

Suburbia

By Amanda Hurley

The first streaks of evening were beginning to taint the sky a dangerous charcoal. It was cold out, and the Esmeraldi family were all bundled up against the weather: Jimmy, the father, in a dark blue puffer jacket and beanie; his wife Annette in a woollen housecoat that she had tied tightly closed with a sash. And then there were the kids: Max, Samantha and the baby, Abigail, all tucked into ski suits with mittens threaded by a string to keep them in place, not that a single child had them on.

There was too much to be done to worry about mittens. There were fireworks to be unpacked; rockets to be lined up; Catherine Wheels to be extracted from their packaging; boxes of sparklers to be stacked into a tower. Although the church steeple had just chimed 6pm, the back yard was faint in the gloaming and Annette was glad she had left the kitchen light on to add a glimpse of cheer to the darkening garden.

“Be careful Max,” she said quietly as her oldest child extracted a large rocket from its packet, his eyes gleaming with excitement. The seven year old lifted the bulky object and laid it on the table. Annette shifted the weight of the baby in her arms to one hip, just in time to catch the rocket before it rolled off the table top. Max had already turned away.

“We’re going to let that one off last,” he told his father. “That one is going to bang alright, it’s gonna to light up the night.”

Jimmy laughed and ruffled the little boy’s hair. “Quoting my lyrics back to me, are you? We’ll have to see what we can do about getting you a place in the band.” He looked up at Annette then, in time to see a flicker of annoyance cross her face. There’d been a time when his wife had loved that song, the one that had launched Jimmy’s fleeting career; a

time when it had just been the two of them, before marriage and children had slowed them down.

Samantha was standing next to the table, a sprinkling of freckles dusting her cheeks. She was short for her five years and her eyes barely peeked across the top of the table. She was studying the bright packages of the fireworks carefully, peering at the printed graphics that adorned each rocket, reaching out a tentative finger.

Abigail was wriggling in Annette's arms. "I'm going to take this little one in to get changed," Annette told Jimmy. "Keep an eye on Max will you, before the whole neighbourhood goes up?"

And then she was gone, pulling the kitchen door firmly closed behind her, as if to prevent fingers of night from entering their home. In the garden, Max was busily scraping a hole in the soft, muddy ground in which to balance the rockets.

"Is it deep enough, Dad?" Max asked after three or four shovelfuls of soil. "No, Max," Jimmy answered, "Keep going."

He was distracted; he could feel it within himself. Nights like tonight always reminded him of other New Year's Eves. Like that night a decade ago when he had first seen Annette at one of the myriad industry parties to which he was always invited. He could have been out every night of the week and often he was. His band's first song "Fireworks" had reached number one and everyone wanted to know the lead singer from Nightshade Rounds.

Annette had taken him by surprise. Although it had been her beauty that had startled him as he had glimpsed her at his producer's house, she hadn't been clamouring to meet him, unlike the array of fresh-faced models at the party that night. Her face and that long, silver dress that she had been wearing trapped him like a beacon. There hadn't even been a chance to speak to her; days later he'd found out her name, that she worked as a sound technician for one of London's newest labels. She'd been flattered by his interest, been quickly swept off her feet.

A year later, at the same party, he'd proposed to her at midnight, leading her out onto the balcony that throned over the Thames. The fireworks of the new-born year had reflected in her dark eyes as he'd slipped a ring onto her finger. He'd whisked her into his arms then, carrying her back into the party and yelling as loudly as he could, that he, Jimmy Esmeraldi was getting married. A second number one hit, an explosion of love for the woman by his side; he'd been unstoppable that year.

"Dad? Dad! I can't get the hole deep enough." Max's whine cut into Jimmy's thoughts, and he was back in the back yard, his breath a spray of crystal in the cold night air.

"We'll just have to dig down a little further," Jimmy said, reaching for the toy spade they were using, looking briefly around. "Where's Sam gone?" he asked his son, but Max was too busy to care.

