

CHAPTER 1

After Bill had helped his mum and the removalist shift furniture and boxes into the new house, he was free to explore. He walked onto the grass verge of the dusty road and looked up and down. Not a sign of life. No kids on bikes. No cement footpath to roller-blade on. He was not even allowed to walk the kilometre to check out the primary school he'd be going to after the holidays, because of what Mrs Mabel Flint (the old lady who lived three doors down) had told his mum.

As soon as the removalist van had pulled into the driveway of the new house, Mrs Flint had appeared at the gate to welcome the family with a plate of lamingtons and a stern warning about the louts who hung around the school. This meant that the local store, the only one for miles, was out of bounds because you had to walk past Dewey Creek Primary School to get there.

Life looked grim. Bill began to think that the last place they had rented back in the real suburbs might have been better. It had no garden, just a tower of pampas grass near the front door, but there had been a park nearby and a couple of good mates a street away. This time there would be a new school to cope with as he went into Year Five, and, worst of all, Dad wouldn't be there to take him to school on the first day.

Bill sat on the grass. He was yanking at weeds when his eye caught movement. He looked up. Strolling out of the overgrown driveway next door was a kid in a pirate suit – headscarf, eye-patch, sword, everything. The pirate had short, messy

dark hair and long, skinny brown legs. He looked about Bill's age, maybe a year or so younger.

The pirate sort of sleepwalked past Bill as if he were not there. Bill heard him chanting over and over again, 'I must not go to the shop by myself. I must not go to the shop by myself.' And yet the pirate was heading in the very direction of the shop as if being led against his will.

This was one brave kid. He'd have to get past the louts at the school to make it to the shop. Bill watched the pirate disappear down the road still saying, "I must not go to the shop by myself." He hung around the nature strip for ages waiting to see if the pirate would ever get back. Bill's mum, Pam, came to the front door and called out across the garden, 'You must be baking in that hot sun. Come and get a drink.'

'No, thanks,' Bill called back.

So his mum carried out a cold drink and a sandwich for him. She also brought him a hat. Bill put the hat on, ate his lunch and stayed on the edge of the road. His mum wandered back inside shaking

her head and wondering if Bill was missing his Dad who had been gone for six months.

Eventually, after the longest wait (maybe an hour), Bill saw a small colourful figure kicking along the dust at the end of the road. He watched it draw nearer. Yes, it was the pirate. Bill's heart leapt. He was so glad the pirate had survived the journey.

As the barefoot pirate got closer, Bill saw that his mouth was crammed with lollies. He still didn't take any notice of Bill. He just sauntered back through his front gate.

In a way, Bill was glad there was no fuss, no questions, no walking stiffly around each other like dogs do when they first meet. In fact, at the moment the pirate had got really close to him, Bill had taken cover under his hat and started fiddling with his empty drink glass as if that were the most interesting thing a person could do. But he was curious. He had to know who that pirate was.

Part Title



CHAPTER 2

For a whole day after that, Bill hung around the boundary fence between his and the pirate's property. It was hard to see into next door's place. Their garden was like a jungle. You could just see the house's green roof with its chimney poking up through the trees.

All morning, Bill did hair-raising bike stunts along his lawn hoping the pirate might catch a glimpse of him. The stunts were so daring they even scared Bill. He was doing things on his bike he'd never done before, like sticking his feet up

on the handlebars, standing on the pedals and riding no hands, arms outstretched like a circus performer, and taking huge leaps into the air off his bike ramp. His courage was wasted. No one seemed to see him.

That afternoon, Bill decided to keep a lookout by pretending to do some gardening. He took his mum's secateurs to prune the shrubs, but he also absent-mindedly chopped off the heads of the daisy bushes, the only flowers in the garden. His mum went berserk. It was not a good day.

The next day, Bill was waiting near the fence watering the mutilated daisy bushes when suddenly a fairy stood up and looked over the wooden palings. The fairy had a wand, a silvery dress and even a tiara. Under the tiara was the same messy dark hair that Bill had seen under the pirate's scarf. So the pirate was actually a girl!

