

Shifting Horizons

Sighing softly, Miranda dips her brush into a mug of murky water, then into the messy watercolour box on the high stool next to her. She sweeps it across the paper on her easel, adding a new streak of vibrant peach to her version of the sunset that is slowly spreading across the horizon before her. She stands alone in her back yard, bare feet set wide apart, her jeans and t-shirt covered with an oversized man's shirt. Stepping back to inspect her efforts, Miranda growls with frustration and turns away, her shoulders slumping. Her fifth attempt this week is starting to show some promise of capturing the scene, and although she is pleased with herself for persisting this long, she's even more annoyed at how slow her progress has been. She feels sure that a child could do better!

She almost takes a sip from the water mug, then stops herself just in time and picks up her lukewarm tea instead. The past ten years have been such a blur of dutiful service to her kids, her teaching job, her aging parents. Even the family dog has started crumbling, and has needed extra attention from her this year! Her recent burst of enthusiasm for this new hobby is an attempt to scrape back some time for herself, now that the kids are starting to need her a little less. This is the year she's going to rediscover some of the things that used to bring her joy and satisfaction, and that once made her feel like herself. That's the

idea, anyway! Right now, though, it's mostly reminding her of how long she's put her needs and interests on the back burner, and the skills she's lost along the way. When she was a child, and even a young adult, things seemed to come so easily to her. It wasn't hard to feel good about herself when life was a steady stream of achievements and affirmations. Now nothing seems to cooperate, including these damned paints and brushes, and it feels like she's made an artform of snatching failure from the jaws of success. All her old confidence has seeped away over the years. Who knew pushing out and raising a brace of kids would take over your life and your sense of your 'self' so utterly?

Standing at the high bedroom window, Sam stops for a moment to take in the glowing beauty of the sky as the sun begins to set over the town, then catches sight of her neighbour over the high back fence. Brush in hand, she is daubing at a canvas propped on an easel in the middle of her wild back yard. The neighbour's pile of dreadlocked, pink hair almost looks like it's deliberately matched with the scene she's trying to capture, and Sam admires the woman's creativity and boldness. Though she can't see the details of the painting in the fading light, she feels a pang of jealousy that she's out there doing something so frivolous, just for herself, alone and uninterrupted. Bliss. She wonders if the artist knows how lucky she is.

As she watches the woman turn away from her painting, Sam's phone buzzes on the bed. That will be Will, texting to say he's running later than expected, again. It's going to be another solo bath time, she thinks, trying not to resent her hardworking partner. She just hopes he'll be home in time to help put the twins down, at least.

Everyone keeps telling her this is a tough phase, but that it will all go by so quickly, and that she must savour this time while the children are small. She knows there's truth and wisdom in this, but when she's just about dead on her feet, it doesn't feel particularly helpful. It *will* get easier, she assures herself. When the baby can sleep alone in his cot more, when the toddlers are toilet trained. In the meantime, she will just have to try not to envy her neighbour's freedom too much. She resolves to find it inspiring, instead. After all, she may be in the trenches now, but she *will* have time like that for herself again, one of these days. She may even be able to resume her studies, cut short by the birth of the twins.

Sam notices that their elderly neighbour, one house to the left and across the street, is back in her favourite position on the front footpath. The small, wiry woman is down on all fours, presumably pulling the invisible weeds out of her already-perfect lawn by hand again. Oh, to have the time to spend all afternoon

doing something so completely unnecessary! Sam catches her uncharitable thought and immediately chastises herself for being so mean-spirited.

She bends her head to kiss the soft hair of the sleeping baby strapped to her chest, breathes in his delicious scent, and stops for a beat to gaze at his golden lashes and opalescent lids. Then she turns from the window, bracing herself for whatever has been keeping the toddlers so worryingly quiet for the last ten minutes.

'I'm ok, I'm ok... it's going to be alright,' Dawn recites to herself like a mantra, trying to avoid crying out. The pain sears from her hip, up and down her left side. Managing to drag herself up onto her hands and knees, she grits her teeth and tries to collect her thoughts. She has tripped and fallen on the cracked cement of the front driveway, just as she was about to begin her daily, therapeutic task of pulling the nut grass from her nature strip. Her son, Peter, will be here any minute to drop off some groceries after work. If he can just help her into the car and over to the hospital, then she won't need to make a big fuss.

