**The Old Man on the Porch**

by Weldon Burge

[contact@weldonburge.com](mailto:contact@weldonburge.com)

302-737-3422

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“Just leave him alone, Noah,” his mother said. She didn’t even look up from the eggs she scrambled in a pan on the stove. “I don’t want you going near him.”

Noah was eight at the time. He glanced out the window at the old man on the porch at the house across the way, the only other house on the stretch of land his family owned. His father had always hoped to develop the land, to build a true homestead in South Australia, just north of the Musgrave Ranges. His plan was to purchase more sheep and make the family business more profitable. But the dry, desert-like conditions and adjoining mountains made that near impossible. The plan died when he did.

The elderly man sat in a rocking chair, and Noah had never seen him move from it. The man looked to be hundreds of years old, his face lined with crevices, skin as pale as milk. On his head was one tuft of stark-white hair, growing like a mushroom from his scalp.

“Who is he, Ma?” Noah asked, not for the first time.

His mother merely shook her head. She turned from the stove and shoveled a mound of eggs on his plate. “Never you mind,” she said. The answer he always got for the question. “I just don’t want to see you near him.”

“How long has he been there?” Another frequent question.

She looked out the window. “Probably since the start of time.” Then she turned back to him. “But never you mind. Just stay away from him, you hear?”

And that was the first time Noah recognized fear behind her eyes.

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For years, he followed his mother’s advice, keeping his distance from the man who perpetually rocked on the porch not a hundred yards from Noah’s home. He never understood how the man’s home never changed, never seemed to deteriorate despite the lack of maintenance. How the man apparently never ate or drank, never needed sleep. Like an addiction, curiosity drove him to learn more.

One day, when his parents had traveled to the town of Oodnadatta to purchase supplies and food to stock their pantry, he steeled his nerves to address the man. When Noah approached the front step of the porch, the man stopped rocking. But he didn’t look at him, just stared at the horizon, no expression on his face.

Noah had never seen the man stop rocking before.

He put one foot on the step, and the man looked down at him. The man’s eyes were pupil-less, pure gray. Maybe he was blind. His eyes didn’t blink. Noah couldn’t tell if he was staring at him or was just aware of his presence.

“Mister …” Noah suddenly didn’t know what to say, his questions evaporating in his mind. Why was he here in the first place? Mere curiosity? Or did he want to conquer his fear of the man?

The man cocked his head, almost mechanically, and his seemingly sightless eyes widened. When was the last time anyone had spoken to him?

“Mister, are you okay?” Dumb question, but the only thing that came to Noah’s mind.

He stepped back from the porch. Why had he done this, despite his mother’s warnings?

The old man smiled, but something far from a human smile. A bizarre curving of the lips, the corners of his mouth nearly reaching his ears.

He winked at Noah.

Noah ran.

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When Noah became a teenager, he worked with his father, tending to the sheep and the small garden they had behind their home—a futile attempt to raise their own food in the brutal desert climate of the outback. Noah half-expected the vegetables to burst into flame on any particularly fiery afternoon.

One day, while mending a fence a ram had broken during the night, Noah noticed how gnarled and calloused his father’s hands were, the knuckles swollen and bruised. He then looked at his own hands. Not as severely damaged as his father’s hands from years of hard labor, but calloused with broken nails. Noah wondered if this was the life he genuinely wanted.

As his father replaced a broken fence rail, Noah turned to stare at the old man.

“Stop staring at him,” his father said without looking up from his work. “There’s no sense staring. Nothing changes.”

“Pa, who is he? I mean, really? Who is he?”

Noah’s father shook his head. “I don’t know what the thing is.”

Thing. Not a man. Thing.

“It’s not human,” his father continued. “We don’t know what it is. But it has been here as long as our family has owned this land.”

“Ma said he’s always been here.”

“Our ancestors owned and respected this land for generations. That thing has been on that parcel for probably centuries, who knows? Some say he sat on a boulder long, long ago, always facing east. No one knows when the house appeared. An old man, rocking in that chair, never standing, never eating, never sleeping. Just rocking and gazing out over the desert like it’s waiting for something. Makes no sense.”