'Hello, Bill O'Connell,' she said.

'How do you know my name?' he asked.

'Just do. Can I come over?'

'Sure.'

‘My name’s Mat,’ said the fairy, pushing her way through two broken palings that swung to the side like a kind of gate. ‘Mat Grube. With an “e” at the end so it rhymes with tube.’

Bill didn’t know what to say, but Mat filled in the awkward moment. She picked up a stone from the ground and said knowingly, ‘This is an igneous rock.’

Bill just nodded.

Picking up another large stone, Mat said, ‘And this is basalt.’

Bill still didn’t know what to say, so Mat took responsibility for the conversation.

‘Igneous is formed from magma which has cooled on the earth’s surface or deep within the earth’s crust. Basalt is a dark volcanic rock with these lines running through it. They both come from volcanoes.’

Finally Bill managed to say, ‘How do you know?’

‘Just do.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Eight and a half.’

‘I’m nine,’ said Bill.

‘I know,’ said Mat.

Later, when Bill went inside, he told his mother all about Mat.

‘She knows everything,’ he said.

He told his mum about igneous rocks and basalt and she said, ‘Well, I never.’

From that day on, Mat Grube was known in the O’Connell household as an authority on all things – the weather, politics, poisonous plants, cycles of the moon, anything. Whenever Bill said, ‘Mat says . . .,’ his mother would know better than to contradict.

Bill didn’t see Mat for a few days after their first conversation. He and his mum had a lot of small shopping trips to make. It was best to do all that boring stuff with his mum without kicking up a fuss; it kept her from brooding on the sad thing only she and Bill knew about. The times when Bill was at home, Mat was nowhere to be seen. It felt like she was magical, that she would only

appear if he knew some spell. He didn't have a
clue how to make her come out.



Part Title



CHAPTER 3

It was the end of the week before Bill saw Mat again. He had lined up some empty tin cans on a tall packing case and was knocking them down with a tennis ball, trying to make as much noise as he could, when she simply stepped through the hole in the fence. This time she was wearing a T-shirt and jeans. It felt like Christmas to see her.

‘Like to see our place?’ she asked.

‘Sure,’ said Bill.

They climbed through the fence and entered a land of green shadows. Bill followed Mat past

old trees and along a mossy, twisting path that led suddenly to an open, sunny patch of ground. And there was the house, a tiny wooden house like a young child's drawing with a door in the middle and a window on each side.

Bill and Mat walked up stone steps to the open front door. You could see straight down the hall to the other end of the house where it opened onto a back verandah. They were just about to walk inside when a tall bearded man came running down the hall.

'Get out! Get out!' the man was yelling.

At first Bill wasn't sure if the man was talking to him or to the chook that flapped past him out of the house leaving a splat on the doorstep.

'You're the Bill Matty's talked about, aren't you? Come on in. Watch out for that chook mess now. You and Matty can clean it up later. Let's go and do some painting.'

Bill followed the man and Mat through the house to a sunny back room. It was an everything sort of room. In one corner there was an electric

stove, a fridge, a sink and a bench, and some copper pots hung from a beam. The cupboards had blue and white checked curtains instead of doors, and the wall above them was decorated with flowery china plates. In the middle of the room was a table covered with books, magazines and jam jars. In the far corner was a pot-belly stove and some comfy-looking chairs grouped around it. One of the walls had windows and glass double doors that looked out onto a wide verandah. The room had a strange smell that Bill later learnt was oil and turps.

‘Mind the mother-in-law,’ said the man.

Bill had hardly noticed the old woman. She was sitting in a rocking chair covered in a rug even though it was a hot day. At a closer look, she was actually crocheting the rug.

‘Mind yourself, Donald!’ the mother-in-law said, laughing. She had white teeth that looked extra white because she had very brown skin.

‘Call me Nan,’ she said to Bill.

‘Mind Uncle Len, too,’ said Donald. Bill couldn’t see any other person in the room, so he

guessed that Uncle Len must be the ancient dog who was wagging its hairless tail.

‘Grab yourself something,’ said Donald to Bill, pointing to a trolley covered in pencils, charcoal, paints and brushes.

