

I miss them. It's been sixty times around the sun already, but I still miss them. Not even a house stump left to ponder, all levelled and returned to fields. But the same road is here, and the same channel, and the distant plantations, and the green paddocks burned to brown every summer.

But they're not here. Mammals they were, very advanced. *Homo sapiens*. The tall man, the pretty wife, the boisterous boys, the infant daughter. Sights and sounds clattered around them; photographs posed for in the front yard, babies on the veranda, Holdens in the driveway. Comings and goings; summer cricket, February school starts, autumn rain and winter wood-smoke. Christmas days and bonfire nights, bee stings and dog bites. Where did the time go?

Here's one now – the Ringleader, I call him. The favourite, if I had to say. A towhead tearaway, lean and quick on his feet, Smiley-gets-a-gun and Ginger Meggs bravado. He's got a 'Combat' steel pot on his bonce most days, and a handy lower limb is a makeshift M1. There's almost always a younger brother in convoy, a darker version, and he's got some pace on him too.

Here they come, with loops of fibrous rope around their shoulders. They've filched this green stuff from the sheds up the road and in a few days I'm going to be rigged like a spider's web. I don't mind. It's a break from East Side and his moaning. They prefer me to East Side, a better spread of branches for climbing, and even some nailed timber steps decorate my lower trunk. That hurt at first.

Hey West Side, here's a story for you. These kids will truss you like a chicken.

I've got a feeling that - ...

Shut it, East Side, I know the drill. You wish you got this much attention.

Every spring they tie me up with their hay-band huts, all the better to reach the higher branches and the starlings that nest there. Or to just loaf about on their ropy platforms. An elevated lounge room, club members only. They scuttle up and down with impressive skill, the little beggars. Sticks are carried wherever they go, the better to poke bull-ant nests, and clatter along woven-wire fences, and mime-shoot each other. And to just plain-old wack things. Like that blue-tongue the other day, ouch. Poor old *Tiliqia*.

Here they are, trapezing in the late afternoon. On the road to the north is a distant figure, walking this way. Immediately they shimmy down and pelt along the asphalt toward the tennis court, shouting. It's the tall man, with his curly brown hair and cuffed trousers. By the crossroad he scoops them up and carries on to the house, up the driveway and round the back, his passengers chattering like early morning magpies. There are excited shrieks from even-younger voices inside.

They play kick-to-kick in the back yard, the full-size footy out of scale to their small hands. The boys jump and shout. Right-handed Ringo is left-footed when kicking. The tall man torpedo-throws the ball, underarm, and it spirals low and hard. I've not seen the young ones demonstrate this skill. Must be taught elsewhere, perhaps beyond the great river to the north.

The tall man comes and goes each day, away on foot in the morning, home the same way. Sometime the wife is there with a welcoming kiss, baby on her hip. But usually it's the boys racing down the road to greet him. On weekends in the warm moons he turns out in white, and takes the same path toward the cricket ground, swinging a child on each arm.

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In the '20s I was attached to the earth here. A bare-rooted sapling, English Oak, *Quercus robur*. Along with East Side diagonally opposite and two elms. We were a twiggy congregation for a few years, maturing to a four-piece silvan ensemble straddling the roadway and channel beneath. In my 30th year I first fruited, and ever since have been a seasonal larder for possums, mice, and birds. Beetles and ants love my leaves and mulch, and they sometimes feed the many nesting Aves stationed on my crown. I can stash 40 kilograms of carbon dioxide in a good year. I do my bit.

The land was – is – a vented volcanic plain. Flat as a shit-carter's hat, as the Farm hands like to say. Ours was the first planting on this South Road. Clear views down to the pine plantation on Wattle Avenue, then around west to the dairy, the brick silos and the swamp over to the north, and across to the eastern wetlands by the bay. Back then it was early model tractors and horse-drawn ploughs round about. Those nags, *Equus ferus caballus*, were stabled down by the sheepyards. Oddly, for workhorses, they were *always* complaining about the workload.

The elms, *Ulmus glabra*, are so introverted they don't raise a peep, but East Side is a talker, mostly complaining about the morning sun he cops.

Try the arvo blasts I've put up with, and these damned south-westerlies. Yeah, I'm throwing you shade alright.

We're strangers in a strange land, and to underline the displacement we even have a willow for company, in the corner of the family's front yard. Someone tell 'em Old Blighty rang; he wants his trees back. Still, you make the best of what you've got. And you need to be quick on your roots – the neighbours are not always friendly.

A row of eucalypts borders the SS Cameron paddock on the other side of the road. They're juvenile grey gums, *Eucalyptus punctata*. Punks is right, no respect for Sherwood Forest ancestry. Every winter it's the same:

Hey West Side, show some decorum - no streaking allowed! Laughs.

Please – I'll have you know I built the Royal Navy. Yes that's right, the Roy-

Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum then.

