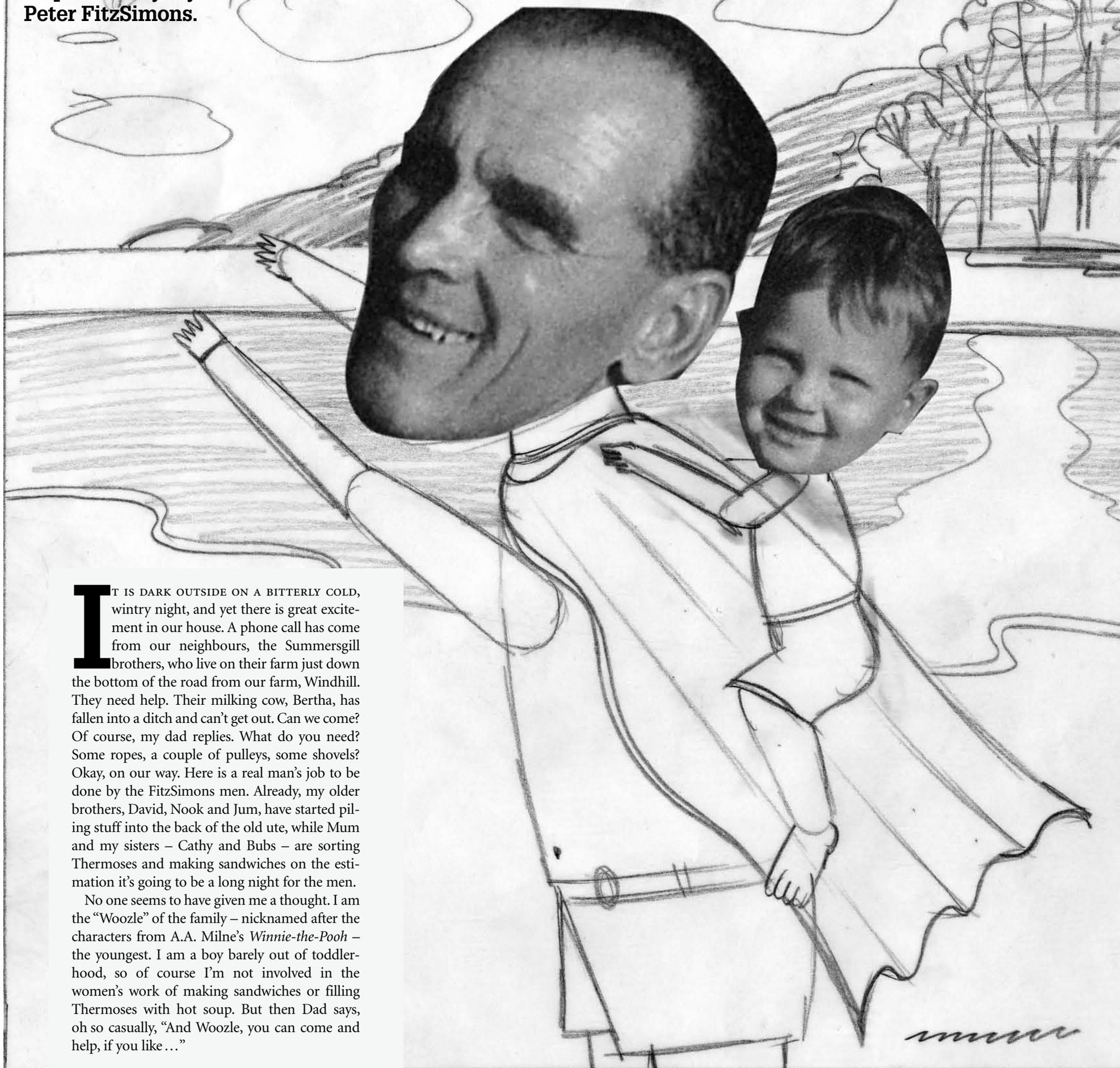


When a dad teaches his son to plant a tree while he also nurtures him with wisdom and understanding, it's no wonder he becomes a role model – or that his memory lives on so powerfully. By Peter FitzSimons.

# My father my hero

**I**T IS DARK OUTSIDE ON A BITTERLY COLD, wintry night, and yet there is great excitement in our house. A phone call has come from our neighbours, the Summersgill brothers, who live on their farm just down the bottom of the road from our farm, Windhill. They need help. Their milking cow, Bertha, has fallen into a ditch and can't get out. Can we come? Of course, my dad replies. What do you need? Some ropes, a couple of pulleys, some shovels? Okay, on our way. Here is a real man's job to be done by the FitzSimons men. Already, my older brothers, David, Nook and Jum, have started piling stuff into the back of the old ute, while Mum and my sisters – Cathy and Bubs – are sorting Thermoses and making sandwiches on the estimation it's going to be a long night for the men.

