

Smoke Signals

Karen Jones

I'm not supposed to climb up here. I've been told before. I've been told about balance, about making rash decisions, about not listening. I've been told lots of times about not listening. There's a lesson there. Of course, there are lessons everywhere.

Life's lessons. Those are the ones I can't learn. I can learn maths and French and how to drive and all those things that have logic and rules. Life does have rules, they tell me. But the rules are obscure, I respond, and everyone seems to be living by different rules – it's too confusing. Just live by our rules, they say, the ones we give you. And I smile and promise I will, but I know there's no point because their rules only work in here and I'm not always in here. Sometimes I'm out there and today I'm up here, studying the chimneys.

I spend my life looking up. I bang into things and people, but it's worth it to see the beautiful chimneys; those funnels, those conduits for clearing away the bad, for sending up smoke signals, for painting the sky with wisps and puffs.

I've never ventured out this far onto the roof before. This chimney looked better from far away, but I wanted to run my hands over the roughcast. I've always wondered if it would be hot to touch. I had to know.

The roof tiles are slipping under my feet and I can feel myself being dragged down. I know the guttering won't be able to stop me and I know it couldn't take my weight even if I did decide to try to grab on to it as I slide, face down, points of shoes scuffing, hands scrabbling for grip.

And so I will fall. The ground will rush towards me as I rush towards it and there's nothing anyone can do about that. It'll be chaos. No rules. Just me, fast air, hard ground, bones breaking, hot blood pouring, feet running, heads bowing, tears falling. If she had just followed the rules, they'll say. If she had listened, just this once, about this important thing, she'd still be here.

But now I know chimneys don't feel hot on the outside, so I'm okay about the falling and surely dying. I have my answer. I'm always content when I have answers.

As I finally go over the edge of the roof and flip onto my back, I wonder if that was a working chimney I examined. Didn't the janitor tell me one day? Which ones are working, which not?

I'm falling, dying and it turns out I don't know the true answer to my question after all. As the last few feet of fall dash on, I realise I could just have asked someone. Probably wouldn't have listened to the answer though. No matter. At least I'm falling with my back to the ground, still looking up, still looking for smoke signals I'll never understand.