a mass of little brass bells. I asked, "Jonathan, I mean Tassie, what are they?" He replied, "Oh, that's just some old thing that Dad put up there. They kind of drive us crazy sometimes, but Mum likes them. She says they spread music through the house."

I came to know their sound very well, and would often stand at the back stair, waiting for Tassie, and flick them with my finger and thumb. Mr Smith would yell out on occasion, "Who is playing with the bells?" I'd usually bolt down the stairs, but they all knew it was me.

III

One night Dad hadn't come home at the usual time, yet again. Mum was making dinner, and was not happy, clearly annoyed. When she called me for dinner, I came straight away else I knew I'd be in trouble. We ate quietly with no conversation when we heard the car.

Dad had arrived home and stumbled a little as he came through the door. I knew straight away there would be trouble. Mum was already cranky, and now with him obviously drunk and he had been driving, she was really angry.

Truth is I wasn't happy either. I didn't want to see Mum like this, and I hated when Dad drank too much. He really became a different person, and I was scared of him. I was getting a little older, and had been dropping snide remarks at times, which in normal circumstances, would land me in some trouble.

Tonight was not normal, but I still persisted in a few remarks. In response to his stumbling arrival, I had called out, "Did you have a nice trip? See you, next fall!" He didn't take that very well, and strode over somewhat unsteadily, and slapped his hand across the back of my head. In his drunken execution, he probably hit me harder than intended, but no matter it was done. It hurt. Mum screamed at him, and I quickly left the room.

I don't think he ever hit Mum. Personally, I don't think he was game to do it, even in a drunken state. That night they argued only briefly, and it was all quiet. When I got up in the morning, Dad was asleep on the couch, as I expected.

Life resumed its normal rhythm in the following weeks, and then there would be another incident like that one. It just became part of how we lived. I was on edge whenever Dad came home, not knowing what to expect. Mum seemed to always have a glass of wine at hand, and I didn't appreciate why that would be at the time.

IV

Over the years in my childhood, I had spent a lot of hours in my room assembling and painting model airplane kits. These were mostly fighter planes and bombers from World War II. I had quite a few of them, and they were hanging off fishing line, suspended in my room.

I'd been given a small camera as a gift and had taken to experimenting with it to try and capture some battle scenes. This involved taking some of the craft and hanging them outside in the backyard off some branches to simulate fighters attacking a bomber, or dogfights.

This all went well until I decided to add some realism to the scene. I went and found a cigarette lighter and applied the flame to one of my older bombers. The model plastic burns really well and with black smoke. I grabbed my camera to get a few shots, which incidentally did turn out pretty well, when I had them developed some time later.

Unfortunately, what I didn't count on was the globs of burning plastic that dropped to the ground. Where I had set up my little diorama, was right down in the bottom corner of the yard, which had some longer dry grass leading out into the bush beyond our backyard.

While I was busy taking photos, the grass was being consumed by flames, and before I knew it was spreading further. I raced up to the laundry and found a bucket, which I filled with water, and hurriedly carried back to the flames. This didn't make much impact, and I began to realize this was becoming serious.

As I turned back to get another bucket, I saw our neighbour running down his backyard with a hose in hand. He was quickly on the scene, and spraying water over the fire. It took him a while, but eventually there was only the sodden blackened grass and a smoke haze remaining.

He asked me if my parents were home. Mum was home, and we walked together up the back stairs to talk to her. He didn't say too much, but Mum clearly got the message that this was a disaster narrowly averted. In all the drama, I'd also managed to burn my finger with some molten plastic, which Mum bandaged for me.

V

It was a night that Dad came home late, and as usual, had been drinking. He came into the living room where Mum and I were watching TV. Mum basically ignored him but did tell him his dinner was in the oven, waving him away. He stood there a moment, and seeing the bandage, asked what happened to me.

I don't know why, I guess I was fed up with him, but I sneeringly replied to him that I got burnt trying to start a bushfire. Mum then had to explain what I meant by that, and he wheeled about, and went outside.

I now regretted making any comment but went to see what he was doing. He had grabbed a flashlight, and wandered down the backyard, where he scanned the burnt

area. The end of the yard drops a bit lower there, and he managed to slip aided by his drunken state. He was angry now, and came back inside, with his shirt and pants stained with the blackened grass.

I was trembling at this point, unsure of what he would do. He slipped his belt off his shorts and moved toward me. I went to run but he grabbed my arm, and swinging the belt, slapped me hard across the backside. I yelped in pain, managed to wrench free from his grasp, and ran to the front door.

Mum was screaming at him, but he was zoned out and just focused on me. I got the front door open but was slapped again by another strike across the back of my thighs. He grabbed me by the arm, and shoved me, telling me to get to bed, landing another hard slap of the belt on me again.

I lay in bed, sobbing in pain and anger, and listened to Mum and Dad screaming at each other. Mum came in later, but I pretended to be asleep. She just sat there with me for a while, and I eventually went to sleep.

VI

Next morning, I was sore, and looking in the mirror, could see some evident marks from the strap. It was very tender to touch, and I winced in pain as I got dressed. It was all quiet when I came out of my room, and I was surprised to see that the couch was empty. I wanted to get out of there, so left quietly by the back door. The car wasn't in the driveway, so I guess Dad had gone out, or maybe had left last night. I wasn't sure.

