



The Pine Trees

THEY STOOD AT THE END OF THE PADDOCK,
THREE EXOTIC PINE TREES AMONG
THE GUMS – AND THEY KNEW ALL OUR
SECRETS. BY **BROOKE DAVIS.**

I've been dreaming about home recently. Beautiful scenes with yellow light and family dinners and Mum's smile. It is my happy place, I think. That place yoga teachers urge you to find. A fire so hot your cheeks burn with it, the sweet smell of the bush through the open windows, so many stars in the sky it's like a floating city up there. Small, warm lights on the horizon. People, far enough away not to bother with, close enough to feel like you're a part of something.

I want my ashes scattered there. More specifically, I want my ashes scattered at The Pine Trees, an unimaginative family name for the three pine trees that sidle up next to the winding driveway, out of place and exotic against the gnarled gums, the ache of that dry landscape. The blinding light of it.

There are strangers in our home now, people who don't know that the pine trees are actually The Pine Trees. They don't know that we burnt marshmallows down there. That we lay on the soft bed of pine needles and planned big lives. That I took my first love down there. They don't know the secrecy of it; that the cars from the road can't see you. They don't know the silence of it; that all you hear is the swish of the leaves in the wind. They don't know the magic of this place.

My younger brother and I once sat on top of The Pine Trees feeling like we owned the world, like we were ducking planes, like we were running our fingertips through clouds. I had started high school, he was coming to the end of primary school. Both on the edge of

something. The pine sap thick on our palms. Scratches all over our legs from sliding up the rough bark. What did we talk about up there? Smelling of Christmas and endless forever time.

Remember how slow time could be?

The grass in the paddock near The Pine Trees was almost always past my waist, and I would collapse into it, looking up at the sky for hours. Was it hours? Or minutes? Why did it feel so good to feel far away from everybody and everything? I was

always looking for pockets of time and space to disappear into.

I remember once Mum's hot face coming towards me from the paddock. "There's a snake in the paddock," she said. "Don't go down there. Where's the dog?" She was flustered, tired. The world on top of her. Her shoulders were always thick with knots. You'd press your fingers into them and it was like a bag of stones. I can feel my shoulders becoming hers. Why can't I get her compassion, her openness, her intelligence? Why do I have to get her shoulders?

There were more snakes. On the concrete steps at the front entrance to our house. Dad almost stepped on it. One on the front verandah, when we were eating dinner out there on a hot, hot night. There were always snake skins along the fence above the tennis court, draped over the wire like pantyhose. I can see Dad hitting one

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with a shovel. He must have been terrified, but he was the only one in the near vicinity who could do it.

We had a plague of crickets in the house one summer. They flew about attaching themselves to curtains, hiding behind cupboards and couches, launching co-ordinated attacks in the middle of the tennis and re-runs of *Fast Forward*. The soft thud of them on my temple was the most disgusting feeling I knew. We armed ourselves with shoes on our hands and squished them all over the floor. The sea of cricket carcasses in the clear light of the morning was like war.

There were bees too, bees that found their way into the space between the outside and inside of the house, and they had to die as well, like the snakes, like the crickets, like everything does. Not everything dies because they're in the way, but a lot of things died like this when I was a kid.

When Mum died in an accident, we didn't erase her voice from the answering machine. For five years it was there. It was defiance, love, grief, comfort, laziness. It was mostly laziness. But it sure was nice to hear her careful, quiet voice on that thing.

When you die "prematurely" –



whatever that means – people can give you a status akin to sainthood. Mum was generous and warm and kind, but she was also funny and weird. Not everyone knows this about her. She went to the toilet with the door open, she wore her gardening clothes to pick up fish and chips from town, she could never plait my hair as neat as the other girls' mums could. She burnt my school socks in the microwave once because they weren't dry and I was running late for the bus. And there were forgotten things in the back room that hinted at a life she had Before Us; a mysterious guitar, some philosophy books, a book on homosexuality. It didn't occur to me until I was well into my 20s that my parents existed before I did.

There was a time in my teens when I flirted with the idea of being a massage therapist, and I asked Mum to lie down on my bed. She closed her eyes and I massaged her all over. I kneeled at her feet and pressed into them.

We talked in quiet tones. What did we talk about? What does a 14-year-old say to her mum, as she massages her feet? Why isn't there somebody recording these things? In this world of over-

surveillance, why didn't anyone record the conversations I had with my mum?

Not long before she died, I shared a bed with her for a few months. It was a strange thing to do as a 27-year-old, but I was saving money for an overseas adventure, and my older brother had taken the spare room. After Mum and Dad split up, Mum sold our family home in the bush, and moved into a brand new house in the suburbs. She was surrounded by Bunnings and high fences and the sound of lawnmowers.

After a night out, I'd sneak into the house and feel my way down the hallway, running my hands along the new walls. I'd undress in the silence, and slip under the covers. Sometimes, as a joke, I'd slide my arms around her and nestle into her back. She'd explode into laughter and fling off my arm.

One night we talked and laughed and talked in the darkness. I think we were picking apart my latest boy troubles. My brother kept yelling down the hallway from his room, trying to join in. We were all giggling. I remember the warmth of her body next to mine. I sometimes imagine myself back to that moment.

A few months later, the police came



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to Mum's new front door. I was long gone, travelling overseas, lost in a sea of my 20-something selfishness. My older brother was there. When I rang Dad from Ho Chi Minh airport in Vietnam he said, "You're going to get some very bad news, so you have to prepare yourself." I sometimes picture him sitting in a room somewhere, staring at a wall. How do I tell my only daughter her mother's dead? Is there a Dad School for things like this?

I returned home to Mum's bed then. I slept in it on my own. For the first few months, I couldn't sleep on her side of the bed because I was afraid I might crush her. It is a difficult thought to explain in the cold light of reflection, of distance, of rationality, but this is quite seriously how I felt. Later, I always slept on her side of the bed, so desperate was I to find a way, any way, to bring her close again.

When I visit home, I drive past our old house. The road is paved now. I slow right down and wind down the window. I breathe in. The sweet smell. There's so much space. I feel death and sadness and love and hope and tragedy; I feel all of that roll up through my body. It is beautiful, and horrible, this feeling. I look at The Pine Trees. I want to stop the car, to squeal on the brakes like they do in the movies. To fling myself at them and wail. Or discreetly pull over and think quietly. But I just keep driving.

The Pine Trees stand side by side. Three of them. What have they seen? What are they going to see? Will someone chop them down one day because they're in the way? If I was dying, I'd ask the strangers if I could climb those trees, to the very top. I'd ask if my brothers could, too. We'd sit up there apart from everything, a part of something. Time would become elastic. We'd cry for Mum, laugh for her, sing made-up songs in off-key voices for her. ●

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