

Number 12, Hollis Avenue

Spines of burr grass stick in white bubble socks. A shortcut across the horse paddock, barb wire scrapes off some of my skin. Fox Terrier, Fred doesn't miss the attack. I race down the hill.

Fred has a lot of spirit, he digs his teeth into my school shoes, he won't let go. He shakes his head from side to side, growls, shakes my foot some more. I freeze, press my feet into the ground so he can't get to them. He spots another target at the top of the street. Dust flies as he skids to have a go at Mrs Hughes.

Single level fibro cottages line the curve. The orange is ours, it's the only housing commission one in the street.

Julie is sitting in the front yard in the shade of the bumstinger tree, flicking her hair, touching her breast and arguing with her boyfriend about the meaning of some word.

Each child in our family is responsible for a section of the garden. Julie's is on the right, her harvest is slugs. Mine is in the shade on the left, nothing ever grows. Porky, the youngest, shares his gardening responsibilities with mum. Their garden has petunias in summer, weeds in winter. Paul has the back yard where he grew two tomatoes. His job is to mow. Mum thinks she can't count on Dad.

In the lounge room the TV is on. *The Curiosity Show* blares, "What do you do if the sun is a little glary?" We don't care. All we care is that the TV is switched on and tuned to go.

Driftwood, shells and coral decorate our house. Mum says that seeing them is the only way she can cope with having to leave Coffs to come to Goulburn.

Hot August Night is on the turntable. Dad got the record player from the back of a truck. On Sundays *Cracklin Rosie* blares from mum's bedroom while she knocks back a flagon of porphyry sauterne. On Sundays Dad taps mum on the bum and calls her Willy.

The boys are in the back yard, playing tackle with the Turners. Mum is working till 11pm at Sirdar Wool. Dad has knocked off from Kermac, he'd be at the pub, the Carlton or the Gordon, depends on who he's fighting with this week.

Julie and I share a bedroom. On my bed I have dolls, they are lined up in a row. It freaks Julie out. Seven heads and thirteen eyes peep out from under the blue chenille bedspread. Klinky has one eye missing and a torn mouth. I love him more than the others. I will be buried with him. I have told mum to make sure that I am buried with him. Dollikin is my second favourite, she has long red hair and body parts that move. She can't be broken.

I change out of my school clothes and line up my shoes. Nothing bad will happen.

Outside the window is my tree. I love my tree. I am a good climber. My suitcase is packed, ready to go. One lock is busted. Inside my case I have a picture of Mother Mary, cards showing the steps of Holy Communion and a pair of kaleidoscope binoculars. These will keep me safe.

I tuck my dolls in and check they are ok. A Bay City Roller poster falls off the wall onto my head. I feel a chill on the back of my neck. Sounds, through gritted teeth. *You're a mad bitch.* My hands start to sweat. I see the crack in the fibro above my bed. I cover the crack with the fallen poster.

Grains of milo are scattered on the kitchen bench, the tin is empty, the boys have eaten it with a spoon and they have drunk all the milk. I look for some food but there is nothing left in the house to eat.

I go to Blue Hill's corner shop for supplies, no shoes. I pretend I am walking on rice paper, like Grasshopper in Kung Fu. *When you can walk the rice paper without tearing it, then your steps will not be heard.*

Michael Peters and his cousin Glenn watch me as I go past their house. They stand looking out at me from the window. Glenn, whose dad is a Lawyer, blushes a lot when he sees me. In class he does anything he can to make me notice him. He yells, "What are you doing?" I hold my right arm out in front and in slow motion pull my left arm back, I bend my right leg and raise it forward, balancing on the other leg. Glenn laughs with Michael, I continue on my quest to the shop.

Up on the corner Jack Smith gives me a wolf whistle from his front veranda. He is wild but really cute, too good for me, he would not whistle at a girl unless he likes her. His dad's a mechanic. My cheeks go red. He whistles again. I am beetroot.

I make it to Blue Hills, rice paper intact, and go the long way home to avoid Jack and Glenn, saving my family from starvation with two Golden Gaytimes and a Big Choc.

Porky only gets a chocolate Billabong. I can already hear him squawk, "What!"

Mum paid for the blue nylon carpet, white vinyl lounge and seersucker curtains herself.

There are two lounges and two chairs. The one I call *my chair* has its back to the window. It has big arms and a high back. It is the best spot in the house. From it I can see into the kitchen and no one can sneak up on me from behind. Before I sit in my chair I make sure it is in exactly the right position. It can't be right up against the wall. That is bad luck.

