

I Miss You

It had been so sudden. So scary. The flood of '22. Pip walked over to one of her favourite places. She sat on the long branch which lay close to the ground, next to a mound of dirt that was now mud.

Time seemed to be passing by as slow as molasses dripping from a spoon on a cold winter's morning.

The unforgiving stench of black silt hung heavy in the air, causing Pip to breathe through her mouth to avoid catching a whiff.

Pip looked around, appreciating "Claremont", her home.

The pang in her heart stung, as she saw the familiar landscape torn and ripped apart, like it was only an unimportant piece of paper. Pip's family had lived on this land for almost 200 years. She felt comfortable here, even when she was alone.

Although Pip had felt like nothing could ever harm her tiny slice of paradise, she had watched it snatched right out of her hand. The beauty of the Central West washed away in seconds.

A boiling rage filled the 14 year old. Just the thought of everything made Pip want to burst into angry tears.

"Why does it happen to us? Fires, mouse plague, drought ..."

The word drought caught in Pip's throat, like the scratch of heavy boots dragging through a patch of dusty, cracked ground.

As she looked up and around, she remembered a very different time. A memory made in exactly the same spot. It was 2019, and the drought had been going on for almost 3 years.

Harry and Pip were on the large log, reading the treehouse book together. Maggie was leaning on Pip's legs, looking very content despite the horrific time they were going through. She was very large for a Blue Heeler, but she had the heart of an angel. It was almost as though Maggie could communicate with Pip. They were best friends.

'Oh, dear old Mags' thought Pip. Tears prickled in her eyes, a lump in her throat forming.

'She was the best.'

Pip pushed away the crushing thought of Maggie, and like a movie, the flashback played on.

Harry walked over with his book clutched close to his chest. The crunch of cracked mud, disturbed by a stifled sob. The worn, paper-thin shoes had given in to the blasted catheads again.

"Hey, Harry, it's ok, its ok," cooed Pip, "Soon we'll be out of this wretched drought, and we will be able to afford new shoes, and, ... and not with the stupid bank's money either - our very own!"

Though Harry seemed to believe it, doubt flickered in his older sister's eyes. It seemed impossible to remember a time without helpless bleating sheep, skin tightly stretched over a hollow skeleton, stumbling across the cracked ground, scavenging for a feeble tuft of dead grass.

Harry, forced at the age of 7 to shoulder the heavy burden of knowing the devastation of drought, glanced up to his sister's dusty face. He felt the warmth of a familiar arm protectively clutched around him, and for just a second, he felt like everything was okay. With a sigh he looked down and started reading the Thirteen Storey Treehouse.

Pip looked up with a glint in her eye, "Hey Harry, I've got an idea. How about we make some money and save up for some brand-new shoes! Or maybe we could even help Mum and Dad pay for the pellets, or chip in for a load of hay!"

It seemed so unfair that two men could write a silly picture book on a tree house and get so much money. 'Why is it', thought Pip, 'that so many city slickers have so much cash while there are people like us, not knowing whether they will have to sell the family farm?'

"CLANG, CLANG."

Pip snapped out of her haze of sorrowful memories. Back then it seemed so do-able, but the now teenage Pip knew that no amount of money made from selling baked goods at the Molong stall, could make a dint in her parents' debt.

"CLANG, CLANG."

The large bell sounded again, calling her back home.

"Coming" she yelled, even though the house was around a kilometre away.

"CLANG, CLANG."

The bell tolled.

Pip turned to look at the mound of mud and the hole where the old headstone used to be.

"I brought your favourite toy!" Pip whispered as she gently laid down the worn tennis ball.

"Bye Mags ... I miss you".