

THE CANDLEBARK

By Philip Rainford

Dawn came late to the valley, the tree covered mountains shielding it from its early morning rays. The last signs of winter melted in the grass as spring came to the valley. The wise old Candlebark had seen the passing of many seasons. It stood sheltered in the corner of the valley, near two lonely houses. Its smooth white trunk bore the scars of bushfires past. Its ragged base, where the old bark had not fallen away, giving it the appearance of a stubby candle, was now the home of burrowing beetles.

When it was young there had been few people. Men had camped throughout the hills digging holes. Occasionally they would stand beside the Candlebark or its neighbours and water them. The moisture was warm but welcome; it contained elements not present in the rain. It was a time of harmony between the trees and the people and vibrations from the men made the tree feel comfortable.

Then it changed. Men arrived in large numbers. They dug deeper holes and built lots of houses - wooden houses. They cut down many trees, some close to the Candlebark, destroying the peace and harmony of the valley and replacing it with terror. Only the trees deep in the forest were safe, not the fringe dwellers like the Candlebark who lived among the men and could not flee. Trees waited in fear, sending messages, via the wind, of the actions of men while neighbouring trees were brought down and sliced up.

Finally the reign of terror ended but only a small number of trees near the Candlebark had survived, huddled beside the houses. The men continued their practice of watering the roots with warm liquids particularly at night when they gathered in big numbers and made noises that reverberated through the ground. They were not peaceful vibrations and the trees decided they did not like men.

Decades passed and the antics of men continued unchanged. Some of the Candlebark's neighbours died of old age or disease; remaining as silent spectres, lean, lifeless, stripped of their greenery by wind and time until they fell or were cut down.

The tree had no knowledge of dwindling gold supplies or ghost towns. So when the men vanished and tranquillity returned to the valley, it knew not the cause and soon the presence of men was forgotten. The trees lived in harmony as the undergrowth began to reclaim the land and creep towards the houses, warily at first, as the older plants carried a memory of the danger.

One day, a man drove up to one of the houses in a loud metallic frame that sent nasty vibrations through the trees. Younger trees, who had not known or cared about the past, did not understand the threat. The man trampled his way to one of the two houses, damaging the Candlebark's undergrowth cousins. Fear returned in the ensuing weeks as he ripped out plants, cut dead wood with sharp instruments and sprayed water that made some of the plants feel strange. Over the next few days they withered slowly and painfully.

Finally the man settled into the life of the valley and lived in harmony with the forest. He never drove his metal frame again; it stayed and rotted as small plants found shelter in its shade. He was a loner and had few visitors. During the day he would wander off towards other houses that the tree had been told existed in larger numbers beyond its reach. At night the man would return unsteadily to his home and vanish inside, until one night, he fell in the snow and never got up. Other men found him and took him away. The trees found themselves alone again.

When the soldiers came, the trees were in shock! Loud metallic frames flew overhead. Other metallic frames roared through the area setting off explosions that sent projectiles flying through the air that damaged or destroyed the plant life and disrupted the tranquillity of the Candlebark and its neighbours. Eventually the soldiers moved on, their exercise in the

deserted valley was over. They did not return but the valley had caught the eye of one of the officers.

A few months later, another metallic frame pulled up at one of the houses. Inside was the officer. With him were two of his saplings, a boy and a girl. The tree recognised them as different. It had never experienced a family and sensed they were not a danger. The tranquil vibrations of the children's voices were soothing as they played beneath its high rounded canopy. Years later, one branch would still bear the scars of a rope from which a tyre had once hung.

These were kids who'd only known life in the city; to them it was a wonderland, a refuge from their other life. They enjoyed the shade of the tree and talked to it in a language whose tones were the only part it understood. They played on the decaying wooden tray of the metallic frame that had been abandoned by the other man and pretended it was actually moving. They carved their names in the tree and gave it joy because it could feel the happiness of the two lonely saplings.

One morning, the tree was greeted by early spring sunshine. The Candlebark always missed the crisp cool mountain air of the winter, when the warmer months descended. This was a time when its unshaded limbs began to change colour turning red or orange as the world began to wake from its winter slumber. It was a time when creatures emerged from their burrows to soak up the first heat of the season. They hid among the tangled debris, discarded iron and refuse for protection from predators, and they knew that man was one of their greatest threats. Some lay like harmless twigs on the ground, disturbing no one.

That day, the little boy and the little girl emerged from the house to play. They greeted the tree as they had done every day. They played on the old metallic frame and gathered water from the stream. Then the little girl found one of the twigs. She reached towards it and screamed. The boy called for his father and the tree felt painful sensations. The little girl never came to play again and happiness left the family. Eventually they too departed.

It was not long before the men returned. This time with many large metallic frames built for ripping up the ground. This time death was swift. There was no prolonged period of terror only a brief time of destruction. The Candlebark found itself alone. There was no plant life within communication range, just empty fields of churned up dirt. In time the men transformed the site. The ground was made hard so other men could come and go, setting up temporary camps.

The creek that once flowed with crisp clean water was now clogged with garbage. The narrow road that ran by the houses was widened and the town buzzed with the loud vibrations of metallic frames that left an unpleasant taste in its leaves.

The little boy and his father returned one last time. They could no longer feel the magic that had once existed in the area. The Candlebark felt them go. The tree felt old, the spark of life beginning to dim within its trunk, it had no reason to fight back. It felt choked by the new environment and the harsh vibrations that disturbed its tranquil existence. That winter it allowed the cold to reach its heart, extinguishing its ancient spark.

In the spring; the new owners cut it down.

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