

A Favourite Sky

Jour-ney (jur'ne) *n.* Passage from one place to another, sometimes applied figuratively to the passage of gaining knowledge.

He's mostly been in bed since Easter. He's up for a while at night though; I hear him stoke the fire and shuffle through paperwork. He sighs a lot. Sometimes he cries; a low moan of shallow sobs that I try to pretend is the dog whimpering against the cold. Mum must hear him too because she gets up and talks softly to him and the floorboards creak as they go back to bed together.

He's always back asleep when I leave for school so we leave notes for each other in a diary on the kitchen table. It was his idea. It's a black day-to-a-page one and he leaves it open for me with the skinny red tassel draped across today's message. His writing is a bit shakier than it used to be, but still much neater than mine. Every morning I read his message over and over while I crunch through my cereal and think what to write. I flick back through the pages, we've been at it for months now. Back when we started I had to write small just to make my news fit.

Good news - Johnno got his P's yesterday!! Modern history assessment due today, have to give a presentation – can't wait 'til it's over. Charles Sturt Open Day coming up in a fortnight, I'd like to go and have a look – what do you think? Hope your appointment goes OK today. Love, Tim.

There just seemed so much more to say back then.

Hope your presentation went well, better you than me! Uni Open Day sounds good. Doc says I am doing all the right things and will be back to my old self before too long. Sooner I hope. Might pop in to the sale yards today, just to keep an eye on the old blokes. Love, Dad.

The words have thinned out and dried up and now we're down to a daily effortful sentence. Reading it is like swallowing a tablet, writing it even more so. I move the red tassel to see today's message.

Monday: Good luck with your cross-country. Dad.

I want to scrawl *I'M SO BLOODY OVER THIS!* across the double page in thick red text like a graffiti artist. I spin the blue biro he's left for me around my thumb and force out a reply in my usual printing. *Thanks. Tim.*

I don't know why we write our names after our messages, it's not like anyone else is going to write in it. Mum knows it's just for us. I hammer her with questions on the way to the bus.

How long is this going to go on for? Can't the Doc give him something stronger? Can't he at least TRY getting up?

As she drives down our steep driveway, the orchard rushing past behind her, I notice new lines crinkling out from her eyes.

He's sick love, and it's going to take time, longer than we thought. He doesn't want to be like this. He's got another review next week.

As I climb out she catches my hand in hers and looks straight at me, her eyes a mix of fear and hope. *Don't give up on him.* I feel like she's X-rayed my mind.

Tuesday: *How'd you go? Dad.*

Came 3rd. Johnno 1st (new school record) & Steve Mc 2nd.

Zone is August 10th in Benalla. Maybe you can come? Tim.

Wednesday: *Well done. Maybe. Dad.*

Thanks. Tim.

Thursday : *Not too good today, Dad.*

I stare at the page and try to swallow the gritty desert-dryness out of my mouth. My stomach folds in on itself so I slop my cornflakes into the dog's bowl. I inch Dad's door open slowly. The curtains are drawn but I make out his shape, he's coiled up on his side, facing the middle of the bed. Mum's put some daffodils on the bedside table, next to his tablets, a glass of water and last Saturday's paper, still neatly folded. Part of me wants to stay at the door - I haven't been in my parents' room for years - but I pad in slowly, pull back the doona and tuck my long runner bean legs on to Mum's side. He opens his eyes, focuses on me, and we both manage something like a slight smile. Our knees touch lightly. We stay like that; cocooned together, in the half-light silence for a long time. Tears leak on to his pillow. Eventually Mum calls, *Tim! Bus!* Back at the door I stare at his thin lifeless form and wish I knew what to say. I pause again over the page on my way out. *I miss you. Love, Tim.*

Friday: *Bit better. Got some fencing on tomorrow. Can you give me a hand? Dad.*

Love to - ha ha! I'll grab Johnno too, he's owes me! Tim.

I wake as soon as the sun hits my window like a torch. I drizzle a thick river of honey through the volcanic porridge bubbles, leaving his to warm on the stove. I wonder when he'll be up and how long he'll last. Maybe he can sit on the camping chair in the sun and watch Johnno and I have a go at the fencing. That'd have to be better for him than another day in bed. I fill the thermos with coffee and throw some ham and cheese sandwiches in the backpack.

The diary isn't on the table. I hunt around in the neat pile of papers near the phone but can't see it. I don't really know where else to look. I throw a chunk of red gum into the wood burner just as Mum flings open the kitchen door. She hasn't brushed her hair and her eyes are wide. Her words chase each other out of her mouth in a breathless high pitch. *I can't find him anywhere. He was gone when I woke up.*

I jump up, knocking the backpack off the table. The frosty air stings my arms and face but I don't feel the stones cutting in to the soles of my feet. The ute is still out the back. I am running, - *Dad!* - the morning light and the dust start to spin together and I hear a God-awful fear in my voice. *Dad! Dad! DAD!* Mum is racing too, back through the house, down to the dam, across to the chooks, she's got the phone in her hand now. I wrench at the handle on the shed door, *Dad?* but it doesn't move. It's locked from the inside. I feel the blood swish around my body. *God, no. Please, please, please, no.* I slam my body against the door over and over. It rattles and clatters against me but stays wedged shut. When I stop my desperate crashing

there is nothing, just my own rasping sobs and the soft whimper of the dog from inside.

