

The Boys are Mine

The kids are making a racket chasing each other around the two ancient cast iron beds in the other room. They're getting on each other's nerves, and on his.

'Keep it down.' Stu shouts.

That shuts them up, but a minute later Boobook howls.

'He hit me! He hit me!'

Stu stamps his foot on the earthen floor. 'Cut it out, boys!

It's already past nine o'clock and he still has work to do. Warily he switches on the computer.

It's not right. Here he is slumming it in the rough stone cottage down by the creek, while her ladyship is lording it up at the house.

'I'm hungry Dad,' whines Jake, who would be able to make his own dinner by now if she hadn't mollycoddled him.

'Me too,' squeals Boobook.

'Stop your whingeing,' Stu puffs. 'Do I have to do everything?'

He prepares a late supper of vegemite toast and Milo, which the boys shove down their throats. He lays a couple of blankets on each of the beds.

'No more mucking around, you hear?' Stu snaps off the light and scrapes the door shut.

It's midnight before he finishes the bookkeeping. His back aches from sitting hunched over a laptop. He isn't familiar with the paperwork. She used to do it all.

That was before she hit him with it. Completely blindsided him. She didn't love him anymore. It was over. She said it so measured, like she was saying, I forgot to add salt to the potatoes. There was no warning. Nothing.

She'd refused to reconsider. Not even for the sake of the kids. She stood there with her arms folded, her mouth strung in a tight line. So different from the person he thought she was.

But tonight, he has transferred their entire bank balance into his new account.

The boys are sound asleep, and there's only the noise of the generator humming away outside. It's times like these, he has his best ideas.

He drives down the dirt track, dims the headlights, slips the clutch into neutral and coasts through the open gate to the front lawn. He stops under a tree about ten metres from the porch. The moon has set, and the sky is so black he can make out Andromeda. He rigs some spotlights onto the ute's roof bar and connects them to his generator. A million volts of light blare at the main bedroom window. For good measure, he fires off a random volley of rifle shots. Nothing stirs. She's too chicken-shit to come outside. He sits in the ute until the generator runs out of diesel, then he drives back to the cottage and goes to bed.

The next morning at six, he delivers the boys back to her. Their faces are smeared with vegemite from the night before and they are still in their school uniforms.

She's yawning and her hair is a dishevelled mess, but she's cheerful in front of the boys, fussing over them and promising to make them scrambled eggs for breakfast. She doesn't say a word about the night before. She has that way of never arguing in front of them. She makes out all calm and nice, but he knows he's riled her.

'It's my land, for God's sake!' he mutters as he drives off. 'My heritage – what's left of it.'

Against all his fervent arguments, his parents sold off the farm a decade ago to their neighbours. Stu begged his father to carve off a few hectares, including the old cottage, in honour of his pioneering great grandfather who built up the estate from rough country and broke his back screwing a living out of the salt-ridden soil. After the sale went through, his parents embarked on the grey nomad life and then retired to an apartment in the city. Stu stayed on the remnant of property and tried to eke out a livelihood from the land.

And then the farmlet became a sort of post-facto wedding gift. Stu and his new bride lived in the cottage, and when she inherited a few thousand dollars five years ago, they bought a dilapidated two-bedroom weatherboard. Had it trucked up from town on a sodden August day and craned onto prepared stumps. The whole house shook when you walked down the passage to the loo at night. Paint flaked off the external boards in big chunks. But it was theirs.

Jake was a little tacker then, running amok in the olive grove they planted to experiment with olive oil production. She crushed the first crop in a small hand-operated press they found on ebay. Stu drove the beehives around the district searching for thick stands of flowering gums, while she fed the pigs and mucked out their pens.

Then Bobby came along to make it a complete family. He was a complete opposite to his tearaway brother. They called him Boobook because he was as stealthy as an owl. Stu would

be cleaning his gun or tinkering under the bonnet of the ute or having a beer on the back step, and not notice little Boobook sitting motionless nearby, smiling up at him.