No one seems to have given me a thought. I am the "Woozle" of the family – nicknamed after the characters from A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* – the youngest. I am a boy barely out of toddlerhood, so of course I'm not involved in the women's work of making sandwiches or filling Thermoses with hot soup. But then Dad says, oh so casually, "And Woozle, you can come and help, if you like..."



In no time at all I am out in the night, in ecstasy, as my eyes sting in the wind and my drooling tongue almost slaps the lobes of my ears. Dad is driving the ute, and I am standing in the back, gripping the top of the cab, face straight into the wind, while Jum and Nook press close behind me, their arms encircling me to keep me safe, and David is roaring behind us all on the Massey Ferguson tractor, his headlights two little bumping beacons behind us in the darkness.

The freezing night air whips into our faces and whistles through the holes in our shirts and trousers as we tear down the old dirt track, but I'm not remotely cold. For though I am still not quite four years old, I am now a *man*, taking my place with my brothers and father, as we meet this emergency head on and show it who is boss.

**O**NE OF MY EARLY TOYS IS A TINY WHEELBARROW, perhaps a tenth of the size of the one that my older, stronger brothers use to bring the wood from the woodpile to the woodbox. One day, after hearing Dad talk about how rocky the ground is, I conceive the notion that I will use my wheelbarrow to gather every rock I can find and make such a huge pile of them that they will dwarf the house, and that way he will be proud of me and have no more problems with rocky ground. The perfect place to make this pile, I decide, is on our front lawn. As soon as Dad sets off from breakfast to go "down the patch", as we call his farm forays, I set to, working feverishly, trying to make the pile as big as I can before he gets back for morning tea. Load after load after load. Mum is watching, amused, from a distance but does not intervene.

The tractor! He is on his way back. He parks it over by the hoist that we use to lift the orange bins. He walks towards me, his big gumboots making that *whelp, whelp, whelp* sound with every step. I pretend not to hear him, wanting it to be that he discovers me hard at work, just as he is always hard at work. His shadow falls over me. I turn and look up, pretending to be surprised.

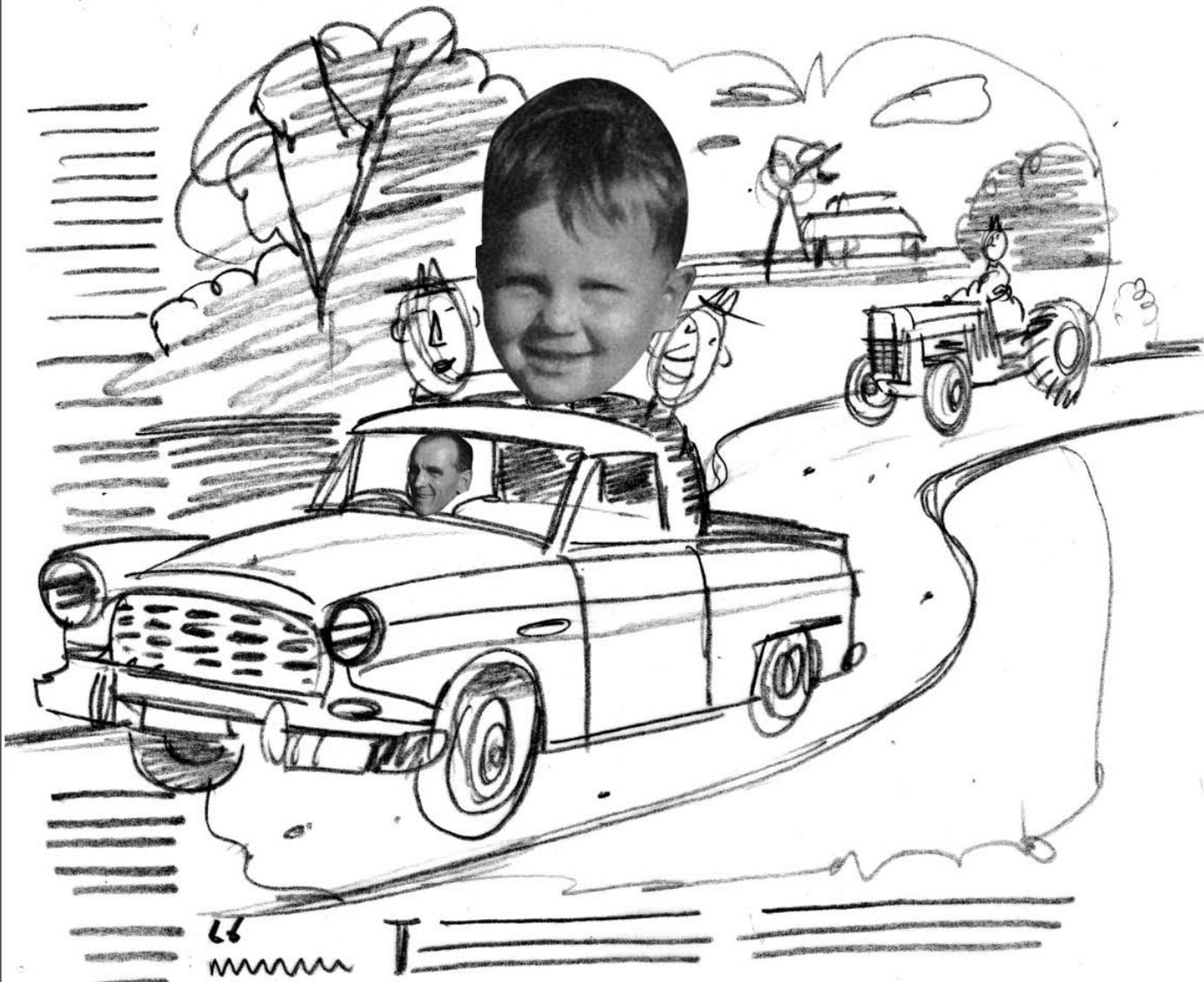
"I'm building a mountain of rocks for you, Daddy," I say, proudly.