I chew the biscuit pieces off my ice block, one by one, until all the coating is gone and then I lick the toffee away until I get to the vanilla in the centre, sliding it in and out of my mouth, until it all melts away. I want to put the stick in the bin but the boys may come inside. I don't want to leave my chair in case one of them sits on it. If one of them sits on it then something will go wrong, someone could die, maybe it will be one of them.

I sit in my chair and I wait. I see my wrist. It is blue and sore. *You think you're smart don't you.* She grabs my arm. *Well...don't you.* My head hits the floor.

Julie comes in, her cheeks are flushed, and she goes into the bedroom. Sometimes I can hear her panting, under the covers, like she's running.

I watch *The Brady Bunch* in my chair and imagine that we have a housekeeper called Alice who jokes around with us, bakes fresh cookies and gives us warm glasses of milk. Today Jan thinks she is ugly because everyone likes Marcia better than her. Jan is pretty clever, she gets some lemons, to fade her freckles, a black wig and some big dark sunglasses.

When I run away from home my plan is to get a disguise too. Then, I have learnt from the *Famous Five*, the best thing to do is to get hold of a cow and go and live by a running stream.

Julie is a bit like Marcia, but with more attitude and in the wrong house. Last time Uncle Harry came to visit he told Julie, in front of me and mum, "You're at the age where you are starting to get horny. You even look horny now." She went red. Mum was drunk, it was up to me to help. I asked him if he thought I was horny too. Julie stormed off. He turned to me, "Don't worry Lizzie, I was ugly too when I was your age. Look at me now." I didn't like to burst his bubble but what he said made me wonder if I had any hope at all.

Julie is older than me by one whole year, she is twelve. Paul is eight and Porky is five. Porky makes me laugh every time I look at him. He has white hair which sits up in a tuft on the top of his head. It's a crack up. When he first came home from the hospital I loved him straight away.

Paul asked where his legs were and Dad told us that they were in the boot. He said he would put them on later when we all went to sleep.

Porky is not his real name and he is not fat or anything. Dad calls him Porky because he is always whinging about wanting something to eat.

As I wait in my chair I feel like something is going to go wrong. *Cheeky little shit. Ugly. Mad. Stupid. Bitch.* A slap for each word. I stand my ground. The more time she spends with me the less she can drink. *Honour thy parents, love thy parents.* I am saving her life. Dad says she wants to break my spirit. But she never can.

It is getting dark. The boys come inside, Paul flicks the channel over.

The best day in our house is Saturday because mum goes to get the groceries from the shops. She always brings home a bag of Violet Crumbles. My job is to divide the Violet Crumbles up between all four of us kids. I am lucky to get that job. They give it to me because they know I won't cheat. If there is an uneven number, I give the extra ones to Porky or Paul.

Paul is mum's favourite, except when he shits his bed. When this happens mum gets drunk and locks him in his bedroom alone with her.

I sit in my chair, my tummy feels sick. I have to do something, protect someone. I fly up from my chair, go to the bedroom and put my running shoes on. One shoe has no shoelace. The other has a shred of string that just connects two of the holes and loosely hangs in place. I walk.

There is nothing easy about what I have to do. If the shoelace falls out I have to start again. I make my way slowly, down the hall, practicing not to break the rice paper, concentrating, focusing, passing my chair – which Paul is now sitting in – out the door, to the wood heap. I grab the axe, swing it, and start twenty-one chops, no more, no less. If I lose count I have to start again. Paul follows me to watch, when I see him, he runs inside. I finish chopping and return to the house. Paul is scared, he refuses to let me in. I try to reassure him that I haven't got the axe with me. He won't listen. I am able to scramble through an open window and return my shoes to their spot in the bedroom. I go back to the living room. Paul looks at me and decides he no longer wants to sit in my chair.

I sit down and wait. Everyone will be ok.

It's getting late and *Little House on the Prairie* comes on. Paul can't take it. He goes into his bedroom, Porky follows him. He always follows him everywhere.

I really don't know how to feel about Half-Pint. I spend a lot of time looking at her. She has freckles and the same colour hair as me. I swear we could be twins. We have lots of things in common. Half-Pint's Dad works really hard all day, just like mine, but her Dad is a farmer and my Dad is a crane driver. Half-Pint is her Dad's favourite, just like me.

