

Between

Then

The story of my childhood was set against a backdrop of tall gum trees. The creatures that inhabited the sun singed bush slept and played beside me. The harsh summer days softened into cool blue evenings as the chill of winter crept through the cracks of our home. Our house was old and creaky with a jarrah floor that was perfect for sliding around with socks on. It also had a tin roof which the falling gum nuts clanged and cracked against when the wind blew.

My life existed between those walls and under that roof. That home and the people who lived there were everything I knew. When I close my eyes, I can still see my mother bustling around in the kitchen, doing whatever Mums do in kitchens. My last memory of her was from when I was a child. I was sitting on the floor when she glanced down at me, her oversized denim shirt rolled up at the cuffs and her wrist watch twisted to sit on the inside of her left wrist. My little hands danced over the buttons we had collected over the years. Each one entering the collection from far away times and places. I loved playing with those buttons, sorting them into different sizes, colours, and shininess. I would inspect each one and imagine all its stories, where they had come from, and all the wonders they had seen.

By then the blue evening sky would have stained our terracotta roof grey. I used to watch the colours change as Dad walked back up the drive. Back then, I thought that he brought the stars home with him. In the morning he would take them away, and then he'd bring them back with him at night. In the evening, chimneys scented the hillside, their smoke lazily drifting over the houses. Our bushland home smelled of potbelly fires, cups of tea, and the warm knitted blanket my grandmother made. That place made me feel safe and warm. It felt like bedtime stories, and hugs from your Dad when your bones are still small. That was before.

At only nine years of age, I didn't know anything of the devastation that lays in wait when one lives long enough to endure it.

At only nine years of age—everything changed.

On the third Thursday in June, this night began like any other. It smelled of all the regular things—cups of tea, my knitted blanket, and the potbelly fires—as I was drifting off to sleep, tucked neatly under my Dad's arm. My thoughts warping; like dreams that turn jagged, and sharp, and cold. It's a feeling that you can't quite place. The thief of breath and thought, and its thorns prickle at your skin - no matter how old you are.

The creatures of the bush knew before we did. They took flight, disappearing into their holes as the smoke oozed thick, sinking into the hillside's cracks and crevices. I remember the shadows shifting as their usual cool grey mutated into crackling flicks and whips of orange light. Outside my window, I watched the eucalypts explode, spitting burning oil and wood, like locked-and-loaded bombs waiting to ignite and the roar of flames stung my eyes and ears. On this night, there were no stars.

Over time I realised that the stars came and went regardless of Dad's presence. The people with their big boots and busy agendas left, as though the wind sighed, dislodged them, and carried them away. They took their noisy cars with them, to more important places, with more important people who needed them more than I did.

Then it was silent, and it was grey.

I mostly dreamt of noises after that. The soundtrack of my childhood, once indistinguishable, was now deafening. I often heard the creak and tap of the radio as Mum switched between stations. I looked for her, expecting to find her searching for some melody to fill our home. But when the breeze died, the roof would stop creaking, and the leaves would stop tapping, and I would remember.

From the window across the street, I watched white wisps curl around licks of wind, as though the sodden ashes were mourning too.

I was told I couldn't go back.

I promised I wouldn't.

I lied.

I escaped once and after that, I didn't try again. My home, now a black stain of earth, slipped through my fingers like air. It stroked my skin, silently pleading for me to stay - if only for a little while.

So I did.

I sifted through the rubble, for anything that would prove they had been there, something that could prove that they were mine... and I was once theirs. I collected just one item that day; an ugly, blackened clump of melted buttons that used to glisten like my hillside's stars.

I didn't need to systematically erase my family the way other people seemed to when they grew up. In one sense, a tempestuous gift lay in the wake of the devastation that day. My family were gone; there were no papers to tell me so, no men in suits, nothing but the clump of melted buttons. In one fell swoop, everyone who knew me had been plucked from the earth, along with anything that signified that they'd ever existed.

Now

My 5th floor apartment has one of those nails you need to whack down every second week or so. It incessantly wiggles its gnarly little head back out again, and when it does, I hammer it down with my ugly clump of buttons. Little splinters break off my floorboards as the uneven edges pummel away at it. Usually, the blackened mass jams the door, but when I need it to, it hammers the nail.

I wonder how many times I will snag my foot on that nail before I do something more permanent about it. I probably never will at this rate. I pad into the kitchen, dotting the floor with fresh patches of blood. That nail gauged holes in the soles of my feet more times than I would care to count, and soon the fresh patches of blood would dry and blend into the wood along with the years of blood stains before.

The gurgle of the kettle soothes my mind. I plop a tea bag into my cup and it brews into a storm, warping with the swirling water. It was chaos down there, with the inky tea and billows of milk. My fingers wrap reassuringly around the smooth mug and the warmth seeps into my palm. I bend to pick up the clump of buttons and return it to its place by the door. Wiggly and uneven, I notice a thin gash of colour and light seep through a fresh crack. I wedge my fingers between two blackened lumps and lever it apart. Inside, terracotta and blue buttons shone out at me, along with a dusting of other colours that shone like the stars. It didn't feel right placing the mass by the door now. It was beautiful. Holding the colours of my home in one hand, and my tea in the other, I padded back to my place on the sofa. It the

light of my potbelly fire caught the freshly exposed edges of the colours of my childhood,
and for the first time in years I could smell home.

Thanks, Dad, I whispered.