

LET ME TELL YOU

February is a funny month here. It can be one thing one year, something else the next. But let me tell you about an ordinary February day in my town in the sixties ...

Gooseberries – small red fruit of the Roaring Lion – weighting the woody spines with their juicy fullness, ripe furry raspberries, blackberries well-blackened. And that's just the back fence. Some branches of Mrs Argyle's greengage tree hang over the side fence and you can pick the plums easily, standing on the roof of the chook shed. In the vegie plot, fading pods are pregnant with overdue peas, and there's some spinach that's been left in the ground too long. You could take a bowl and make a salad right there in the garden: lettuce, tomato, cucumber and radish. You'd never starve. I would have collected three eggs in the early morning and, if Mum was baking for someone's birthday or another special occasion, she might have sent me

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down to the Greens' house at the end of the street for extras. They had more chooks than I could count. Mr Donaldson's work clothes would be hanging heavily on the line, along with some threadbare sheets, waiting for the sea breeze to fluff them about.

Let me tell you about the sounds ...

On this day, the day I'm choosing to describe, you can hear the *skreek skreek whoosh* of old Mr Milton's push lawnmower, 'poor Christine' next door is yelling at her little brother because his school bag smells of rotten apples (she's been called 'poor Christine' since her mother died and her father left her to look after her six siblings), there's the thud of a football being kicked, and Bob Calverton's parrot is squawking what sounds like 'God Save the Queen'. If you listen carefully, you can hear Karen Wilson's grandmother crying (she's almost always crying) and Karen's cat is caterwauling in sympathy. The Lassie dog up the road is barking. Earlier in the day, if you'd been here, you would have heard the roar of Uncle Steve's van as he pulled up at the top of the street and then his cries of 'baker!' at each front gate. Later this afternoon, the new baby in number fifteen will be bellowing while its mother tries to bath her other children. Her husband will be down at Smithy's playing darts and in the gloaming you'll hear

the clink of their bottles. Much later, there might be rowdy arguments in the house nearest the beach about too much drinking and no money for school shoes.

I bet you'd like to know what it smells like ...

Well, on this day, the day my memory chooses, it smells mainly of cut grass. Old Aunt Annie's roast lamb from three houses down mingles with the coconut and chocolate smells coming from mum's kitchen: she's turning plain old sponge squares into lamingtons for the school fete. You can always smell the apples, except if the wind picks up the smoke from the factory and lays it about like slovenly clouds. Depending on where you stand and the direction of the wind, you might smell peaches and apricots from the orchard over the hill or the salty kelp from the beach. Mrs Argyle's lavender plants flower longer than anyone else's, due, she says, to wood ash and heavy pruning, and the flowers have a fine aroma indeed. Yesterday you might have smelt the charcoal bitumen from the roadworks. Today there's horseshit wafting from the paddocks to the south and chook shit up my nose from mucking out the hen house.

So, as you can tell, there are little changes from day to day but the place generally looks and smells and sounds the same on any given day throughout the month of

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February in any given year. And it feels like ... what does it feel like? It feels kind of lazy and easy and mostly happy. It feels like home.

Well, it did.

But then came a day ... which became a series of days ...

I can't really tell you about *The Day*. My mind is too mixed up with half-snapshots, a surreal kaleidoscope, fragments overheard, other people's experiences. If I try to recall it, I just get a kind of roar: white-hot noise, stinging eyes, roiling, bubbling, yelling and screaming.

Instead, let me tell you about a specific day in February in a specific year but not *The Day*. I'll tell you about my neighbourhood on the 8th of February 1967

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There's no fruit climbing up the back fence. There is no back fence. The charred plum tree next door smoulders. No eggs this morning for there are no chooks. Mum's standing at the back door staring at nothing (or everything). Next door's washing flaps about like a slapstick comedy on a vacant stage. There is no house to accompany the washing line and no bed to take the sheets, no man to wear the work clothes. Poor Christine is not yelling at her siblings. Poor Christine is in the

hospital. Karen Wilson's grandmother is still crying and you can hear other sobbings and heavings about the place. There will be no milkman or baker today, no mail delivered, no darts parties at Smithy's.

Everything smells burnt. Here smells like an abattoir, there like an open fire. Singed hair down the street, acrid plastic further on, burning rubber, ashen cloth. Some mothers and fathers won't be coming home and Mrs Argyle's lavender plant has had its fill of ashes. The hill is black and bald. You can't smell any shit or sponge cakes. There's no bird squawking 'God Save the Queen'. There are no birds to be heard at all, no dogs barking but I can hear the mewling of a cat somewhere.