

MYRTLE

Christine Johnson

Ahead of me, the sapphire sea shimmers. The water dances, waves striking the ferry's sides as it motors along, churning up turbulence on the water's top. I listen to the *plop-plash* sound, and notice a sprinkling of foam floating past on the ocean's surface. My gaze follows the whiteness disappearing in the flow, as if sucked down into a salty depth of tears.

Yunbenun, or Magnetic Island, is getting closer. Eyes closing, I breathe pungent air, an aroma my imagination links to a moist, primeval rainforest. I slip my hand into my pocket. Finger yet again the puzzling photograph that has inspired this unexpected journey.

Within me, images, sounds and memories, past and present, merge...

Beep, beep, beep. Weeks earlier, a world away in Intensive Care, it was that high-pitched noise, the sound of a frail human heartbeat, which maintained a flicker of hope. Tubes and wires invaded the unconscious body in the hospital bed. Alongside the beeping, the repetitive rise and plunge of a thin line that pulsed across a screen was both excruciating and hypnotic. It only added to the tiredness I fought that numbed my whole being.

Did I yield, my head sinking? But warning signals flashed, lurching me back. The crisis I'd dreaded became real as the pulsing line leapt and staggered in a single mad misstep. The continuous whine of an insistent note pierced me as the pulsating stopped. Overwhelmed, I didn't cry out, unable to find a phrase to meet the moment. It was as if I had dissolved.

My anxious eyes fixed upon those who hurried across. Desperate to ask questions, my throat remained dry. I couldn't speak. After checking, one efficient nurse placed a kind hand on my shoulder.

'I'm so sorry.'

I look out now towards the Terminal as the ferry slows. Its tranquil chugging runs through the veins of my body, soothing the hurt throbbing there. My fingers reach again to my talisman, the photograph. But the pain attached to the time of my mother's death, the memory of it lingers, and makes me ache.

At home, days passed, but grief persisted. It gnawed. I realised when someone you love dies, your greed to remember and understand them can become insatiable.

One thing that puzzled me was our last conversation. It was the morning of Mum's surgery. I clung to her, forced a smile, fighting a result I refused to recognise as likely.

'You'll be fine. Anyway, you can't leave me, Mum. How can I face the world alone?'

As I spoke, I regretted my words. It seemed inconsiderate, thinking of self at such a time. But she responded with the affection and common sense I loved and admired.

'We all leave our mark.' She smiled. 'Look at my garden. All native plants. Remember, you're unique. Seek what helps you stand strong. You'll know, discovering it.'

As I sorted her possessions after she died, this exchange revolved in my mind, an unsolved riddle. I viewed myself as nothing special. So little remarkable about me. I had no lasting aims and ambitions.

Distracted, I'd almost tossed away an old notebook. But when the covers opened, I saw Mum's flowing hand. My pulse quickened. A diary! What a fluke, stumbling upon such a personal thing. It was like her returning to talk to me, tell me about travelling to out-of-the-way places, youthful getaways she never mentioned in later life. All come and gone, well before career, marriage and motherhood tied her to the urban experience.

Regret rose in me and a deep sadness. Years slipping past, not enough shared. Mum, so wise, tending her trees and shrubs, how little I knew about the real inner journeying it had taken her to reach that calm place. It was then, as if to shunt grief aside, that something fluttered from between the pages: the photograph.

I drag my gaze from the promised beauty of this small island with its beaches, wildlife, and botanical riches I'm about to disembark and explore. Draw the photograph out into the light and gaze at its black and white surface for the umpteenth time.

Young features, fine-drawn and feminine. Intelligent eyes. The hands fold at her slim waist. So pretty. Not yet disfigured by age, a lifetime of robust work. The profound mother-and-daughter resemblance so clear in the image strikes me as odd. Unrecognised before, while Mum was alive, now it's inexplicable, going far beyond nearness in looks.

In the photograph's background looms a tree.

That first time I discovered the picture, something struggled to click in my brain. Something puzzling I failed to see. Fascinated, I'd turned the photo over. I found, in Mum's writing, a single word.

The photograph bore the enigmatic message: 'Myrtle.' My name? One I'd never liked.

