

Climate Change

by Katherine E. Stuart

That's it, she's flipped, thought Jess, Hannah's finally gone over the edge. Buckets in the shower?

Jess knew Hannah had had a rough start in life. Moved to Australia at the age of 7 with parents whose longing for a complete change and the sun drew them to the outback, where their profound disappointment with their lives back in Scotland merely plumbed new depths. Hannah had left home ASAC (as soon as she could), changed her surname and after graduating from university moved to Sweden, where she hoped they'd never find her again. She'd found a job there travelling the world for a telecommunications group selling 'communications to the masses'.

But a year ago Hannah had been enticed back by the prospect of a mid-career veer studying law—and her parents leaving her a reasonable-sized home in Moonee Ponds. They'd died in flames, engulfed by a raging bushfire their car couldn't outrun.

Hannah was certainly intense. She painted kids' portraits for money, and sometimes weirdly abstract oils for fun, and was prepared to live pretty much hand-to-mouth while she completed the new degree.

So Jess wasn't too surprised by the lecture she got on arrival at Hannah's two-bedroom, two-storey townhouse, where she was to stay until she could find her own place.

Although she was finding it hard to take it all in. A lethargy that went beyond the usual jet-lag had begun to gnaw at her edges.

There was a lot about saving energy: turn the lights off when you leave a room, don't leave the light on over the stairs, keep the doors closed to keep the heat in, plug in the microwave only when you're going to use it, and (despite it being intensely cold—according to Jess) that the gas heater had been switched off for the summer.

It was early September. Jess was shivering. She'd just arrived from Sweden herself—not enticed but dragged back by an unfathomable sense of familial duty. Her father, to whom she had never been close, was now a widower and had been diagnosed with Old-Timers (an American friend's ruefully homophonous name for Alzheimer's disease), and Jess was needed to help out.

Hannah had kindly met her at the airport. The plane arrived in the early evening, and it felt freezing cold to Jess, coming from one of the hottest summers on record in Stockholm. Long into August and September, the shade of the sycamore tree that grew at the centre of her cobblestone courtyard in central Stockholm had felt as warm and humid and inviting as if it were spread out over a piazza high up on the Amalfi coast.

Hannah had carried Jess's heavy suitcase up the stairs and showed her a mattress on the floor topped with a thin sleeping bag and a mean-looking, stained pillow. And then launched into her lecture.

The stuff about saving energy made good environmental sense and good economic sense of course, given Hannah's status as a full-time student trying to make ends meet without any assistance whatsoever and incurring a debt as she went to boot.

But the stuff about water...?

“Bucket's in the shower so save the water when you shower. I use it for the washing machine once a week and the cat drinks from the buckets too. There's several so don't worry.”

But Jess was worried. *Buckets* in the shower? What on earth was Hannah on about?

By the time they'd drunk tea and she'd been offered and refused food and a shower, Jess was feeling the first scratchiness in her throat. She excused herself, cleaned her teeth and

crawled still fully clothed under the sleeping bag. Thank god I always BOP (bring own pillow) she thought as she swam into an uneasy sleep.

Two hours later she was awake again. The house was dark and there was gentle snoring coming from Hannah's room across the hall. Jess's throat felt like it had been wire-brushed, and she was chilled to the bone. She groped for the desk lamp and pulled on two jumpers and some woolly tights from her suitcase, and covered the sleeping bag with her heavy Swedish winter coat. Her legs burned but she was still cold to the core. Eventually she slept again from pure exhaustion.

When Jess groped her way down to the lounge room the next morning Hannah was already crunching cereal and watching TV.

"Company," she said matter-of-factly and "Help yourself", waving a spoon towards the kitchen, while images of the pertly attired and perfectly made-up host and hostess of some morning TV show shone brightly and whitely from the ancient colour screen.

"Look Hannah, I wonder if we can light the heater—I'm freezing. I froze all night. I'm happy to pay for the gas."

Hannah dragged her eyes away from the screen and frowned at Jess. "What's up with you?" she said suddenly sitting bolt upright and zapping off the TV with the remote. "You look bloody awful."