They were glory days.

Stu put a sign out on the highway – *Pioneer Estate Produce*. Occasionally they'd sell a dozen eggs or a kilo of honey to passing motorists or load a pig on the ute and sell it off to the town butcher. They didn't have much money, only the little they could earn from surplus farm output and her part time job at the newsagency, but they had each other, the boys and a damn near sustainable lifestyle.

And then she goes and fucks it all up.

'We're having another week at great grandad's old place,' Stu tells the boys when they race out of the house to greet him the next Friday afternoon. This having to wait on his own porch is messing with his head.

'I'll let you in on a secret,' Stu tells them. 'The cottage is haunted. Why don't we see if we can catch ourselves a ghost?'

'Yay,' says Jake, jumping up and down.

The boys pile into the back of the ute with Sandy the kelpie.

'Can Mum come?' Jake asks.

'No, she's hopeless at ghostbusting,' says Stu pulling up the tailgate.

'I want to go back and say bye to Mum,' says Boobook.

Stu turns and sees she's waving from the doorway with a stupid grin on her face.

'Na, you can't,' says Stu. He climbs into the cab and roars off in a cloud of dust.

Stu has traded some rabbit pelts for a second-hand boom box. At midnight, when the boys are sound asleep, he drives back up to the house. With the spotlights beaming at galactic intensity on her bedroom window, he sets the volume to distortion loud and plays Led Zeppelin's metallic *Whole Lotta Love* over and over.

Love, go to hell. What she needs is a good rogering.

On Sunday, he roars past the house fifty or more times in first gear and sprays a few shotgun pellets into the corrugated iron roof. On Monday he puts water in the generator while she's out doing her pre-dawn paper run. For good measure he leaves a welcome turd on the doormat. On Tuesday there's a new lock on the gate. He takes the gate off its hinges

and sends her pet lamb scampering. On Wednesday he gives her a reprieve which makes the shock of Thursday's meteor shower of rocks on the roof all the more potent. On Friday morning he drops the boys back to their mother. By Friday afternoon he has second thoughts. He picks them up from school early.

'We're going out shooting, boys,' he tells them. 'Throw your schoolbags in the back.'

The ute is packed with tarps and swags, an axe and guns. He drives past the farm turnoff, to a gnamma hole, fifty kilometres east.

On Saturday night the police come by the cottage. Apparently, they'd been round twice already. His wife had been an incoherent mess at the station. They hadn't been able to calm her down.

'She's frantic about the kids,' one of the officers tells Stu.

'They're alright,' Stu says, waving across at his sons who are sitting quietly on one of the beds, looking smoke-blown and weary. 'We shot up a few tin cans and had us a lamb pit roast out at the rock hole. It was a perfect night to sleep outdoors. Just a gentle breeze to cool the young fellas' heads after they'd rampaged 'round the bush all day.' Stu eyeballs one of the officers, a local boy who'd been a pushover at school. 'Connecting with nature, Bruce, like we used to do when we were kids. Remember?'

The cops leave. Tell her, as long as the kids are unharmed, it isn't their territory.

On Sunday morning, she drives over to the cottage. The boys run to her before he even notices she's there. She locks them in her car then marches back to the cottage, her eyes blazing.

She spits on the dirt. 'You pull that trick one more time—'

'And what?' He crosses his arms. Looks straight through her.

Her nostrils flare. She points at him and scowls. 'Don't you *ever* harm those kids,' she hisses. She rants and rages, her face redder and redder the less he reacts. His heart sings to see her so worked up.

During his next week with the boys, he ups the ante on the boom box and spotlight caper. Sometimes twice a night. When he drops the kids back to their mother early on Friday morning, she's shuffling around in her slippers and trackies. She's trying to be chipper for the boys, but the grey sagging skin under her eyes is a dead giveaway. What with not sleeping

and getting up before dawn to deliver the papers, she looks like a zombie. By the end of the month, she's moved into town.