"Good work, sonno," he laughs, huge, towering over me, his face full of love, grit and grime. "But maybe the front lawn's not the right place for it."

Then Dad takes the shovel leaning by the fence, and with three very careful scoops moves my pile to a more suitable place near the plum trees, and then, taking me by the hand, he leads me in to morning tea with Mum, telling her they have "a real little farmer" on their hands. No matter that he has thwarted my plans to build a mountain atop my molehill, I could have fainted with pleasure to hear him utter those four words to Mum.

As I write, I can see a photo on the left wall of my study, of me getting a piggyback from my dad when I am nudging three years old and he is in his late 40s. We're both in our swimmers, a flowing river behind us, on a lovely sunny day. He is lean, strong, tall, gazing resolutely at the camera with just the barest trace of a smile on his lips. And I am everything he is not. Podgy, short and absolutely beaming – both to be the centre of attention of the camera and to have my arms around his neck, to be so physically close to him. And you can see the truth of it there in my eyes to this day – I want to grow up to be just like him.

IT'S A FUNNY THING WHEN YOU LOOK CLOSELY AT A glass of lemonade. Always, at odd spots around the interior of the glass, there is a trail of bubbles constantly bursting forth and heading upwards



"Dad is in the driver's seat, I am on his lap. He lets me pretend to steer. A distant bolt of lightning gives us hope that perhaps we might get some rain tonight. Dad and I love rain."

on an only slightly wavering course to the surface. There, those bubbles don't explode with any enthusiasm – they just pop and instantly fade, so lightly you have to concentrate to even notice. Most curious is that there is neither rhyme nor reason as to why the bubbles come from one particular spot in the glass.

And this is exactly the way my memory works.

One such moment concerns planting an orange tree with Dad. I had done this a hundred times, but I remember in extraordinary detail planting this particular one, down beside the same old white gum that often served as the *whippy* post when we played hide 'n' seek. This planting is seven trees in from the end of the row. Dad lifts the baby orange tree from the back of the trailer and brings it right next to the hole he has laboriously dug. Carefully, using his pig sticker of a penknife, he cuts the cloth away from the root and gently deposits the small tree into the hole, piling up the dirt around its base. And now it is my turn.

"Like an Indian," he says, and as ever jog-trots around the base, using his feet to stamp the dirt down and motioning for me to do the same. He is so huge and I am so small, but there we go, father and son – as the light starts to fade and that old gum tree throws shadows over us – running round and round the mulberry bush/orange sapling.

"Woo, woo, woo!" I yell, slapping my hand back and forth upon my mouth.

"Woo, woo, woo!" Dad imitates me, and now we do it together, continuing to run around it long after the earth has been safely pressed down upon the root system.

I remember the whole episode down to the very last detail, down to the rich smell that the earth exhales when Dad throws a couple of buckets of water around the base of the sapling to get it off to a good start. I remember sanity slowly returning to us, as we eventually stop and climb back up on

the tractor to go up to the house. Dad is in the driver's seat, I am on his lap. He lets me pretend to steer. A distant bolt of lightning gives us hope that perhaps we might get some rain tonight. Dad and I love rain.

