

Goodbye to all this
Chapter One - A Shadow

by Sophie Townsend

- 0:05.187 There's a group of us, mums of kids at the local school, who sit on a Friday morning and have coffee together.
- 0:15.660 We meet at the cafe round the corner from my house, in Glebe a suburb near the city in Sydney, Australia.
- 0:26.821 Usually, we're laughing at the expense of someone's husband.
- 0:32.238 We must look horribly cliched, like this: after school drop off, complaining about the men in our lives, the ones we chose to be with forever, the fathers of our children.
- 0:48.917 It's just that with raising kids and paying bills, sometimes the person you do that with, day after day, is hard to like.
- 1:01.905 And here, in the coffee shop, with these women, it feels safe. Because we know each other so well, and we all have the same stories, and we feel the same frustrations and the same exhaustion, and the same small triumphs too.
- 1:21.908 So we lay it all out for each other, and we laugh. And it feels like it will always be like this, that our lives will go on, in this safe little place we've made, where things are sometimes hard and exhausting, but really very good.
- 1:44.319 We never expect anything really bad will happen. Not to us.
- 1:57.499 I'm Sophie Townsend, with Goodbye To All This, an original podcast from the BBC World Service
It's about losing the man I loved, and going on without him.
It's about raising two girls through grief, and being alone, and surviving, mostly intact.
- Chapter one: A Shadow.
- 2:45.000 Most of the week is a rush to get them dressed, through the school gates, and get myself to work on time. But Fridays, Fridays are mine, and I don't have to be anywhere after school drop off. There are no meetings and no deadlines on a Friday, and I can walk slowly back from the school, going the long way to see my favourite Eucalyptus tree, thinking of nothing but the household chores I'll catch up with, a visit to my parents, maybe some writing I'll do...
- Fridays are a lovely long breath out.
- 3:40.910 **Nicola:** It was a very local time with kids in pre-school and primary school – it was all about them – we all lived locally, we had kids at the local school and life was pretty similar for all of us.

3:55.084 I always thought of Nicola as a founding member of the coffee mums. I don't think she was particularly – she was just there before me. There's always been mums at the coffee shop – groups of women talking, laughing, getting through it together.

4:12.620 **Nicola:** It kept me sane and it kept me in touch with the fact that what I was going through was similar with what other women were going through. With all things that we thought were tragedies or traumas that our kids were going through...well we were going through. It did give us some perspective because it wasn't so traumatic, because it was normal.

4:44.820 Coffee mornings, walks round the park, a night down the pub... it keeps us sane. Sane-ish.

4:54.932 **Nicola:** Sitting in cafes, regularly, with people you know, you do peel away the layers. I think some people peeled away more and felt comfortable but I do remember mornings where people would take their turns to cry with what was going on.

5:12.357 No one minds the tears. But someone, often the person crying, will always make a joke, and equilibrium is restored. After all, We are the lucky ones. with all the stresses of raising children, we're basically alright.

5:33.653 I tell them about Russell.
"He says he's exhausted."
I say, in a way that makes it clear I have no sympathy for it at all.
I'm sick of hearing about it.
"I mean, who do we know who's not tired?"
He isn't wildly happy at work, I know that. And there's never enough time to get everything done on the weekend. So things are rushed, but so often we're rubbing up against each other the wrong way, we're short with each other, not considerate or kind because there isn't the time.

6:10.400 **Nicola:** I remember something along the lines of "he's complaining of being tired, he doesn't know what tired is"
Yes, I do remember saying "I've been tired for twenty years, since I've had my first child" so when Patrick comes home complaining of being tired, I'm not that interested...

6:27.858 She's right - no one's weariness ever manages to be as interesting as your own. And the exhaustion of someone you live with, someone you're depending on to help you get through all the colds and the stomach bugs and the children's temper tantrums is not only not interesting, it's infuriating.

6:52.498 I'm not going to indulge him - I'm too busy and maybe, just maybe, I like believing that things are alright, because things always have been, not perfect, but alright.

And I'm tired too.

He goes to the doctor's, gets some blood tests done.
At the coffee morning, I make fun of that too.