"Thanks," said Jess. "I feel awful. Think I've got the flu or something."

Hannah's cool white wrist was swift, and pressed against Jess's forehead for all of ten seconds.

"Right," she said. "Fuck. OK. Wait here."

Like I'm going somewhere, thought Jess, and slumped into the vacant sofa.

Hannah went into the kitchen and opened the window. An icy wind followed her back into the lounge room, where she pulled open another window to create a cross-draught.

I was right, though Jess. She's lost it. Wondering vaguely at the same time through the rising mistiness in her head how on earth she was going to survive the next few days with a host gone nuts, nowhere to stay, and a raging fever.

Hannah brushed past Jess and disappeared up to her bedroom, descending a minute later with a beanie, gloves, a thick scarf and a bulky, shapeless pullover.

"Here, put these on," she said, dropping the clothing onto Jess's prostrate form. "There's plenty more where they came from. We're not making the room warmer. We're going to make it colder. That'll kill the bugs. We'll keep you warm, and any live bugs will stay on you. I can't afford time off."

Hannah went back up to her bedroom and pulled on an extra sweater herself. Then she went into the kitchen and thoughtfully made Jess some tea and toast. "How do you like it?" she called.

Jess spent the rest of that day and about two weeks more stretched out and rugged up on the sofa, feeling worse than she could ever recall with a flu virus, watching TV and feeling trapped between there and here – between her old life and the new one she was going to have to make. Between this climate and the one she'd left.

Jess had hoped to find a place to live by the first weekend. Not a chance! Things had changed. There was an acute shortage of available rental accommodation. There were long-winded forms to fill out, references to find, and she could see immediately that it was a 'beauty' contest she would have Buckley's chance of winning. As a self-employed new arrival with no recent local references, it was going to be tough. Twelve years ago

she'd walked into several real estate agents and had her pick of places. They'd even driven her to some and waited while she inspected them.

For Hannah's sake, she turned off all the lights and saved water in the buckets left in the shower recess, understanding quickly that it must be the water before the shower ran hot that you saved in the bucket.

"Do you have to pay a lot for water these days?" she asked Hannah.

"Not particularly," muttered Hannah, not looking up from her notes on the principles of jurisprudence.

After a month Jess was feeling better but not well.

"I wonder if you'd mind if I stayed at your place for a while." Hannah was at Uni and Jess had phoned her sister Rose, who was living with her husband and teenage son in cramped quarters on the other side of town. There, it would be a mattress on the lounge room floor trying not to be in the way of *three* people. Oh fuck!

"I'm a bit worried about Hannah. She's become, well, she seems to have become very—obsessive. Really, I'm worried about how long I'll be able to stay here."

"What do you mean?" asked Rose. "Obsessive about what?"

"Well," said Jess, "she's got this *thing* about saving water in buckets from the shower and using it to fill her washing machine to wash her clothes! And she only washes the dishes when there are none left in the cupboard. I mean that's pretty weird, isn't it!"

"No," said Rose. "Lots of people do the bucket-in-the-shower thing. Hasn't anyone told you about the water shortage?"

“What? There’s a water shortage? No, nobody’s told me anything.”

“The reservoirs are low, we’re on stage 3 water restrictions. There’s been a severe drought in most of Australia for ten years or more. Didn’t you *know* that?”

Ten years or more. About the time she’d been away.

“No,” said Jess quietly. “I had no idea.” She had a vague feeling of guilt—preposterous guilt—as if her leaving had somehow precipitated the drought, that she was responsible, in however small a way, for what was happening.

So Jess saved water from the shower in buckets to water the garden and wash the floors and kept her showers short to assuage a growing sense of irrationally personal guilt. And then raged at the attitudes pervasive in the media and even in her water bill that encouraged every Aussie to do their bit for the shortage. There was something very 1940s, 'there's a war on', and rationing sort of quality about it all. While those with the power to effect real change on a suitable scale if such was really required seemed to have neatly side-stepped any responsibility.

