
She remembers the sound of his laughter from when they were young—pure, unrestrained, like the unburdened giggle of a boy who knew only fun. He was her big brother, the only one with the right to torment her but love her with equal force, the one who, despite their sibling wars, would defend her unconditionally.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows through the unkept bush of Yarloop as Donna and James tore through the scrubs and wild grasses, feet pounding against the earth, laughter ringing in the air. This was their world—the world of dirt paths and secret trails, where the branches formed ceilings and the bushes marked walls, and they were its only inhabitants. They were the kids from the bush, and they knew every inch of it like their own hands.

“Look, come here!” he called, beckoning her down to the dam. He’d found a piece of refrigerator foam; it was a rough, jagged slab, about the size of a small raft. Its edges were uneven, torn where it had broken off. It was thick, streaked with years of grime and speckled with small dents. It had clearly seen its share of wear.

But placed in the water, it floated. “Here’s how you catch ‘em,” he said, standing on the foam as it sunk just below the water’s edge under his weight. She watched, wide-eyed, the water lapping just above his ankles. Then she saw tiny tadpoles wriggling toward it, drawn by some mysterious trick

only her brother seemed to know. He stepped back on the dam's bank and handed Donna the foam. "Go catch 'em, sis!" Standing atop it, she felt a strange freedom, steady yet fragile in the water's embrace. "Hold it steady, wait 'til they're all there, then just scoop 'em up!"

The two of them hunched side by side over the muddy bank, giggling as they filled an old jar with water and a handful of tiny black tadpoles, their smooth bodies flickering in the light. She looked up at him, her face a blend of awe and admiration, as if he were some sort of master magician conjuring miracles from murky water.

Further up the hill, they reached the rabbit warrens, a maze of tunnels they'd discovered together. Her brother poked his head into one of the holes, arms disappearing up to his shoulders as he reached inside. Suddenly, he pulled out a tiny, trembling rabbit, its fur soft and grey. She gasped, hands covering her mouth, then begged, "Please, can we keep it? Just this one?" But he shook his head, a gentle kind of authority in his voice that let her know the answer wasn't going to change.

"Nah, you ain't keeping a bush rabbit." She pouted, crossing her arms, but deep down, she knew he was right. He handed the little creature to her, and she held it for a moment, feeling its heart flutter against her palms, before reluctantly letting it go.

They wandered further into the thick of the bush, reaching the trees they had once claimed as theirs. Here, they'd hacked away at branches with an old saw to build their makeshift gings, slingshots. They spent hours here, taking turns to climb and look out over the dense underbrush, convinced they could see forever. Sometimes, he'd be the big brother, bossing her around or daring her to climb higher, but if she so much as lost her footing, he was there in an instant, ready to catch her, steady her, and remind her that he'd always be there.

The world of Yarloop was where their bond was carved, strong and fierce, like the twisted trunks and gnarled branches

they clambered over each day. His love was an unconventional one, rough around the edges, but solid, and it was a love she trusted with her whole heart. Out here, among the mud and the branches and the warren holes, it was them against the world.

Donna adored him even when his fierce independence began setting him apart from the other kids. Even when others saw him as a troublemaker, she saw her brother, brimming with life and potential, a little too wild to be easily understood.

Yet, that untamed spirit had a way of leading him down paths she couldn't follow, drawing him into shadows she was powerless to pull him from. She watched helplessly as her brother, once her hero, started to drift further away. It began small, just tiny rebellions she tried to rationalise as "phases," but the older they grew, the more those phases grew too. He went from sneaking out to sneaking substances into his life, and each new choice left a crack in the family she tried so hard to hold together.

She was caught between hope and the cold edge of reality. How could she abandon him, her brother, the one who'd once stood by her through scraped knees and broken hearts? Yet, how could she save him without losing herself?

Their parents held onto faith with an iron grip, almost as if they could will him back into the boy they knew. And she watched them, caught in the terrible weight of wanting to believe as they did, but terrified of the pain that lay in such hope. She tried to be strong for them, to be their rock when her brother's choices pulled him further into the depths. There were nights she sat with her mother, silent tears staining their faces, neither of them able to voice the fears gnawing at their hearts. And there were other nights, dark and endless, when she stayed up late, staring at the ceiling, praying for a miracle she could no longer believe in.

Over the years she's tried to see glimpses of the boy she once knew, to find pieces of her brother beneath the hardened shell he has become. She wants to believe he can break free,

that he can rise above the mistakes that chain him, yet each time she sees him fall back into the same patterns, she feels herself crumble a little more.

She wishes she could make him understand the pain he leaves behind, the empty places in their lives that only he can fill. She wants to shout, to scream at him for making their lives a series of small heartaches, for making her doubt her love for him even when she wants to cling to it. But most of all, she wants to find a way to forgive him, to forgive herself for the days she felt like giving up on him entirely.

