

Her father's job

by Claire King

Cicely's father has a secret job. He tells her he is an explorer, and every night at bedtime he takes her small, soft hand in his and describes the fabulous worlds that he will take her to one day. They will trek through the humid jungles of the tropics, bake in the rasping heat of the Grand Canyon, dance with the penguins on Antarctic ice.

Cicely knows this is not true, because every night, even though her toes curl under the covers in anticipation, she sees him remove his spectacles and rub his eyes. He always has a headache after work. Also, he is never dirty.

Cicely has deduced, therefore (because she is seven now, and rather clever), that her father is probably a rock-star, or a gun-fighter. Her two fingers stretch out to him. Bang!

Today Cicely is whizzing along the pavement on her green scooter. She is wearing lipstick and a flamboyant scarf in shades of pink and purple, both borrowed (without asking) from her mother. She is carrying the dinnertime baguette.

Cicely's mother is trailing behind. She is growing a baby brother in her belly, a big round one that jumps when you put your cold hands on it.

When Cicely gets to the streetlight on the corner she pauses, waiting for her mother to catch up. The bread is bakers-shop warm and smells toasty. Cicely has a plan. She untwists the cat's ears of the paper waistcoat, her determined fingers cracking the crust and tearing soft white bread from the middle of the loaf. She means to put the paper back, of course, covering her tracks, but as she sees her mother approaching it crumples in her fist and she drops it behind her.

"Cicely!" her mother scolds, "We don't drop litter. Pick it up."

Cicely is doing a lot of picking up these days; her mother has lost her bend, and picking things up is not her father's job. But as she reaches down for the paper it is whisked away by the breeze, light

as a promise, tumbling over itself off the pavement and into the road. Cicely sees it escaping and launches into a run.

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Cicely's father is not an explorer. He is a listener. All day he sits before dark screens peppered with light. All night the radar pulse echoes through his ears, his dreams filled with the clatter of discarded satellites, meteorites, the orbiting debris of the space race. Somewhere in the stratosphere, one day, a threat may arrive, hidden in the clutter.

He should hear it when it comes. It will sound wrong, somehow, he is sure. But wrong, how?

He should hear it, but he will not. He has not.

He hands off his shift, stands, stretches. The last thing he will do on this Earth.

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At the corner, his wife's arm whips out instinctively, grabbing Cicely by her flamboyant scarf, almost choking her. Cicely stumbles, then stares up at her mother indignantly, battling shocked tears.

The wrapper tumbles on its solitary way and is buffeted by a passing van, swept skywards on the updraft.

Cicely's mother begins to say something, to apologise. But it is too late.