The night after finding the snapshot, I propped it by my bedside, keeping it close. I whispered into the darkness.

‘Goodnight, Mum.’

I lay awake missing her, and imagined being rocked by her as a child, as if by the sea. Safer than the ocean of grief overwhelming me. The rocking suggested travel towards asylum. And like a refugee, I needed relief, somewhere to ease sorrow. I fell asleep and glided on through the night. One hour stretched into the next, waves lapping at the edge of my consciousness.

I woke lacklustre, wanting that fading memory to continue. It occurred to me. This photograph, even the dream, both might offer something soothing. There seemed such happiness emblazoned upon Mum’s youthful face. Where did she travel, finding such joy? Was the photograph a clue left behind? At least it drove me away from misery, towards the unfamiliar.

Instinct drove me to seek hints in Mum’s diary, to research places she mentioned visiting where the Myrtle was endemic. A gardener and nature enthusiast, she called a place just off the coast of Townsville ‘alluring.’ I needed a positive getaway and planned my trip. Whenever sorrow reared up like a wave waiting to crash down and shatter me, I held it back. In a fluster of preparations, I showed it my determination to prevail.

Upon arrival I hire a car, setting out to discover a hidden wonderland. This mesmerising island, with its ecological diversity, makes my head spin. One beautiful bay beach, coral reef offshore, follows another. When I walk hiking trails, the earthy smell of undergrowth mixes dampness with freshness, the air pristine. It intoxicates. I peer into the forest where tall timbers thrive, awed by the stars in this arboreal opera. All seem to share the limelight.

Urban ignoramus that I am, I have asked my local librarian in advance.

‘Which one is Myrtle?’

She shows me pictures and botanical sketches.

‘Dominant tree of the rainforest, up to fifty metres, beautiful hardwood, brown or deep red to pink,’ she says. ‘A beauty. Smaller varieties, too. Amongst the oldest kinds of flowering plants worldwide, dates back two hundred million, can live over five hundred years, a true survivor.’

The image returns to me of Mum in the photograph, shoulders leaning against a tree’s

trunk as if soaking up its strength. I yearn for connectedness with something so vast.

I've followed a track that finishes in a clearing strewn with moss-laden fallen trunks. Nature's tumbled limbs create a sculptural masterpiece. I stand, enchanted. A slight *splish-splash* suggests a water source close by. I tremble. The sound, its murmur, travels the distance and whispers to me. Like a heartbeat.

I connect what I see, hear, and feel to a place of my imagination ignited by the photograph. Fantasy fades, replaced by reality. The journey, this setting, becomes a magical step back in time. I move closer to one tree I believe I have recognised - a Myrtle.

The widespread roots at its base stretch out, beckon me forward. I climb across them, reach a position where I can turn and lean my shoulders against the trunk. I cross my hands at my waist and stand like the image in the photograph. I'm like Mum, all those years ago.

I sense something growing clearer. A longed-for glow permeates me. My mind shifts. A surge brings things into congruence. Myrtle, my mother's cradling hands, her joyous face. No longer torn by loss, things within me lock and fit.

'I've been here in spirit,' I whisper, 'with you, the tree. You named me then, and I'm returning. You've led me back.'

Within me, Mum's advice resonates. *Seek what helps you stand strong*. This tree, my namesake, tells me I'll persist. It keeps my mother's counsel alive within me. Not just now, but forever. Tears of relief fall.

At rest under the Myrtle, I explore my link to this place. It is somewhere I know I will return to. And when I board the ferry, I will carry a deeper understanding, ready to begin my journey home. And a new urge to keep alive and add to Mum's native garden that waits there, calling out for my attention.

The Myrtle stands firm.

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Judge's comments: First Place goes to "Myrtle" by Christine Johnson, a beautifully written and poignant first-person account of Magnetic Island that crosses seamlessly between environment, family, and memory. Of note is the essay's use of the senses of smell and touch to convey the Island's place-character. Christine brings a personal memory of loss into dialogue with the ecological and the botanical. I was struck, for instance, by the double meaning of the term "Terminal" (referring to both a place of arrival and the nature of human mortality). A love of the Island's flora, especially its long-lived myrtle trees, connects generations of people across time and space.