

The Cake Tree

a short story

written by © Brenton Cullen

Bailey watched the van trundle down the potholed road, turn left and disappear from sight.

He looked back to the seven people behind him. The remaining residents of Crableaf Corner each looked equally dismayed.

Miss Windham, plump and colourful, dabbed at her nose. 'Now what?'

Mr McArthur, with a taste for itchy-looking scarves, sighed. 'Last of the good ones.'

Bailey's mum wrapped an arm around him and young Millie. 'We'll make do.'

Dave from the corner shop, who always wore his tool belt, nodded. 'We will.'

Mrs Silver, the ageless librarian, rocked slowly on her heels. 'Fourteen. That's the fourteenth one to up and go in my time.'

'No more bakery. No more cake shop. No more tea stall. No more CWA markets with scones or Anzac bikkies.' Mr McArthur drooled as he reflected.

'We can try ordering again from the city,' Bailey suggested. 'There must be towns somewhere with a heap of cakes and lamingtons and biscuits and slices and chocolates that we could order.'

The grownups shook their heads.

'Nobody has heard of us,' Georgie the mayor said. 'Or they say we're too far away. But mostly ...'

'Mostly we can't afford it,' Miss Windham said. 'We've hardly two red cents in the budget.'

'Alas,' Georgie said. 'It's true.' She pulled a notebook from her pocket and tapped it three times with her pencil. She looked at the residents who all thought and stroked their chins but ultimately shrugged.

‘No new money making ideas?’ Georgie said. She hung her head and pocketed the notebook. ‘I’m the worst mayor ever. Because I haven’t got a foggy idea either.’

‘Anyone try their hand at baking again?’ Mr McArthur said.

‘I did,’ said Mrs Silver. She blinked. ‘I ate the batter to test it. Worse than a mouthful of scraggy leaves and red dirt. Gave it to Balthazar. He spat it out too.’

‘There’s hardly money in the shop account for flour or sugar or anything,’ Dave said. He scratched his head. ‘What ingredients did you use for the batter?’

Mrs Silver shuddered. ‘Best not to speak of it.’

The residents linked arms and wandered up the main, and only, street to the library slash mayor’s office slash school, where the little grassy square and park benches to the side served as their general meeting place.

‘I’d give anything,’ Dave said, licking his lips already, ‘for a strawberry lamington. With a ton of coconut.’

‘I want Louise cake. Up the wazoo!’ Millie cried.

Mum stared into the distance. ‘Old Mr Paver’s creamy finger buns were divine.’

‘Chocolate cupcakes,’ Bailey said. He licked his lips. Drool pooled into his mouth. ‘A massive pile of chocolate cupcakes. With sprinkles!’

‘And frosting!’ Miss Windham cried.

‘And raspberry drizzle,’ drooled Dave.

‘As many as we wanted,’ said Mr McArthur.

‘Whenever we wanted,’ said Georgie.

‘If only,’ Mum said.

They all sighed. Everyone went home and so did Mum and Bailey. Mum made cabbage soup with lots of yucky vegetables for dinner. Bailey swallowed it, just, but made faces and complained the whole time. So did Mum.

‘It stinks,’ Bailey said.

‘I know.’ Mum nodded. ‘But it’s all we’ve got.’

‘I wish we had dessert,’ Bailey said. ‘I wish there was just one teeny chocolate cupcake to look forward too.’

Mum shook her head. ‘Not likely.’

When Bailey went to bed that night, he lay awake for hours. He thought of the bakery, the last bakery in town to close. It had been three long days since he’d had any treats. Now all they had were vegetables that grew in the paddock and the fish Dave caught and the measly, out of date food tins and maybe some eggs from Miss Windham’s chickens. When they felt like laying some.

‘Everything else can grow,’ Bailey mumbled as he tossed and turned. ‘Why can’t *cakes* grow?’

As sleep claimed him, a bolt of lightning struck. The drizzle began and turned into a downpour. Bailey had his back to the window. Mum was snoring already. Dave was watching TV. Miss Windham was reading a cosy mystery. Georgie was chasing her cat who had peed on the carpet. Millie was brushing her teeth. Mrs Silver was reorganising her bookshelves, of only six books. Mr MacArthur was taking a brisk walk around his backyard.

