

Forest friendship

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Commended: 2023 Marysville BookNest Writing competition. Open section

It was a shock to learn that Jennifer's breast cancer had recurred with a vengeance five years after her initial treatment, with secondaries showing up in her bones. There was a three further difficult and painful years leading up to her death, with recurrent hopes of a cure constantly dashed. Graham still recalled all too clearly those excruciating last months when he carried Jennifer's ever-lighter frame upstairs to the bedroom each night. On several occasions he was aware of the egg-shell-thin bones breaking even as he held her in his arms.

After the funeral, Graham had turned more and more to the solace of painting. He had dabbled with brushes and paints before his retirement a year after the funeral, but now he was free to fully indulge his hobby. He mostly enjoyed painting landscapes and had a particular enthusiasm for depicting trees in considerable and painstaking detail.

Even before Jenny's death he had indulged himself in solo camping trips in the state forest near Eildon. He had found a secluded spot in a scarcely discernible track leading away from the forest road. About half a kilometre in he had discovered a pond with water lilies in a patch at the edge, croaking frogs, dragonflies and warbling birds in the undergrowth. The pond was surrounded by seven magnificent mountain gums with smaller trees growing between them. He visited this secret location three or four times per year spending a week or so creating an image of the pond and the trees in different seasons, different light conditions, different weather and from various perspectives. He completed the paintings at home over the subsequent weeks.

Graham had a collection of around twenty such paintings stored in his garage. The latest depiction was displayed on the wall of his living room only to be relegated to the garage when a new one was completed. Friends and family were curious as to where the pond was to be found, but Graham was vague and cagey about this, giving only a rough indication of its location.

On his latest trip in late Autumn, Graham was shocked to find that large white crosses had been painted on all his trees and many others in the surrounding forest.

This was a desecration. These giant trees were his friends. He had even given each one the name of a dwarf from the Snow White fairy tale, assigning each name as he felt best suited the personality of the tree as he conceived it. That night he drove into town and visited the local pub. He asked about the white crosses and his worst fears were confirmed. The marked trees were those that had been slated by the forestry commission for felling and transport to the sawmill. This outrage, which to Graham was tantamount to murder, was scheduled for two weeks' time.

Graham felt bewildered and desperate. He knew that he had no hope of influencing the forestry commission whose processes and decision making was lost in a hopeless maze of bureaucracy. He would have to act alone and quickly. He set to work the next day, starting on Doc, the largest of his trees. He carefully blended paint to match the varying colour and texture of the bark. With meticulous effort he slowly obliterated the white cross. It was not simple as even small discrepancies of colour or sheen gave the game away. It took nearly two days to get the first tree right. Though he was a perfectionist Graham had to accept some little blemishes as there was a deadline to be met.

At the end of the second day of working on obliterating the white crosses, the weather closed in. He should have headed off home, but the matter was too urgent. He shivered in his tent as the rain beat down and the cold winds blew. After two days the sun came out and Graham set back to work. It was easier now that he had mastered the technique for this unusual challenge, and he made good progress.

He became aware of the cough when he reached Sleepy, his fifth tree. By the time he reached the last tree, the one he had designated as Sneezy, he had a raging fever, a hacking cough and increasing disorientation. He felt he had not done a particularly good job on Sneezy, but he was now somewhat delirious. He hastily dismantled his tent, stowed his paints and equipment in the car and drove somewhat erratically back to civilisation.

In hospital, he was put on powerful antibiotics for pneumonia, but his fever did not abate, his breathing worsened and he deteriorated rapidly over the next three days. On the last day, as he lay there breathing stertorously, he imagined himself lying in a little boat in the middle of his pond beneath a blue sky on a sunny day. As he drew his last breaths, the trees slowly bowed to him from around the edge of pond, their leafy heads blending together to form a canopy above him and increasingly blocking the light. He drifted languidly into the darkness feeling warm and rewarded and totally loved.

