

The Aerial Tree
by Peter Dann

Looking back, I wonder if my father didn't leave his cherished projects incomplete as a way of deferring some moment of personal reckoning. The projects I am thinking of lived in a state several degrees below suspended animation for years, but were never completely abandoned. I suspect my father hoped that I would see his attitude to these projects as one of tenacity. I don't, however.

People who worked with my father said he made an excellent hospital administrator. That suggests a strong streak of practicality in his make-up. Two of his colleagues made exactly this point with me at his funeral. I must have said something that scandalised them. In fact, I did. I remember exactly what I said, but we don't need to go into that. There is little point having a funeral if family members cannot express upset. Possibly I was upset about things I should not have been upset about, but once an upset is let go, there is no telling where it may lead. These two colleagues, a tall bald guy, plus someone called Robert who tried to put his arm around me, they seemed to feel I needed a lesson in father appreciation, and I did attend their lesson for about twenty seconds. Maybe it was less. It was an unpleasant scene. My point is, there was never any connection between my father's personal life and that job. I am very sure of this. My father would never have brought his personal life to that office where he had to work with people like that bald guy and that Robert. He was just not that easily trapped.

Some other time I will give you the whole guided tour regarding my feelings on this matter. For now I am just going to stick to the bare facts. These are as follows. We only ever lived in the two houses, and both of them were in Nunawading. At neither of these houses was it possible to park a car in the garage, on account of my father's television set collection. The junk in our garage wasn't all televisions, but mostly it did consist of televisions. Every hard rubbish collection, my father would go looking for television sets. His plan was that he would build a ham radio

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transmitter from the parts in these television sets, most especially from the valves. He was not interested in television sets that did not have valves. With every hard rubbish collection there were fewer and fewer television sets that had valves, because transistors had taken over. The valves were getting rare, so it was lucky he had already started his collection when he had. My father thought it likely some of the television sets he had collected would have valves that did not work, and even the valves that did work might be unreliable, and might soon burn out. Even when he had his transmitter working he would need lots of spare valves. These valves were not manufactured any more, and so were rapidly becoming a rarity.

I believe my father thought that when he had built his radio transmitter and had talked to whoever he wanted to talk to on the other side of the world, then my sister and our mother and I would greatly admire his tenacity and will power. I believe he must have looked forward to a day when someone would say how remarkable it was that he had persisted despite all the ridicule about not being able to park in the garage, and having to move both cars in the driveway every time someone wanted to use the inside car.

It was a somewhat similar story with my father's aerial tree. When I was three or four, my father had a transmitter that he had bought second-hand. It was not home-made, like a real transmitter. This bought transmitter was his stopgap, until he could build his own. To help him send his signals, my father had rigged an aerial that stretched from our living room window to the top of the gum tree in our front garden. Using this aerial, my father talked to people in Japan and America, and once he talked to a fellow on a yacht in the Pacific Ocean. My mother told me that when my father met someone on the radio they talked mostly about the weather where they were, and what kind of radio transmitter and aerial they used. Their conversations were not very interesting.

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One night my father's aerial blew down in a storm. After he went to work, my mother collected the wire and left it coiled on the garden bed outside our living room window. That coil of wire stayed there for years with weeds growing through it, waiting for my father to string it up again.

Not all my father's aerial had blown down, however. When constructing his aerial, my father had strung a loop of green plastic coated clothesline around the topmost branches of his aerial tree. He used this clothesline to hoist his aerial wire up into the tree. This clothesline had not come down in the storm. It still dangled from the tree top, and my friends who played at our house knew this gum was my father's aerial tree because of the plastic-covered clothesline. It dangled in a long green loop. My mother eventually said the clothesline loop was dangerous, so my father taped the bottom section of it to the trunk with masking tape. Now our gum tree had white stripes around its trunk as well as the dangling green loop, and it was very easy for people to find our house in the street.

It is easy to see that my mother must have loved my father very much. Every time there was a big wind, she was afraid that gum tree would fall on our house. She also said it sucked the moisture from her garden. Whenever someone in our street had a tree chopped down, my mother would get a quote from the tree chopper, but my father would always say "No, Bette. That's my aerial tree."

Perhaps my father did not really care as much about his television sets and his aerial tree as I imagine. Perhaps he hardly gave these matters any thought at all, and that's the real reasons these shadows persisted in our life. Perhaps, all along, it has really been me who has needed to throw out the junk.

That heap of television sets, and my father's aerial tree: I suppose there was something funny about them, or there could have been, if you had told the story

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right, and you weren't already feeling sad. I don't think that's the case, though, with my father's stone cottage.

My father began his cottage years before he met my mother. He did not know her at all in those days. Perhaps he was going out with other girls, or perhaps no girls at all. It must have been a time in his life when his dreams were very powerful, when he still had no idea how his life would actually turn out. For some reason, he had bought this block of land near Tarnagulla, a bush block, and begun to build a stone cottage. I think this was at the time he was working in a pub. I have no idea how long he spent on this project, but it must have sunk months into it, driving up and down to Tarnagulla, and eventually he managed to excavate a flat area large enough to build a small cottage on, and then he built a kind of iron shed without a door, and then, of the actual cottage itself, he made a start on one wall. He would have done all this himself, one his own, without any help. I am sure of that.

We went to see my father's stone cottage only twice, that I remember. Once it was hot, and the other time it had been raining, and there were puddles where the cottage was going to be. The puddles time, my sister and I both understood we were going to spend our whole summer holidays here, helping our father to complete his cottage, which would be like a cottage in a story book. Once it was finished, we would be able live in the cottage like people did in the olden days, and work in the garden.

