

## *Day Trippers*

(2,489 words)

I'm waiting for the alarm to go off. I've always done that, woken before it. I listen to a sheep bleating, our neighbour's ewes are lambing. I hope there aren't any foxes about. I kill the alarm, hoping to give David a few more minutes, and get out of bed. It's 4.45, black as pitch and freezing. I'm glad I'm not a sheep.

"You can put the light on. I'm awake."

"Why do we *do* this?"

We both know the answer to that one. I grab a quick shower, catch sight of myself in the mirror. Strange how perfectly normal I look.

An hour later, still jittery after a near miss with a roo by the gate, we're up to the axle in snow on Macedon. We creep along behind the car in front, visibility's appalling, what we *can* see is the clock on the dashboard.

"Maybe you should ring," Dave says.

"This'll clear. I really want to take the kids myself this morning."

He gives me a look. "You okay?"

“Fine. Just a bit tired.”

We’ve been married over forty years, spent most of it raising Angus beef down near Portland. I’m sure he knows I’m lying but he concentrates on his driving. The snow does clear but the traffic is still heavy. I don’t know how people can do this every day. Somehow, we arrive on time at seven-thirty, catching a wave from our son-in-law as he dashes for the tram.

Through the front door, there’s the usual chaos. A calm, controlled sort of chaos. Stuff everywhere, the kitchen a bomb site, this is not an orderly house. The two kids are still in their pyjamas. Alexander is steadily making his way through a bowl of cereal. Matilda is doing sums. Our daughter Kate is writing a shopping list.

“Hi,” she says. “We heard the weather was awful, I really appreciate this.”

“Not a problem.” After all, we do it every Friday, minus the snow. It’s just a bit earlier than usual.

“Chapel, for heaven’s sake! I have to be there at eight-fifteen.”

Only priests and schools have chapel at eight-fifteen. Kate’s a schoolteacher. She waves the list. It’s long.

“Can you go to the market for me? Or your grandchildren will starve.”

“No problem.”

“I wish you’d move to town, you wouldn’t have to get up in the middle of the night.” We just smile, they’re always on about it. They want us close by, growing old safely. She gives up. “Got to get dressed.”

She’s off down the hall. Alexander bursts into tears. “She didn’t say goodbye!”

He’s distraught. Dave, now transformed into papa, explains that mummy isn’t going yet, she doesn’t go off to teach in her tracky daks. Certainly not to a school that has chapel. She’ll say goodbye. Alexander decides to console himself with a crumpet.

I find the crumpets.

“Two crumpets, Anzi.” That’s me, *Anziana*, Italian for “old woman” and boy, am I feeling the part.

“Let’s start with one,” I say.

“Look at my sums, papa,” says Tilly.

“Subtraction. That’s impressive. Have you thought of doing it like this?”

Dave sets out the sum as he was taught in 1955. “See? Isn’t that easier?”

Tilly gives him a look. "Mm," she says, and goes on doing it her way.

Alexander is halfway through the crumpet.

"Have you had any breakfast, Tilly?"

"Mm." There is most of a slice of toast in front of her.

"You think a quarter of a slice of toast is a good breakfast?"

"I'm full."

Of air, obviously. Their mother reappears. "I have absolutely *got* to go. Can you do their lunches?"

"Sure. What'll they have?"

"They'll tell you."

Hugs and kisses, they go to the door with her, wave like she's going for six months, they love her to death. It's 8.05.

"Lunch. What do you want on your sandwich, Alex?"

"Ham and avocado." A man of decision.

“Tilly?”

“Um ...”

“Matilda, I think it’s time to put the sums away, good idea? Sandwich. What would you like?”

“I don’t know.”

“Nor do I, Tilly.”

“Ham. No butter.”

“It’ll fall apart.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Lunches are gradually assembled. Sandwiches, cheese sticks, some new dehy delight which purports to be bits of strawberry and looks as though it’s been stamped out of recycled rubber. Fruit’s a problem, it’s Friday, only one apple left. Alexander gets in first. Tilly decides on breakfast fruit in a plastic container. There’s an open jar in the fridge. She sniffs it, makes me check the use-by-date. She ladles it out, inspecting each piece to make sure it doesn’t harbour a swine flu colony. They want yoghurt as well. Alex thinks he has some yoghurt at crèche from yesterday. For some reason this creates a huge dilemma, should he take another one? I suggest that any

surplus can always be brought home and Dave takes him off to get dressed and avert a tanty over yoghurt. I wish all dilemmas could be so easily resolved.