'Camping at the cottage is over,' he tells the boys. 'It's time to go home.'

When they get there, the boys run from room to room, calling out for their mother.

'Looks like your Mum's left us,' Stu grimaces. 'She doesn't love us anymore.'

'If we tell her we love her, she'll come back,' says Jake. His face is perky and bright.

'If she cared, she'd be right here, wouldn't she?' Stu says. 'She'd be hugging us and dishing up a nice roast with caramelised pumpkin all around it, like she used to make.'

He gets out a piece of paper, and draws a line right down the centre of it. On the left side, he writes five words – *kind, loving, caring, happy, cuddly*.

'That was your mother before she left us,' he says.

In the right column he writes - *mean, angry, nasty, sad, cold as ice*.

'That's your mother now, Jake,' he says firmly. 'She doesn't want to see you anymore. Adults do that. First, they like you, then they don't.'

Jake's little brow crinkles. His eyelids squeeze together, and teardrops leak down his cheeks. That sets Boobook off. He starts to bawl.

'Man up, Jake. You're too big to cry.' Stu folds his arms. 'Us men will get along just fine without her.'

Jake wipes away his tears. He shouts at his brother. 'Stop that crying, Boobook.'

'We're the three musketeers,' Stu says clenching his fist in the air. 'All for one and one for all.'

But Boobook only wails louder.

On the last day of term, Stu drops into the school.

'She's been bending that elbow a fair bit,' he tells the parochial old principal whose brother runs the family property south of town.

He unfurls a note he's patched together on the local doctor's letterhead, which recommends the boys live permanently with their father.

'She can't cope with the separation,' Stu insists. 'She's a wreck. Everyone can see it. There's no point foisting the kids on her as well.' He looks at his watch. 'It's nearly three. I may as well pick them up now.'

He locks the gate at the highway turnoff. There'll be no surprise school-holiday visits from her in her tinny Hyundai.

The boys are playing hide and seek. It isn't really a game, Jake is terrorising Boobook, who is hunkered down, trembling amongst the waist-high weeds in the vegie garden. They'll have to sort that out between them. He has other problems.

A few of the pigs have gone lame. An infection is spreading right across the pens. Stu can't afford to vaccinate. He'll have to shoot the weak ones. He is bending down to pull a lame piglet out of its pen when Jake's shouting suddenly stops, and both boys start shrieking. He looks across the field to the house, and there she is, right outside his back door, mud up to her shins, with the boys jumping up and down excitedly around her. She's laughing and cuddling them both. For a split second, a sentimental pang shoots through his heart. But then the anger cuts in.

He drops the piglet and pumps a couple of bullets into the sky. He runs at a pelt across the field.

'Get in the house boys!' he shouts, waving the air harshly with his rifle.

The boys let go of their mother and scamper up the steps. The flyscreen door bangs shut behind them.

'Lock the door!' he shouts, 'Lock the door!'

Stu stops a few metres from her. She's rooted to the spot with her arms folded.

'Get out!' he warns.

'They're my boys, too,' she says tersely.

'Get off my land, or I'll have you charged with trespassing.'

She just keeps right on standing there, her legs astride. 'I want the boys back every other week, like we agreed,' she says. Her eyes narrow.

She's pushing it, staring back at him like that.

'They have a right to be with their mother, Stu.' Her mouth closes in that mean tight line, just the way it was when she ended it.

'Get out!' He points the rifle at her feet.

'Don't pull any stupid stunts, Stu, or I'll take you to court.' She's trying to be tough but her voice is quivering now.

A couple of shots ricochet off the dirt near her feet and she turns and runs.

He finds a court order in the post box and throws it in the bin. He calls the child support agency and tells them she's abandoned the boys and they are in his care full time. He demands they take maintenance from her newsagency wages.

Situation sorted.

But the boys are rattled by their mother's unexpected visit.