- 7:31.043 Bear and I are off on holidays. Bear, our first child - she's ten, going on 25... She's clever and sophisticated and not quite a little girl anymore. She's been Bear since she was first born - baby bear, then big bear when her sister arrived two years later, and then just Bear. Our Bear, still, sort of.
- 8:00.279 She's been desperate to go to Tokyo ever since she started watching Japanese cartoons.
I want to spend time with her and I'd go anywhere - I can see puberty on the horizon and the attraction of spending time alone with her mother waning.
- 8:24.209 She and I can't wait to be on our way. I kiss our younger daughter, who we always call Poppy, like the flower - bright and open and delicate all at once. I'm full of quick and superficial re-assurances of the lovely week she'll have with Daddy. She adores her father in that openly physical way eight year olds still can. But she's aware, at the airport, even as she holds his hand tight, that her sister is getting the better deal here - that she's being left behind.
- 9:03.569 I kiss him, remind him about the dentist appointment she has this week. Just before we go through the doors, I turn to wave. Poppy waves. He blows a kiss and now I see it - there's exhaustion in his eyes, and in the way he stands.
How didn't I notice it before? My heart gives that anxious little flip that is usually set off by one of the kids. And Bear tugs on my hand and we go through the doors and I swallow the anxiety. He's just tired.
- 9:54.876 We get lost in a seven-floor stationery store, we eat noodle soup out of a vending machine. We walk the streets, buying presents of Hello Kitty socks for her friends. We finally get brave about crossing at Shibuya station which our guidebooks tell us is the world's busiest crossing, and we like the noise her children's subway ticket makes as she goes through the turnstiles. And then we come home at night to our tiny hotel room, and Bear watches a television program about a small talking dog, which we don't understand but that she declares the finest television ever made.
- 10:52.942 And then Russell calls one night, and I can hear Poppy in the background, yelling out to the dog, and Russell trying to keep his voice down.
- 11:07.525 He talks the way you do when you've been reading medical reports - like suddenly you know what's what but in actual fact are as in the dark as ever. He says the tests indicate an iron deficiency, which is unusual in men, and could indicate internal bleeding, which may indicate a tumor.
- 11:33.582 "But," he says, "That's worst case. It's probably not that. It's probably nothing."
- 11:48.764 More news the next night. The doctor has sent him off for more tests. They show a protein in his blood which COULD be an indicator of bowel cancer. But the doctor thinks it can't be right - Russell is scrupulous about screening - his mother had died of bowel cancer. But that marker, well, it means something's up.
- 12:09.773 "I'm sure it's nothing," he says. And again, we are out of sync, this time me feeling scared, and wanting him to take this seriously, and him, wanting it all to blow over.
- 12:28.979 I sit one morning on the subway, and I think about the call, and I cry quietly, hoping no one will see.
- 12:48.477 Bear notices and asks me what's wrong.

“Missing your dad and your sister. That’s all.”

- 12:59.719 I think she knows that it isn’t all.
She gives me the smallest of pats on my shoulder, in that tentative way a child comforts their mother, not wanting to make it worse, not knowing what it is. She teases me for being homesick, hugs me, and busies herself counting the subway stops.
- 13:29.954 I don’t think I sleep the whole night through the rest of the time we are in Tokyo. And the day after we’re home, he has another test, this one to rule bowel cancer out, and it turns out the bowel is healthy and fine and there’s nothing to worry about. And his specialist says that quite possibly, Russell’s exhaustion, his low iron, this protein marker in his blood (which, after all, is sometimes not a marker for cancer) are just anomalies.
- 14:06.000 Relief.
It’s okay - and the night after the bowel scan we make dinner together and he looks lighter somehow.
The girls do their homework and he and I move in the way only people who know each other and love each other can - in a rhythm only achieved out of long established patterns of padding around one another.
- 14:34.776 He makes me laugh. A wry comment, delivered dead-pan.
We talk politics and work gossip. He lectures me on a bit of arcane history of rock and roll and laughs when I make fun of him.
It’s an evening full of those moments never spoken of in the coffee shop - a kiss, a shared joke, watching the way he twirls his noodles round his fork, the way he folds his arms over his chest and sits back after dinner, the way he pours wine into my glass.
The way he loves me.
- 15:31.026 He argues with Poppy, who says she’s allergic to vegetables this week, but in the end they find a compromise.

After dinner, we put the girls to bed, and watch TV. I lie with my head in his lap.
- 15:39.497 Here is my husband, who’d been all alone in the world when I met him, an only child and his parents long-dead. A determined bachelor, self-sufficient and seemingly fine the way he was. And somehow I’d managed to get through all that.
- 16:02.764 We’re watching an American cop show we only realise half way through we’ve already seen.
Poppy comes downstairs and tries to argue her case for being allowed to stay up with us.
He takes her back to her room.
- 16:19.901 He’d always been clear he hadn’t wanted children, but had them because he loved me.
And the family we’ve made is everything to him, and I am everything to him and he to me even through those times we forget it.
- 16:39.161 We watch the late night news, switch off the lights, and go to bed.
- 16:51.913 We sleep deeply, only woken by Poppy, who comes in earlier than we’d like, to chat.
We have breakfast and the girls get ready for school.

Russell kisses us goodbye - his doctor has ordered a full body scan, just to be sure,
and he's going.
But just to be certain.

17:17.252 And I have coffee with the school mums.
Then my mobile rings, and I go outside to take the call.

17:32.919 And I tell them what he tells me.
A shadow, on his lung.
The tiredness, the protein marker in his blood, and now, a shadow on his lung.

17:50.782 **Nicola:** ...So i can't remember even what he was low in, but yes I do remember you
coming back to the café, and you cried.

18:03.856 And I look these women in the eyes and I see it all. Sympathy, fear, there but for the
grace of God, and this look that says, "we will do anything you need. Anything."

18:25.464 Turns out, I'd need everything.

Goodbye To All This is produced by me, Sophie Townsend and Eleanor McDowall.
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