On our actual holidays, we went to the beach, mostly, and once we went to New Zealand. I don't remember my father ever talking about his cottage other than those two times we actually went to see it, and the time of the puddles, I know we came home the same day. I'm sure my mother never mentioned the cottage at all. All the same, that unfinished stone wall, no taller than I was, stayed in my mind, year after year. I would see the wall with its sandy-coloured stones whenever I watched my

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father shaving, though even then I seemed to understand that once he had his shirt and tie on, there could be no more thinking about his stone cottage.

I wish that for just five minutes I could be there in my father's presence while he was actually building his wall, placing the stones.

A year or so after my father died, I decided on a whim I would take my boyfriend to Tarnagulla and we would see if we could find the cottage. I did not like our chances, seeing I was eight or nine the last time I went there, but after an hour or so driving around we did find the place. The block was not nearly so remote as I remembered it. There was a new power line running past, and on either side of the block there were houses with numbers on their letterboxes, only a couple of hundred metres away in each direction. That was not the real surprise, though. The real surprise was that now my father's cottage wall rose to a full height, and extended around three sides of where the cottage was going to be. The walls had gaps for windows, and looked almost ready to have a roof built over them. The iron shed was still there, but nearly rusted away.

Jack, who at this time had not yet learned so much about me, pointed out that my mother must have been paying the rates on this land. It was either that, Jack said, or the property had been sold.

Even then it was pretty obvious that Jack and I weren't going anywhere, but I was still into ignoring the most obvious of signs. Jack said some other dreamer must have bought the property, and continued work on the walls. He showed me how this other dreamer had understood much better than my father how to put stone on stone, how the section built by my father was not quite true, whereas the later stonework was quite vertical.

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There was no phone reception from the block. Even when we got back on the highway, my mother was not picking up. I could not talk to her until we could already see the city skyline. She said of course she had not sold the land. Of course she paid the rates.

Some pretty bad rift opened up between my mother and my father after I left home. It would have been the usual shit. I don't exactly know what it was all about, but I suppose I hoped they might work it out, because there seemed to be a lot of fundamentally good will between them. I wasn't exactly paying proper attention. I was in a pretty tumultuous situation myself, flying backwards and forwards from Auckland on account of work, and a guy at work, and I had pretty much taken my eyes off the ball, parent-wise. I know my mother took a trip to Greece on her own, while my father stayed home. I always assumed he was home in Nunawading, going to work, but he wasn't going to work, or not at the hospital. He was working on his cottage. He was building the place where he could live after he and my mother had split up.

I found all this out after we got back from that trip to Tarnagulla, back to my apartment. I did not particularly want to discuss any of this with Jack after I had finished speaking with my mother, but Jack said if he was good enough to drive me to Tarnagulla, he was good enough to hear the full low-down on the stone cottage, and so I told him, and then we had a big fight about it.

I was thirteen when we moved from our first house, the house with the aerial tree. We did not move very far, just a kilometre or so. We took the television sets with us. After we moved, we found out pretty quickly the new owners had chopped down the aerial tree. They probably had reservations about the tree just like my mother. At our new house, we did eventually get rid of the television sets, though it took a few years.

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Now my mother has her painting studio set up in that garage. The arrangement is not entirely satisfactory on account of all the artificial light required, but she is pleased with her studio, and unlike my father, does not seem to have turned her pastime into an impossible quest.

My father, I think, set up every project so that there was bound to be an aching, on-going gap between present reality and some future state that he must have known could never come to pass.

I loved my father very much, but this disturbs me, just as it disturbs me, also, that my mother continues to pay the rates on that place at Tarnagulla. For my mother, that unfinished cottage cannot represent the happiest of memories, even though she and my father were finally reconciled, and neither ever travelled separately again. I can only imagine that my mother must find it easier to write a cheque each year than to stir up whatever she really feels about those three stone walls in Tarnagulla.

I loved my father so much. I could almost swoon for him at times. Yet I find now that I dread the dreams of men. In every wardrobe I seem to find an old guitar, or stowed at the back of a high shelf, a fishing rod and waders, or out in the yard there is a car on blocks, or there is a chess set on the bookshelf waiting to rekindle an obsession. Under the bed, a fencing foil. I dread these chimera that men conjure into existence, and will not kill off. When I am sixty-three years old, I do not want to be writing a cheque every year to pay off some crop-ravaging dragon that the man in my life has refused to slay. Men should grow up. If my father wanted to leave my mother, then he should have hired a van and taken his stuff away. I've done that. I've done it twice. It may be heart-breaking at the time, but when it's done, it's done.

I wish that I could tell my mother all this, but there seems no easy way. She paints her landscapes and her flowers, and she gardens, and sees her friends. Whenever

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conversation does turn to my father, I hear no tone of acrimony. Her main concern has always been for me, that I am not yet settled in myself, as she likes to put it.

Perhaps we just need a really good talk, my mother and I. There's a lot I've not yet taken up with her fully, not least the question of how my father came to get such terrible medical care, all things considered. Also about the early years. And the later years.

She would possibly think it silly if I was to ask her again about the aerial tree. I'm sure she cannot share the ache I feel whenever I think of that eucalypt with the bands of masking tape around its trunk, and my father's evident need to speak with people on the other side of the world by sending a signal out along his wire. But perhaps we could even talk about that one day.

I went to see her only yesterday, actually. I dropped in on the off chance, and found her in the garage, in her studio, as she calls it. She had the radio on, and as I approached I could hear her humming. As it happened, she had started on a painting of a little house that she had seen in a magazine.

We had coffee and slices of orange cake in her studio/garage, with the door up, and we did at least start to talk. It was a lovely morning, and we started, as I recall, by talking about the weather.