'Can I get in your bed, Dad?' asks Jake appearing suddenly in his darkened doorway. He crawls in beside the fleshy bulk of his father. He tosses and turns and squirms.

'Settle down,' yawns Stu.

'I'm scared.'

'Nothing to be scared about. We're the three musketeers, Jake. All for one. . .'

' . . .and one for all,' says Jake, his voice cracking.

'Now go to sleep.'

'I can't close my eyes. I get awful pictures of Mum sitting on my bed in the cottage. Only it's not Mum. It's Mum's ghost.' Jake is shaking from head to foot.

'Don't be a wuss. Get some shuteye,' Stu hisses.

In the boys' adjacent room, Boobook's sobs softly.

This is the sort of crap she heaps on. Making those poor kids feel guilty for her screw-ups.

Another court order arrives. But Stu's not taking orders. *He* makes the rules for his sons.

He drops in to see Kev, the newsagent, to complain that he isn't receiving the paper regularly, and the ones he does get are being interfered with by the delivery lady, a.k.a. his estranged and mentally deranged wife. Stu drops seven or eight plastic wrapped newspapers on the counter, which have the words "FUCK U STU" written all over them in thick black marker.

'Hang on, Stu. Do you even have a newspaper subscription with us?'

'No, but these are still turning up at my farm gate every other day.'

The newsagent frowns dubiously. 'She says you won't let her near the kids, is that right?'

'It's a fact, Kev, that men the world over are being fucked over by their ex-wives and denied access to their kids,' Stu says. 'I'm just evening up the score.'

'Is that what you're doing?' asks Kevin drolly. 'I thought you were just being a spiteful prick.'

‘There’s plenty of people been in this district far longer than you have, Kev.’ Stu’s voice has a menacing edge. ‘I’d hate to see the locals turn against you,’ Stu snaps his fingers, ‘just like that.’ He turns and walks out.

Stu dusts off his best jeans and cotton shirt and fronts up to the Family Court demanding sole custody. The boys are sent off by themselves to the social worker for assessment. A week later, the judgement comes back: *The court finds no reason why the children should not have regular contact with both parents.*

The week-about child access arrangements are formally endorsed.

‘You really blew it with the social worker, Jake,’ says Stu.

‘I told her I wanted to stay with you!’ Jake pleads, his face hangdog.

‘You better,’ says Stu. ‘What did Boobook say?’

‘Nothin’. He wouldn’t say a word, even when she gave him a lolly.’

‘Hmmm,’ Stu says, grimacing.

‘I told her I like you best because you take us camping and hunting,’ Jake insists. ‘I told her Mum is mean and nasty and cold as ice. I told her Mum doesn’t love us anymore.’ He looks up at Stu, his whole face crumpled into a big sorry. He starts to weep. ‘It’s all my fault.’

And that starts Boobook up, squawking like a fledgling fallen from a nest, his mouth wide open and his eyes squinted shut.

Stu spreads his arms. ‘Come here boys.’ He gives them a hug, then looks Jake sternly in the eye. ‘You’ll have to try harder next time, ok?’

‘I’m sorry dad.’ Jake hangs his head.

‘Well, we’ll just have to work around it. But from now on, you have to help me muck out the pig pens to make up for the mess you caused me.’

She’s closing in on him. Demanding he sign the access agreement. All this drama because some crone with a law degree has an opinion.

Stu needs more ammo. He raids his Facebook account for some old shots of her reclining semi-naked on the bed. He crops off baby Jake lying next to her, and posts the pictures on the *Porn Queen* website with her number. He sends it out to his contact list — *She has to earn a living somehow, I guess — now I’m no longer supporting her.*

The school has banned her from picking up the boys. But the conniving bitch has gone behind his back and collared Jake at the school athletics carnival. She's promised him a cake for his birthday. Jake's been looking at pictures of birthday cakes on the internet all week. It's all he can talk about. She's told the boys they can come to her place for a party. Do they want to? Of course they do. Boobook and Jake have pestered and pestered Stu until he's had to put his foot down.