He is still the boy she remembers, locked away behind bars and miles of regret. And while the innocence of their childhood feels distant, her love remains. It's a painful, worn-out love—stretched thin from years of false promises and broken dreams. But it's there, holding her up as she walks the narrow line between hope and reality, never letting her forget that he's her brother, no matter where his path takes him.

This is a story of love and the unbreakable bond of family, the story of a sister who holds the torch of hope even in the darkest moments. It is a story of choices and consequences, and the echoing question of whether redemption is out of reach.

A story of life in instalments.

My name is James Michael Scott and I am a drug addict and convicted criminal.

My rap sheet is quite extensive: Possession of illegal substances. Possession with intent to sell. Drug trafficking. Burglary. Aggravated burglary. Aggravated burglary with intent to harm. Theft. Robbery. Receiving and possessing stolen goods. Possession of illegal firearms. Discharging a firearm in public. Possession of prohibited weapons. Assault causing bodily harm. Assault with intent. Vandalism. Reckless and unlicensed driving.

And then there are the accusations that haunt me still, of sexual assault and rape.

My mind is a fragile battleground, I suffer from acute anxiety; I am

constantly in a fight mode, expecting impending danger, and it consumes most of my thoughts. My heart races, sweat drenches me, I have trouble breathing and I panic, crowds suffocate me, I'm hyper-aware of every movement, I constantly need to be aware of my surroundings, I need an exit strategy and I cannot have anyone unknown walk behind me.

At the age of 48 I have spent a total of 21 years in prison, first entering when I was 24. I would say I'm institutionalised; jail is embedded. The rules, process, social system and way of life are all I know, and I'm good at them. I had to be; that's how you survive prison. Survival is my expertise.

Each time I walk through that heavy slab of reinforced steel, criss-crossed with thick metal bars and a small, shatterproof window allowing a glimpse of the confined world coming, I am innocent, we all are.

What's the secret to lasting so long behind bars? Never count days; one day, tomorrow will be today and today, you get to go home.

A wise man once told me, "Hard work pays off." Well, I've worked hard in my criminal endeavours, and now I'm reaping the rewards. All my efforts and dedication have paid off with a well-deserved prison sentence. Success, indeed.

My life choices, 20-plus years of prison, solitary confinement, physical attacks, mental attacks, threats, attempts on my life and abuse have made me an unlikely candidate to survive the 'real' world. I doubt they've given my cell away just yet.

During my second stint in the big house, a screw sneered, "Back again, Scott. You'll end up doing life in this joint. It will just be in instalments. Welcome home."

Turns out, he was bloody right.

*From the inside looking out – Ain't it always the way.
(Letters from the inside 2023)*

I sat alone on the worn wooden stool, staring blankly at the chipped paint on the cell wall. The dim light flickered above, casting eerie shadows that seemed to dance to the rhythm of my troubled thoughts. My mind drifted back to a time when life was simple, before the shadows took hold.

I was ten years old, running barefoot through the drains behind my family's home in Yarloop. I can feel the sun kiss on my skin and the wind ruffling my hair as I scoured discarded pipes for joogies. My younger sister, who I affectionally named 'blood blister,' faithfully trailed behind carrying the bucket. Our mother, a woman with a heart as vast as the ocean, called us for lunch.

I can hear her voice now, it was more than just a sound; it was an anchor, trying to ground me in the chaos of my life. It rings with a familiarity that is imprinted on my soul, like a favourite song known by heart. No matter where I was or what I was doing, the sound of her voice could always find me, wrapping around me like a soft, comforting blanket. And now I prayed that voice would break through these walls, wrap me in reassurance and love, and drag me home.

As I sat in my cell, I couldn't help but wonder how things might have been different. I thought of my father, a man with boundless wisdom and eyes filled with pride of dreams that once seemed within reach. The memories were bittersweet, a reminder of all I had lost and all I had squandered.

The clang of the cell door brought me back to the present. A guard entered, clipboard in hand. "Scott, you have a visitor," he announced. My heart skipped a beat. Visitors were rare, and I couldn't imagine who would come to see me now.

The guard led me down the sterile hallways, my mind raced. Could it be my parents, holding onto the last threads of hope? I took a deep breath as I approached the visiting area, bracing myself for whatever awaited.

The door opened, and there, sitting at the table, was a face I knew well. My mother, one of the few people who had not cast this man adrift but had tied a life rope around the boy as he drifted relentlessly in the current, she had held tight, trying to pull him to the safety of the shore. Her eyes were filled with a mix of sadness and determination. My heart ached at the sight of her, a reminder of the boy I once was and the man I had become.

"James," she said softly, her voice trembling. "It's time to come home."

In that moment, amidst the shadows of my past and the cold reality of my present, a glimmer of hope sparked within me. Perhaps, just perhaps,

redemption was not entirely out of reach.

(Letters from the inside 2023)