

EIGHT CHIMNEYS

He said, 'You might want to sit down for this,' and pulled out a chair from the kitchen table for her. He put his phone on the table, sat down and waited for her to join him.

The sun shone through the kitchen window. It stretched across the room and fell upon her tired, worn face. It stopped at the lounge room where Taylor stood watching the wiggles on television.

She had made him a cup of coffee - white, no sugar before he took the call. His coffee was now cold. She turned the stove down and the water that was boiling eggs stopped bubbling.

'Do you want them hard or soft?' she asked looking into the pot.

'Did you hear what I said?' he asked.

'I heard you,' she said, her eyes unable to meet his.

He took another sip of his cold coffee. 'I'll have them soft.'

She put two pieces of burnt toast onto a plate and the eggs on top. Then walked to the table and put the plate in front of him. She sat down across from him and wiped strands of hair that had fallen into her eyes. She waited for him to say something.

'The bank has declined the loan,' he said.

She watched Taylor dancing in front of the television, putting one hand on top of another, saying 'hot potato, hot potato' as bright colours flashed on the television screen.

She lowered her voice. 'What are we going to do for money? What about all the debt?'

He looked down at his untouched eggs and fidgeted with his phone. 'We'll make it up.'

'How? How will we make it up?' She got up from the table, moved to the kitchen. The curtains were pulled back and she stood sun lit, leaning against the bench, her arms folded.

'We'll find a way. We've been through challenges before. We'll make it through this one.'

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‘But we weren’t in this much debt before,’ she said ‘and we didn’t have Taylor to think about.’

‘Janette, I need you to be...’

‘You need me to be what Tim?’ She ran her sweaty hands down her jeans and moved out of the direct sun-light. The house was hot. Their weatherboard home had no air conditioning.

‘*We* need to be optimistic,’ he corrected himself. ‘To try and look on the bright side.’

‘And what would the bright side be?’

Tim thought about this then said, ‘That we still have each other. We’re still a family.’

Janette smiled.

‘Your eggs are going cold.’ She began to scrub the pot that had bits of egg stuck to its edges.

Tim scraped parts of the toast that was burnt with his knife, putting the burnt bits to one side on his plate. He then bit into the part with runny egg on it. Janette put the pot on the sink to dry.

Janette sat back down at the table and watched as Tim ate.

‘You could ask your dad about a job at Loy Yang,’ she said.

Tim stopped eating. ‘I’d rather leave the old man out of this.’

‘Can you at least think about it?’ Janette stretched her hand to rest on top of Tim’s.

‘I’ll think about it,’ he said and got up from the table, leaving the plate of burnt toast.

‘Where are you going?’ Janette asked.

‘I told Mackie that I’d swing by this afternoon to help him bail hay. I won’t be too long.’

Tim gave Janette a kiss on the forehead, walked to the door, put his boots on and left.

Janette watched Tim’s truck pull out of the drive way from the lounge room window, then walked to the couch and sat down. Taylor was now playing with her dolls. The wiggles were no

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longer on television. Janette picked up the remote and flicked through channels. She scrolled through photo albums of her and Tim on her phone from six years earlier.

The pictures made Janette smile.

‘What is it mummy?’ Taylor asked as Janette laughed at a photo of Tim she’d found.

Tim was wearing a white t-shirt and zinc on his face. His hair was to his shoulders. The photo looked like it had been taken on one of their summer day trips to Woodside beach.

‘It’s a picture of Daddy,’ Janette said ‘doesn’t he look different?’

Taylor moved to the couch and looked at Janette’s phone. ‘Very funny,’ she laughed.

Janette heard a knock at the door. She got up from the couch and answered it. When she opened the door, she saw her friend Sally, holding a basket full of figs.

They greeted each other and Janette welcomed Sally into the house, pointing to a spot on the kitchen table that Sally could put the basket on. ‘I know figs are your favourite,’ Sally said.

‘They’re Tim’s favourite too,’ Janette smiled. She invited Sally to take a seat at the table.

Sally looked around the room, pulled out a chair and sat on it.

Janette put the kettle on. She waited for it to boil. The baby magpies had returned and Janette could hear them outside the kitchen window begging.

‘Sorry to just drop in like this, but my mind has been going a million miles an hour,’ Sally said. She looked at the basket and picked at a bit of leaf that had fallen through its weave.

Janette leaned against the kitchen bench. ‘Is it the closure? Are you worried about that?’

‘Yes. Aren’t you?’ Sally asked, her voice quivering as she held back tears.

‘Of course,’ Janette said. She looked over at Taylor. ‘We have Taylor to think about now.’

Taylor was putting her dolls into a bus and directing the bus around the carpeted floor.

‘I’ve heard there’s jobs in renewables. I try to talk to Mitch about it but he just shuts down.’

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Janette made a cup of tea. Pouring water into a cup for Sally, she asked, 'Do you take milk?'

