

The Grief Tree

Vanessa Turner

*I see your face
And I will survive*
— INXS

A tree sees many lives come and go beneath its great branches. Some lives leave their mark carved deep into the bark, while others fade away like a dream, as if they had never been quite real. But beneath the tree, the ghosts of the past linger on, living only what they have lived before. These are the memories that have sunk so deep that they cannot be cut out, by chisel or axe, and they remain for those who wish to see.

Sam loves Jessica
1760

“Please. Please. Don’t go.”

The girl reached out her hand, pleading, her face tear-streaked and pale in the moonlight. “Please stay.” And her other hand curved around her belly, as if protecting the life that lay within.

But the boy stepped back, ducking out of the shadow of the tree, and watched impassively as she began sobbing again, the hand she held out to him clutching at air.

“I cannot, my father cannot know of this. I must go.”

This, the same voice that had whispered in her ear almost every night, murmuring words of love and sweetness. The same voice that had told her he loved her, with all his heart, for eternity.

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This the voice that now spoke with such coldness, like the cruel chill of winter that could bite deep into one's bones and turn one's body to ice.

"But what will happen to me?" She whispered brokenly, sinking to the ground.

"I don't know." He had not an inch of care in his voice, as he turned to glance over his shoulder. "I have to go, I'm sorry."

He began to step back further and then she was at his feet, sobbing and trying to hold his trousers with hands that shook so violently she could only swipe and miss, again and again.

And he moved away, further, his mouth curled in disgust.

"I have to go."

"But you love me," she whispered, staring up at him through a haze of tears. "You said you *loved* me."

He shook his head and did not answer, save to turn and walk away into the night.

"*Oh please*" The girl sank back on the grass, leaning against the willow's trunk. "Oh please don't leave me like this."

But he left, fading away like a shadow.

Reaper

1970

Five men and one boy gathered at midnight beneath the willow tree.

They were tall, and wore heavy black jackets on their shoulders and solemn expressions on their faces.

They did not speak as they met; their words were voiceless, flickering between the men like a candle flame, igniting and dampening, loosening and hissing with the gentle breeze.

Above them, the willow's great branches shadowed the sky like rivers of black. Tangling and entwining then spreading out until they faded into nothingness, and drooped back to land like tears.

The young boy stood by the tallest of the men, his hands buried deep in his pockets. He would be at most 15 years, and he stared without moving at the inscription on the tree.

They were the last words of his father, written out playfully in rhyme, the words of love and laughter tragic in the aftermath of his death, a reminder of all they had lost.

His words would never be forgotten.

They stood still for an hour, their heads bowed. There was no movement in the night save for the breeze that rustled the leaves above them, and in the silence, each were lost in their own memories. Finally, the tallest of them stirred, and placed a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Come, son," he murmured.

The boy wrenched his arm away and ducked out from under the tree. He stood silent in the moonlight, waiting for others to join. One by one they did, and again the tallest of them came to his side, but this time he did not attempt to speak or touch.

Together they walked back across the paddock to their cars. In another year they would be back, drawn from their own lives to this memory of the one night when they had lost so much.

Grief brought men together, when the tattered remnants of a youthful friendship could not.

We were here

2006

"This is my favourite place in the whole world." Ari Daniel's voice was filled with a soft reverence as she ducked under the willow's tranquil branches. Inside the leafy curtains the willow was a great dome of tangled vines. Her fingers moved over the deeply chiselled message in the trunk her grandfather had left, and she felt strangely comforted. Moonlight splattered down through the foliage, forming small puddles of silver on the ground that shifted and swayed with the breeze.

"Lie down ..." she said, turning to the other girl, "and then look up."

They lay for a time, staring up at the stars that peeked through the willows leaves.

"Mum says this tree's full of memories." Ari whispered, "Sometimes, if you listen close, you can hear their voices. And my

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brother said that he once saw a ghost lady dangling from that branch.” She pointed at the thickest of the branches above them.

Her eyes wide, the other girl snuggled deeper into her covers.

“Let’s try,” she whispered.

They lay still for a time, listening to the breeze as it caressed the leaves, making them tremble and shiver. Slowly, the wind began to pick up, and the rustling grew louder, until the girls could no longer even hear their own breathing.

“It’s making voices ...” Ari murmured.

Please. Please. Don’t go.

The two girls stared at each other, then wordlessly moved closer together.

The leaves rustled louder and Ari had the thought that they were crying.

Don’t go.

The wind blew harder.

Don’t go.

The willow’s branches shifted together, creaking.

Harder and harder the wind blew, leaping from branch to branch, dancing about the girls, drawing its long fingers through their hair and licking their skin with its cool, salty tongue.

“Ari...”

Don’t go!

A branch snapped with sickening finality and the wind wailed, crying to night sky its pain.

Then silence.

The wind retreated as quickly as it had come, and the girls were left, shivering and anxious.

“Dad calls this the grief tree.” Ari sat up, and looked up at the heavy branch. “And I think she was trying to tell us something.”

... and the memories go on ...



Vanessa Turner wrote this essay in 2007 when she was in Year 12 at Gosford High School, Gosford, New South Wales.