

## The Last Summer

By Michael Winkler  
*Published in The Age*

“All her hair’s gone. Thought it best you knew in advance. She looks beautiful, actually. Like a tiny little Buddhist nun.”

We were due to arrive just before Christmas. I had a lot on my mind. December hysteria. Work hassles. And her. Coping with it all seemed a remote possibility.

The antidote to apprehensiveness is action. I razored my head until it was baby-smooth. My brothers did the same. Strength in unity; those with hair wouldn’t have all the numbers any more. And, most important, it might give her a laugh

The traditional pre-Christmas wagon train snaked up the Hume from Melbourne, cars bursting at the rivets with presents and provisions and clunky holiday gear. I knew we had arrived the moment I clambered out of the car into that familiar northern Victorian heat and bullets of sweat started bursting through my shaved skin.

She guffawed at my silly skull. Mission accomplished. I stooped to cuddle her. Operations and illness had made her miniscule. Every time I saw her again was a small shock. Her presence was unchanged though; that delectable chuckle and easy chatter failing to conceal the sense of something still and special at her core. The body had never seemed a more irrelevant vessel.

All of our lives until we left home we had lived beside water – the Murray, for most of the time, and then a Murray-fed lake. We lived in small towns and knew small-town ways. While I had been 20 years in buttoned-down Melbourne, she retained the childhood rural easiness that I had lost.

The heat haze off the lake, the inane buzzsaw whine of power boats, the stickiness of melted ice-cream, treacly asphalt sticking to the rubber of your thongs – all of these things were familiar; they had all been part of all the summers we had spent together, but they were her territory now, not mine. Superficially, this was a summer like any other. We did the same things, told the same jokes, ate the same treats. No-one mentioned that it was actually the last summer, and that these things would never be the same again.

We celebrated the season with coffee and chocolate-covered ginger, morning-teas that sprawled into the afternoon. In the charcoal night we walked slowly around the streets to look at Christmas lights. We read the newspapers and laughed at them. They say that anything worth crying can be laughed. We laughed like downpipes in a summer storm.

She was three years and nine months older than me. From the beginning, I observed her with the fascinated admiration that is the preserve of the younger sibling. I always knew the names of the books she read, or funny things her friends said, or her preferences in food or clothes. The reverse was rarely true, and I never minded, because it was the natural order.

She was the leader, which meant that in the long summers of yesteryear when school Christmas holidays seemed to extend for decades, she led and I blissfully followed. We played dress-ups. We

put on shows. We attempted to dam small creeks with rocks and sticks and sludge. We spent countless afternoons leaping in and out of a small inflatable pool in the backyard. The great thing was to sprint across the yard, strike a pose in mid-air, then crash into the water. Her preferred mode was ballerina. Mine was a whooping Indian. More often than not I made her laugh, and if this reward was only afforded when I hurt myself with bone-juddering landings, then that was how it must be.

That was then. This summer, like every summer, it was water, again. She lowered herself in at the lake's edge to watch the vaudeville I created with her children and mine. We launched bombs of exquisite splashiness. We pretended to bend over and tie our non-existent laces and were barreled off the jetty into the lake. I dusted off my Sioux war whoop and painful bellyflop. She was laughing, of course.

I was as frenetic as a blowfly and probably as annoying. My wife told me to calm down. Leave the next potential pun unmade. Let the next slapstick opportunity pass unslapped. But I couldn't do it. I felt like I was spiraling out of control. When I wasn't roiling with extrovert good humour, I was troll-grumpy. I thudded between these poles, never able to find an equator of evenness. I suspect it was the same anger and fear that motored both modes.

I was doing my grieving in advance. It wasn't something she wanted to know about. Once or twice I asked her a few big questions: she deflected some, ignored others. There were better things concerning her, such as coordinating the care of the new trees that had been planted in the local wetlands. The fact that I was pining for something that had not yet gone would have merely irritated her. My private grieving was the Janus face of the ardent lover who must keep his affection a secret. The emotions were actually similar; the sadness had a strange beauty.

At night, not sleeping, I thought of how life is a time-space trick. The strange and beautiful coincidence that we were around together, that in the infinite stretch of time and the impossibly large expanse of space, I shared a crossover with her, even if it was too brief – shouldn't that be enough?

The calendar shows that there was one more summer after that, but it wasn't a real summer; she was no longer quite the person I knew, and while I loved her just as much there was not the same fun. And for us, summer together – any time together – had to be fun or it wasn't worth doing.

Magpies caroled at dawn. The bedroom was airless. Another day in the last special summer. Loss and love. The daily rediscovery that it is possible to experience something and long for it at the same time.

I pulled on my shorts and ate brekky in the sunshine, waiting for her to wake up and make it fun again.