All her neighbours have their hands full enough with their young families. And despite obviously being very busy, they all seem so capable and unflustered,

Dawn observes. Take that sweet family in the corner house, with the young twins and the brand-new baby. The lovely young mum is always taking them off to some interesting activity, and her little brood is always so beautifully turned out! Dawn often marvels at the young couple's energy and industriousness. If she can possibly avoid appearing to them like the helpless old woman that she's quickly becoming, then she will.

She tries to breathe through the pain, eyes tightly shut. In a flash, her mind leaps back to the delivery room, with her first son about to emerge into the world. That seems like another life, and another woman entirely. What she wouldn't give to be that young, starting her life as a mother all over again! It's almost as though she blinked and her strong, capable body became frail and unreliable. Where did the time go?! Often, as she potters in her tidy garden, the sounds of neighbourhood children playing in their yards and riding their bikes in the street make her stop in her tracks, filling her with longing as she recalls watching her own tribe of littlies. They never stopped – chasing, wrestling, climbing the big old mango tree or playing mysterious and enthralling games until finally it was time to call them in for dinner.

All five of her darlings have long grown up, and are dispersed across the country now, with some of the grandkids even living overseas. She does get a couple of calls a week from one or another of them, and her youngest, Peter,

pops by for a chat, and to help her out, when he can. At least he's not too far away. The others find it hard to travel home, with their lives so full and busy, but they manage a visit or two, most years.

It's been a whole eighteen months since Frank passed away, and Dawn still catches herself pouring two cups of English Breakfast some mornings. Since he died, she's made an effort to fill her weeks with coffee mornings, library classes and bingo, and has even joined a community choir, although her voice is nothing like it used to be. But at the end of it all, everyone goes their separate ways, and she's back at home and alone again. She comes out here in an attempt to fill in some of the empty hours that stretch ahead of her until the next event, and to escape the silent house.

The maggies often keep Dawn company while she busies herself on the footpath of an afternoon. They perch on the chain link fence – a pair of adults and two youngsters. The mottled grey feathers of the immature birds are slowly, week by week, taking on their parents' sleek look. They fix her with their sideways gaze and like to take turns diving down for any tidbits she turns up as she roots out any sneaky weeds. Their comical chatter and the ungainly gait of the young ones always make her smile, and she never tires of hearing them burst into glorious, full-throated song.

Here they are now, swooping down to visit her again. The adults take up their positions on her fence with brief, expectant cries, and the young ones stroll along the grassy footpath, heads tilted, clearly wondering when their first afternoon snack will make an appearance. Dawn sighs. 'There'll be nothing for you today I'm afraid, sweeties!' she says, wincing and sighing. She is starting to lose hope that her son's car will ever appear. If only she could join the feathered family – launch herself into the darkening sky and leave this useless old body behind; free and powerful again.

It's been slim pickings for the mother magpie and her family lately. It hasn't rained for a while now, and their usual food sources have started drying up along with the land. Any day now, the lanky teenagers will finally be ready to make their own way in the world, but already there's a nest of fledglings to take their place, who noisily demand a constant supply of worms, bugs and small lizards. She can usually rely on this place for a decent afternoon feed, but they've waited a while now and it's providing none of the usual morsels they've come to expect. Trilling to her family to follow, the mother bird launches herself from the low fence, skims over the prone human and swoops out towards the familiar silhouette of a tall gum, indigo against the blazing vista. An invisible force pulls her back to the nest full of clamouring, expectant

mouths, which she will do everything in her power to fill; back to her centre, her reason, her life.

Soon, the mosquitos will chase Miranda in from the dimming yard, but before they do, she watches a small group of birds sail gracefully away from her, into the pink and orange gloaming. With a few deft strokes and a satisfied smile, she quickly adds them into the skyline on her canvas. They make the perfect finishing touch.
