

The Guardian

by Sally Houtman

The boys, Trickster and MacCauley, had sat there for the better part of the morning, on the front steps of MacCauley's house at the east end of Old Cypress Road where it crosses Highway 501. The school holidays, for MacCauley, seemed to pass in a series of long-shadow days, like late afternoon all day long. Beside him, his friend Trickster sat, legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed, the *Encyclopaedia of Insects* open on his lap. In a small fishing village with one stop sign and no left turn, you got your entertainment where you could.

"*Coleoptera*," Trickster announced, tapping a finger to the page. This was in reference to the large black beetle-like creature, the approximate size of a two dollar coin, which lay between them on the step, inverted atop a large-veined leaf. Researching the nature of the insect had formed part, if not all, of their conversation since its discovery that morning in a mud rut along the tree-line that separated the back yard from the woods. Trickster rapped his knuckles twice on the splintered step. It made a hollow, authoritative sound. "*Coleoptera*," he repeated, "The scientific term for beetle. From the Greek *coleos* meaning sheathed, and *pteron*, meaning wings."

MacCauley sat up straighter, nodding. His friend, it seemed, had an infinite capacity for the knowledge of such things as weights and measures, coordinates and plot positions, and no end of room for trivia and scientific facts. All of which he was ready and willing to share at a moment's notice. Like the fact that houseflies always hummed in the key of F, and that giraffes had no vocal cords. His friend was the one whose hand shot up in class at every question. "*Galileo!*" "*Gondwanaland!*" "*The Bernoulli Effect!*" The answers came in rapid succession. MacCauley knew the answers, too. They just came to him five minutes after the question was asked.

Trickster was a slight, fidgety boy with a thin nose and the sideways smile of the perpetually bemused. Born Terrance Richter,

he had earned his rather fitting nickname through a series of unfortunate mispronunciations on behalf of a classmate from his kindy days. Confident beyond his years, Trickster had a manner of being disarming in a way that could simultaneously amuse and annoy anyone with whom he had close and frequent contact.

Listening, MacCauley slid his hand into his pocket, felt the weight of the metal soldier he kept close at hand. It was a solid and purposeful object which made him feel secure. He glanced over at his friend. With his down-sloping eyebrows, MacCauley often bore an expression of such focused concentration that he appeared to be listening to no less than three conversations at once. The questions that dogged MacCauley most, though, were the things even his friend could not explain away through science, like the nature of the wave-like shadows that frequented his bedroom ceiling in his near-sleep state, and why the grown-ups that he lived with walked the floors so late into the night.

"The Egyptians," Trickster carried on, unprovoked, "worshipped beetles. Saw them as God-like creatures, carved their images into stone and am-u-lets."

MacCauley knew nothing about the ancient Egyptians. He pictured giant statues with human bodies and animal faces, walls carved with zig-zag patterns, robed people traversing barefoot across marble floors. He folded his hands across his knees, right over left, and gave his friend a sidelong glance. Not being much of a talker himself, he preferred the safety of other peoples' thoughts. But MacCauley had learned through the years that conversation with Trickster could be like a trip by boat through choppy water. You always ended up somewhere unexpected, but sometimes you just had to get off, stretch your legs and walk around.

"They *even...*" Trickster said, emphasising his point with a finger in the air, "thought the beetle was responsible for the passing of time by pushing the sun across the sky. Whoa."

"Huh." MacCauley blinked hard, glanced down, then up at the sky, imagining the sun, a luminous ball, being slowly rolled from day to night. "I wonder how it died."

After a rather engaged discussion, MacCauley's theory was that the insect had met its end at the hands of a predatory bird or cat, while Trickster, pointing out the absence of obvious injury, concluded its demise was most certainly down to lack of proper hydration on account of the recent drought.

"But..." Trickster said, tapping a finger to his teeth. His eyes had that squinty look, the look he got before he was about to say something of great importance. "There is a distinct possibility that the drought may have only been a contributing factor. There *is* a difference between association and cause and effect, you know."

MacCauley nodded as if the distinction were clear.

Trickster flipped the page, tracing his finger down. "Whooooa," he said, an octave higher than his usual tone, "it says there are 350,000 different species of beetle known to man!"

MacCauley turned his head away, considering the very real possibility that he was about to hear them all.

Trickster, MacCauley knew, came by his mind of facts and figures honestly, for his father, a rather large and intimidating man, was the type who woke at 7:24 each morning without the aid of an alarm, rose and washed, ate six eggs scrambled, two slices of whole wheat toast accompanied by a pot of hot black coffee, tended to his chickens and set off for a twenty minute stroll. He then returned home to don a suit and tie before setting off to a job where he managed the accounts at a factory near the edge of town which, for all intents and purposes, appeared to produce nothing but smoke.

