

The Last Thing

Rebecca Bryson

“Hey, mum.” Derilla wandered into the kitchen as I was chopping carrots at the bench. The *thwack, thwack, thwack* of the knife against the wooden board had muffled the sound of the front door opening. She brought a waft of burnt woodchips into the room and I looked up briefly to see her untangle a pink mask from her thick, black curls and drop it to the floor.

“Where did that thing come from?” I frowned before turning back to the knife and carrot. We can’t afford for me to go ahead and cut myself.

Thwack, thwack, thwack.

“Kimberley gave it to me. It’s pretty, huh?”

“Doesn’t matter. It needs to be N95 or P100.” I threw another glance at the mask on the floor. It shimmered a little. Glitter. Great. “That looks like neither.”

I lay the knife carefully on the board and stared at Derilla. She stared back at me defiantly. My own mother’s stubborn jaw jutted out of Derilla’s face. The girl could look like all different members of my family in one day. That morning, as she padded sleepy-eyed into the kitchen for breakfast, she was Dad. But right at this moment, she was Mum all over.

“Dez, it *needs* to be a particulate respirator. Remember what they taught you in school. And what *I* taught you.” My fingers were beginning to feel numb from the cold vegetables. I rubbed them against one another.

Derilla slumped onto the couch, arms crossed over her chest. “It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t smell out there.”

“It *does* smell, I could smell it when you came in. Before I could even see you. And it doesn’t matter whether you can smell it or not, remember? We do



what the app says." I wiped my hands against a tea towel that was already slightly damp and picked up my phone. The AAQ immediately opened. "Air Quality Melbourne: Hazardous."

Derilla sighed. "It *doesn't matter* what it says, does it? It's always been either hazardous, or very unhealthy..." she rolled her eyes as if the entire issue was incredibly boring. I kind of knew how she felt. Waking up each morning, checking the app, the filters in the ceiling, the water...

"I know, darling. But it lets us know when to move on. Tomorrow's the day, I'm afraid. I hope you're packed."

"I'm always packed." Derilla slid off the couch, seemingly boneless, and slumped towards her bedroom.

"Check the vents in there, please! Or wear your mask!" My eye flickered involuntarily to the urn sitting on the floor next to the door. Always by the door, never on a shelf. Always ready to be taken wherever we go. It's such a heavy thing. I should have kept the ashes in their box, but it didn't feel right. I turn back to the carrots. "Mindy, what's happening in the news?"

An unrecognisable ABC news reporter's voice sounded. Prim and clipped. I couldn't tell who it was. I don't really know any of the news reporters anymore. I just know what they tell me – the areas that are safe, the movement of the fires, the attempts to manage them, the houses that are taking people in and, lastly, the most recent list of people who have perished. Well, the reporters never use names. But I try to decipher from the descriptions. Does that sound like someone I would know? Is that the right area? The right age?

The news report always ends with a reminder of how to fasten the particulate respirators. Over the ears, under the ears, pinch the nose, make sure it suctions...

"Mindy, turn off the news." The walls fall silent. I scrape the carrots into the pot on the stove and then stand and listen to the soup start to simmer, absentmindedly stirring it with a spoon as I watch the trees swaying in the dusk outside the grubby window. There are so many things I miss about being outside. The smell of fresh air, lemon eucalyptus on the breeze, the thumping of my feet on the grass as I run each evening, the smell of the dinner wafting from other people's windows as I run past their lit-up houses at dusk. I can still go outside, of course. But it's not the same. A grey pall blankets the sky and, when the sun does shine through, it's weakened. The sun is a dull, orange ball in the haze. The air feels thick. Running is advised against. Any activity that requires

deep gulps of air into the lungs can't really be done anymore—not unless you're in a well-conditioned building.

