

Brice Gardner

That morning had felt like any other Wednesday for Jack Smith, rudely awakened as sunlight choked its way through the blue bed sheet knotted to the curtain rail. Bleary eyed, he untangled himself from his covers and slowly pivoted upright. Various tweaks and clangs emerged from mattress springs that had suffered years of abuse. After a Herculean effort to lift himself up, he grabbed his phone from his desk and stood slouched in the middle of the room, browsing the notifications wearing only a set of faded boxers.

6:00am: *"We miss you, start your second session of Mindfulness today!"*

Swipe.

Jack hadn't opened the app since he installed it on January 2nd, and it was already approaching the start of April.

7:46am: *"Tonight's super blood moon – Everything you need to know about the midnight spectacle" - The Sydney Morning Herald*

He tapped the article and browsed it briefly, skimming for any details that made it particularly noteworthy, finding nothing but a few pictures, dates and recommended locations he wasn't bothered to pay attention to. He placed his phone down reluctantly with a sigh. Noticing the clanging of pots and pans spewing from the kitchen just beyond the bedroom door at the ungodly hour of 8:30 in the morning, he thought of Andrei Bolkonsky, looking down at *War and Peace* on the bedside table. Catherine and Anna must be washing up again.

Each morning, if it wasn't dishes, it was cooking breakfast, or vacuuming, or some other mundane task that never amounted to anything worthwhile. He couldn't picture Hamlet with a Hoover, or Dante with a dish cloth. Even Bolkonsky recognised that life was more than that. He rubbed his forehead, temple pounding, and opened the door to face his wife.

"Catherine, why don't we spend the day at Hyde Park? The forecast's good and we haven't had the picnic rug out in ages."

"I'd love to, really, but today's too busy." She took a deep breath. "I've gotta finish these, put on two loads of washing before work, then afterwards buy that new tablecloth and prepare the house for dinner tonight."

"Come on, you said that last week. There's more to life than washing dishes, honey."

She turned to face him, still handing dishes covered in suds to her daughter, who was struggling to handle plates larger than her head.

"I can't just *not* do this Jack – if you come and help finish up, *as well* as buy the tablecloth on the way back from uni then *maybe* we can stop off around lunch, provided we're back in time to pick Anna up from school." He took the conditional skepticism as a 'no'.

"Fine. I'll go on my own then." He sighed.

"Jack... It's not that I... I just..." Her voice trailed off, as she watched him go back into his room and shut the door.

She loved her husband for all his idiosyncrasies, but the last few months had been tougher than she had expected. He had moved to the guest room on his own volition

only a few months ago to 'focus on writing', and so Catherine now spent most nights lying in bed alone, wondering what had changed. His commitment to her and Anna had seemingly been replaced by authors whose names she couldn't pronounce, his mind always consumed by narratives she could never keep track of in their long-winded complexities. Each precious day off had now become some grand journey that they all needed to embark on. Every relationship needed a dreamer, but the line between dreaming and delusion was a fine one. Too busy to be held up with self-pity, Catherine returned to washing dishes, handing them down to her daughter to dry with a poorly-feigned smile that seemed to satisfy the young girl regardless.

Jack, however, was unwilling to accept compromise. Returning to his room, he was proud of himself if anything, choosing to stand up to her and not be "*shackled by the obligation to inaction*" (that aphorism would go in the book without a doubt). A few years ago, the Jack of Old would have submitted. Post-Tolstoy Jack saw the truth: of course he wouldn't waste his day washing dishes or buying tablecloths, real things were to be done, none of this "clean the house, cook the food, make your bed" sort of nonsense! As he searched through piles of clothes to find a shirt for the day, scattered in various corners, he dispelled any doubt that crept into his mind, replacing it with a logical resolve. *War and Peace* was a work of genius, and Tolstoy knew what a remarkable man looked like, he rationalised. Each morning, when he saw the dull reflection of himself on his phone screen, a slightly more Bolkonskian face beamed back.

Each time, he smiled a little wider.