

## Vanished

The dry leaves crunched under my worn sneakers. The air was thick, almost as dry as the crusty earth beneath me. The sun had beat down on it day after day, year after year. Another year, another summer, another relentless drought. I looked up at the searing sun that pierced through the godlike trees that seemed to bow to their master. In front of me I could only see a metre or two ahead. The path was finished, nonexistent even. The vegetation had overgrown across what was once a bush track for the most adventurous bushwalkers – that's not me, so I guess you could say I'm crazy for being here. A day out here was hellish. A year would be... Impossible. It was 2 years since Patrick disappeared, not a shoe or a hat was left, not a single trace. Dozens of cars, camera crews, chaos, screams and noise, but today nothing, just the wind and my shoes taking the same steps he took, desperate to find an answer. A tingle was sent down my spine, the trauma of what happened last year had haunted me. Every move, every sound was amplified. I stood there alone, It was like the wind was whispering secrets to me, secrets about him. It had changed here since the disappearance of Patrick, the nights were darker and the clocks didn't move.

And yet, time drudged on and I feared the worst. The daunting realisation that my family would probably be worrying about me hit me like a freight train. Just before I turned back, the ground sank under my feet which gave me an uneasy feeling. I staggered my way across the bush, the bags felt heavier each step I took. A glint of light appeared under a leaf, the familiar rounded silver ring, could it be...

A key ring. *Wait, I know that key ring!!*

First day of school, his chubby legs carried him to the school gates. His bag seemed huge compared to him. His small key rings jingled and jangled as he walked. My eye caught the one with the image of Patrick and I unwrapping our presents.

He slowed down, watching me, his eyes were soft, hidden beneath tightened eyebrows. He held my hand. “Are you going to be in my class?” I remember the naivety in his young voice and the hope that I’d say yes. “No” I responded. “I’ll see you at lunch.” It wasn’t long before we parted ways. He went to his class and I to mine. And I could still hear the key rings.

As I stood over this treasured piece of my brother. Suddenly... the shape, colour and material was altogether different. I picked it up in my fingers, inspecting it and my heart sank. *A beer cap, rusted and bent.* I had been so wrong. The bronze coloured piece of trash fell to the earth and was almost completely out of view once again. My body felt anchored, stuck and I didn’t want to drag it around anymore. I didn’t want to ask anymore questions, or have any more unanswered wishes. I just wanted movement. For my life to move forward without the familiar and inevitable sting of my brother not being here. In what felt like a daze when the world spun and churned around me, within me, I lost my balance and fell. The crash, burn and stabs of twigs and trees was an unforgiving catch as I plummeted into the thick bushland. My body, like a rag doll, a slave to gravity’s whim, finally found the ground and fell in a heap. I couldn’t move.

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The early morning chill made my skin prickle. It all set in. The dread of coming here, dying here...I would melt into the earth and one year from now I’d be a disaster story. My parents would carry another burden. Cruel, cruel world. I couldn’t have that, they’d been through enough.

“Ah!”

My voice echoed through the trees and nearby valley, only to be heard by the animals who could do nothing for me. I read my watch. *19 hours*. The dizziness made the hands jumble together.

The hunger ate me from the inside. It was my body’s way of screaming and flailing about.

“Hello!!!!!!”

A howl echoed through the bushland. I turned, eyes darting around the green and grey.

Then the sounds of earth crunching beneath what could only be shoes. That heavenly sound! I never thought it could ring so sweet!!

“I’m here!” I screamed.

A moment later my sister and a man in high-vis came towards me. She embraced me, tears in her eyes and a wail in her throat. We cried for what felt like forever. For me, for Patrick, for us all.

I was safe. The same ending hadn’t befallen Patrick, but I was going to make sure I was there for my family until he came home to us. I know the hope was dangerous, but it is all I have.