Promise / Marie Low

Jen's eyes were blurry from looking too long at her phone and she wondered just how long she had let Eliza sit in front of the television.

Her daughter was lying in the air-conditioned dark of the living room, eyes dull and thin legs askew up the back of the old leather couch. Yet another episode of *Bob's Burgers* was playing.

Jen felt sick in the pit of her stomach. She wondered what harm she was doing to her daughter, letting her wallow in an endless round of animation, her skin coated in the artificial cool and her face lit by pixels instead of the sun.

This was not why they had moved here.

"Eliza," she said.

The girl grunted.

"Eliza," she repeated.

"What?" Eliza's white face looked over at her with irritation.

"Come on. Switch the television off. Let's get outside and do something."

"It's too hot, Mum. I'll do something tomorrow."

The child looked unanchored, Jen thought, a pale shape against the gloomy room, a listless spider, all legs and arms. Jen's desire to join her in front of the television was strong.

Instead, she went into the front room. She had been avoiding this spot since lunch. The room, once a verandah and now enclosed with windows on three sides, overlooked paddocks that had become just dust.

Pat was no longer down there, doing whatever it was he found to pass the time when the remaining cattle had been fed and there were no crops to attend to. There were just a few skinny cows listless around a salt lick.

It was Pat that had made her turn to her phone. She couldn't stand it, the sight of him, shirt streaked with dirt, stained hat jammed on his thinning hair, standing there, looking at the dust, acres and acres of it, as if his blue eyes could make it different if he just stood there for one more hour. Just one more hour.

Three years ago, the dust had waved with the golden heads of mustard weed, thick and healthy like oats, heavy with the promise that Pat could become a farmer. The promise flowed through the weeds and the stand of old gums that hid god knows what, and flavoured the air around the old farmhouse standing on the rise. The promise flickered and danced all the way down to the river.

"You could grow babies on that soil," his cousin had told him, smiling eyes wide.

Back then, the river was busy with its own existence, a wide brown highway lined with willows and stones made for skipping. They had swum in the summer heat, drops evaporating almost instantly as each of them climbed out of the water.

Now, it was dry, dry, dry. You could walk from one town to another around the fetid brown pools left in the riverbed.

Pat had been lit with the promise then, she remembered. He had been lit all through the first year with no rain and well into the second. He had sown crops that withered and died and claimed them cheerfully as experiments.

But the third year saw no flickers of that promise, just more drifts of dust that came through the screens and settled on everything, the tops of doors, the edge of the TV, shelves and floors and windowsills, until you felt you had been born sheathed in a fine powder. The skin on their faces felt soft with it.

Even the snakes had taken shelter under the house, betrayed by the trails left in the early morning or late afternoon as they slid out to look for water.

And the dust etched itself into the tired lines on Pat's face and edged the voice that Jen heard less and less often. The lethargy had come to all of them with month after month of unblinkingly blue skies.

Eliza, oblivious to crops and cattle and empty rain gauges, had also become weighed down with the drought. The three of them made their own tracks in the dirt each day, following their routines.

Jen sat at the table in the back room, looking out at the hot wind and thought of her girl and Pat and the energy that had sunk into the hard ground after the last of the rain.

She thought of the day Eliza had been born and the shaking happiness of Pat, his voice loud on the phone to his sister and his whole person out of place against the white and the cleanliness and the rigidity of the hospital. She thought of the first sight of Eliza's small and scrunched red face. And she thought of the guilty slow pleasure of the money left to them by an uncle that would finally bring Pat face-to-face with his dream.

Rain or no rain, Jen thought, they were here, and the fleshless land still had beauty. The gums, old and twisted, were rooted in the memory of floods and great years, and odd creatures, like goannas and moths, had come into their own in this strange orange world. Birds of all kinds - finches and magpies, crows and lorikeets - flocked to the birdbath she kept filled.

A strand of her blonde hair strayed across her face and she looked at the dead ends of it, feathered against her view of the paddocks.

Down there, Pat strode out again and for some reason, it was the sight of his knees, vulnerable and knobby beneath his shorts, that made her decide.

Jen jumped up and showered quickly but carefully, conserving water in a bucket on the floor, and picked out her most colourful dress, a Hawaiian one bought for a pink Christmas theme four years ago, with butterflies and flamingos and as loud as a shout in church. She put her hair up in a red clasp and put on makeup and went to find Eliza to ask her to wear something pretty, dodging questions and complaints, and handing the girl sparkling earrings to keep her quiet.

In their cupboard was Pat's Hawaiian Christmas shirt and she laid it out on the bed.

Jen had kept one small section of the house garden alive - the section where the birdbath stood. She had shuttled bath and shower and washing machine water there each night and talked to the pretty white heads of the whirling gaura and complimented the gardenia on its shiny, artificial-looking leaves.

A single hibiscus bloomed with three yellow flowers, fat and sinfully lavish.

Jen found the red checked picnic blanket and brought it out to lay on the pavers beside the single patch of green. Then she raided the kitchen for the jug and glasses and filled them with red cordial and ice, finished with petals from the nasturtium growing at the foot of the gardenia. On a plate were iced cakes - out of a packet, Jen did not like to bake - and jam-filled biscuits and, by the time Eliza came out, curious despite herself, sunset orange crepe paper floated from the sparse fingers of the gum, and music zipped sharp around the dusty leaves.

The face of her child was enough for Jen and she laughed out loud in the tiny pocket of green.

"It's a fiesta!" Jen said, hugging Eliza. "Go and get that rainbow sombrero from the junk room and call your Dad."

She watched as the child, shiny in a smile, ran inside and came out with the dusty sombrero, darted around the side of the house and bellowed for her father, urging him to hurry up, and returned pulling him like a pilot boat leading a large cargo ship.

He looked at the blanket and the food and the sombrero and the unexpected brightness and stood blinking before taking off his own bruised-looking hat.

For the first time in maybe a week or a year, Pat took Jen's eyes into the keen focus of his own, hat in his hand and the faint beginnings of something soft starting around his mouth.

"You're bloody mad," he said, and turned to laugh at Eliza twirling in a yellow dress on the edge of the blanket to jagged music, pale fingers hanging on to the rainbow sombrero on her head.

"Your shirt's on the bed," Jen said.

He shook his head in disbelief. "Right-o."

Pat shuffled out of his boots and stripped off dirty socks, flinging them alongside the crepe paper in the tree where they hung, limp and ridiculous in the late afternoon light.

There were clouds gathering on the horizon behind him as he went inside, but clouds had gathered there before. Clouds had gathered and there had even been the crack of thunder, and the bright spark of lighting, but no fat drops had fallen. No fat drops had fallen for three years.

Still, Jen thought, it was promising.