A soft tune snakes out of the walls from Derilla's bedroom. I can tell it's an old Taylor Swift song, even though the sound is muffled, like it's playing through a thick pillow. Kids seem to love old nostalgic songs. And television shows and movies. They watch them again and again and never grow sick of it. Derilla seems to be constantly watching Bob's Burgers. And when she gets to the end, she starts from the beginning again. She doesn't seem to be interested in anything new.

I ladle out bowls of watery soup. It's not as thick and rich as I'd like, but there's plenty of veg at least. I try to top Derilla's with extra carrot. Carrying two bowls into Derilla's room, I breathe deeply over one of them. The steam seems to clear my lungs and the soft onion scent brings its own brand of nostalgia. I see why Derilla likes that feeling so much.

She's spread out on the bed, head propped up on her pillow as she stares blankly at her tablet. She's watching an old David Attenborough film. A herd of gazelles tear across straw-like grass as a lion dashes after them. Derilla looks up from her screen.

"Mum, the sky is so weird in Africa." My fingers begin to burn against the hot bowls, so I place them on her desk and glance over her shoulder at the screen.

"What do you mean, darl?"

"It's blue, like a cartoon. Why is that?"

It's always the small, unexpected moments that catch me off guard. Like when I'd told Derilla that I'm older than Google and she'd thought I was joking.

"Google it," I'd wanted to say.

Of course, I knew that Derilla was a toddler when the first of it started. When the Red Season hit. I remember lurking inside with her squirming in my arms, wanting to play outside. I questioned everything back then. All my choices, like so many others. I allowed myself to think the dreadful things: why did I have a baby? Why, in this climate? In this world? If there was no more outside, or blue skies or clean air. It seemed to get better after that, once the rain had soaked the earth a deep red, cleansing the skies but staining the concrete. Once the immediate threat of the fire was reduced, the fireys took to the streets of Melbourne with giant pressure hoses, dislodging the red stains from the cracks in the ground. Some of us cheered. Some of us claimed it was a waste of water. And it was. We knew that when it all happened again.

Then, we got used to it. We tolerated it. It's strange that my most dreadful memories are from the very beginning, when the world only got more scorched from that point. We expected it then, I suppose.

"It's not just Africa, Dez. Australia had sky like that too once. When I was younger. There are still parts of the world where the sky is that blue."

Derilla turned off her tablet and placed it on the bed. "That's weird. It looks like something from a painting." She fiddled with her hair and I could tell something was bothering her. She chewed her lip. "Mum, Kimberley and her mum and dad are staying."

"What do you mean? A bit longer?"

"No, they're staying for good."

Her eyes began to fill with tears and I wondered how long it would take for one to roll quietly down her cheek. "Surely not. They know better than that."

"Kimberley says they're sick of moving and then coming back. Nothing's ever happened to their house before, so they're staying this time." Derilla's face seemed older in the dim light of her bedroom. Had her cheeks always sagged like that?

I knew it couldn't be good for a kid to keep moving around, chasing the spots on the map with the least amount of air pollution. I enjoyed the days we were in our own home the most, of course. The shelters were overcrowded and unsafe and the AirHomes weren't much better. I can't really speak ill of the families who let us stay while we're on the move, even though we do the same when Melbourne is safest. It's begrudging, I know. They do it because they know that they'll need it too in a couple of months. But still, they could make it very hard for us. There were horror stories of men climbing into bed with women while they slept. Of families making their visitors sleep outside or in dog kennels. There was even a story about a young woman who was locked in a cabinet. For that reason, I keep Derilla close to me at night, my arms around her small body while her thick, dark curls cover my face.

"We're all sick of moving, we just have to do it."

"Can't we move? To a different country, I mean?"

I wiped my hand across Derilla's cheek, soaking up the tear that had escaped from her eye. "It's not that simple." I thought about others—people we knew, people we were related to, Derilla's father... choosing to be a climate refugee was a choice. Not necessarily a bad choice, even when some return to us in an urn in a box. But, it was a choice I wasn't prepared to make just yet.

"Why not?"