Not one of them saw, through the mist and pouring rain, a red *something* drop from the sky and land in the centre of Main Street.

The next morning, Bailey looked up the street and down the street, up to the sky and down to the ground. Where did *this* come from? He didn’t see a single clue.

Nothing to reveal where the teeny shrub, sprouting out of the bitumen, had come from. And especially nothing that explained how a chocolate cupcake with coconut and sprinkles, in a red patty cake case, could be sprouting from a thin vine on the little plant.

Bailey looked curiously at the cupcake. Was it real? He felt it. It was. Gooney and creamy and soft and squishy. He pressed his finger in the centre and the cake sprung back. Freshly baked too.

Bailey scratched his head.

‘But *how?*’ he muttered.

The cake did look good. Bailey licked his lips. What if he...?

He checked nobody was around. He plucked the cake from the tree and gobbled it up. He swallowed the crumbly chocolate bits in the bottom of the patty cake wrapper and slurped the chocolate icing and savoured the taste on his tongue as long as he could before it slid all the way down his throat. He shook crumbs from his shirt onto the ground. They landed on top of the now cake-less plant.

Bailey crumpled the cake wrapper in his fist and continued on his way to school down the street. He looked back at the little plant as he walked. His brain whizzed and whirred with wonder. Would another cake grow?

The next day, having told nobody about the cake tree and having heard nobody else mention it, Bailey dressed in a hurry and left early for school. He hoped another cake had grown in the night.

He reached the street and stopped fast. The plant hadn’t just sprouted extra cakes, it had also grown. It was now the size of bush, thick and full with at least five cakes hanging off the leafy stems. A cupcake, a lamington, a slab of marble cake and two muffins, one blueberry and one choc chip. The townspeople were gathered around it, all of them. Bailey’s mum came up behind him and placed her hands on his shoulder.

‘Good Lord,’ she said. ‘Would you look at that?’

Bailey was looking. He and mum went closer and greeted their friends who were circling the cake tree with bewilderment and hunger in their eyes and freshly-licked lips.

‘What is it?’ Mrs Silver said.

‘Witchcraft?’ Dave wondered.

‘Magic of some sort,’ Georgie agreed.

‘Makes me hungry,’ Mr McArthur said.

Millie reached a hand out to touch the bush. She brushed her fingers over the raspberry-pink lamington growing on the top. ‘Where did it come from?’

‘Who cares?’ Miss Windham said. ‘Let’s eat.’

And they did.

They dug into the cakes, splitting them in half, and sharing pieces around so everyone got some of each. They gobbled and chewed until nothing but crumbs were left. When they finished, the townspeople looked at one another.

Millie blinked. ‘Do you think ...’

Georgie slurped. ‘I hope there is ...’

Dave clapped his hands. ‘It’d be a miracle...’

Mr MacArthur salivated. ‘Oh, can you imagine...’

Mrs Silver sighed. ‘Tomorrow,’ she said. ‘Tomorrow, we’ll check. Tonight, everyone pray.’

That night, before they each went to bed, every citizen of Crableaf Corner kneeled in their rooms and prayed and wished for more cakes overnight.

Bailey and his mum wished together. They had spent all evening talking excitedly about the day.

‘That creamy goodness,’ Mum said. She kissed her fingertips like a French chef, replaying the memories in her mind. ‘That was the best doughnut I’ve ever tasted.’

‘The lamington I had was scrumptious and delectable,’ Bailey said. ‘I want another just like it.’

Mum squeezed him tight. ‘Tomorrow,’ she said. ‘Tomorrow.’

Rain poured all night long that night. Everyone sat in their little houses, all on that one street, and crossed their fingers.

Bailey, with the perfect view out the lounge room window, sat up till after Mum had gone to bed – well after midnight. He kept his eyes open long as he possibly could but nothing happened. The cake bush stayed the same. Nothing grew, no cakes or slices or biscuits, and eventually Bailey’s eyelids grew too heavy to watch anymore.

The next morning, Bailey woke with an aching neck and a grizzling tummy. Before he put his school uniform on, brushed his teeth or wolfed down bland bread and a boring apple down for breakfast, he rushed outside.

