

BENEATH A RIVER RED GUM

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Picnic paraphernalia attracts me. Rummage through the cupboards in our house and garage, and you will find everything you need for a picnic. Thermoses, insulated carry-alls, cane baskets, ice packs, fold-away chairs, hotplates, a billycan, two melamine picnic sets, towers of polystyrene and plastic drinkware, two picnic blankets (that have lain hopefully in the boot of every car we've ever owned) a leather case of hardly-used, multicolored, multi-purpose cups, and a small knife that lives permanently in my handbag. You see! I am always ready for a picnic.

My strongest memories of family picnics, though frustratingly weak, are in Lawson Park Mudgee.

A black car drives through the gates. Our parents scan the park. An excited tribe of kids in the back seat push against each other to see, then scramble out of the car and race towards the swings. By the time we dash back to our mothers' insistent calls, the picnic blanket is spread beneath the river red gum, the baby is blowing raspberries and air-walking, the cake tin is propping up the cordial, the fathers stand around with one hand in their pocket and the other around a glass of beer, and the mothers are unwrapping tea-towels of sandwiches: egg, tomato and cheese; roast beef and tomato sauce.

What I remember most about picnics in Lawson Park however, are the colours green and black. The rich emerald of the grass we raced across to the swings, the lime green branches of the weeping willows, the black drifting water of the Cudgegong, the mysterious shadows behind the willows. It was an oasis with an edge. Cool and beautiful, shadowy and dangerous.

You could say a picnic is just an outdoor meal with disadvantages – flies, ants, an uncomfortable seat and predictable cold food. Yet the universal and nostalgic appeal of picnics has been captured again and again in art, film and literature. So I ask myself, why is it that I, and a whole lot of others, put picnics up there with holidays and Xmas?

It must have something to do with a need to be close to nature, especially for modern humans who cosset themselves within houses, and behind gates, fences and front lawns. It must also be about freedom and spontaneity – the taking off of shoes, the cartwheels and twirly-whirls. But I think more importantly, picnics introduce us to a world outside our comfort zone, where life is a little less certain, a little more threatening, but also a little more thrilling.

A picnic reminds us that leaving home occasionally, while it has its hazards, is a good thing to do.



My mother and aunt ready for a picnic a la 1950s.
(from the Brown family albums)