Eergh. Drop it, convict. Like that main branch of yours, in the autumn just gone.

You resemble a three-fingered butcher ordering four beers.

The willow in the garden corner, *Salix babylonica*, is a shy young thing, forever bullied by these larrikins. This, last summer:

Hey, cricket bat. How about this heat? Feeling thirsty?

Alright, Chips Rafferty, that'll do. She and I might compete for water, but I won't let these yobbos rough her up. She's very sensitive.

Look, we know you're a weeping willow but there's no need to cry about it. Don't babble on, babylonica. Laughs.

Eergh.

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Here's Ringo, heading out of a morning dressed for school: all shorts and Brylcreem. Toilet paper stashed in his satchel by the anxious mother. His browner-version collaborator waves him off from the end of the driveway, holding the mother's hand.

The bus stop is opposite Melican's, on the roadside where the eucalypts parade themselves. He's a little shy when there are big boys around. One of these prefers to await his transport from altitude, so shinnies up a trunk and takes a seat thirty feet in the air. Ringo, himself no slouch in the climbing department, leaves his jaw on the ground.

Here's the youngest boy as a two-year-old, very small; another brown-hair, with a look of the mother, sitting on the front lawn burbling away. Happy, until a bee drops by and delivers a sting that leaves him howling. *Apis mellifera* are content in their workers' paradise, but outside the hive they are an unsociable lot.

Well, that was uncalled for.

Well, the little brute crushed a dandelion I had my eye on.

Really? He's only two. Wait, don't tell me - it's 'the apian way.' Something to do with wasps in your family tree, right? But you've not dealt with a mammal before, have you? Missing something?

Whaddya mean missing someth--? ... Oh.

That's right, you left your sting behind. And a few internal organs, when you tried to rip it off of the little guy. Hara-kiri, my friend. You're about to bleed out.

Who knew? That wasn't mentioned in basic training. I'm seeing a bright light...

A pauper's grave for you, then. I'll send your regards to the hive.

Here's the same boy with his mother holding him up by one leg and slapping his back in desperation until a tuppence piece dislodges from his windpipe. She breathes a deep sigh of relief. He just breathes. The next-up brother, the older of this younger pair, lingers guiltily nearby. There will be words with that one.

Here are Ringo and Brownie, with their youngest brother, a little older now. They're up in my hay-band cubby, then down at the channel, then echoing shouts through the narrow pipe that brings water under the road. The little boy hangs back, the big boys cajole him forward. The eucalypt push doesn't like it.

Hey, Greensleeves - what gives?

Ah, they're just playing.

No they're not. See that?

The little one has his head inside the pipe opening, a little unsure, but now his shoulders and legs too. There's a brother at each end of the conduit, egging him on. He's got fifteen feet to traverse. But alarmingly he stalls halfway through, whimpering. It's too tight, and too dark. Brownie's voice takes on an urgency – he's too big to get in there, and he knows what the mother will do if she finds out.

Crikey, Oakie. That kid's in a jam.

I agree.

Can't you drop some fruit, make a racket? Alert the mother... something?

What? I'm not made of acorns, you know.

Ringo keeps his cool, reaches his stick inside and makes contact with the tunneler. To my relief he slowly extracts the young sibling at the end of his carbine, and the Great Escape is effected.

The cows from the dairy are a pleasant lot. *Bos taurus*. Not the brightest bunch, but pleasant. Most mornings after milking they walk down the field and rub against my bark. I'll admit, I don't hate it. Ah, here is the wife in the rear laundry. The back wire door slams and the two little boys clamber up the side fence railing. The elder of this pair is unlike his siblings - he favours his left hand to reach and grasp and hold. The two gape at the cows. These are taking the afternoon shade under my canopy. The boys hold a small, tight wad of papers. They are turning the leaves and declaiming loudly. The herd is unimpressed.

What a racket these two-legged calves make. Won't the milker shut them up?

Pretty sure that's not going to happen. You could try though.

So the largest Holstein tells the young humans to put a sock in it, then continues to graze. The boys laugh at the 'moo' they've generated and carry on. The cow spins her head to remonstrate and is distracted by something unusual; the white-painted gate to the road is open. The boys see it too and begin to bang the fence and declaim even more loudly.

Ooh, look at that lovely roadside clover. Who's with me girls?

The herd is filing onto the road, and the boys are jumping out of their skins with excitement. The mother pops her head over the fence now, then goes quickly inside. I sense the hum of the telephone line. In time a utility pulls up and a man and sheep dog alight. A fraternity of *Canis familiaris* is penned half a mile away, in the direction of the tall man's daily destination. Their howls waft in the air on still nights. I enjoy their work, when they bend the Farm sheep, *Ovis aries*, to their will at the large gatherings held in the south paddocks. Today *Canis* rounds up the bovines just as easily, and they are soon back in their field, looking pleased with their road trip. The boys on their paling grandstand gesticulate and chatter on for a long time.