“How is that possible? To live that long?”

“It’s not. At least not for regular folk. Or any living thing.”

“Why haven’t we moved away from here, then?”

His father shook his head again. “Your grandfather and his father, and the fathers before, lived on this land. It’s our history, our heritage.” He pointed at the old man. “That thing will not drive us from our homestead.”

Noah said nothing, not wishing to disagree with his Pa. But he was convinced the man on the porch didn’t care what they did. He understood his father’s pride in the land and his love for their family and its legacy. But it meant nothing to the old man staring into the distance.

Noah’s father often talked with him about their aboriginal ancestors, often speaking of the times to come. The Elders had dreamt often of a massive tidal wave devastating Australia, and the prophecy still held sway in the aboriginal communities. This was also the reason so many Elders had returned to the “country,” as his father put it, to prepare their spirits and connect back to the land, back to their ancestral homes, and back where they belonged. They had seen the signs of the End of Days.

“Our people have owned this land for more than a hundred thousand years, Noah,” his father said. “The land is us, and we are the land. It is our heritage and responsibility. We must protect and keep it.”

“I understand.”

“I know you understand. But you don’t live it, son.”

“Pa, the prophecy of the End of Days is only a myth. The Elders said giant earthquakes and a massive tidal wave would end the world years ago. We’re still here. It’s a fairy tale.”

“It’s our tradition. Don’t dismiss it, son.”

Noah shook his head.

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Global unrest had intensified as Noah entered his late teenage years. Technological espionage had escalated between China, Russia, and the United States. The North Koreans continued to test nuclear arms, threatening to decimate South Korea, Japan, and even Australia. Drones the size of hornets could now carry biological payloads designed to wipe out entire cities. The Tehran Accord of 2032, intended to end nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, was, like many treaties, disregarded mere days after its signing. Civil unrest ruled every corner of the planet.

The fuse was short.

The world as Noah had known it had always been this way. Australia had largely avoided the planet’s human ills. Yet, the threat of a nuclear attack from North Korea or another hostile nation on the brink always rested uneasily on his mind. For that reason, he enlisted in the military.

Noah joined the Australian Defence Force when he was seventeen, the earliest he could, hoping eventually to deploy on operations with the Army. But he knew he’d run off to the ADF to escape his home situation—which, in hindsight, his home was not as horrible as he’d thought. He later understood, that it’s tough to shed the blinders. He’d soon realized and came to appreciate how much his parents had sacrificed for him.

Joining the ADF provided the opportunity to move to Canberra, a modern city so different from the homestead. He’d hoped to enter the academy, but they discovered in a medical physical he had a slight arrhythmia. He could not then apply and was unable to work his way into becoming an officer. They only permitted him to become a reservist, far from his dream. He resigned from the military and got a job as a carpenter, working for a company that primarily produced doors. Not exactly the future he’d envisioned.

When his mother told him that his father was gravely ill, Noah decided there was no future for him in Canberra. His family needed him to return to the homestead, back to his people.

Soon after Noah returned, his father died suddenly of acute myocardial infarction. His mother’s grief overwhelmed her, but Noah couldn’t understand why she blamed the old man on the porch for his father’s death.

“Your father is gone,” his mother said, “yet this thing is still here, as always. It’s not fair. Why should that thing live yet your father dies?” Tears sprang to her eyes. “I hate it.”

“I know.”

“Hate it, do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“We need to kill it.”

Noah looked at her for a moment, surprised. His mother would harm no one or any living thing.

“We need to kill it,” she repeated.

“I don’t think we can, Ma.”

“If it breathes, it can die.”

“How do you know it breathes?”

She didn’t respond. Just stared at the old man and shook her head.

“Ma?”

“It doesn’t deserve to live. It just doesn’t,” she whispered.

The next day, Noah found his mother dead in the road’s dust in front of their home, her body stretched beneath the blistering sun, facing the sky with open eyes. She lay only fifty feet from the man’s porch.

The coroner later claimed she died of a massive coronary and didn’t feel a thing. Noah doubted that. She had his father’s rifle in her hands when he found her. He’d removed the rifle before the authorities arrived to take her away. But he knew why she had it, what she’d attempted to do. There was a spent shell in the weapon. She’d got off one shot before she died.