"Do you think there is a beetle heaven?" MacCauley asked. "Or is human heaven filled with all the animals and insects the earth didn't want?"

"There'd have to be separate departments," Trickster said. "You know, different areas for different species. Otherwise, if there were things like fleas and mosquitos in heaven, it wouldn't be much of a heaven, would it?" He pulled a pack of Skittles from his pocket, spilling half the contents into his palm.

“Good point,” MacCauley said. From Trickster's outstretched hand he picked out the green and orange Skittles, the two colours he knew his friend did not like. He pulled absently at his shoelace. “Do you think it had a soul?”

Trickster laughed and scratched his cheek. “Nah, it's not a sentient being. Only sentient beings can have a soul.”

There was something pleasantly edgy about Trickster, about his steady, deliberate tightrope walk from one sure-footed idea to the next, the way he never wobbled, never lost his footing. MacCauley, as a rule, stayed away from things without edges, like rope swings and water slides, steep things that dropped sharply away. He turned the metal soldier over in his hand, tracing his finger along the slight hooked bend in the rifle, then across the thin, sharp curve of the helmet.

Through the screen door he could hear the humming of his Aunty Mae. It was a deep, rich sound. His aunt seemed always to be humming one long, continuous tune, one that had no beginning and no end. His mother's older sister, Mae had moved in the year before, the day after MacCauley's eleventh birthday. It was the day her husband, MacCauley's Uncle Walker, a commercial fisherman, had set out on an ordinary morning in late July with his yellow-slickered crew aboard the Schooner Ernestina, never to return again. MacCauley often thought his Aunty's humming was some sort of beacon, a signal that might defy both fog and distance and guide her husband's vessel home again.

He was glad that Aunty Mae was home, especially on the holidays, unlike his parents who seemed to be at work most all the time. His mother worked Wednesday to Sunday as Assistant Manager at the Ale House. MacCauley liked when she worked on Wednesdays. It was Bratwurst night at the Ale House and she always came home late in the evening bearing a tray of sausages on steaming, thick-crust rolls. His father, who owned a mower that only worked when sworn at, and a Hilux that was continually breaking down, had been forced to take on a second job in addition to stringing wire and

mending fences, working weekends at Union College where he swept and mopped the floors.

From the tinkle and clatter in the kitchen, MacCauley knew it must be nearly time for lunch. He preferred his Aunt's lunches over those at Trickster's house, as Trickster's kitchen, he thought, smelled like a mix of liniment and burnt pizza, and the cushions on their vinyl chairs, when sat upon, exhaled in a pained, asthmatic wheeze. Trickster's mother, who sorted mail part-time at the factory, spent most weekends in the kitchen stewing and preserving things MacCauley was certain were not meant to be stewed and preserved. He thought her marmalade tasted rather like unwashed knuckles, and the stew she made each week from summer vegetables to serve throughout the week for lunches, he'd concluded from its rather vague consistency, had to be concocted entirely from a combination of mop water, ash and lemon rinds. Trickster's parents, too, MacCauley felt, possessed the same blandly vague consistency, for they had a tendency to stare across the table past one another while negotiating such topics of conversation as where to plant the aspidistra and what day the glass recycling was to be put outside.

Aunt Mae appeared as a silhouette behind the screen, then in profile as the door creaked open and slammed shut. Hers was a soft, but pale and sullen face, and he could see his mother in the wrinkles around her eyes. "Well, how about that," she said, glancing at the capsized beetle on the leaf. She made a small movement with her hand. "So there'll be an extra guest for lunch today?" MacCauley was glad to see her smile.

"It's a beetle," he said. He rubbed his hands against his jeans. "We're trying to figure out what kind it is."

She stooped and set down a tray of ANZAC biscuits, a melon, quartered, and triangular sandwiches with the crusts cut off. She looked tired, her face pinched and strained. MacCauley wondered if time passed differently for grown-ups, as it seemed she'd been tired so long that he feared she might become unfit to be anything else.

"Hmm..." She took a step closer. "If my college biology doesn't fail me, I dare say what you have there is a Guardian Beetle."

Both boys looked up. Their heads did a bob and weave. Trickster flipped quickly to the index of his book.

