

## The Claire Tree – Synopsis

A man, James, in his late twenties, reluctantly arrives at his childhood home in Tasmania. He is immediately swept up in his family's past. When James was eight, his sister, Claire, mysteriously disappeared and was never found. The last place she was ever seen was by the walnut tree in the middle of the family orchard – this is the last point of contact she had with the world, and James thinks of this tree as being a part of Claire. Her disappearance has haunted the family for decades. James was completely in love with Claire; he adored her in a rather unhealthy manner, feeling she was his protector. As he grew up, he searched for her around Australia, and parts of the world, in any place he could find; he has used his position as a Journalist to try and track her down. Now he is coming home because his mother has reported that there has been a possible sighting of her in Hobart.

James becomes involved in all the messiness of family life, all the old wounds open. His father is distant and unmoved by anything; he goes through the motions. His mother is old now and is scared of losing him; she wants him to stay with her. The other reason James has returned home is his mother's health – she has had a few too many accidents around the home and he discovers that some may be self-inflicted.

He also becomes involved with Claire's ex – Heath – whom James had secret desires for; everything Claire owned he wanted to own. Through each other they rekindle Claire's essence and each discovers a different side to this person they once passionately loved. She is a vast mystery to them; in the course of this they bond and start to believe that since they have been through the same thing they understand one another. Heath wonders if he is falling in love with James or if he simply needs the connection to Claire.

Throughout, there is a thread of Alice in Wonderland, with James's vivid imaginings and fantasies becoming intensely real to him. Did she fall through a portal in the tree and enter another world, the other world she always spoke of as an actress, the world of art which is more real than this one? These are linked to the flashbacks of James's youth – where we

see Claire's last day with him, his hospitalisation due to her imagined presence in his head, and his eventual determination to search her out; his struggles to find a place without her guiding presence at his side.

In time, after his mother's sudden vindication of his need to find Claire, and with Heath at his side, they travel to Hobart to search for clues. Impossibly, he finds an actress at the markets who looks like her. He follows her home. She invites him in, curious about him, and then makes love to him. James, knowing it is not her but after so much time looking, decides that this is the closest he will get to her, and submits to her. He tells her his story and lets her manipulate him into thinking she is Claire; she enjoys the role she is playing; there is a touch of shadenfreude in that she's stringing along this little lovesick boy who fancies the memory of his sister.

Heath is upset at this. Heath fulfils the role that Claire once possessed in James's life, and he is not happy with this realisation. James uses 'Claire' to manipulate the relationship he has with Heath.

In the end, James goes too far. He wants ownership of 'Claire'. She decides to leave. Unable to handle a second disappearance he strikes out and injures her. In a state of panic he brings a reluctant Heath into the picture. In a scene of confrontation, 'Claire' finally convinces James that she is not his sister, destroying the beautiful delusion. She walks away.

In a coda, James has evidently been ill and is recovering at home. Heath looks after him. His mother is dead, having hanged herself on the walnut tree. She had wanted James, but James had wanted Claire. Claire almost destroyed them both. So they cut down the tree, and it seems that a new beginning is possible.