

# The Serpent's Tooth

by Michael Olsen

*Lights come up on DON, a man in his early 60s, pacing back and forth. He stops.*

Jess! Jess! You wouldn't believe it! It was Will! Yes! He was right here! That was his car! You just missed him! My God! After all this time—just to pop up like that! No warning!

*Pause*

*You'd call it the return of the Prodigal Son. I wanted to give him a hug—honestly, I did!—but I was a master of self-restraint. I kept my cool the whole time—the whole time.*

*Pause*

What? Of course I said the right things: I invited him in, offered him a drink, offered him a seat. I sat in the armchair, he sat on the sofa, like it was a Sunday afternoon chat, father and son catching up on what's been happening the past week.

*Pause*

It was weird to hear his voice. It was so much deeper! He was all grown up! I forgot straight away how he sounded as a kid.

*Pause*

He's in Bendigo now, married, the wife is a primary school teacher—just like him. They've got a three-year-old daughter, Mary. I didn't let on it almost broke my heart to see photos of the little one on his phone. Blonde little urchin with curly hair. You would have loved to see her. I actually congratulated him. I did. He was obviously very proud of what he'd achieved.

*Pause*

*(nodding)* He's made the family he never had.

*Pause*

Everyone said that he'd come around, that he'd see sense and want to get in touch again, and here he was. But I certainly never expected it. My mother noted it when he was little. A "perverse determination," she called it. When she told him to come in for dinner one night—when he was just a toddler, and playing in the sand pit—he refused. When she called out again, he just grabbed his Tonka truck and stormed out the front of the house! We all laughed about it, but I knew then that once he'd made up his mind—that was it.

*Pause*

"Will by name, will by nature." That's what you said, isn't it, Jess?

*Pause*

The thing is, he absolutely *hated* the divorce, hated it with a passion. After that little argument we had over him coming to my place for Christmas—I told you I did get rather loud and angry at him—he used it as the perfect pretext to not have anything more to do with me. Goodness knows how much Marcelle was aiding and enabling him. No phone calls. No texts. Nothing. He said he was sorry now—but he knew what he was doing when he was 15. He admitted that. I told him all I had wanted was to be a father to him, and he'd denied me that. He apologised—profusely. It was nice to hear those words, even if they were 16 years too late.

*Pause*

He said he'd kept every single one of the letters I wrote—as if to make me feel better—but I reminded him I stopped writing them when he moved out and no one would tell me where he'd moved to. He'd told them not to tell me his address. He apologised for that, too. I didn't hold back. I told him how much that hurt.

*Pause*

But I was watching him. For some reason he seemed—I don't know—uncomfortable—and I couldn't figure it out. He'd done all the right things: he'd visited, he'd apologised, he'd told me what was happening in his life, he'd shared the family photos, we'd even swapped phone numbers. I didn't know if we would ever play happy families, but something was definitely on his mind. The way he perched on the edge of the sofa, expectant. The afternoon wasn't going that badly, was it? I didn't have to wait long to find out the truth.

*Pause*

Do you want to know what he said? Are you sitting down, Jess? Are you sitting down?

*Pause*

It turns out he wanted money. Simple as that. And a lot of it. But it wasn't for himself, he said. Oh no. Get this: it was for his mother—for Marcelle! Can you believe it? Marcelle!