

The Safe Place

I remember this place from my childhood. It was years ago that I first came here, and yet it feels like only yesterday. So many things happened to me here; so many firsts. You were here for none of them. And now you want back into my life.

We moved here not long after you left. I was only eight. Life was pretty good. Nothing but playing and having fun. A bit of learning, but it was all about being a kid. That lovely little girl age of life when you have no worries and your time is occupied with best friends, teddy bears and fits of giggles, as only little girls can do.

One day, dad picked me up from school. That never happened. But it was okay. It was fun to see him. Mums make you do homework and eat vegetables and go to bed on time. Dads play games, let you stay up late and buy ice cream treats.

He didn't say much. We just held hands and walked home together on the familiar path I had taken with you many times. I babbled on about my day at school, not caring to ask why he was there instead of you. Or noticing that he looked sad. I sat down at the kitchen table, he brought me a snack and then told me you were gone.

“Gone where?” I asked.

“On a little holiday.” He replied.

“For how long?” I asked.

“Not sure.” He said. “A while.”

“It'll just be you and me.”

“Okay.”

And that was the end of it. It should have been a momentous moment in my life. It became an issue a few years later. But at the time, it was just another event in the life of an eight year old. I didn't really understand what it meant, and didn't care that much. I was more interested in afternoon tea and the cartoons on TV that were waiting for me. Then it became our new normal, just the two of us.

We moved house pretty soon after that. To the area where I am standing now. Our house had the most awesome hill out the back. To my young brain, it was the best place in the

universe. There were rabbits and foxes; birds and ducks; and the most awesome group of kangaroos wandering around on that hill.

Back then, this was the place me and dad used to go adventuring, just the two of us. You had to climb a fence to get here. Not a tall, scary one, just a regular fence. Dad said it was to keep the wildlife in, not people out. Many pairs of jeans and shorts were torn on that fence over the years.

It looks pretty low to me now, but at age eight, it was as tall as I was. There was, of course, a paved path up the road a bit, but it was too far away for us to be bothered. You would have made us walk around and take the safer route. But dad just hoisted me up over the fence and leapt after me. Then we jogged down a steep slope to get to the path. It was only a few metres long but really steep.

I'm recreating this journey today.

At age 24, I can climb over the fence without much effort. The slope is as steep as ever and now as an adult, I think how risky it was back then, particularly for a child. A parent would be right to make them walk around. And the metal fence screams tetanus at me today.

I make it safely to the path and the "don't eat the blackberries" sign that is still there. "Weed spraying in this area." I always wanted to eat the blackberries. Kids don't get the danger. What harm could be it be? They're just little bits of fruit. But it was one of the few things that dad did not let me do. Smart man.

Down the path, around the corner and I reach the old bridge that crosses the river. Dad said it used to be a fair dinkum car bridge, before the bushfires levelled this place. That's why we live here now, because the fires burned the trees to the ground and instead of replanting, they built houses. It made me a bit sad at the time, that the trees died. But if it wasn't for the fire, according to my young brain, I wouldn't have my house and my hill, so I figured it was okay.

The bridge looks pretty much the same from my childhood, a grey, concrete structure that would probably survive Armageddon. It's not a bridge as such, just a road passing over a river. There are still dead trees and branches banked up along the side, where they gather because they can't make it under the bridge. It's a bit murky on one side and then, because the flotsam can't get through, it is lovely and clear on the other side, just like I remember.

The tree build-up always reminded me of a dam that beavers would build. In my head, a daddy beaver lived here with his kids. No mum in this family; she died in the bushfire. But many brothers and sisters to play with. Dad tried to convince me to make it a family of possums or wombats but I wouldn't listen. It was beavers and that was it. The influence of American TV. I should have listened. No beavers in Australia. He was pretty smart. Yet still, today, in my head, it remains a beaver home.

I walk over the bridge, pass the rickety old gate, and start down the nature trail. I reach the first of many crossroads and decide which way to go. Steep, flat or in between, whichever way your mood inspires you on the day.