Tilly is doing cartwheels and attempting the odd arabesque, getting in some practice for this evening's ballet lesson. It makes a nice change after all that subtraction. But it's eight-fifteen and she's not even dressed.

"Till? Going to school in your jimjams?"

She wanders off, you cannot hurry that child. The phone rings. It's her mother: remind Tilly to take her homework book and her hat, she tends to forget both. I hang up and hope that mummy has not forgotten chapel. Alexander is dressed and I do his teeth. He stands on tiptoe the better to see himself in the mirror. I encourage more brushing.

"They're sparka-larka-larka-ling, Anzi," he says, putting the brush away with finality.

Tilly appears, now dressed, takes her turn at the basin and – more particularly – the mirror. I think we are raising a family of performers. Or narcissists. Teeth done, I produce her hairbrush.

"No!" She tries various expressions in the mirror. Discomfort, pain, agony. Settles on agony.

"I'll be very gentle." She tries out a few preliminary sobs anyway. I am actually sympathetic, she has fine hair and it knots easily, just like her mother's used to do; brushing it takes me back thirty years. The ordeal ends, she grants forgiveness.

"Shoes, Tilly?"

"Yeah, yeah." She wanders off again. Alexander and papa are earnestly discussing hamstrings. Alex is four with no personal experience of hammies – doubtless it will come - but we are St Kilda people and the question is how quickly Nick Riewoldt's will mend. I pack Alexander's lunch, including the disputed yoghurt. I check his other bag for spare clothes and a dinosaur. Today the letter D has centre stage. Alexander is now ready for departure.

In the bedroom Tilly is pulling on non-regulation socks. I offer to find the right ones. She insists that these, with their fetching pink decoration, are okay. "Bella wears these." Oh, well in that case, of course they're okay. Bella is Tilly's best friend. Bella is smart and feisty and definitely not the sort to be constrained by rules about sock colour. Any rules, for that matter. We move on to hair-bands. Precious minutes are wasted selecting a hair-band which will be gone from Tilly's head by the first set of traffic lights.

"Tilly," I say, "it's getting late."

"Yeah, yeah."

Dave is striding down the hall carrying Alexander's bags, Alexander trotting behind him.

"We'll be in the car."

"Right."

"Of course we'll be beat the Dockers," is the last thing I hear as they go out the door. "Even without Riewoldt." Faith is a wonderful thing.

"Got your schoolbag?" I say to Tilly.

"Um ..."

"Did I see it in the bedroom?"

She finds the bag, stuffs her lunch in it.

"Got your homework book?"

A prolonged search of the playroom reveals the homework book under a pile of ballet clothes.

"Jacket? Hat?" They're not allowed in the playground without a hat while even one stingy ray of sunlight struggles feebly down.

"I've got them, Anzi."

"Great, we can go." Silly me, Tilly's unlocking the back door. "Matilda?"

"I need a bug."

"You what?" She's out in the garden.

"I'm supposed to have a bug but I haven't got a bug so I'm going to take my bug-catcher. If I can find it."

We bought the bugcatcher at Scienceworks oh, a year ago? Could be here. Or at our place. Or at the other grandparents'. Or at Bella's. Or at crèche. Or anywhere.

"It's really, really late, Tilly."

"I've got to have *something*." We search for the bugcatcher without success.

Alexander is yelling from the car. I can imagine Dave, not the most patient man alive, trying to keep his finger off the horn.

"We have to go, darling."

She's at the kitchen cupboard now, takes out a tiny plastic container. She's out in the garden again, filling it with soil.

"We might find a bug on the way." I refrain from mentioning that without holes in the lid, any bug we might catch on the way – in the car? – will surely die. I have a quick vision of heating skewers over the stove and it is now 8.40. We still have to drop Alexander at crèche.

"It'll have to be a dead bug," she says. "Or it'll suffocate." Bright girl. I lock the back door.

"Come on, darling. We're going." My firmest voice. Off down the hall. A miracle, Tilly follows, all the way out to the car. Dave raises an eyebrow.

"Bugs," I say.

Crèche. Alexander is out of the car, waving goodbye to papa. Tilly follows.