'Actually Janette, I'll have a glass of water. I need to cool my nerves.' Sally patted her eyes with a tissue she'd grabbed from her hand-bag. 'Do you know anything about renewables?'

'We haven't discussed it,' Janette said. 'I think we might try our luck at Loy Yang.' She poured water from the tap into a glass for Sally and carried it over to the table where Sally was sitting. She then went back to the bench, collected her cup of tea and sat down at the table.

'I think he's drinking again and I'm sure I saw Tim's car parked outside the pub,' Sally said.

'I'm sure Tim would have said something to me if that was the case,' Janette said.

'Don't be so sure,' Sally said. She sipped water, then placed the glass cup on the table. Water dripped down the side of the glass. It left a ring on the table.

'Maybe you're reading into things here. It's a stressful time for all of us.'

Sally took another sip of the water. She was quiet then said, 'Yes, you could be right.'

They talked about the kids schooling, the hot summer they were having and Sally's macramé interest. Janette suggested to Sally that she turn her macramé vocation into an income. No matter how they tried to avoid it, the subject would return to the pending closure. When Sally finished her glass of water, she got up from the table to leave and thanked Janette.

Janette walked Sally to the door. When she stepped outside onto the door step, she felt a cool breeze that had set in. In the sky, grey clouds were forming and grouping together. Tree branches were swaying. Rain would bring relief. Janette waved goodbye to Sally.

Inside, the house was still hot. It felt stifling. Needing to clear her head, Janette decided to take a drive. She helped Taylor pack up her toys and to choose one for the drive. She cut carrots to feed the horses and left a note for Tim, in case he got home before they returned.

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Taylor sat in the back of the Corolla with pencils and her colouring book. The radio station played a Miley Cyrus song and as Janette drove down Monash Way, she sang along to it. She circled the Hazel wood pond, then got onto Tramway Road, before turning onto Church Road.

Once on Church Road, Janette pulled the car over. The sun had disappeared from the sky, and only grey clouds could be seen. Janette's hair blew in the wind as she stepped out of the car.

Taylor clambered out of the back seat and clasped Janette's hand in hers as they walked over to the paddock's fence line to feed the horses. At school pick up they would feed the horses as the paddock was not far from Taylor's school. Occasionally on weekends they'd visit too.

They watched as the horses moved closer to where they stood behind the wire. They called the horses over, making clicking sounds in their mouth. Janette took out the carrots packed in a sealed plastic bag, and reminded Taylor of how to place the carrot in the palm of her hand.

When the chestnut horse approached, they rubbed the star on its forehead, then Taylor held out her hand with the carrot. The horse scrunched its nose as it bit the carrot with its teeth. Clouds began to rumble and not wanting to get caught in a storm, Janette decided to leave.

On the drive home, Janette listened to music on the radio as Taylor coloured in her book.

When Janette pulled into the drive way, she couldn't see Tim's car parked. Stepping out of the car and walking to the door, she called Tim but his phone went to voice mail.

The house felt hot when they got inside. Janette opened the windows to let the cool air in. Taylor slumped on the couch, put the television on and asked what they were having for dinner.

Janette told Taylor to wash and change into her pyjamas. Taylor got up from the couch and went to her room. Janette started making dinner, in-between helping Taylor bathe. As she cut vegetables she glanced out the window expecting Tim to return. Outside, pigeons balanced on the washing line as the wind pushed the line in circles. Splotches of rain dotted the pavement. Lightning struck in the distance.

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Taylor emerged from her bath with her hair soaking wet. Janette helped her towel dry it while keeping an eye on the vegetable lasagne cooking in the oven. The timer on the oven no longer worked.

When the lasagne was cooked, Janette cut a slice for herself and Taylor. She called Tim but his phone was now switched off. She cut him a piece, covered it in tin foil and left it on a plate to warm on the stove. They ate dinner watching television and listening to the rain pelt down on the roof.

Approaching dark, Janette put Taylor to bed, closed all the windows and watched television in the lounge room, waiting for Tim to arrive.

She was in the bath room when she heard a noise at the front door. When she went to see if it was Tim, she saw him stumbling through the entrance, kicking his shoes off. He was drunk.

Tim walked over to the kitchen stove, peeled back the tin foil covering the lasagne and began to eat it with his hands. Janette stood at the hallway entrance, her arms crossed.

‘I was worried about you,’ Janette said. ‘I tried to call you a couple of times.’

Tim shrugged. ‘I was with Mackie’ he said.

Tim bumped into the dining table as he walked to the couch.

When he got to the couch he collapsed on it. ‘I spoke to my old man,’ he said.

‘We’ll talk about it in the morning,’ Janette said ‘when you’re sober.’

Janette walked back to their bedroom. She left the door ajar. She got changed, brushed her teeth, and rested her head on the pillow. From her bedroom window she could see the rain falling off the drain pipes. In the distance she saw the top of the station’s eight chimneys. Every night she would fall to sleep with them in view. Stars began to dot the sky. Night grew and fell upon the station until Janette couldn’t see the station’s eight chimneys anymore.