Dad used to pick different ways each time and we used to play spot the birds on whichever path he chose. We spotted ducks, magpies, crows, pigeons, cockatoos, robins and blue fairy wrens (my favourite) over the years. One day we saw a parrot, with its beautiful bright reds and greens. Today I spot only pigeons and magpies. It brings back a memory of you complaining about birds waking you up too early in the morning and eating the apricots and peaches from the trees at the old house. It's one of my only memories of you being there. You wished they would go away. Turns out, you went away before the birds ever did. Just me, dad and the birds from then on.

From the moment we moved here to my early teens, this was mine and dad's special place. Our adventure playground. We used to get up early before anyone else was around and go walking at sun up. I didn't mind when I young. Sometimes, on really hot days, we would wait until the evening and go as it was getting dark. This was when the birds were asleep and we met kangaroos, foxes, rabbits and feral cats. We went actively looking for birds, but we avoided anything else. Not safe, dad said, this is their space at night. But we still went walking, just cautiously. Another dad decision that a mum wouldn't have made.

My favourite walk was always along the river, the path I'm taking today. The sound of the traffic fades and all you hear is the water flowing, birds chirping and the wind blowing through the trees. The perfect place for contemplating.

I spent many hours of my life wandering this path. It was all about bird watching and the adventures of the beaver family to start with. Then in my teenage years, I more often than not came here on my own, thinking about the usual teenage angsty things. Hormones, friendships, boys I might like.

I went through a phase where I used to run back and forth in the scorching Canberra heat when I thought I was too fat. Got heat stroke on a number of occasions. I'd limp up the front steps to the house and stagger through the sliding door. Dad would take one look at me, push me into a chair and fill me full of water and ice. No lectures, just shake his head and say "you are not fat" and then make me eat an ice cream.

I had my first kiss here, along this river. At age 14, with a boy from school. Josh was his name. We were partners in a science assignment, observing nature. We'd been here a few times together but there was no romance, at least from my perspective. We were sitting on the dirt path, watching for birds, and he leaned over and kissed me on the lips. A sweet, soft gentle kiss. It was unexpected but kind of nice. We didn't talk about it afterwards, just walked back to the road, said goodbye to each other and went our separate ways. It was a one off. We nodded hello to each other all through to Year 12 but it was never mentioned again. I haven't seen him in years. We did get an A for that assignment.

A few years later, I had another first with Dylan, my first serious boyfriend, in this place. You can fill in the blanks on that one.

Around the same time, this is the place I used to come to wonder why you left. Why I was the only kid without a mum. It was the only time I ever missed you, when I was walking here alone, just listening to the birds and the wind in the trees. Many anxious, tearful walks took place here. What did I do wrong? Was I too naughty? Why did you hate me? I wish I could tell my 14 year old self, that it wasn't anything I did, it was you, not me.

Today, a decade later, the path suits me because I am once again here for contemplating about you. I'm on my way home to see you for the first time in 16 years. You found me through social media and messaged me to get together. I ignored it for a few days and then after a couple of sleepless nights, I told dad. He was surprised, but said I should meet you here. I haven't lived in this house for a couple of years but he suggested we do it here, my comfortable place, my safe place. Now, the moment has arrived and I need a few minutes to myself, so I have returned to my special adventure place.

I take one last look around at the river and trees and take a deep breath. I turn around and head to the house. Over the bridge, up the slope, jump the fence and down the street.

I swing open the gate and hear the familiar squeak that dad never got around to oiling. I walk up to the house. No, to my home. This is my home. Just me and dad. I lived in a place before this but that was just a house, this is home.

I walk up the path to the door, the well-trodden path home. I hear the comforting voice of my dad and a strange woman's voice as I open the door. This is the first time I have heard your voice in over a decade. It is completely alien while also being oddly familiar.

I pull open the door and head into the future.