

Juice

The Satsuma plum is thought to be a symbol of endurance and strength. At least that is what my gardening book says.

For me, it is a symbol of Paul.

Just a year ago today, we gathered to tip a silvery urn of ashes into a shallow hole in the earth, a few steps from the place where he had made his mudbrick shack. Into the earth, to be the earth, the roots of the young plum sapling reaching out like tiny tendrils of spirit until all becomes one. His mother and father pouring all that is left into the dusty, eucalypt-infused soil.

It's already one year – we go to remember, because it is impossible to forget.

My young daughter says, 'He's not here, silly'. She's right, of course. He is everywhere – casting his wisdom out over the mountains and valleys of Warburton, the place he called home; touching those he loved in their dreams, weaving a magic in lives that cannot be explained. When I dream, he stands before me as a well man – youthful, vibrant, in his prime. His cheeks are full of good health, not puffy from the steroids. There is no shuffle in his gait, or carefully hidden twisted agony in his face. The Ketamine pump is nowhere to be seen and his dark hair is full and wild. But my three-year-old boy calls the plum tree 'my friend Paul' and asks how men become trees.

Paul would be happy we have had so much rain lately. His biodynamic vegetable patch would have been abundant right now. He would have marvelled at another year of growth in the manna gums near his humble home, and made another six hundred mud bricks to build the extension on the shack. He would have drummed.

He would have kept going even when the pain was overwhelming. He would have kept on confounding the doctors at the hospital as they marvelled how someone so sick on the inside could look so good on the outside. He would

have set off on a few more paragliding adventures and shouted his rage to the winds, while he lost himself in the one way that freed him from his moment of truth.

The plum sapling is now about as tall as Paul was, and I lean into its glassy green foliage and let the leaves brush my cheeks and capture my tears. My forehead presses against a willowy trunk and for a moment it feels as if I am resting against his chest. But he is gone and the missing does not ease as a year progresses; it crashes in like thunder, steals away with the dawn and I still find myself looking for his car in the main street of our village, or expecting his name to pop up in my email inbox.

He didn't want us to be sad. He didn't even want us at his funeral, just the immediate family he insists. So instead we have this tree and our stories. His dad told me when he was cremated the funeral director said that they should look up to the sky because they might see him. Bodies, it seems, evaporate when cremated, but 'Paul's body,' said the funeral director, 'being so full of chemicals from his treatment might be different'. A billow of smoky grey haze drifted away on an upstream that would take a paraglider all the way home.

Paul didn't have time to deal with bullshit. His honesty was brutal in a way that left you shuddering, but you always knew his truth. He shaped me. He didn't choose to live like anyone else – I won't know another like him. And he chose how and when to die. He feared neither judgement nor finality, and he lived with quiet dignity as he knowingly took his last courageous breath.

And he loved plums.

But he couldn't keep going. Couldn't keep saying goodbye to us. Couldn't face another night of pain when he had exhausted every treatment option, every available pain relief, every diet, every experimental chemo, every meditation, every shot of wheatgrass. Couldn't make it to his forty-fifth birthday or until Christmas.

At 5.53 pm on 8 December, the last night of his life, he sent me an email. No text, just three words in the subject line that said, 'Thinking of you'. I was bathing children, tucking them into bed. By the time I read it, he had already gone. The warrior had gently placed his sword at his feet and quietly stepped backwards into the forest of his life, following the sound of his own drumbeat. A ten-year battle ended in victory.

In a few autumns time, I will be able to pick the fruit from these boughs and make spicy plum sauce. I'll use the Stephanie Alexander recipe. It's bittersweet. Everyone can have a jar; Paul's essence steeped in the spices of its sticky, ruby red glaze.

One year today – a strangely empty year of relief and disbelief. But you are still close enough to feel, softly present in the seasons, always to be heard in the beat of a drum, eternally my dear friend.

And still alive in the words of our favourite poet Kahlil Gibran:

But now our sleep has fled and our dream is over, and it is no longer dawn. And if our hands should meet in another dream we shall build another tower in the sky.

'Keep it real,' you said. 'Let life dribble down your chin.'

Lindy Schneider

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