The bush was gone. And in its place...

A huge tree as tall as a house with sloping branches, six of them, and a green bushel at the top close to the clouds had emerged in its place. The tree’s branches were peppered with rows upon rows of chocolate bars, cream buns, jam donuts, blueberry muffins, custard scrolls and fairy cakes, and much, much more.

The villagers gathered by the tree and plucked all sorts of treats from its branches and happily munched and chatted.

‘It’s a miracle,’ Bailey said.

‘I’ll say,’ said Mr McArthur.

Miss Windham licked pink frosting from her fingertips. ‘Suppose the tree will still be here tomorrow?’

Georgie squeezed custard out from the bun she was eating and laughed as it splattered over Dave, who hardly noticed as he nibbled a fudge slice.

‘I certainly hope it will be,’ said Georgie.

‘No reason why it shouldn’t be,’ Mrs Silver said.

The townspeople shared and enjoyed desserts each night for the rest of the week. Every day the townspeople checked the tree was still there and that cakes and treats were still growing. They always were, and it always was, even more than a week later.

‘Should we tell someone about the tree?’ Mr McArthur asked.

‘I’ve been thinking that,’ George said, sitting below the branches and tucking into a hot cross bun. .

‘Could do with some publicity. We can get tourists in. The tree would bring people from kilometres around,’ Dave suggested.

Bailey shook his head, choking on his Danish. ‘No! It’s our tree, not anybody else’s.’

‘Oh, I agree,’ Mum said.

‘Look, so do I,’ said Mrs Silver, nodding seriously. ‘People might poke about here and bring scientists or doctor who’ll want to analyse the tree and take it away to try and figure out its magic and then ...’

‘And then there’ll be no more cakes,’ Bailey said.

Everyone gasped in horror.

‘We can’t let that happen,’ said Dave.

‘No sirree,’ said Miss Windham.

Georgie raised her hands. ‘Okay, okay, folks. It appears the majority has spoken. No body is to know about our delicious secret.’

A few days later, Miss Windham burst into Dave's general store where the townspeople sat chatting and sipping weak coffee, the only kind they had.

'What are you so excited about?' Mum asked.

Miss Windham caught her breath and slapped a piece of paper on the counter.

Everyone crowded around to read it.

THE GREAT VALLEYTON BAKED GOODS CONTEST

Are your cakes the crumbliest?

Are your buns the creamiest?

Are your donuts the doughiest?

Then bring along your best baked goods to Valleyton Town Hall and you could WIN

\$1,000!

Everybody's eyes sparkled.

'A thousand dollars?' Bailey cried.

'We could be rich.' Miss Windham nodded and rubbed her hands in glee.

'Think we should enter?' asked Miss Silver.

Mr McArthur shrugged. 'But with what baking supplies?'

'Well,' said Miss Windham, his eyes growing, 'we don't *need* any baking supplies.

We don't have to bake at all. We have cakes already. Remember?'

Everyone slowly moved their heads to look at the cake tree right outside.

'They are the most delicious cakes ever,' said Millie. She smacked her lips.

'Wouldn't that be cheating?' Mum whispered.

'Yeah, we haven't actually baked them ourselves, like the other contests would have done,' said Dave.

'But,' Mrs Silver said, 'we do need that money. The town needs that money.'

And everyone slowly nodded because Mrs Silver was very right. They all looked to Mayor Georgie.

‘It’s up to you,’ said Miss Windham.

Georgie thought. Long and hard. A smile crept across her lips.

‘Dave, fetch your ladder,’ Georgie instructed. ‘Bailey, grab some boxes. We have cakes to pack.’

It took six hours to drive to Valleyton, the biggest and nearest city to Crableaf Corner. Bailey thought it was a little embarrassing to ride in Georgie’s campaign van with her face slapped on the side, along with the slogan *PLEASE, PLEASE, VOTE FOR ME (please)*.

Everyone squashed into the van, each with a Tupperware on their lap of a variety of treats from the cake tree.

‘So the contest judges can try a bit of everything,’ Miss Windham said.

