

## THEY SAY ...

*They say that animals have a sixth sense for danger and can detect the slightest change in the air or earth. It explains why many of them get highly distressed or flee impending disasters. The animal world lives with the threat of death every day.*

Time moves slowly when you hear sad news. Somehow, your brain and heart form a buffer between you and the world and you move in an alternate state of being. You are like an astronaut looking down upon the small orb, which is the earth.

You remember odd, little things about the day your father died. Like how the wind was fresh, but not too cold. It hadn't rained in months and the bureau was predicting a break in the drought. You didn't believe them. You wore a grey dress to work and regretted only having a cappuccino for lunch as it would be another hour before your break was due.

The phone rang while you were tidying a clothes rack.

It's for you, your colleague said.

You pulled a face as you walked over to the counter; no doubt your husband wanting to know what to cook for dinner.

Hello, you said. What's up?

Plenty, he answered.

Something about the way he said that word brought you to the edge. You were so close; you could see the dark water below.

You held your breath and looked up to see a customer take a shirt from a rack and walk over to the mirror. You knew that whatever you said next would make him push you further and you would fall into that deep dark water.

You took a step and remembered to breathe.

Is it the kids?

No.

A moment's pause; a slight relief, but then you knew.

Is it my Dad?

Yes.

Over the edge you fell into the silence of the dark water. Your heart pounded in time with your screams.

You go with your brother to see for yourself. You run to him and crouch down beside his dead body. You reach out and hold his hand. It is still warm. You feel the familiar bumps and wrinkles of his aged skin and hold it close to your cheek. You close your eyes and remember his hand through the years. Memories rush to you like a child's collage. The strength of his hands when they held you as a babe, their kindness and caring when you were sick, their understanding when you erred and their love and comfort during times of sorrow.

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His hands held the hammer and saw that built your childhood home. The place where you and your brothers loved and fought, and your mother died. His hands guided the spade and ploughed the earth. They were giving hands.

You remember when you were eight or nine and he'd come home from work. You'd wait for him by the front window, eager to share your day. He'd grab both your hands and swing you high like a monkey. You'd sit on his lap and he'd ask you about school. You played with tit-bits from his emptied pockets; scribbled notes on bits of paper, odd nails and screws and bits of dirt fashioned into worry balls. His measuring tape would fall out his back pocket and clutter to the floor, a daily ritual whose sound you waited for.

You stand close to your brother and watch as two men put your father in a body bag and drive him away in a white van.

*They say when a bushfire comes through it sounds like a roaring steam train.  
It blackens everything in its path. The landscape is left ravaged and bereft of  
life. For days afterwards, the soil burns hot.*

You plan the final goodbye at his kitchen table with your stepmother. She looks small and fragile; her eyes mirror your own pain. Decisions you never contemplated before need to be made. Choices are many, the ultimate outcome the same.

You walk around his garden and take a break from funeral preparations. You stand by the fig tree. Its large splayed leaves remind you of his hands. Summer heat was inconsistent, and the fruit was poor. You remember him complaining about the low yield, yet he managed to pick the best for you. He brought you six figs in a brown paper bag late one February day. You shared them together that same afternoon, washed down with a cup of coffee, while you chatted about nonsense.

Tears fill your eyes. You feel his presence everywhere; in the garden beds, in the fruit trees, in the carefully planted rows of carrots, beans and onions, the woodpile stacks and the water barrels. Your gaze settles on the boxes by the lemon tree.

Yellow-Box gum tree seedlings, barely an inch in height, lie in wait for his nurturing hand.

Three hundred and eighty-five! He boasted when he showed you, only days ago.

Raised by him with tenderness and patience, for a bushfire-blackened land. Their fragile stems tremble in the April breeze and you wonder what will become of these delicate babes.

What hope have they now without his love and care?

On the day before the funeral, your children bombard you with questions.

What are funerals like?

Where do we go when we die?

What happens to our bodies?

Your answers sound inadequate. Out of habit you pick up the phone and dial his number.

The sound of his voice on the answering machine both shocks and saddens you. You want to

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ask him, what should I say? What should I do? You replace the phone in its cradle and stare at it, caught between running and wanting to hear his voice again.

It is a surprisingly hot day in the middle of autumn when you say your final goodbye. A long day filled with stories and tears. Rose petals fall from your hand and are caught by the breeze; only a few land on the lowered, wooden box. Family and friends follow in your footsteps with fistfuls of earth.

Thud, thud, thud. The dirt lands on the coffin.

Mummy? Why do people throw dirt? Your nine-year-old daughter asks.

That is the final goodbye, you answer. She looks at you with such seriousness.

Like, when a dog buries its bone?

Yes. Like that.

*They say that the Banksia and Wattle tree will only release its seed under the extreme heat of a bushfire. For their species to survive, they must endure destruction.*

Hours, days, weeks, months; your sorrow flows through time. You try to keep up with the myriad duties you have as wife, mother, worker, but lack the concentration to give any of them the time and effort they deserve. Common sense tells you to take control, get on with it. It's what he would do ...did. It's how he lived.

Poor mum, you don't have a mum or dad anymore.

Your six-year-old speaks the words that invade your thoughts. Her comment, spoken so innocently, pierces your heart. You're alone now, like a strand that has unravelled from a silk scarf, floating in the breeze.

You remember when you were a little girl with a scraped knee. He would say,

Don't worry, you'll get over it by the time you get married.

His comment would both infuriate you and make you smile. And through your howls you would answer him,

But Dad, I'm only seven ... ten ... twelve.

As the years went by and scraped knees became bad days at work or broken relationships, his answer remained the same.

Now you're a wife and mother. You think of your three children and know how quickly they will grow to adults. The world is a big, scary and beautiful place. To survive they need the same strength, honesty, love and guidance that you had. They need to enjoy the same freedom and security of being themselves as you did with him.

You watch the news on the anniversary of another fateful day. The reporter reflects on the damage of the past and locals talk of scars that will remain forever-burned into their soul.

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Rehabilitation is slow, but Mother Nature has been busy at work in the fire-ravaged towns. You close your eyes and imagine his gum seedlings, growing up tall and strong in the deep, black soil and for the first time in months you feel ... hope.

*They say that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.*

*They say that where there is love, there is hope.*

I say, thank-you, Dad.