

Go Well!

Word Count: 1, 614

He always wakes first, the little one. In the half-light he pads in and clambers over his sleeping-giant Dad for a cuddle with her, savouring every single moment of having her all to himself. Then their morning ritual; two mugs - one big, boiling and peppermint, the other small, tepid and raspberry. Jiggling his tea-bag and wrapping his hands around the warmth he yabbers about last night's dreams, impossibly complex inventions and the *very, very amazing* day ahead. Invariably just as her toast pops up one of the bigger ones appears, rumped and yawning, *Mum, is the porridge ready? Ahh - I mean, Good Morning Mum! 'Morning Ben! Is the porridge ready?*

She plucks his red satin superhero cape off the clothesline, pleased all mud pie ingredients and squished in banana have slipped off in the rigours of the heavy duty cycle. (*Napisan is my middle name!* is her standard cheerful response whenever she is asked how on earth she manages four young boys.) Next the blanket – a.k.a *mangee* - a fleecy apple green with a beaming yellow caterpillar. Back when he was a nappy-clad toddler it would dry to his soulful chants of *mang – gee, mang – gee, mang – gee*, his crumpled face yearning for his just-out-of-reach companion. Today even his teddy is spotless, still managing a slightly quirky smile despite the indignity of being pegged by its soft crimson ears.

Back in the kitchen she hunts in the overflowing container cupboard for the small lunchbox and water bottle. *Grain or wholemeal? Cheese or ham? Apple or banana? Dried apricots or sultanas?* His red backpack unzipped; the brimming lunchbox goes in first, then the change of clothes, with the neatly folded cape on top. She finds the spare torch under the bunk beds and slides it down snugly in to one of the outer mesh pockets,

his drink bottle in the other. She inhales the differing smells of two herbal tea bags before sealing them in her tiny woven purse, a memento from her adventures through South America. She hesitates choosing between *Hairy Maclary* and *Green Eggs and Ham* so finds room for both.

She's replaying their Saturday morning ritual, frame by frame, while she packs his backpack. It begins on Friday night with her stifling a giggle behind the door as they whisper conspiratorially - *so we don't waste time getting ready in the morning* - changing out of their jarmies and back into day clothes by torch light. She feigns surprise at their speed when they appear, a gaggle of inside-out shirts and back-to-front pants, for Saturday morning pancakes. *All set for a big adventure?* she asks, handing each of them a backpack laden with fruit and drinks. *Don't forget the rules; stay together and stay inside the fence.* They chorus *yep, we know, we will* and they lope across the garden heading for the paddock, a morning of Huckleberry freedoms under a big country sky stretches ahead; tree climbing, cubby constructions, archaeology digs and self-sufficient picnicking. *Go well!* She throws a load of washing on and blows on her peppermint tea as she watches them disappear across the green, anticipating her own uninterrupted adventure of losing herself in the Saturday paper. The kindly sleeping-giant eventually rises and busies himself in a nearby paddock, within earshot but out of their way, called on only to confirm or deny the discovery of a *Tyrannosaurus rex* jaw bone.

She rummages in the bulging third drawer now for the blue-tac, *surely it's in here somewhere?* Then settles on the bed, surrounded by packets of photographs. A

frangipani-scented candle flickers on the bedside table. *Do you scrapbook?* she was always being asked, *ahh, no...um, maybe when they're all at school* she'd reply, completely bewildered by the idea of grown-ups cutting and pasting. In the photos, he is the little one always trying to keep up. There he is, always enveloped by the others, their bigger bodies and olive arms around him. A little smile flickering between timid and sure beneath dancing brown eyes and a shaggy blonde mop. *You're my very own Hairy Maclary*, she would tease, scooping him up, ruffling through his soft, thick layers of fly-away hair.