Bailey had a box of jammy lamingtons on his lap. He had to keep talking himself out of opening the box lid to peek inside and steal a lip-smacking glimpse of the yummy goodies. After hours of driving, everyone was relieved to pile out of the van and stretch their legs when Georgie finally parked in front of the tall city convention hall where the baking contest was being held.

Bailey and Millie marvelled at the tall buildings and bustling people and colourful attractions.

‘Wow, I can’t believe how long since I’ve been to the city,’ Mrs Silver said.

All the adults nodded in agreement. Bailey and Millie marvelled with wide eyes. This was the first time either of them had ever been outside of Crableaf Corner.

‘Come on,’ Georgie said, locking the van, ‘the contest starts soon. We better check in.’

They rushed into the town hall where a bevy of people with trays and stands of glorious-looking cakes were organised on rows of trestle tables. The wafting smells of freshly-baked goodies was irresistible.

‘Not as glorious as our magic tree cakes,’ Dave whispered with a wink.

The group set their containers of cakes down on their designated table and waited for the judges to make their way down the row to them. The judges removed the lids of each contestant’s container, studied the cake, tasted it and wrote notes on their judging pads. Bailey and the townspeople sneered and smirked at their fellow contestant’s cakes, sure of their win.

‘Okay, the Crableaf Corner Team,’ one of the judges said.

They all beamed and nudged and jostled each other. A judge lifted the lid on the first container in the row, the one Bailey was standing at. He smiled pre-emptively then frowned at the judge’s confused face. Bailey looked down at his cake container.

It was empty.

The judges went along the row and opened all the containers Mum and Mrs Silver and Georgie and Mr McArthur and Miss Windham and Dave and Millie all were holding. The townspeople looked at one another speechless, their jaws dropping as they stared stupefied, along with the judges and their laughing fellow contestants, at the row of empty containers.

The judges stared grumpily at them all. ‘We don’t know what sort of time wasting joke this is,’ said one judge, ‘but Crableaf Corner, you are all disqualified! It is a shame you have chosen to spit in the face of the prestigious cake and baking competition industry!’

With their heads down, they all shuffled miserably, gripping their empty Tupperware, out of the hall.

‘I don’t understand!’ Georgie cried.

Everyone had opened and closed and opened and closed the containers fifty times back in the van. But it was no good. The cakes, the lamingtons, the jam buns, the custard tarts, the scrolls, the fairy cupcakes and hazelnut slices had all vanished and no matter how many times they kept checking, they did not come back.

Mum sobbed. Miss Silver held her head in her hands. Bailey jammed his hands under his armpits, and scowled. Millie and Dave took turns kicking out their frustration on Georgie's face on the side of the van door.

'Stupid cake tree,' moaned Bailey. 'Stupid, stupid cake tree.'

'I guess we don't know its magic like we thought we did,' Mr McArthur said, stroking his moustache like a very wise man.

'What do you mean?' Bailey asked.

'Isn't it obvious?' Mr MacArthur said. 'We must have broken the tree's rule. The magic was for us, only. We took the cakes out of Crableaf Corner. Away from the roots of three.'

Everyone started to slowly nod, their cogs whirring.

'That's ... that's why the cakes disappeared,' said Bailey slowly. He hung his head. 'It must be. You're right, Mr M. We're so stupid. We had a good thing going.'

Mrs Silver sniffed. She dabbed at her eyes. 'And now we've blown it and I'll never have a vanilla slice ever ... ever ... AGAIN! WAAHH!'

'Oh, get a grip, Mrs S,' said Georgie. She had a wicked look in her eye. 'I've got an idea.'

Everyone waits by the van while Georgie dashes off down the street.

'What is she doing?' Bailey asked.

Miss Windham shrugged. 'I just want to go home to Crableaf Corner.'

'And forget all about this,' agreed Dave.

A few minutes later, Georgie returned. She was carrying a bulging bag tucked under her arm. Despite protests, she refused to answer what was inside, until everyone piled into the van and Dave turned the key and started the long journey home.

Not until the city had been swept away, and the road got bumpy beneath the van's tyres, did Georgie finally open the bag. Bailey's eyes glowed.

