

FRIGID

BY DANIELLE BRAME WHITING

Siberia.

An illusion we create to protect ourselves from the potential tsunamis.

Sometimes cold, dark, and deafened with silence and screams. Others scorching, itching, sweaty and suffocating. Always... barren.

*Peers at their surroundings.*

This has taken me time. I have sculptured this place carefully using collected experiences from each year of my conscious memory.

Over there, that part of the wall remembers the moment that I won my first art award. I was seven. I loved to draw. The subtle scratching sound of my pencil on the sketchpad was soothingly satisfying. Long flowing lines and short jagged flicks all dancing together to recreate what was swimming around in my imagination. Then the colouring. Mixing and matching the elements of my pencil case to find that perfect replication. Playing with light and dark, it felt like I was conjuring my own magic spells. Spells that covered my wall and brought colour and smiles into my room every day.

Mrs Ingles, my year one teacher, always complimented my art and was the one who encouraged me to enter my work into a local competition. I remember so clearly creating the picture. My grandfather had taken me for a walk down by the lake and we'd sat in the grass watching the sun sink slowly behind the distant shore. It is one of those memories that stays with you like a comforting hug. Grandad sat with me and told me stories about when he came down to the lake with his dad. He also showed me how to whistle using a blade of grass. It was really hard and I didn't get much of a whistle out of it, but enough that he gave me his patented smiling eyes and a pat on the back. The next week, Grandad and I were sharing a different patch of grass, by my Nanna's grave. His eyes never really smiled after that. Even when he tried, the smiles were always blurred by tears. Even when he laughed at some silly



joke you told him or some piece of slapstick me and my brother had rehearsed for his amusement, the light inside him stayed extinguished. So, at the age of seven, I wanted to capture that last magical moment I had with my grandad, before his love was ripped away. My own private magical spell that conjured up a beautiful memory. I was reluctant to share the picture with anyone at first. My mum had seen it on my wall and asked me to explain it. At first, I didn't want to tell her. It was like, ummm, like it was my memory and my moment and my spell. If I told her then it wouldn't be so special anymore. And then she said to me, "It looks like you and Grandad at the lake." I looked up, into her face. I could hear what she was trying to say and I threw my arms around her belly and hugged her so tight.

"You know," she said while I held onto her, "I think that would be the perfect picture for the art competition because it tells such a beautiful story."

I let mum frame it and let Mrs Ingles enter it. I went to the gallery with my parents, my brother, and one of my uncles. I enjoyed looking at all the entries and thought for sure that Marco Roberti's picture would win because it was really big and colourful and made me feel happy. I made a large surprised "Oh" face when they put a 1<sup>st</sup> sticker on my picture and thought that it was really nice other people had enjoyed it, the way I enjoyed Marco's. I stood next to my picture with the judges while the newspaper man took a photo and then we went home where I put my little spell back on my wall where it belonged.

Then my uncle came in. "I suppose you won't want to talk to us little folk now you're famous." He joked and chuckled. I just kept looking at my picture and was thinking about nanna. "You know," he kept going, "it's not a bad try for a kid. And it was nice of the judges to give you an award, once they found out you'd just lost your nan."

*Makes sounds of a bomb falling from a great height and exploding*

And in just one sentence he ripped an inconsolable tear through my spell, and undid every other good feeling and good thought I'd attached to my art.

Over there, I call that friendship corner. It began when I was four. When I made my first best friend. For years it was plastered with big toothy grins, teddy bears and lamps. When I was about ten it started to change. My best friend Jamie had moved away with their family to Darwin. We'd had other friends, but nothing like our friendship. We told each other



everything. Shared every special occasion. Had the same sense of humour. Whatever obsession one of us developed, the other would blindly dive in and obsess over it too. Like, once, we decided we were going to become one of those sketch artists that sits in popular tourist spots and draws pictures of people with oversized heads. For the next four weekends we set up a table on my front lawn and offered to draw portraits of anyone who passed us by. Or, this one time, Jamie's nan took us to this chemist and bought us these powdered lollies. They were called muckrakers. Man, we thought they were the best lollies we'd ever tasted. So, we saved up our pocket money the next week and my mum took us back to the chemist and we spent all of our pocket money on the lollies. We were that obsessed with them and then heaps of other kids in our year became obsessed with them too. We started a trend or something.

When Jamie left, we promised to stay in touch. At first we were allowed to call on a Friday arvo and catch up about the week. Then one week, Jamie didn't answer when I called. One became two, two to three. Eventually mum sat me down and said that Jamie's mother had called and asked that I not call anymore. Apparently, Jamie was so busy trying to stay in touch with me that they weren't trying to make new friends in Darwin. What our mums didn't realise was, unlike Jamie, I didn't have the option of making new friends. I wasn't a novelty. I wasn't the new kid with a million possibilities. Everyone at my school already knew me. Everyone else was already in friendship groups and no-one was looking for an extra. For the rest of primary school I basically spent every recess and lunch with my head stuck in a book, reading or drawing. No-one bothered me, but no-one bothered with me either. It wasn't until I went to a new school in year 7 that I finally found a group of friends to hang with. Still, I've always kept them a little bit at arms length. I guess, I'm worried if I get too close they can just take it away again. And that has consequences. It means that in the friendship hierarchy I will always come off as second choice. Damned either way as my dad would say.

The friendship corner is a little darker and more claustrophobic than when it first began.

When things happen to me, around me, or because of me. This is the space I retreat to. Plastered with every little moment that may have been inconsequential to others, but resonated strong enough in my world to impact my life's trajectory. I used to just retreat in here and allow all of these experiences to yell at me until I was a tiny ball of miserable. Each



time I came here I became less confident. Less sure that what I said and thought and did mattered to anyone, anywhere, at all.

Until I saw this sentence written on the first page of a novel

My grandmother was unpleasant, or, at least, my memory of her is.

For who can know how much fact lays in the memory of a child.

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I thought, yeah, of course, my understanding, my vocabulary, the way I translate the world... it's all limited by my life experience. And kids? I mean... mega limited life experience. Like, person's tragedy could be another's 'just a day at the office'. So why? Why should I let my perception of experiences I had as a kid be so very influential on my choices and my self worth? It's ridiculous, right? Once I read that quote, I began retreating into my Siberia with a very different approach. I began to study those walls and corners to try and understand how I, as a child, came to interpret the world as I did. To figure out how that has influenced my words, thoughts and actions, and, most importantly, to weed out the destructive and distracting ones.

It's not always pleasant here and I still have my moments, but you have no idea how much brighter it can be since I read that quote. It's like, someone pulled a huge lump out of my stomach and gave me permission to just, be me.

Do you know what I mean?

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