"P'robly inside too," he mumbled, pushing the mounds of soil aside with his fingers.

But Samantha was still there. She had walked to the other side of the garden and hidden herself behind a tree. There was a thudding in Samantha's chest that she didn't know how to control. She was too young to remember last year's display and Max had filled

her with stories about the loud bangs and whooshes that were to come, the explosions of falling stars and the flashes of bright neon lights.

There was a loud sudden shudder then, a swirl of radiance in the sky that illuminated the night with a burst of abrupt yellow sparks. Samantha started to scream, her hands tightly clamped over her ears, trying to drain the echo of the explosion from her body. In a minute, Jimmy had found her, drawn by her shrieks. “Shhh,” he cooed to her, pulling her small body into his, shielding her from her fright. “It’s okay,” he told her. “That was just the first one for tonight.”

“Is everyone all right? What’s going on here?” Annette had re-emerged from the house, a cleaned and coo-ing Abigail again propped on her hip. Jimmy looked up at her, haunted by the sharp tone in her voice. Those almond-shaped eyes of hers looked wan tonight, more tired than usual. Did she have regrets about all this too, Jimmy wondered to himself. This dream of family, this life in the suburbs? Wasn’t there also a part of her that missed the limelight?

She’d already turned away, an arm around Samantha’s shoulders, drawing her away from Jimmy. “Max, what on earth are you doing?” Annette exclaimed. Amid the focus on Samantha, her eldest son had busied himself with the fireworks. Managing to unwrap one of the rockets, he had planted it in the hole, its spike pointed dangerously towards the house. In his hand, he held a lighter, which he was unsuccessfully flicking at with his thumb.

“Jimmy, get it away from him!” Annette ordered and Jimmy flinched at her harried tone. He hurried towards the small boy and pulled the lighter out of his hand. Instantly the child began to cry, holding his palm in his other hand.

“Oww, Dad! You hurt me.” Max was hopping from one foot to another, his eyes pooled with tears. And there was Annette, bending over the boy, blowing gently onto his hand. Annette and her children: the little blonde boy that looked so much like her; the stumpy girl-child with her long locks and the promise of beauty that shone in certain lights; the baby whose fine, soft hair Jimmy loved to stroke. They were all looking up at him now, four sets of eyes, and although he was part of them too, Jimmy could feel a barrier between them, an invisible line that divided between *he* and *we*. It was as if a pane of glass had fallen from the sky and he was outside, reduced, watching his family through a window. The sensation was gone in a second and Jimmy shook his head to clear the image.

“Come on guys,” he said with a gusto that came with an effort. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

He righted the rocket that Max had placed, pointing it towards the darkness of the heath across the road. He flicked the lighter until a flame emerged and then touched it briefly to the firework’s fuse. Instantly, a glow of heat began to move up the cord.

“Everyone back,” he ordered and there was a general shuffling behind him, the kids tripping in their excitement and agitation. Samantha had her hands over her ears again, he noticed. And then with a swoop, the rocket was skyborne and for an awful silent moment, Jimmy thought it was a dud, that the flame had gone out in the air or that the gunpowder was wet. Bang! The firework detonated in a hail of golden sparkles and Max danced in a circle below, his hands flung high to the heavens.

“Another one, another one Dad!” he cried, racing to the table and gathering up a fistful of small rockets. They were all grinning then, Jimmy running a fond hand over his son’s woolly hat, Samantha cautiously lowering her hands from her ears, her eyes dark with wonder. Even Annette was smiling, her cheeks flushed with excitement. They caught each other’s eye then, sharing a quick glance. It was still there, Jimmy realised, that overpowering love of a decade before, despite the mountain of nappies and failed recording deals; the fruitless hours in the studio that had failed to reveal a new hit; the daily frustration in Annette’s eyes.

As Jimmy bent to light another rocket, Annette was opening a packet of sparklers. She’d placed a lit candle on the birdbath and was now showing the two older children how to hold the sparkler’s tip in the flame. Max shouted in wonder as his caught alight and he was off, running through the garden. With wide strokes, he spun his arm around, leaving the imprint of a circle in the night.