Half-Pint's Dad doesn't seem to crack any jokes and he doesn't have special sayings like my Dad does. My Dad is so funny and says things like, "The fox smells his own trot first," "There's no prizes for second best" and the one he says the most, "Who's got shit for brains?"

Today Half-Pint starts school at Walnut Gove and she is told by Miss Beadie that she has to write a story for Parent's Day. She gets worried because she doesn't know how to write that well but that doesn't stop Half-Pint. She stands up in front of everyone and tells them all how great her mum is and how she can cook, clean and sew.

From my chair I see Dad pull up in the Kingswood. He is early. The pub hasn't closed yet.

Dad smells like beer. He puts his fingers in his mouth and lets out a whistle to tell everyone he is home. He stumbles towards the kitchen.

We bolt to the dining room. Dad puts the tomato sauce on the table and breaks open a newspaper bag full of greasy fried chips.

Julie screws her face up.

"What's your problem Lady Muck?"

The boys gobs into the food. I grab some chips and drench them with tomato sauce.

Julie goes to take a chip, "They're cold."

"Well pardon me, Misery Guts."

Dad tries to stand straight and look her in the eye. He holds out two pieces of battered fish,

"You can have some of mine."

She taps it with her finger. "It's cold too!"

Dad screws up his face like hers.

"I am not eating cold fish. Who knows how long it has been waiting at the pub." She grabs a hand full of chips and stomps off.

Dad curtseys behind her, "Well excuse me if...my... your shit don't stink." He nearly falls over and just catches his fish in time.

The boys enjoy the feast.

Dad takes a piece of fish from his plate and throws it across the table to me, "Here Lizzie, have some."

I ask the boys if they want half. They shake their heads and polish off the last few chips.

Dad sways and takes his dinner into the lounge room to watch the TV.

After dinner the boys are tired and they go to bed. Dad falls asleep sitting up on the lounge.

I'm not tired. This is my favourite part of the day. My Dad is here with me.

Dad pretty much wears the same thing every day of the year, a navy blue singlet, faded black stubbies and thongs. He has a hairy chest and big beer gut. We love to make fun of him and ask him when his baby is due. He just pats his tummy and says, "It's pure gold."

I grab my homework and spread it out on the floor.

Mum reckons that when she first saw Dad she thought he was the handsomest man she had ever seen. She told me and Julie, in the birds and the bees talk, that she couldn't control herself. He looked like Elvis and that's how she ended up with us four kids.

Dad's legs are sprawled apart. He has no elastic in his undies so his balls slide out of his stubbies. It is not a good look. When he is awake I point it out to him and he tucks them back in but they only pop out again. It's hard to imagine Dad as Elvis.

The Waltons comes on. Lucky Dad isn't awake to see it. If he sees these guys it really stirs him up. He thinks John Boy is a wanker and says he doesn't know how the rest of them put up with him.

Last Saturday when everyone was in their bed I tried calling out in the night the way the Waltons do.

I called, *Goodnight Paul*.

Paul called back, "Goodnight Lizzie."

I called out, *Goodnight Porky*.

Goodnight Julie.

Goodnight Mum.

Goodnight Dad.

Dad called out, "Goodnight John Boy."

All of us laughed.

The next night mum had been drinking all day. I tried doing it again. No-one would say anything this time. It made me try even harder. I called out again, and again, until Dad said, "For fuck sake Lizzie shut the fuck up and go to fucking sleep. I've got to go to fucking work tomorrow."

Dad is snoring now. I usually try not to wake him but it is way too loud. I get up from the floor and go over to the lounge. I stare at his head and at the black hairs that stick out of his nostrils. I grab his nose and pinch it hard. I hold it tight until he stops breathing. He swipes at me and misses, "Piss off." He drops off back to sleep. His snoring stops but only for a little while and then it starts again. I do the same thing again, and then I do it a few more times, until he says, "Go to fucking bed."

Around now it is best to do what he says, mum will be home soon and I don't want to get caught being up and out of bed.

I put my hands on his big snoring mush and give him a whopping big kiss on the cheek.

In my room I get out my broken rosary beads that I hide in my pillow slip and I kneel next to the bed. I say my prayers, like I do every night.

I pray for mum and ask God to let her know how much I love her.

My bed is pretty cramped because of Klinky, Dollikin and all the guys but I can just squeeze in. I say goodnight and give each of them a kiss and a hug.

Last night when everyone had just gone to bed I called out, *I love you.*

I heard the sound of Fred barking outside.

Tonight I just whisper it to myself, along with all their names.