“We don’t know what might happen on the way. Not everyone is willing to take us. Or we might end up somewhere worse. There are different problems everywhere. Every country has something they don’t like.” I knew that it could be better for us if we fled, but I also knew it could be much, much worse. I wasn’t prepared to take the leap yet. Not while there were shelters in Victoria that could take us in. I couldn’t give up a certainty for something I was unsure of. Not while Derilla was with me. Not while the urn was a constant reminder of the worst.

“Can we visit Kimberley tomorrow?” I leaned over to lift the soup from the desk and pass it to Derilla. She began stirring the hot broth with the spoon, softly blowing on its surface.

“Yes, I think we should.”

I only knew Kimberley’s parents through Derilla’s friendship with their daughter. I was used to being thrust into relationships with people who wouldn’t normally be my choice. Making small, uncomfortable chatter in unfamiliar kitchens, sipping instant coffee while our daughters dashed off to play together, unaware of the social awkwardness occurring between their parents. But I quickly began to look forward to these moments. These fragments of human connection lacking from other areas of my life. I’m lucky enough to have a job that allows me to work from home—editing learning materials for online university courses—so I almost seamlessly moved into the transient lifestyle while others were not so lucky. Loss of income, homelessness, untreated illnesses and malnutrition were common in Melbourne. So I felt a pang of guilt whenever I felt lonely. Loneliness is the least of anybody’s worries. Loneliness is a luxury that should be relished. Besides, I had Derilla. And her friends and their families began to fill those missing connections I had lost from a past life.

As Derilla and I approached Kimberley’s house, her mother was standing in the front yard, looking carefully at her phone.

“Hi, Anne,” I called, as Derilla ran through their front door to find Kimberley.

Anne looked up from her phone and smiled weakly. “Hi, Beth. Just checking the air quality.”

“Dez mentioned you and Bill have decided to stay. Is that right?”

Anne sighed and pushed her phone into the back pocket of her grubby jeans. “We talked about it a lot last time we were here. And now we’re back, it seems like the right decision. We can’t bring ourselves to pack up and move again.

Especially when the house we built is standing right here, as always.” She looked up at the small property in wonder, as if she were seeing it for the first time.

“It’s not about the flames, though, is it?” I felt a bit annoyed at Anne’s stubbornness. She should know that the periodical moves aren’t about the actual flames. Not for us, anyway. But I can see the nostalgia in her eyes. The memories she must have shared with her family in that house.

Anne scratched her arm and looked at the ground. “I know. I just can’t do it. *We* can’t do it. The air will be bad, the water will be bad... I know. The food will be scarce...” She trailed off and looked up at the house again. The renewed sight of it seemed to give her strength. She looked back at me. “We’re just not moving.” I’d heard of other families doing this. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn’t. I can understand their choices, but at the same time I can’t. They have a daughter, like Derilla.

As I packed up the pantry that night while Derilla dozed in her bed, I thought about Anne’s face as she stared back at her house. I felt like I’d shed any kind of attachment to our own house. It was the only way we could do it, year after year. Things stopped having much meaning. I couldn’t let them. Things are just things. Well, most things anyway.

I threw packets of lentils and pasta into my backpack, leaving behind any vegetables we hadn’t used up. Anne and Bill could help themselves to whatever we leave behind. I could leave them a little hope. That thought made me feel less wasteful, but also sad at the thought of them creeping into the house to ransack anything we hadn’t taken. I knew they’d do it. People get desperate. I left my backpack next to the front door and asked Mindy to set my alarm for five am. The urn was there, ready to come with us. Derilla would carry it, as usual. I’m not sure why we continued to lug it around. We wouldn’t be able to keep doing it for much longer, surely, but we’d try for as long as possible. It was the last thing.

As I lay in bed, unable to sleep, I heard the soft sounds of Bob’s Burgers seeping through the wall that divided me and Derilla. She fell asleep to a random episode every night, and so I did too.

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