“Careful son,” Jimmy called, but he was too late. In his excitement, the child tripped. The lit sparkler flew out of his hand and landed on the table laden with fireworks. With a loud curse, Jimmy ran to the table and grabbed the sparkler, his hand closing briefly around the orb of glowing sparks before he threw it down onto the ground, stamping it out with his feet.

For an unearthly minute, the family cowered in their places, unsure of what to expect, frightened only by the sudden terror in their father’s voice. But the sparks had not caught. Jimmy was the first to move, shaking his hand where the sparkler had singed his skin, wiping it on the side of his trousers.

“New rules,” he gruffly told his children. “No running with sparklers. No moving while fireworks are being lit. Do you understand?” There were nods among the group before him, Max’s face sheepish with penitence. “Do you realize what a close call that was?” Jimmy asked him and Max nodded again.

“Can I help light the next one, Dad?” he asked quietly.

Abigail started to fuss then, her weight becoming leaden in Annette’s arms. “I’ll have to take her in,” Annette told Jimmy. “She’ll be needing a feed now. We’ll watch through the window.”

Fighting back a desire to follow his wife into the warmth indoors, Jimmy turned to his two older children. Max was already sorting through the fireworks on the table.

“Do you want to choose the next one?” Jimmy asked Samantha, but the little girl shook her head, hanging back, her hands behind her back.

“Well, should we do that big one, then?” he asked Max, who eagerly nodded his head. They carried it over to the makeshift launch pad together.

Engrossed, neither Jimmy nor Max noticed as Samantha turned away; they were too busy trying to prop the rocket in the muddy, slippery ground. Jimmy had already forgotten the lit candle in the birdbath, the packet of sparklers that Annette had left on the rim. He was too busy to see the little girl draw a long, thin stick from its packet. Standing on tiptoe so she could see over the edge of the birdbath, Samantha held the tip of the sparkler in the candle’s flame.

She held her breath as the sparkler flickered into life, bursting with a sparkling, fizzing bloom. It scared her, that sudden spurt of flame, and Samantha dropped it onto the ground, where the sparkler continued to shoot out stars. Entranced, she bent close down beside it, reaching out a tentative finger towards the hot, glowing centre. As she did so, her woollen mitten flopped out from the sleeve of her jacket and into the heat of the lit sparkler.

“Come on guys, get back,” Jimmy was yelling, raising a protective arm around Max, who was zapping closer to the lit firework in his excitement. The screech of the rocket as it shot out into the air was deafening and its intensity caught Jimmy by surprise. For a long moment his ears rang with its echo, blocking out all other sounds. And then the rocket exploded overhead, shooting out a hail of stars like a scattering of precious gems.

As the firework melted into a cloud of black smoke and its thundering roar became just a part of London’s nightly traffic, Jimmy suddenly became aware of another sound. Someone was screaming. His daughter, Samantha, over by the birdbath. He flew across the garden towards her, gathering her into his arms. There was a bitter aroma in the air, of singed wool and burnt flesh. It took Jimmy a moment to realise what had happened: the child, a spent sparkler at her feet; tangled threads of wool hanging from her tattered, melted jacket sleeve; an awful wound already blistering on her wrist.

He picked her up then and ran with her into the house, his feet moving as if through air. Annette was already crossing the kitchen; she too had heard the screams. The back door banged open as Jimmy entered the house, placing the child on the kitchen table, the horror of the burn evident.

“Get the first aid kit from the bathroom,” Annette shouted at him. As he left the room, Jimmy could hear his wife sobbing into the phone, “Emergency. Please, we need an ambulance.”

He glanced back briefly. There it was again, that pane of glass between him and the other members of his family. The moans of the child on the table, the frightened pools of his son’s eyes. The crying baby, still strapped into its high chair. And his wife Annette, staring helplessly, with eyes that seemed to bore through him.

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