The house is brimming with locals, drinking cups of tea elbow to elbow and talking quietly. Big rough farmer hands wrap around delicate floral teacups that jangle against saucers. Nobody needs introducing. Lemon slice gets offered around on a sagging paper plate. The phone never stops ringing. They come and go in a slow moving wave, it's a haphazard car park out the front. We run out of milk and sugar and somebody reappears with more.

Casseroles in pyrex dishes start to pile up on the kitchen bench, with yellow post it notes stuck to the lids, *20 mins at 180. Can be frozen.* The fridge is jammed full of barbequed chickens and lasagnes and ice cream containers full of soup. Mum gets me to hook up the spare chest freezer on the verandah and watches me rearrange the stream of offerings to make room for more. She smiles wryly - *shame we're not hungry.* She doesn't look as tall. She pulls her polar fleece around her sunken frame instead of zipping it up. *I'm freezing* she says.

Even my principal drops in. He's younger than everybody else there and he looks kind of out of place with his pointy boots and gelled hair. When he shakes my hand and says *I liked your Dad a lot* I feel something inside my chest start to splinter. I bite hard on my lip while I get him a coffee. Out by his car he tells me not to worry about my assessments.

Anybody from school been around?

Just Johnno so far.

There's um, he stares hard at the fuzz of yellow wattle down the drive then looks out longways across the valley, a psychologist if you want to, you know, talk to somebody.

I lay on my bed and stare at the ceiling, counting the small scabs of peeling off-white paint and the faint blue blotches of mould over and again. I read and reread the dozens of cards on my desk. The newsagent in town must only stock 3 styles; the one with the sunset over the lake, the white one with the silver cross and the black one with the single trumpet lily. *Be assured of our thoughts and prayers. Hoping your memories will be a comfort. Please join us for dinner one night when you're up to it.* And then there's Johnno's, a photo of the hills up behind our place on dusk glued on white cardboard. *Shit. I just can't believe it. If you need me mate you know where I am.* Buried underneath the mound of cards is my half-written English assessment from before. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is a frustrated search about the meaning of existence. Discuss.*

Johnno and I collect firewood in his back paddock, loading it in to the ute in silence. The sun is sinking and a flock of cockatoos flap and screech from a lonely gum, startled by the dull thudding of wood on metal. The sky darkens in degrees and is more purple than blue now. I can just see my breath; suddenly I'm freezing too. I stare at the sky on the drive home. He loved the sky. *You'll never see stars like that in the city.* He had a favourite sky, petrol-blue he called it. *I drove your mum to the*

hospital the night you were born and I just knew everything would be all right because it was the most perfect petrol-blue sky.

I find Mum sitting on the laundry floor, propped up against the washing machine, holding his red-checked shirt. Her face is soaking wet and she looks like a little girl. *It still smells like him.*

It's nearly a week before I go back up to the shed. I hear my pulse throbbing right out of my neck as I walk up there with the local copper. I put my hood up and dig my hands deep in to my pockets and keep them there. The door swings open and for a moment Dad's there too, it's the woodchip farm smell. I know what Mum means now. I gulp in deep lungfuls of him.

Sorry about this. Just details. You don't have to stay son.

But I do, I watch him as he squints up at the roof joists and scribbles things in his notebook. He wanders around, picks up a drum of rope and measures the diameter. The colourbond walls start to spin fast and I grip the workbench to stay upright. I lurch outside with the world tilting, my lungs gasping for new air and a thousand hot needles pricking my face.

You right?

I let the tap run through my hands and splash a series of cold sharp handfuls on my face and over the back of my neck. My hands grip my kneecaps and the gravel at my feet slowly comes back in to focus.

I'm finished here now son. He clenches his thick sausage fingers to block a chesty cough. *Found this.*

I wipe my hands down my jeans and take the diary from him. He keeps walking, clearing his throat all the way to his 4WD down at the house. I watch him go and feel my pulse leave my neck and jackhammer around my skull.

The red tassel lies across August 10, still weeks away.

Tim, give them a good run for their money today.

I'm so sorry I can't be there.

Love you mate, Dad.

I slide down against the peeling bark of the giant twin-forked gum. My fingers run smoothly back and forth across his words, absorbing them. My pulse slips back into a gentle, silent rhythm and my body is stilled with a new calm. The thin lump behind the page is the blue biro, waiting for me. I pull my hood down and drink in the endless, cloudless mid-morning blue. The soft warmth of the thin winter sun filters through the branches and rests on me. He loved the sky, my Dad.