

Under the great gum tree

The gum tree grew tall, so tall in fact people came to know it because even through the scrub and thick bush they seemed to be able to tell that particular gum tree from any other.

Joshua and Wendy Pike planted it the day Joshua came home. Wendy took him to the heart of their bush land property where a giant hill stuck out from the surrounding hills with pride. It was only proper the hill be called Mount Proud even though it wasn't a true mountain.

The day Joshua came home he was a changed man, as was many who had seen and done terrible, horrible things and lived to tell their horrifying tales. The day they planted the gum tree though he seemed to change, his mood shifted a little from the deep dark place it had been settled in for so long.

When their daughter Gina Marie was born he seemed to come back even more from that bad place and he began to live again. He revelled in his life as a father and a farmer, as a husband and a young man whose life is ahead of him.

As Gina Marie grew older Joshua would take her to see the gum tree on Mount Proud. He would drive the four-wheel motorbike out there, over the track years of vehicles had worn into the earth. And when they got there he would carry her to sit beneath the gum tree and tell her tales of his own childhood. Funny tales and happy tales, then as Gina Marie got older, mysterious and serious tales.

What never changed though was the tale of the day she was born.

"I held you in my arms for the first time and it was like coming into the light" he would tell her gently, awe and happiness in his voice, "I had never realised I was in the darkness until I held you, but then I realised I was and stepped into the light and happy world you and your mother were in"

"Where's the dark place Daddy?" Gina Marie would ask, not entirely understanding what her father was saying.

"It's in my head baby girl" he would say gently then kiss her forehead and sing to her the same song he always sung. Joshua's voice was the clearest, most beautiful voice Gina Marie had ever heard and she insisted he teach her as well as dance. Joshua would laugh and dance giddily to his own voice until he lost his breath and had to stop.

Over the years their visits to the gum tree became less frequent. Joshua and Wendy had three more daughters and as each grew older they needed more attention as did the farm that had belonged to Joshua's grandfather. He and Joshua's father were buried at the back of the property under a bushel of wattle and peppercorn trees.

Gina Marie grew up and moved away. She married a young man from Bourke and they acquired a property along the Darling River. For years they lived on that property but not once did Gina Marie call it home. She always felt that something was missing and that fact seemed to come between her and her husband time and time again.

Then one day the phone in the kitchen rang and Gina Marie listened as her mother cried and told her about Joshua's failing health.

"You have to come home Gina Marie" she said, tears in her voice and Gina Marie was sure they were coursing down her mother's face. Wendy wasn't known for her crying,

like any tough farmer's wife she knew that tears solved nothing. But they took exception to something like this.

"I'll be there soon Mum" Gina Marie said and hurried to the car with a suitcase in hand.

When she arrived Gina Marie saw that she was the last of her family to arrive. Her sisters cars were already parked outside the house and all three of them were gathered on the veranda surrounding their mother with their comfort and protectiveness.

When Gina Marie pulled up Wendy stood up and hugged her daughter fiercely. A hug which was returned in full by Gina Marie.

"I'm glad you came" Wendy whispered, her voice hoarse from crying.

"I had to" Gina Marie replied simply. Nothing could have kept her from her father.

"Where's Bill?" one of her sisters, Ellen, asked.

"He couldn't come" said Gina Marie vaguely. Her husband had set her an ultimatum; she could either go to her father's side and be with him or stay on the farm and be with her husband. Gina Marie hadn't had to think for a moment what her choice was.

Gina Marie stepped into her family house and at once felt at home. This was her home, she finally realised that now.

Her father was sitting propped up on the couch with a wool blanket covering his legs. His face was pale and thin, his mouth open as he gasped in breath, his eyes tired and drooping with the weight of keeping them up.

"My Gina Marie" Joshua croaked weakly and gave his eldest daughter a lopsided smile.

"I'm home Daddy" Gina Marie said then burst into tears and clung to her father.

For a while Joshua indulged her then he pushed her away gently and said, "Enough of that baby girl, no more tears" he smiled at her, "Take me to the gum tree"

Gina Marie didn't have to ask which one. She helped him up and into the farm car; she knew he was too weak to hold onto her on a motorbike, and then she drove him up through the tracks and to the heart of their home.

She helped him to the tree and propped him up against its sturdy trunk.

For a few moments Joshua stared into space, studying the trees and valleys and rivers he must have seen a hundred times but never got tired of seeing.

Then he began to sing and Gina Marie cuddled into his side as he sung the song some of his army buddies had taught him. They had all had children and liked to sing the song to remind them they would get home someday and see their kids.

When he finished he was quiet for a moment then he started up again and this time Gina Marie began singing too:

Bye-o-baby,

Bye-o-baby, baby.

Bye-o-baby.

Bye-o-baby bye.

Daddy still loves you.

Daddy still love loves you.

Daddy still loves you.

Though he's gone to war.

"Dance baby girl, dance" Joshua said between breaths then started singing again.

Gina Marie got up and danced for him, twirling and swaying and bowing and bopping. She danced even when he was silent and couldn't sing any more. She danced even when she knew she should stop and check on him.

But some part of her knew she didn't need to check on him so she danced. Joshua Pike was free now. He was forever free of that dark place Gina Marie and the great gum tree which towered over her as she swayed to the beat which she could only hear in her soul. Years later, after the funeral and the sadness, and long after Gina Marie had moved in and took over running the farm, and after her mother had passed away in her bed after a long and terrible sickness, and after Gina Marie had re-married and had her own children, the great gum tree still stood tall and strong. Not a single storm could blow it over, not a lightning strike or bushfire could touch it.

Just as her father had done Gina Marie took her children to the gum tree on Mount Pride and told them stories of her youth.

She taught them the song her father had entrusted her with and taught them to dance to the beat of the music in their soul.

She took them to see their grandparents and their great grandparents and their much older ancestors that were buried in the cemetery at the back of the property under the bushel of wattle and peppercorn trees.

Generations later, long after Gina Marie's grandchildren were dead and buried, the gum tree finally fell. It crashed to the ground and tore a great hole in the earth like a wound. The Pike's who still owned the land replanted the great gum tree from a seedling in its leaves and continued to dance and sing the war song Joshua Pike had taught Gina Marie long before.

No one could remember where it came from or who had made it up but it was much a part of them as the great gum tree which grew on the top of Mount Pride and surveyed its surroundings like a wary old man who had seen this sight a hundred times but never got tired of seeing it.