She chooses her favourite photos, the ones she knows she has copies of, and places the series in front of her. A human pyramid captured just before it slid in to a tangle of limbs and laughter. Swinging, with big smiles and big dreams, on the gate that sun-kissed spring day they moved in here, *Our own farm!* Each holding a squirming pet; the dog, a chook, the rabbit, while Paddlepop Pete, the guinea pig, struggles for breath beneath his chubby-fingered clutch. Eating icy poles and wearing Santa hats in the new jumbo wading pool. A professional black and white one, denim jeans and white shirts on the king size bed. Manfully pushing tent pegs in their favourite high country campsite - *We're doing good teamwork Mum, just like Bob The Builder!*

She stretches the blue-tac from baby blue to greyish white, rolling it into small lumps. She is completely absorbed by the task, what the Buddhists call *mindful*, her whole world now lost in the careful creation of each little ball. Turning the images over, methodically pressing one sphere in to each corner and one in the centre. Arranging them comes easily and she smiles when they stick fast to the smooth, dappled timber.

She finds the camping mats in the spare room, layers of blue foam coiled tight with an ocky strap. His is the newest, with the least perforations. She measures it precisely, then slices it cleanly with a Stanley knife. She glances at her fabric box, a mass of untamed colours yet to make their journey to the sewing machine. (*Do you sew?* they ask, *well, I used to, now I just sew buttons back on and patch up jeans!*) She unearths a bright farmyard print left over from the cot sheets she whipped up in the last eternally long days of her first pregnancy. But cotton seems somehow too summery, so she leafs through until she uncovers something thick and velvety - *whatever was this for?* - it feels soft and warm and offers no resistance to her fabric scissors.

The boys have slept late this morning. They jostle in, their striped pyjamas and well-scuffed ugg boots damp with garden dew. *There's snow on Buffalo*, they report cheerfully before handing over a haphazard posy of electric yellow wattle and delicate jonquils. *Mum, maybe one day soon could we take the toboggan up? Pleeese?* She nods but no words come out. She slips a ribbon around the flowers and is back in a moment from last week, his face buried in the flowering wattle tree, *Mum, it smells just like peanut butter!* She offered him her hands, slightly moist with hand cream, *what about these? Honey buzz yoghurt!* They are keen to get ready and scuttle out again. She has already cleaned their boots and laid their new clothes, gifts from their unfailingly generous grandma, out for them.

Their Dad is reading out loud in the study. She listens as his voice catches on some words and stumbles on others, then pauses – a deep breath - before trying again. He is

always soothing their exasperation with encouragement, *It just takes a bit of practice Champ, that's all - have another try.*

*As the sun went down and the fireflies began to blink, Christopher Robin gently told Pooh, "Promise me you'll always remember: you're braver than you believe and stronger than you think."*

*"Oh, that's easy," Pooh replied. "We're braver than a bee and taller than a goose ... or was that a moose?"*

*"Silly old bear", laughed Christopher Robin. Just remember that even if we're apart, I'll always be with you." Pooh looked up at his very best friend. "Yes, Christopher Robin. And I'll always be with you too."*

She hears the heavy long car rumble up the gravel driveway, past the orchard and the chook yard and the dam. She aches now when she thinks of the dam, with its magnetic allure and cruel indifference. Muffled voices. *It's time*, she hears them say. His Dad appears beside her, she hasn't seen him in a suit since they were married. *In good times and bad*. She extinguishes the candle and grips the posy. She keeps hearing that line from the children's book, *Some days are black, black, black like burnt toast*.

The neighbour bought it over last night, as promised. *I hope it's okay - for your little fella*. She had gasped slightly at its beauty, richly flecked camphour laurel with an exquisite dark swirl flowing across the centre. It is like water in one light, marble in another. The oil has a vaguely citrus scent - *just like lemon cordial* - he probably would've said.

*He loved boxes*, she murmurs as they tuck him in to his, plush red velvet making quiet ripples on his camping mat. His blanket and teddy, both fresh with the promise of winter sunshine, in next. His backpack at his feet and the collage of family photos near his head. His Dad's tear-smudged letter tucked into his coat pocket, *I'll always be with you*. A highly coveted bag of marbles from one brother, a perfectly formed nautilus shell from the next. *Here you go, I want you to have it*, the eldest whispered, handing over his trophy first tooth.

*All set for a big adventure?* She adjusts his beanie before placing one last kiss on his cheek. *Go well!* She presses the tea-bag purse into his cold little hand and turns away while they screw the lid down.