"I'm coming too," she says. "Make sure he's settled." Six going on thirty. I refrain from pointing out that Alexander loves crèche, he doesn't need settling, sometimes he even chooses to go in the holidays.

Tilly has charged ahead, Alexander pounding behind her, it's a race to see who will punch in the security numbers which both of them know. Alexander graciously allows Tilly to do it. We go in, unpack his bag, meet and greet, I sign my

name, Alexander signs his name, I go to put the yoghurt in the fridge, report that there is no other yoghurt there – and Alexander throws a wobbly.

“I left one there yesterday.”

“Well it’s not there now, Alex.”

“But I left it there!”

“Maybe you ate it after all.”

“I didn’t!”

“Well perhaps it’s hiding at the back of the fridge and silly Anzi couldn’t see it.”

Tilly guides him to a table with play dough, gets him settled, he forgets the yoghurt. I’m glad she came after all, even though it’s now 8.48 and if we get stuck behind a tram, she’ll be late for school. I kiss Alex goodbye, he gives me a hug and Tilly and I hurry – almost – back to the car, keeping our eyes open for any passing bugs.

The traffic gods are with us, a bit of roadwork, a couple of red lights but no trams. We are actually three minutes early. We even find somewhere to park not too far distant from the school. Tilly gives papa a kiss while I retrieve her bag. She and I

have time to dawdle along the path, looking for bugs as we go. Nothing but ants, which are way too boring. She is losing interest anyway. By the time we reach the school gate, the bug-keeping container is in her bag. She zips her jacket right up, it's always cold around this old state school in the early morning.

"You want me to come to your class with you?"

I always ask. She's in grade one now but she's never quite had the confidence to stride in there by herself. I know it will come so I don't push it. I just go with her and help her to find a hook for her bag and if none of her special friends are around, I wait and chat until the bell goes. That's what usually happens. Not today.

"I'll be alright," she says.

"Sure?"

"Yes," she says, "I'm sure." Then she hugs me fiercely. "I love you, Anzi."

"I love you too, darling."

"Don't be late this afternoon, I've got ballet." And she's gone. I walk back to the car and sink into the seat right on nine o'clock.

"She went off by herself."

David smiles but does he know how important it is? "I've got something to tell you," I say.

"I know." He pulls out into the traffic, dodging a kid on a bicycle, a boy with no more road sense than the roo we encountered earlier. "Let's find some coffee."

"Am I right in thinking," he says over the lattes, "that we mightn't be able to do this much longer?"

"Perhaps not both of us. I'll find out this morning."

"Your mysterious appointment."

I nod.

"I'm coming too."

All of a sudden the whole idea of trying to keep it from him seems ridiculous. After forty years? Not just ridiculous, impossible.

We go to the market. We keep the appointment with the specialist. We collect Tilly from school, take her to ballet, watch her dance. Her *pliés* are improving. I wonder if she's too young for "The Nutcracker", I want to take her. We pick Alex up from crèche and play footy in the park. He's full forward, papa's on the flank and

Tilly stops pirouetting to become a nifty rover. They're in the bath when Liz gets home.

"Sorry I'm late, staff meeting. They okay?"

"Fine, we've had a great time. Might hit the road though."

"You look tired, mum."

"Me? Just getting old."

"It's all the driving, if you moved to town it would be so much easier."

We laugh and leave them and head off. We don't say much until the traffic thins out and we're on the Calder.

"Are they coming for the weekend?" Dave asks.

I nod. "We can tell them then."

"Maybe we *should* move. You'll be down there a lot anyway. For treatment."

I shake my head. "No treatment."

"Please. You must."

“Delaying tactics, that’s all. And when was I ever happy in the city? Let’s just leave things as they are for now.”

“And after?”

“It’ll be okay.”

“I don’t know a thing about ballet.”

“Tilly’s got lots of books. You can read up.”

Briefly, Dave reaches for my hand.

“I’m so glad she went into class by herself,” I say. “It was like she was trying to tell me something. That she’s growing up. She’ll cope. They both will.”

There are flurries of snow on Macedon but we make it home without incident. We turn into the drive and the same old roo is there with a female. They lope away into the night.

“People go into remission,” says Dave.

“Yes,” I say. “They do.” Hope is a wonderful thing. I get out to shut the gate. The stars are brilliant. It’s hard to see stars in the city.

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