It was full to the brim with paper packets of iced buns, bags of lolly snakes and chewy mints, punnets of sprinkled cupcakes, and even a few family size blocks of chocolate.

Everyone's mouths watered at the sight. Greedy fingers lunged forward to peel the goodies from Georgie's clutches, but she held the bag to her chest.

'This is our stash, and it needs to last us a long while,' said Georgie. 'Since, when we get home, we don't know what the cake tree is going to be like.'

Bailey's eyes went wide and sad. 'Do... do you think the tree will stop growing cakes now because of what we have done?'

'No!' everyone shouted.

Georgie grimaced. 'It's something we might have to prepare ourselves for.'

Drool was hanging from Mr McArthur's lips. 'But these,' he said, pointing to the bag, 'these we can all eat, right? And since you got them from a shop, we know they definitely won't just up and disappear.'

Georgie smiled. 'Let's just get home and I'll show you my idea.'

When they had trundled back into town, everyone gasped at spot where the cake tree was. Or rather, where it had been. Now it had shrivelled into a scorched stump in the middle of main street, with nothing but scattered crumbs left to show what it had once been.

Georgie shifted the remnants of the cake tree away with her foot, grabbed a spade from Dave's store, and began to dig. She dug a hole as deep as a hand could fit in, then

smashed an Ice Vo-Vo biscuit from the bag of goodies in her hand and scattered its pink-white shavings into the hole. Everyone gasped.

‘No! You monster! Don’t destroy the Ice Vo-Vo’s!’ Mrs Silver cried.

‘That’s for eating, you ninny Mayor!’ Miss Windham grabbed her chest and swooned, the other hand dabbing her forehead.

Georgie laughed. ‘But this is my idea, folks. If that cake tree could magically grow, then maybe we could do the same. Plant a cake tree of our very own.’ She shook the bag of treats. ‘But not just one cake tree.’

Everyone slowly began to understand. They held their hands out and Georgie dished things out: a packet of chocolate biscuits to Millie, a hot sugary donut to Bailey, iced buns and coconut caramel scrolls to Miss Windham and Mrs Silver, while Mum and Mr McArthur handled the lamingtons, and Dave went to fetch spades from his general store.

Everyone spread out in a row and dug into the rich red dirt of the street. They scooped out holes in the earth and crumpled crumbs of all the goodies inside, then flattened the soil again. Before long, there were twelve freshly dug mounds in a row.

Twelve new plantings for twelve new cake trees.

‘Now what?’ Bailey asked.

‘Now,’ said Georgie, ‘we water the seeds, and we wait.’ She held up the bag of goodies, with a few biscuits and cupcakes left from each packet. ‘But first, let’s have supper.’ It rained all night that night. Bailey sat at the window of his bedroom again, watching the street outside, and looking deeply, as much as he could through the spatters of raindrops on the glass, at the twelve mounds of freshly-planted cake seeds. Would they grow?

Bailey squeezed his hands together, and made a wish. Then he went to bed. And outside, the magic began.

All over Australia, in all the streets and lanes and cul-de-sacs and lawns, at every house and home, paper dropped from the sky.

And in the morning all the citizens in all the towns went to work and school and to walk the dog and fetch the newspaper and buy milk, and they stopped and picked up the leaflet from their front steps or driveways.

They read it in earnest, in shock, in surprise, in wonder and in glee.

They conferred with neighbours, they raced to work to tell their colleagues who all had the same note at their doors.

They planned trips and packed cars and filled up with petrol and got ready for a new place to go each school holiday or day off or long weekend.

They made sure they took wads of money to spend and pour into this strange little town that sounded so wonderful, so marvellous, so magical, that they knew it would become years-long family traditions to go there.

All from this leaflet that arrived on their streets.

As if by magic.

Come visit Crableaf Corner!

Home to the ONLY self-growing CAKE TREES in the whole of Australia!

Pick a lamington from a bush or a cupcake from a tree

Snip a cream bun from a branch or a donut from a vine

Visit the general store, the school and library, the Mayor's office, enjoy the beautiful rural

land, the sweeping dusty plains, and chat with the friendly townspeople.

The MUST-SEE SPOT for kids, parents, grandmas, cousins, and ALL TOURISTS!

THE END