

“Time Too Short”

A Short Story

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Karl was always partial to summer. It gave him an energy, a connection with the creator. Not that he ever pondered the existence, one way or another, of any creator. His was an innocence that any creator would never wish to taint with sophistication. The sun shone, the waves lapped the jetty and the glass green water was cool and inviting.

It was too hot on the jetty board-walk, the bitumen skin on the ancient red gum planks near melting point. The marauding seagulls, notwithstanding the lure of the burley and cockles carelessly strewn by the myriad anglers young and old at their respective stations, refused to settle there. Better the balustrade, its white paint long faded and chipped admitting the briny air of past seasons to penetrate and preserve the noble eucalyptus milled perhaps a century ago, inland somewhere near the River Murray.

“Look after my gear, will ya? I’m going in.” Not so much a request as a confirmation of understanding among the lads of the jetty. Their rods resting against the railing, lines wafting out somewhere to their respective floats. Somehow they never became tangled. Part of the innocence perhaps. Karl knew his dampened wheat bag with its booty would be there when he returned, despite the seagulls. The garfish, five in all, slender and sleek, gutted and scaled were pleasant enough company for the lone squid that had serendipitously found its way on to the line at the wrong time of the day.

He slipped out of his thongs and scurried over the hot planks to the gangway on the leeward side that led down to the dilapidated landing a few metres above the water line. Decades of weathering, countless years of pounding by the volatile gulf waters and general neglect had added urgency to the call for maintenance to this ageing skeleton. Yet each pile, with its horde of periwinkles and barnacles, which

clung like a filigree wedding ring on the finger of a lady scorned, stood undaunted as the waves forced themselves by.

Karl descended the steps to the lower platform and, with an ancient arboreal agility, hoisted himself to the top of one of the piles, some metre and a half above the decking. He stood there a moment assessing the heaving water just below. It rose, it fell; rose and fell according to some command issued from some unimaginable depth thousands of leagues away and carried faithfully to this, its final resting place on the shores of the Gulf St Vincent. He felt his shoulders twitching, fending off the fiery midsummer sun that stretched its invisible tentacles to every point on the horizon. There was no escaping their sting, except down into the chill blue-green water. It surged and splattered against the jetty piles sending gossamer mist to hover momentarily in the dried air only to dissipate before it could soothe his tender skin. A few more years' exposure to this southern sun and it too will metamorphose into wrinkled hide, just like his late father's.

"What are you doin' down there, ya woose!" a voice from above chastised. Karl looked up to see a well-muscled lad a few years his senior, stripped to his tattered jeans, balancing majestically upon the balustrade.

"Watch this for a bomb!" bragged Wayne.

"Oy, get down from there ya lout. Can't ya read the bloody sign!" bellowed an older man's voice from behind the lad on the windward side of the jetty. The sign, of course, was illegible to all but the 'writers' who had daubed their tags over the warning not to jump from the jetty because of the obvious dangers.

Wayne wasn't a 'writer'. He was more in tune with the principles of the 'Rocker' of the 1960s era, a bit like his dad.

Yet if his dad had caught him in this situation Wayne would have expected a clip behind the ear.

Since his father's tragic demise three years ago, Wayne had sought to disguise his grief with bravado, a disposition that had brought him into contact with a few of the more delinquent lads in the district, a brief brush with the police, and deeper into conflict with his young mother. It was all right for her to go out and find another man so soon. Everyone knew it wouldn't last. But at seventeen, Wayne's hormones didn't allow for compassion for others' feelings. He just smiled insolently at the seasoned angler. How many times had he done this before? He braced himself; saw the swell approach and like an eager bombardier launched himself to the wet below.

Karl froze on the landing pile, silently watching his brother descend in slow motion, back straight, cradling his doubled up right leg as close to his body as possible, his left piercing the water like a lance – all to the cheers and shouts of encouragement from the rest of the gang above.

The swell, however, passed too rapidly.

The moments passed as they often do following an act of bravado.

Karl's eyes remained fixed on the ever decreasing platelet of effervescence rising from the shallows to the surface of the water, dissolving into ether.

And still the moments passed.

Then Karl rapidly thawed as he saw the frantic, pained look on his brother's face as it slowly penetrated the surface and gasped for air. Why wasn't he treading

the water? Why wasn't he calling for assistance? Why was his mouth positing the remains of breakfast only to be replaced by the salted water of the gulf?

Karl felt he ought to run to the bottom of the landing along with everyone else; but he could not. He, too, was paralysed. Out of sympathy perhaps. He could not face the simple, awful truth. His mother, Angie, had warned them. Why is it that we are so foolish not to heed the wisdom of our elders? Why was Wayne's father not around to clip him behind the ear?

The End