**L**ATE ON THE AFTERNOON OF MARCH 16, 1992, a lovely day that still had the echoes of summer about it, I was at *The Sydney Morning Herald* offices – just on the southern edge of the Sydney CBD – and about to write up an interview I had conducted with the recently deposed NSW minister for education, Terry Metherell. I was feeling particularly good because the evening before I had asked Lisa to marry me, she had said "Yes", and I had decided that the best occasion to announce our engagement would be at a family barbecue the next weekend. And then the phone rang. It was my brother David.

"Bad news, I'm afraid," he breathed down the phone to prepare me. "Dad has dropped dead at home. Looks like he had a massive heart attack." *Dead ... dead ... dead ... Dad's dead ... heart attack ... dropped dead ... Dad's DEAD ...*

The words echoed around my head as I tried to comprehend the enormity of what I had just been told. For some absurd reason I still can't fathom, I tried, for as long as five minutes, to try to finish the story on Terry Metherell before I gave up the struggle and headed for the door, for the farm, for my father lying dead in the orchard. I picked up Jum from his law office in the city, and between us, comparing the details we had gleaned from David's phone call, we pieced together what had happened.

Dad was about a hundred yards down from the house, on the spot where the chook yard used to be – now a sunlit glade where the grass grew green. He had been doing what he often did these days, helping a neighbour, in this case none other

than Brian Watts, who wanted to borrow Dad's post-hole digger. Mr Watts was just backing his tractor in, with Dad directing him a little to the left or right, when Dad suddenly fell to the ground, face down. Brian jumped down and, immediately realising that Dad had suffered a heart attack, started thumping his chest to try to jolt him back into action.

Soon knowing that he was outgunned, Mr Watts had run to the house, had Mum call the ambulance and returned to Dad, followed shortly afterwards by Mum, who fell to her knees and, in vain, tried to get Dad going again herself.

"Oh, Peter ... Oh, Peter ..."

Only 30 minutes or so later, the ambulance men, who had raced all the way from Gosford, got to him and did their best, but no amount of resuscitation or number of electric shocks to the chest could bring back to life a man who had in all likelihood been dead before he hit the ground.

But here was the thing. If his time was up, this was the perfect way for him to go out.

We, his sons, were soon there, followed by his daughters. Mercifully, his body was not to be taken by the professionals before the family was ready. Jum and I had called ahead and insisted that his body was not to be removed until we had got there. So, while Mum made the undertakers endless cups of tea and engaged in polite chit-chat – a lady, whatever the circumstances – Jum and I were able to get to Dad.

He was on an undertaker's trolley, in a blue body bag, between the fourth and fifth row of orange trees, where the undertakers had wheeled him, just down from the house. We opened the bag and there he was, cold and still, his boots on,



**"Jum and I both started howling like two-year-olds, together, and then separately as we both had time alone with him."**

his ever-present penknife with the pig sticker still attached to his belt, and a very peaceful expression on his face. Jum and I both started howling like two-year-olds, together, and then separately as we both had time alone with him – just as our siblings did when they arrived a little later.

Finally, those very kind undertakers – by now filled to the eyeballs with the tea that Mum had kept making for them, even as it had fallen dark – took him away.

In a little dark van, edging slowly down the row of orange trees he'd planted 44 years earlier, past the house he'd built with Mum, past the children he'd sired and the woman he'd loved for nearly

half a century, past the tennis court he'd carved out of the bush, between the two palm trees he'd planted at the entrance to the farm, then back down the dirt track he'd first ventured up 45 years earlier, Dad left Windhill.

Oh, but he would return all right. A year or so later, all was in readiness. The glade where Dad had died had been mown; David, Nook and Jum had organised for an enormous block of Peats Ridge blue metal to be dropped just beside the spot, and all of the family – all of my brothers and sisters, with all of our partners and progeny – gathered around.

And Nook had a shovel and a robinia sapling. Purposefully, he dug a hole on the very spot where Dad had breathed his last. And then we opened the bag that contained Dad's ashes. We put the sapling on top of those ashes, pushed the soil back on top of it again, and then – just as he had taught all of us to do – each and every one of us observed the ancient rite.

"Like an Indian," Dad had told us. And like Indians we did a little jigging run around the sapling, stomping the soil down with our feet, while patting our mouths and making the "Woo, woo, woo!" sound.

On that huge rock, so big and heavy it will be there forever, we affixed a silver plaque on which the words are engraved:

*Peter McCloy FitzSimons*

*Born at Greenwich, NSW on 25 February, 1916.*

*Died here 16 March, 1992.*

*He had spent the previous 44 years farming the surrounding land. He was a good man.*

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