'Why not?' they plead.

'Because it's a school night and it's my prerogative,' Stu smacks back.

He's being generous, he tells her, letting her meet the boys at the local café. And even though she's put him through the wringer in the courts, he's considerate enough to tell her she shouldn't waste her time bringing a cake. The coffee shop won't allow outside food to be brought in. Yes, he knows they close at five, but he can't get there before half past four because the kids need to go home first and get changed out of their school uniforms.

But Stu takes the boys straight from school to the café. Jake is as excited as a bee in a jar.

'She might make me a truck cake like last year!' he exclaims. He jumps out of his chair every few minutes to check if she's arrived. But as the minutes tick by his excitement subsides. He stands quietly now, both hands on the glass door, looking out sheepishly.

'You see what I'm up against, Vera?' Stu says to the café owner. 'She can't even get here on time for her own son's birthday.'

Vera gives a sympathetic tut. 'You'd have been better off with a local lass, Stu.'

'Looks like Mum's not coming,' Stu tells the boys.

He buys a cream sponge cake, and by ten past four he is heading safely out the door with the two boys lagging dejectedly behind.

But wouldn't you know it, she's early.

She's hurrying up the footpath, carrying a big red parcel and grinning from ear to ear.

'Jake! Boobook!' She rushes over and enfolds them in her arms. 'Hello, my beautiful boys!' She buries her face in their soft necks.

'You really let Jake down,' says Stu standing over them.

She doesn't even look up. She's all about the boys.

'Happy Birthday, Jake!' Smiling, she holds out the red package.

Jake looks down at it, his mouth pouting.

'You promised him a cake,' Stu booms down at her.

'But you said—'

'Let's go, boys,' says Stu. He grabs Boobook's arm and leads him to the ute, and Jake follows.

Stu glances back and sees her still on her knees, hunched into herself as if she has been knifed in the guts.

'You arsehole, Stu!' she shouts. 'This isn't the end of it.' Her voice is shrill. Her hands wave pathetically in the air. A straggle of locals passing by on the footpath stare down at her.

'You're making a spectacle of yourself, girl,' says Vera, who has come out of the café and watched the entire proceedings. 'Go home.'

But she isn't cowed. She pulls herself upright, raises her head and starts to sing in a loud melodious voice, full of devotion and longing.

'Happy birthday, dear Jake, happy birthday to you.' She calls out as they drive off, 'I love you, boys.'

Before dawn, Sandy barks furiously, but by the time Stu gets outside with his rifle cocked, there is only a trail of chicken feathers leading to a stand of trees on the property boundary.

'Ahh, you useless old dog.' He aims the rifle at Sandy, but then drops it. What's the point of all this work, if there's nothing from it? The vegie garden gone to seed. The olive crop rotting on the ground. The pigs collapsing with disease. Everything is crumbling round him. And all because he doesn't have another pair of good hands to help him around the place. She hasn't just let down the boys, she's let down the farm. And she's not satisfied with that. She's still breathing down his neck, threatening lawyers.

Stu packs the ute tray with a few essentials. He lays his sleeping sons on the back seat of the dual cab. He's got no plans, no destination, but he's determined that one day soon the boys won't even remember her name. He leaves the light on and lets the flyscreen door bang shut behind him. Sandy whimpers, but Stu walks right by her. As he drives, the shadowy outlines of Mallee scrub and ploughed fields gain colour. The highway stretches as far as the eye can see, and at the end of it, the sun pokes up its glutinous eye. Pearls of dew glisten on emerald wheat newly sprouted on land that should have been his.

His hands grip the steering wheel.

'But the boys are mine,' he says firmly.

In the rear-view mirror, Jake is still dozing, but Boobook sits rigid. His owlish eyes are wide open, watching him quietly.