

My Father's House **by Shona McLean**

You were nine years old, and it was Friday afternoon. When the final bell for the day rang, you were let out of school with all the other kids, everyone running for their bags, jostling and giggling and stuffing any bits of homework in with lunchboxes and jackets. Usually, you and your little sister got the bus home with all the other country kids. But on certain Fridays, which particular ones known only to your mother, she would be waiting to pick you up in the car, and you knew the trip home with her would be a happy adventure of exploring the parcels piled up on and under the back seat as best you could while the car creaked and lurched over the hills and around the winding gravel roads to the farm. There was always a festive air about those Fridays, the exciting aromas of different foods and the anticipation of treats, and your mother's happy frame of mind after her day away from the farm and all that it entailed all combined to make it an exciting and happy occasion.

On that Friday there she was, waving to you and your sister. Seeing her waiting there was even more exciting than usual for you because your next birthday was only ten sleeps away and you were sure that amongst the array of parcels and food she always came home with on these Fridays there would be something special for you. So, you nestled yourself amongst the pile of groceries and some oddly shaped parcels on the back seat beside you and as the car wove its way home you did your best to quietly explore. You were so excited you thought you might burst.

The car swung off the road and up past the mailbox to the gate. You were quick to jump out ahead of your little sister so you could be the one to open it. Then you shut the gate behind the car, being very careful to put the latch where it should be, and as your father had taught you. Then you ran up alongside the car to the house.

Home. You and your sister helped take the parcels out of the car. You examined each one while keeping an eye on your mother's comings and goings to the house and back. Had she bought birthday presents for you? What was in that big funny shaped package? You wouldn't dare open it; you might be sent to your room if you did such a thing. And your mother kept an eye on you as she swept past with another armload. Later you went looking for your dad, but he wasn't up from the paddocks yet. So you found a book and settled down in a corner of the lounge and began to read. It was nice and quiet in there and you were happy to be by yourself for a while.

You don't know how long it was until you heard the thump of his gumboots on the porch. A few minutes later you heard him coming into the lounge and across to his chair. You knew he was there, but you kept on reading. You still wonder why you didn't say hello that day. Everything was quiet for a bit. Then there was a noise, and you lifted your head and looked at him and he was lying back in his chair with his feet and arms stretched out. His eyes were shut and he was making awful noises. One of your big sisters came running in and shouted for your mother. When she came in, she told you to run and get Janet, our oldest sister. She was still down in the paddocks. She was training to be a nurse and

she just happened to be home for a few days leave. You ran to the back gate and you shouted as loud as you could until she appeared. Then you ran back into the house behind her and you heard your mother ringing for an ambulance. That was a new word for you. Ambulance. After that, things got very muddly and blurry and you didn't see your father again.

You didn't go back into the lounge. You played with your little sister for a bit outside then Janet came out and took both of you into your mother's room. She said you could both hop into the double bed with your books. You could have dinner in bed tonight. You had never heard of such a thing. No children ever got into the double bed, let alone with food. You began to understand that something strange had happened. You didn't know what, but there was this fist of fear, a cold lump in your stomach growing larger by the minute as you did what you were told.

You read and played games with your little sister then as the sky began to darken outside you saw cars arriving and people standing around on the lawn beyond the bedroom window. You recognized most of them even if you didn't know their names. They were people who lived on farms around yours, and they were all friends of your dads. They all looked very sad. Your mother came into the bedroom with food for you and Margie. She sat on the bed for a bit while we ate. We were hungry. We had never had sandwiches for dinner before.

'I've got something to tell you.' She said. 'Your daddy died today. He had another heart attack and it killed him.' Margie started crying and you just froze. You hadn't said hello to him after school. You felt worse than you had ever felt in your whole small life.

Later when most of the people on the lawn had gone your mother said you and Margie were going to stay with Ian and his family for a few days. You felt better for a while because playing with Ian was fun, he was your friend. and he had a treehouse and being up in it surrounded by birds and branches and sky was the closest you had ever come to magic.

You were packed up in pyjamas and dressing gowns and taken by Ian's mother further down the country roads to Ian's house and you were given milo and cake then put to bed. For a time, your days were full of running all over the farm with Ian, playing in the treehouse every day, chasing rabbits, and playing with pop guns. Sometimes his big brother Jimmy was there helping his father with things on the farm., and sometimes

Ian's little brother came with us when you went exploring on the hills above the house . One night you woke in the dark screaming. An avalanche of grief, the understanding that your father was dead and you would never see him again. You couldn't stop crying. Ian's mother came in and she did something you would thank her for forever. She didn't try and stop your tears; she just quietly bundled you up in a warm blanket over your pyjamas and drove you back to your home on those dark and winding gravel roads.

You still remember walking back into the house that night and the overwhelming relief of being

home. This place was the closest you could be to your dad. This is where he sat at the table, this is his chair by the fire where he read you books and talked to you. This is the window where you both watched the thunder and lightning storms when they came, and this is the back porch where he put on and took off his big black gumboots every day. This is the times table he wrote out and pinned above your bed when you were struggling to learn them. This is the cardboard boat he made you to sail in the puddles and that is the baby rabbit he sent you out to find in his boot on the back porch one day. This is how you learnt to ride a horse, that is where he hung his jacket, and this is where you knew proper love. You understood he had gone but in some incomprehensible way he never would leave. He was here, in every inch of this place and in every inch of your heart.

And he's been with you in all of the journeys and adventures and catastrophes which have made up your life since then. His photo is still beside your bed, wherever that happens to be. You are now seventy-three and you still talk silently to him from time to time. And you realize now that one of the best things about growing older is you have learnt to be grateful for the point at which the pain of missing him began to change into a gratitude for having ever had a man like him in your life at all.