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Big Sister

by MaryPat Campbell

The shocking news sounded hollow in my ear as I listened to my father's voice on the phone. It came at me from far away like a slow rumbling train in the night. I knew it would get louder before it quietened and then I wouldn't hear it anymore.

My father's voice, strained, hesitant and stumbling as he tries to tell me what happened.

I remember I kept saying things like, "what? What are you saying?" I don't think I heard properly Dad, Peter - what?"

My father's voice and my confused questions float away as I look out the window at the roofs and trees beyond and a cat sunning itself on the garden wall.

Peter was younger than me. It wasn't possible that he was gone. It didn't register. I hadn't seen him in over a year, he was just away. I didn't think about him much except to feel jealous occasionally when he would text or zoom us at home to brag about his travelling adventures.

I moved through the days like a severed head that finishes a sentence, unaware of the impact of what I was saying. "Peter died," I would say to friends of his and mine. At first it sounded funny, I had to stop myself from giggling and making a joke of it. People looked at me in horror, as if I was mad. I did become a bit mad, you do when someone dies. After the black humour and the horror, came the shivering. My body shook while my dead to the world mind stayed at home under the covers.

We can only die in the future, I thought, right now we are always alive. But 'we' isn't Peter and me anymore, it's just me now, his big sister, sensibly here at home while he, always the adventurer, is gone and won't come back. I don't know what to make of it all. We don't really know what happened to him, except a body was found in the outback that fitted his description and his passport. I haven't got to that point yet where I'm bereft and full of crying.

My father told me they are keeping his room just like it was when he left it over a year ago, with all his posters on the wall, his grimy trainers still in the wardrobe, his old teddy languishing on his bed. That's what will undo me when I next go home, his old teddy, mostly bald and missing an arm and one eye.

The funeral can't happen yet. Australia is a long way away, my father says he doesn't know if it will be possible. He wants to go out there, wants me to go with him. I haven't said I will. It would make it real then, wouldn't it?

All that sunshine and desert, dingoes and kangaroos, the stuff of fantasy travel for me. I'm the stay-at-home type, but I can't face going there either.