The old man rocked on the porch, seeming oblivious. But Noah knew better.

Noah approached the man soon after his mother’s funeral. He stood directly in front of the old man, fists clenched, yet he was stoked with fear. The man sat tall in his chair, unmoved.

“You did this,” Noah said. “I know you killed her. Didn’t you?”

The man said nothing.

“Did you kill my father, too? It was no heart attack, was it? You. I know it was you. How did you make him so ill? He was a strong, healthy man. I know you had something to do with this. Bastard!”

The man said nothing.

“Are you going to kill me, too? Is that your plan?”

The man said nothing. But he smiled.

Soon after, Noah built a twelve-foot fence around the old man’s house, surrounding the property, cutting off the man’s view of the world. Two days after he'd completed the fence, it disappeared in the night, vanished, perhaps dissolved into the atmosphere.

Noah never built another fence.

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In the years to come, Noah abandoned sheep herding and redeveloped the land as an airfield, a small airport with a runway perfect for his Cessna and other light aircraft. The other nearby homesteaders relied on his services to provide food and supplies for families in secluded areas of the outback. He often wondered why aboriginal people remained on land so inhospitable to humans, and those thoughts always drove him to remember his father and how he embraced their heritage. The lifestyle still felt so foreign to Noah.

Several times, the Australian government closed his airport as North Korea yet again threatened nuclear strikes and the government restricted airspace. Whenever flights were banned for any length of time, his business suffered, as did the families he served. And Noah couldn’t understand how limiting commercial flights helped the government protect them from missile strikes. It made no sense to him. But the air force commanded the Australian sky, and Noah could only wait until they lifted the bans to resume his business.

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First, the television reception went out, which happened frequently in the outback. Not interested in most TV programming, Noah had taken to pleasure reading. He often disappeared into the worlds of Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert, and other classic science fiction writers—worlds so different from the one in which he survived.

But this time, when he turned on the television for the weather report, something seemed … off. The screen was blank. Not just blank, but black like an abyss. No broken, wavering lines. No light at all. At first, Noah thought perhaps the TV was malfunctioning. But then he heard the voices, thousands of languages and dialects, all speaking at once, blending into an incomprehensible cacophony from hell. All the voices sounded frantic. Wailing and screams sprang to his ears like knives.

He switched off the TV. *What the hell?*

Then he noticed an odd pulsing in the sky outside his living room window.

Noah stepped through his front door and looked to the clouds. They were swirling maroon and scarlet and black and purple, swirling faster as he watched.

He turned to look at the old man on the porch. The man’s head was now upturned to the angry blood sky. Noah could see he was smiling.

A global rumbling came, the thunder of the atmosphere collapsing on the other side of the world. The old man stopped rocking, apparently keen on listening to the Earth’s final groan. There was an ominous glow far to the east, the approaching conflagration devouring everything in its path. There was also a glow to the west, also encroaching.

The two approaching nuclear storms would likely meet exactly where Noah stood. Exactly where the old man had waited so long. And then Noah understood. The Elders had been right, but they only misjudged the timing. And it wasn’t a massive tidal wave from an angry sea. No, it was a rolling wave of flame.

Noah watched as the old man slowly stood. He’d never seen the man leave the chair, never seen him stand. The thing—yes, the thing, Noah fully realized—stood far taller than Noah had expected, far taller than any man he’d ever known. The thing turned to Noah, smiling. Its monstrous grin contained far more teeth than humanly possible. He winked at Noah and then turned his face again to the reddening sky with outstretched arms. His multi-hinged jaw dropped and widened.

A scorching wind blasted across the desert from the east, its sister to the west. Noah could now see the approaching walls of flame. Massive white funnels spiraled from the sky as if pursued by the nuclear fire. The funnels contained millions of ephemeral entities, the wisps of things once human, and the funnels twisted into the enormous maw of the thing on the porch.

Noah then knew who the old man was.

The Great Consumer of Souls had waited so long for his banquet to begin.

Today, he would finally feast.

Noah waited to burn.

He did not have long to wait.

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