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I like to stir up the eucalypts. They're a brittle bunch, also kind of droopy, especially in hot weather.

Hey, Skippy. Look north. See that cloud head brewing up?

What of it?

It's a big blow, right there. That's going to rattle your root-ball.

Huh. I'm not bothered.

Weeeeeell, maybe you should be. You've got about an hour.

And?

Then you'll feel an attack of gum disease. Better look to your branches, Dingo.

Here are the two little boys, on the driveway with handkerchief packs tied to sticks slung over their shoulders. Swaggies without the swagger. They like to think they are running away from home. Leftie holds what could be a map. The smaller one gets as far as Wilson Avenue before Melican's barking *Canis* frightens the life out of him. He walks on water all the way back to the house.

Now the mother. On a spring afternoon she brings a tiny package out to the front veranda. A pink blanket is spread, and the package carefully deposited. It wriggles. Sounds, like new lambs in the east paddock. The mother places a chair. She takes in the soft light and gentle breeze. Smiling, she reaches down and picks up her baby, then rucks up her blouse and does what mammals do.

Here is the tall man, in the back yard by the wood heap. Late afternoon. He crumples newspaper sheets and puts them on the ground. He adds a kindling of twig litter from *E. punctata*, then more paper. More twigs, some shards of fruit box that Brownie fetches from the heap. He positions four bricks, stacked in twos, on each side of the kindling. An irrigation channel sluice plate, steel, is placed on the bricks. He lights the fire. As the metal heats up the Ringleader and his offsider spray it with water pistols and laugh at the hissing steam. The tall man adds thick *Ovis* cuts to the barbeque and they slowly cup and spit in the cooling air. The little boys appear and warm themselves by the small fire, using knobby sticks to interfere with its embers. When the mother finally calls from the back door the tall man douses the fire, collects his children and his lamb chops and heads indoors, the kids capering around him.

Here are the big boys. What feats of derring-do today? Ringo has strung a rudimentary bow; I recognise a branch from *Salix*'s thin woodwork. The arrow is a rack piece purloined from the mother's clotheshorse. Brownie stands nervously before the back fence. Ringo sets an apple on his head, takes several paces back, draws, and looses. It's a fair shot, but not fair enough. Brownie takes the projectile directly mid-forehead, and quickly impersonates a bag of spuds, albeit one with a garnish of Red Delicious. The mother materialises, aghast, and makes her ministrations, and the worried William Tell is given a willing telling-off. As usual, *E. punctata* are quick with the trash talk.

That's on you, Wind in the Willows.

But, but ...

Who are you calling a 'butt butt?' Could have taken an eye out. Come on!

I will say this; those gums are uncouth and annoying, but they are very solicitous of the children. Local-borns sticking together and all that. And they won't hear a bad word about the mother.

Here she is, bringing watermelon to the four boys cooling off in a canvas wading pool on a hot afternoon. Now she stops the car by the Sneydes Road paddock and shows her wide-eyed little ones an *Ovis* ewe birthing a lamb. She gazes in admiration at her sons' shoebox-and-cotton-wool collection of birds eggs. On a winter day she applies lotion to circular marks on the boys' legs, while the tall man strides around to the side of the house and bundles *Felis catus* and her kittens into a hessian bag. One afternoon by the channel she does battle with a Tiger snake, *Notechis scutatus*, armed with only a shovel. After the second moon of spring she harvests strawberries from the small patch she keeps behind the laundry. And at times on cool evenings there is a glow through the window of the front room, where she sits by the open fire knitting booties for her daughter.

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Then one day the tall man and his wife take their boys and baby. Bundle them into the car. They drive, slower than usual, past the eucalypts and their tattered bark skirts, on by Melican's and the protesting *Canis*, and down to the tennis court. Then to the crossroad from which they have returned so often. But they never came back.

I often wonder what became of them. Where was their new home? Were there more children? Did the young ones have trees to climb, haystacks to explore? Birds' nests to exploit? Could they make huts up high, and clamber through channels, and chase sheep and cows in tussocked fields?

The questions remain, the answers evade. The sun rises and sets, the moon follows suit. Winter southerlies exchange duties with summer siroccos. Up high, migratory waders hasten to and fro on their lengthy flyways. The seasons cycle.

East Side keeps up his whinging, he can be a real pain in the acorns. *Ulmus* whisper secrets for themselves alone. The row of *E. punctata* has matured into a scraggy confection of bark and broken branches, typical of the species. *Salix* and her drapes of cane have gone, and there are no more lowing *Bos taurus* to saunter their pasture and massage my trunk. *Aves* keep me company with their endless chatter and take regular lodgings among my upper limbs. My mulchy understory sustains hordes of *Insecta*. The frogs in the channel bring *Notechis*, sliding on his belly. Wintry winds bring a wistful keening to my bare boughs. The dawn brings the day. But nothing brings back the towhead boy and his band of brothers.

I miss them.