I walked up the back of Tassie's place but couldn't see that anyone was around. I stood there for a while, and without really thinking, began to flick the little bells. They tinkled like they always do, and shortly Mr Smith came out.

"Oh, it's you, Peter, might have guessed. Hey, it's pretty early, pal, Tassie isn't up yet."

I hadn't thought of the time, and mumbling an apology, turned to leave. I was walking down the back stairs, and Mr Smith called me back.

"Hey Peter, it's okay, come and have a glass of orange juice."

I didn't realize at the time, that he had seen me moving gingerly, and had seen the marks on the backs of my legs. I did take him up on the offer, and I wouldn't have normally, even though I love orange juice. I just needed to be somewhere safe.

I carefully sat at their kitchen table, while he poured me a glass of juice. I looked up at him and could see the look of concern in his eyes. That kind of broke me, and I began sobbing, really deep hurting sobs.

He didn't say much to me, just a reassuring hand on my shoulder, and let me vent the hurt. When I had quietened down, he handed me some tissues, and ventured with, "Did your dad give you a hiding, Peter?"

I nodded quietly; said it was my own stupid fault. I told him about the fire, and what happened when Dad came home. Mrs Smith came into the kitchen then, and with a questioning look, went to another room with Mr Smith. I heard them whispering and shortly they came back.

Mr Smith asked me if I would show them the bruising. I agreed and turned to them lowering my shorts. I could see they were really upset and that made me concerned for Dad. I didn't want them to think he was a bad person. I loved him, he was my dad, it's just when he drinks too much.

Mr Smith flicked through the phone book, picked up the phone, and called my home. I

could tell it was my mother who answered. He reassured her that I was okay, and that I was going to spend some time with Tassie today and would come home in the late afternoon. He asked her if my dad was there, and she must have said that he wasn't home. I saw him listening for a while, until he finally replied, "Well, I will be talking to him, please let him know."

Tassie and I spent the day playing Monopoly. He ended up getting Mayfair and Park Lane, which I managed to avoid a few times, but they got me in the end. I got sent to jail four times in that game. The dice did not roll well for me, and I did wonder as I skipped a turn, about Dad and the Police, and jail.

Mr Smith took me home later that day. When we arrived, I could see Dad's car in the drive and I could feel myself shaking as I sat in the car. We walked down the drive together, and I took Mr Smith around up the back stairs, as I usually do when coming home. At the back door, he called out a hello, and Mum came to the door. She gave me a concerned look and a hug, and thanked Mr Smith.

My father came to the door. He looked drained, none of his usual bravado, no smile. Mr Smith asked him if they could have a word. Mum brought me inside, and we stood in the kitchen, both of us listening intently to the quiet words being spoken.

Mr Smith spoke about how I had been a fine friend to his son, that I was a good well-mannered kid, and clearly had a bright future. I had to choke back burning tears hearing him say that.

He said what had happened here last night should never happen again. Then he carefully explained to Dad if it did, he would personally make sure that a doctor examined me, that the school was informed, his employer was informed, and finally the Police. Dad just quietly nodded. His final words were telling Dad to think carefully on his drinking.

VII

I don't think Mum ever really forgave him or looked at him with much affection after that. The months went by and life became more normal. Dad seemed better than he had been. He got out of the Sales game, and took an office job, which he complained about, but he came home on time and seemed happier in himself. He never hit me again.

He and Mum would still argue, and on the occasions when they had friends at our house, they would have a few drinks. It didn't usually end well and I carefully avoided them. I was itching to get on with my life and was soon to complete junior high school. I was looking for a future.

One afternoon over at Tassie's place, Mr Smith tossed a brochure at me. It was about the Army Apprentice School. Over the next few weeks, I read all I could about it, talked to the school guidance, and had long conversations with Mr Smith.

I went through the application process and was successful in gaining a place. I moved interstate and began this new life. I came back home to visit when we had leave, but I felt increasingly remote as the time went by. Into my third year, I received a letter from Mum, saying that Dad had moved out. I guess it was inevitable, and probably for the best for them.

Mum came to see me graduate, and I returned home with her, before I started my new posting. I took the opportunity to visit the Smiths. I walked into their shady yard, remembering countless afternoons there. Climbing the back steps, the little bells were still there. I stood looking at them for some time. A careful flick of finger and thumb sent them tinkling.

Little Bells

The Smiths lived nearby, down a shady street,

When I'd visit, it was tidy, neat,

And in the kitchen were delicious smells.

By the back door were hanging little bells.

I'd flick them with my finger and thumb,

The ringing soft, perhaps gentle to some.

Their home seemed that one place where I could hide.

They asked, "The bells! Was that you?",

"No," I lied.

I wish I was a better kind,

I tried.

But my comments were awful and snide.

They welcomed me still, perhaps they saw hope.

Guide me away from that slippery slope.

Life at home was tough, a belting some nights.

My folks, well they had many nasty fights.

The Smiths, my haven; life as meant to be.

Saved my sanity, until I was free.