"You won't find it in the book," she said. "It's a colloquialism — a nickname given by the locals." She tucked her hair behind one ear. "It's believed to provide protection from misfortune. Your grandad was a farmer. Used to love to find them in his crops. Said it was a sure sign of a good harvest. The role that this particular beetle plays in nature is so beneficial that farmers came to believe their goodness ran so deep that they could ward off negative forces."

Creases formed between Trickster's eyes. He looked down at the upturned beetle. "Seems like it could've used a little protecting itself."

"Wouldn't it be bad luck to find one dead then?" MacCauley asked.

Mae softened her tone. "Quite the contrary," she said. "It's believed that wherever the beetle rests is the place it will protect. It can't move from the spot, so in a way, that's where it stakes its claim, so to speak. Kind of like the rabbit's foot of the insect world." She placed a hand on MacCauley's shoulder. "You've got yourselves a real find there, lads. Kind of a good luck charm." With that she returned inside.

"Whoa," Trickster said. "Beetles are so cool."

After lunch the topic turned to what to do with their good luck charm. A box had been carefully selected in which to place their treasure and keep it safe. True to form, Trickster took on the question of its dispersal as an issue for him to analyse in depth. They lay on the lawn, contemplating for a good long while, backs pressed against the grass until it lay flat.

"We could keep it, and be protected from harm," Trickster said. "But then only one of us could have it. "Or..." he continued. He looked away then back again. "We could take turns. But then if something bad happened to one of us, the other would feel guilty. So that wouldn't work either." A breeze came up, billowing and snapping the three white sheets hanging on the line. "Or," he said,

“we could donate it to someone, you know, give it to someone who needs protecting.”

MacCauley could not help but think about the watery dreams that so often frightened him to wakefulness, secretly hoping his friend would give the charm to him. His gaze turned towards the shed where a rain barrel sat, half full. He began to think about the 350,000 types of beetles, how for every one of something that is seen, so many thousands more remain unseen. His chest tightened, a feeling like the air being sucked out of his lungs, as he struggled to comprehend so many things that defied belief. He began to wonder how many types of ants there were, how many wasps, how many bees. How many planets in the cosmos, how many cells in the human body, how many grains of sand along the shoreline, how many drops of water in the barrel, in the ocean, in a wave big enough to swallow a fishing boat, its captain and its crew.

Something fuzzy inside him sharpened around the edges, dropped focus, then sharpened again. The feeling came and went and came and went, like a persistent wave, or a fish struggling against the flow, and he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do but he knew he was supposed to do something, and he had to do it now.

He sat up in a sudden urgent movement. Trickster stopped his musings in mid-sentence, trying to read his friend's face. And for the first time, the boys' thoughts fell into harmony, their instruments tuned to the same key.

Box tucked securely in his pocket, MacCauley led the way as they took off in the direction of the zig-zag path that led to the bluffs above the fishing port. Past the boat sheds with their corrugated metal roofs. Past the frame houses and summer cabins. Past the run-down blockwork buildings on the cliffs overlooking the bay. Up and up they went, Trickster following closely in his friend's wake, one hand trailing along the metal rail, until they reached the point nearest the lighthouse where the sand gave way to gravel, and then to rocks and jutting boulders.

At the top, they wriggled through a gap in the iron fence to reach a rocky outcrop overlooking the bay. "Here," MacCauley announced, breathless. He pointed to a small rise in the ground near his feet.

And there on a knoll in the shade of the lighthouse high above Pinnacle Point, they dug a shallow hole with a makeshift shovel they made from a discarded can, its label so long gone that the silverish metal had turned a dull green. They placed their treasure carefully in the furrow, then set about levelling and packing the dirt down, marking the spot with a triangular pile of stones. A fitting resting place for their good luck charm.

With the shadows now angling to the east, the boys stood, slapping the dirt from their palms. From where they stood they could see all the way to the outer harbour, to the mouth of the channel through which every boat that came and went must pass. Below, they could hear the ocean, the muffled hum of engines. The sun was low on the horizon, partially shrouded by a thick haze, turning the sea a flat dead grey. Cattle grazing on the big hill adjacent to the lighthouse looked up as if expecting something. In the distance, a foghorn blared.

As they turned to leave, MacCauley paused. "Hang on," he said. "There's one more thing I need to do." From his pocket he produced the metal soldier, and, squatting, wedged it into the gap between the two top stones on the pile, facing towards the sea. He sat back on his heels. In the air he could smell the salt, taste the brine. It reminded him of his uncle's clothes. Job done, they stopped once to glance over their shoulders at the pile of stones, the soldier standing at attention, then turned, and headed in the direction of the path that would lead them home.

