

No Tea Tomorrow

By Kathy Childs

All my life I have dreamed of fire. On cold nights it warmed me, in love it engulfed me, in fever it cleansed me.

I am cold. The early winter frosts are settling on the ground. Icy. Crisp. I lay the kindling in the wood stove and heave some large logs on top to keep the fire burning all morning. I stand in the kitchen, close to the fire allowing the heat to seep into my old bones. The porridge is bubbling on the stove and the aroma of fresh coffee is awakening my senses. The radio chats softly in the background, offering its insights to the world via talkback. Another early start; another long day.

My old knees creak as I kneel to gather the eggs. Three today. Enough for my dinner with one to spare. I feed the clucking hens. There used to be leftovers but there are not many leftovers when you are cooking for one. Himself had died, you know, last winter, after 40 years of hardship.

I survey the yard. The pig no longer wallows in the mud. I remember the squeals as she rolled in the sludge and luxuriated in its squelchy goodness. Complete abandon. The pig is gone. The sty is falling into disrepair.

The mare shivers in the morning chill as I brush her. I lay my head on her flank. Rest awhile. I am no longer cold. Mucking out the stables is hard work.

The cow waits patiently. The warm milk flows through my fingers. I lean against her side, feel her warmth, her life. Milk for tea. Tea for seven when only one is welcome.

I stand, a mug of warm soup steaming in my hands. The shearers have long gone and the sheep have settled in for the long winter chill. The shearing sheds are stark against the landscape; the raw and untreated wood hides a rough and ready interior that offers little comfort. Most of the shearers stayed in town this year. The huts were silent, desolate.

I have swept up the leaves ready for burning, their crackling crinkling autumn hues please me. The warm gold, the deep red and the burnt russet, mingling together on the ground in a jigsaw of colour. The leaves, dry, crisp, dead. The trees will bud and spring back to life as the sun begins a new cycle.

My aches and pains will remain.

The fire and the soup warm my bones and I am tempted to remain inside away from the chill but it is not to be. This afternoon I need to pull out the last of the tomatoes and the straggling lettuces. There is no point in dividing the rhubarb, no need to plant for another season. The shed needs painting. The fences need tightening. Jobs without end.

We had a wonderful retirement planned. Himself had been searching for a campervan. We were going to travel around Australia, to finally see the country beyond the boundary of our land.

I load the rubbish onto the trailer and fire up the tractor. The long walk to the gate to get the mail used to be a highlight. I used to imagine all the things that could have been. That should have been. What would happen if today I followed the road, walked away from here? Himself would forgive me. I am sure of this. I reach the gate and unhitch the bins. I look left, just once, and then I turn around and head back. Too late to dream.

The days are long. The nights longer. Tonight will not be long enough for tomorrow they come for tea. They, like the royal we, are his family, his blood.

They - the driven stockbroker brother and his immaculate corporate wife. The nieces and nephews— doctor, lawyer, engineer, architect. The wolves. They will bring their phones and their tablets and they will tap and exclaim. They will take calls and pronounce in loud tones the wonders of their life. They will bring photos to share of expensive holidays and red-carpet events. But he will not. He will walk with me around the land, talk to me about my garden and hold my hand as I reminisce. He is the black sheep of the family. He became a landscape gardener. I will pour tea for seven but love only one.

I walk through the long dry grass in the early afternoon sun. It bends and breaks under foot. It was a long hot summer and everywhere the land lies gasping for moisture. I reach the stately gum tree and rub my hand over its smooth trunk. I remember what it felt like to touch another, hold another. I close my eyes and remember Himself, his gentleness, his kindness, his touch. Henry does not touch me back. Henry, this is what I have named this majestic blue gum. I talk to Henry now that Himself has passed. Henry knows that I am lonely. Henry understands; he too is the last of a forest, his family that once stood here. Now he stands alone in a field of dry unfriendly grass. I rub my hand over his smooth skin and lean into his mighty trunk.

Henry never says much but he's a great listener. I listen too, for his wisdom. When the wind blows a gale he talks to me in creaks and groans. Last week we had a storm, that howled and battered and I remember the startling snap and great moan of pain as Henry's limbs were torn asunder. I felt his pain; his magnificent bearing was broken and scarred. I must clean up today, burn the limbs, burn the autumn leaves.

I cremated Himself after he died. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. No warming fire on the darkest of days. Today I will burn Henry's lost limbs along with the

autumn leaves and warm myself beside the fire. I will not dwell on tomorrow when they will come for tea.

They - the beloved family with their cloying city ways and their calculating airs. They will come with their plans and the land will be cleared. The bulldozer will make short work of the dense vegetation that is home to the wildlife. The trees will be lopped, the bush will be flattened and the property will be fenced. Land devoid of life. Six of the seven are in agreement. The black sheep and I cannot win this one. They do not want to understand. The land is worthy of something more than quarter acre parcels – but it is their inheritance, not mine. I am but one vote amongst eight.

Tomorrow, one year after Himself has passed they come to tea, to tell me the mourning is over and it is time for the caretaking to end. My time is past.

Henry's limbs are thick and stout. Tears stream from my eyes as the chainsaw cuts through the fallen branches. I cut the large logs into fingers, into kindling, and I feel Henry weeping with me. I am warm again from the work. I am tired but I know I must finish. I do not have the strength to lift the cut branches. I am old. I am worn.

I am weak. I lean against Henry and rest awhile. I will not think of tomorrow

I bring the autumn leaves to the fingers of wood and pile them on. The rusty colour, the crackle as the fire ignites. I warm my hands, working hands. A gust of wind and the leaves swirl and dance. They land on the dry grass and it lights up, tongues of fire moving across the land. I watch in fascination as it crackles and flares. The fire. My friend. The wind moves and sighs and suddenly there is a curtain of orange flame around me. Henry and I stand together.

The flames lap at my feet singeing my toes and still I do not move. I look out beyond the flickering wall and see the land, my home. The wavering searing heat distorts the landscape; my house seems to shimmer in the heat. I turn to watch the animals, restless now, they smell the fire; they understand the danger. They move away, bleating. I know I should help them. And still I do not move.

The fire has me in a trance. I watch in fascination as the flames lick the cuffs of my working trousers. Cotton, not synthetic. The khaki turns to black as the cotton sears and then catches alight. No pain yet.

Henry remains beside me. The two of us, unmoving, unmovable. We watch the flames as they fan out across the land whipped by the swirling winds.

My hair sparks and crackles, cinders fall. The pain reaches out; envelops me. I open my mouth to scream but instead I turn to Henry. I hold him close and with my final breath I whisper – “they’ll get no tea tomorrow”.