

Blue Gum Tree - a short story by Pat Boyle

It was a week night, we were a half dozen guys in our late teens, **hanging around** 'the flat' - as usual. The flat was sparsely furnished, a few old chairs in the **lounge**, plenty of chrome and formica in the kitchen, a mattress on the floor of each bedroom. The only thing of any real value in the place was "the Stereo". Like a **shrine** we would kneel before it, changing records, or adjusting the tone controls. After a time, even this most **holy** of **appliances** grew tiresome. We wanted action.

We got in the car - a big white Valiant, big enough for all of us to crowd in to - and off we went, in search of adventure. We soon found ourselves at Blue Gum Corner, a place named after the lone huge old blue **gum tree** that stood by there, a well-known local landmark. It stands at a minor intersection leading to our town. The trunk is tall and smooth with no handholds for climbing. About six metres from the ground the first branch sticks out over the road.

We parked beneath the huge old tree and discussed what we might do. It was decided that we would use the **tow-rope** from the car to try to climb it. I stood upon the roof of the car and threw the rope over the lowest branch, tied it off, and gave it a good **tug**. One of the guys remarked how the loop at the bottom end of the rope looked like a **noose** - used for hanging. All at once the young **thrill-seekers** hatched an idea - we would **fake** a hanging! I was nominated as 'hangee'.

The plan was absurdly simple. As I stood upon the roof of the car, the rope was threaded down my jacket through my collar and down one leg of my jeans. I put my foot through the loop at the bottom and the car was driven away and hidden down the road. There I hung, motionless. The boys rolled about laughing until, *A car, I hear a car!* Before they ran to hide, they gave me a good **shove** so that 'the body' would swing as the car drove by.

To our collective disappointment, the car simply turned off for town without even slowing. The boys came out of their hiding places and we discussed the situation, surely they had seen me, hadn't they? Then we heard another car, the act was repeated, but still without any apparent reaction. We played the game about five or six times, but as no one seemed to notice, we abandoned the **prank**. What we did not know was that every car that had passed had definitely seen 'the body' and each one, too scared to stop, had driven directly to the local Police Station. Now at that time of the night, the local **constable** was well tucked up in his bed, so the first person dispatched to the scene was the traffic officer that happened to be **on duty** that particular night.

The traffic officer that arrived on the scene that night was typical of his kind; moustached, timid, and not the smartest person in town.

Hearing the siren before we saw the car, we had plenty of time to run and hide in the field beside the tree. I finally felt that familiar mix of fear and excitement we had

been **striving** for all night.

The traffic officer, always the professional, began scanning the area with his spotlight; as soon as the light was off any one of us, we would begin to **crawl** away. The resulting **rustling and scuttling** sounds would cause the light to be turned on the spot any noise emanated from, the crawler instantly freezing. As this would happen another would-be Houdini from our group would begin his escape on the other side of the field. The poor traffic officer ended up darting his light back and forth all over the **paddock** chasing some invisible, suicidal lunatic.

It may be useful for me to **elucidate on** the thinking of the officer at this time. He had been informed that some person had been killed, by hanging, at Blue Gum Corner. When he arrived, the body was gone! and he was hearing 'unnatural sounds' from the surrounding area. As far as he knew, some crazed monster was lurking around in the field before him, possibly dragging a **corpse** behind him - and we thought we were scared!

One of the boys, I had no idea which, had made it to a fence. When the spotlight was off him, he had started to climb it. Now when you climb an eight-wire farm fence, the wires tend to create a screeching noise; this caused the cop to just about jump out of his black boots! He **fumbled** for his torch then ran off down the road towards the sound. He got about half way then slowed and stopped, thinking better of it he ran back to the car calling, "*Get the dog Kevin, get the d - o - g!*" We all knew he was completely alone, so this only resulted in a few **giggles** from the field.

The cop kept looking nervously at his watch, I figured he was probably waiting for **back up** from the local police officer. Once there were two of them, the chances of getting caught were going to be pretty high, so I figured I had better do my best to get out of there as soon as I could. Another screech from a fence on the far side of the field really upset our friend in the uniform. Once more he yelled, "*I've got a gun!*" We well knew that in those days traffic officers were not even **issued with** a baton.

He went to his radio and made a call that really began to worry us. I lay so close I could hear every word, he called for the "*armed offender squad*" and a "*dog team, better make it two*", he had a "*serious situation*" at Blue Gum Corner. Then the police officer arrived. After a briefing from the traffic cop he decided not to go into the field until armed **squad** and dog teams arrived.

Now two spotlights were on the field and none of us could move. By then, Keith had managed to make his way back to his car that was hidden at the gravel pit a few hundred meters away. As we lay in the field we heard his engine start, we heard the sound of gravel beneath his tyres, but the cops did not take their eyes off the field. As we lay in the now damp grass, we all knew it would be a long walk back into town!

As luck would have it, police cars cannot leave their spotlights on all night without flattening their batteries. So, after a time, the two cops began alternating their lighting of the field, allowing us the opportunity to resume our crawl for freedom. One by one,

we all managed to **slip off** and make our way home. Behind us we left what must have looked like a small city of lights, police cars, roadblocks, barking dogs, armed officers and an old towrope hanging from a tree.

When I think back to that night, to what the drivers of the cars think happened, what police believe happened, and to what happened from my perspective, I am reminded of a simple truth - our eyes perceive darkness and light, colour and movement, our ears detect only vibrations in the air. It is how we interpret these images that shapes our "reality".

WORDS:

gum tree - *eucalyptus* - **hang round**: *pass the time* - **lounge**: *living room* - **shrine**: *holy place* - **holy**: *sacred* - **appliance**: *machine* - **towrope**: *rope used for pulling something behind a car* - **tug**: *pull* - **noose**: *ring of rope* - **thrill-seekers**: *people looking for excitement* - **fake**: *imitate* - **shove**: *push* - **prank**: *game* - **constable**: *policeman* - **on duty**: *on service* - **strive**: *search* - **crawl!** *move on hands and knees* - **rustling and scuttling sounds**: *soft indistinguishable sounds* - **paddock**: *field* - **elucidate on**: *clarify* - **corpse**: *dead body* - **fumble**: *look* - **giggle**: *laugh* - **back up**: *support* - **issue with**: *provide with, give* - **squad**: *team* - **slip off**: *escape*.