Jess had been back in Australia for three months, had found a grotty old house with foul wall-to-wall carpets to call her own—for now, she thought, just for now—and was hating it. Her father, it seemed, was not quite as bad as the family had made out. What better way to drag her back?

And in the face of such an apparent water crisis, she could hardly comprehend how far environmental awareness seemed to have retreated. There was no recycling to speak of by her local council. She rang and complained. She felt guilty putting materials that she’d been recycling for years into the normal garbage.

She had to scour the supermarkets to find any cleaning or paper products marked as environment-friendly, whereas in Sweden it had been virtually impossible to buy products that *weren't* labelled environment-friendly for nearly a decade. There, at every level of government and across the board of private and public sector enterprise, there were policies in place to protect the environment and targets aimed at reducing environmental impact and greenhouse gas emissions and halting climate change. The social and political climate there demanded it.

It seemed that in the period she'd been absent from Australia, the voice of the environmental movement had been cowered into a corner. Australia was in climate-change denial, or at least those with any power to effect real change were. A political and social climate of climate-change scepticism had settled like a suffocatingly thick layer of desert dust; somehow acquiring the legitimacy of perpetuity so that nothing and no-one seemed likely to disturb it. The environment? That was the arena of ratbags, ageing hippies and rock stars, and dope-heads—not anyone serious about the future of our great country and the economy!

And then came the revelations in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—that climate change had potentially contributed to its destructive power. Guilt that, as one of the world's biggest polluters, Americans might have brought this calamity on their country themselves; and shame at the dismal failure of their administration's response, began to change the way people thought about climate change in the US.

And then came former Vice-President Al Gore's film about inconvenient truth, and finally the Stern Review on the *Economics* of Climate Change and almost overnight the credibility of climate-change sceptics everywhere sank like a stone.

The social and political climate shifted subtly, like a giant stirring in his sleep.

As the days grew hotter, Jess's periods dried up and she began to have hot flushes: ten, sometimes as many as 20 per day. It was *the change*—perhaps prematurely brought on by a change of abode, change of continent, change of environment, change of social, political and cultural climate. Change in fact in every atom of her physical, mental and emotional being. Change that would not go away and could not now be avoided.

The heat of them bloomed wave-like, propagating to every extremity. She kept a Spanish fan on her desk, purchased on a holiday in Spain in the life left behind for its allusion to seduction and desirability rather than its practicality, and flapped away with it at the heat that climbed her chest and face.

The early summer days had been drier and hotter than she could remember. Air-conditioning had done little to allay a viscid feeling in her throat and eyes. The skin on her shins scaled into a pattern that resembled a dry, cracked riverbed. She walked to the shops instead of driving to do the food shopping, and her long hair crackled and whipped at her face in the searing wind.

She complained bitterly to anyone who would listen. Old friends who like her had grown older and perhaps wiser. Be part of the solution they said. Stay and do something positive.

“Anyway where are you going to run to this time,” said Rose, “climate change is everywhere.” Their relationship was mending. The bonds that had been stretched to near-breaking point across thousands of kilometres were more comfortably elastic now that they were in range of regular long bayside walks followed by Sunday dinners. Their father had deteriorated rapidly in the hotter months, and it was good to be able to share the burden and battle of finding him suitable care.

“I know what you mean,” said Hannah. “Soon as I'm done with the course I'm outa here.” She admitted frankly to Jess that she couldn't wait to get back to the expensive suits and shoes that were part of her corporate persona, the dinners and international

business class travel, the adrenalin of so much power and millions of dollars passing hands as a result of her actions, the respect and the deference. She was itching to get back onto the corporate ladder and climb it all the way to the top.

In Sweden the winter had brought storms with severe damaging winds to the south. Thousands in rural areas were without power for heating and cooking for weeks, so that many were forced to flee their homes. The sheer amount of damage was not of an order covered in any existing contingency plans, so repairing it was taking a long time. Even the Swedes, so good at planning for the future, were struggling.

If we're lucky, thought Jess, we'll be spared catastrophic change. We'll have time to change our ways before the globe heats too much more. But change is what we have to do. And how hard, how hard is that!