‘Take some charcoal first,’ advised Mat.

Bill did as he was directed and looked for some paper. There was none. Then he saw that Donald was painting on the back wall. Out of the wall grew a joyous, swirling circus: the tent, prancing horses and a clown.

Mat was already drawing the best monkey Bill had ever seen. Bill held back. He felt unsure of himself. He was good at drawing cars, but nothing else.

‘You can have the space next to my monkey,’ said Mat.

‘I can only draw cars,’ said Bill wishing he was as clever as Matty’s family.

‘Fantastic!’ said Donald. ‘No one in this family can draw cars. The circus ringmaster would own a car. Draw us the best car you’ve ever done.’

So Bill started on his car. He made it a vintage car with big wheels and a honker of a horn.

Old Nan kept shouting out suggestions. ‘Monkeys don’t wear gloves, Matty . . . That horse looks like it’s biting the bum of the one in front, Donald . . . Ah, but that’s the best horn I’ve ever seen, Billy Boy!’

Mat’s mother wandered through the verandah door carrying two small buckets of strawberries and plums. She was an older version of Mat – thick dark hair pulled back in a bun, olive-skinned and slim. She wore a loose red cotton top and a colourful skirt that swirled as she walked.

‘A mystery visitor!’ said Mat’s mum smiling at Bill.

‘Come and join us, Tessa,’ said Donald. ‘We’ve got Bill from next door helping.’

‘Hello, Bill. If you and Mat help me get these strawberries ready for cooking, I’ll be able to do my bit. I’m going to fill that big jar over there with jam to welcome your mum. Pam and I have just been having a get-to-know-you

chat over the fence. You're lucky to have such a lovely mum.'

Bill smiled. He knew his mum was lovely. She was brave and strong and tried her very best to give Bill a happy life. She also gave the best hugs. Bill approved of anyone who realised what a good mum he had. He also felt a surge of happiness as he imagined his mum and Mat's mum as good friends. Bill's mum might not be so lonely any more.

By late afternoon there were seven people drawing and painting on the wall. Tessa was doing a dancing elephant. A man with no left arm who had come to borrow a book from Donald was drawing a giraffe (because, like Bill, he could only draw one thing), and a lady called Pip who had come to help Tessa make strawberry jam painted some fluffy clouds on a blue sky. They were joined by Mat's big brother, Tom, who loped into the room calling out, 'Make way for the professional artist! Six months off getting his diploma!'

Tom started to paint a curvaceous and beautiful woman whom he said was the trapeze artist.

But Mat accused him of never drawing anything other than beautiful women ‘with big you-know-whats’.

The family had very loud voices and they would bellow at each other from any part of the room or house.

‘Looks like good weather for the craft market on Saturday’ (Donald painting his circus). ‘Might get to sell some of my garden furniture.’

‘Not good for selling rugs.’ (Nan having a ‘feet up’ on the verandah, having moved herself off her rocking chair).

‘But good for busking with my didg.’ (Tom putting the finishing touches to his trapeze artist).

‘Not good for chocolate crackles.’ (Mat at the bench).

‘People like jam any old time, luckily. And my latest batch of bowls are a lovely cobalt blue. Sure to sell.’ (Tessa on a stepladder painting the trunk of her elephant).

Bill had never been in such a noisy, happy family.

And actually being allowed to paint on walls? Bill remembered when he was five and he'd drawn on his bedroom wall with a pencil – a dinosaur driving a car. His dad had hit him across the back of his legs and bellowed that Bill was a so-and-so 'vandal'. (Actually, his dad had said another word much worse than 'so-and-so', but Bill was never going to use those sort of ugly words even in his thoughts. The way some grown-ups swore made you feel punched in the face.)

Like many things Bill's dad said or did, this dislike of vandals did not add up. Two rented houses ago there was a fist-sized hole in the wall plaster near the front door that his dad had made one night after a fight with Bill's mum. Surely a hole in the wall was worse than a pencil scribble? That was the scary thing about Bill's dad. He would have one lot of rules one day and a whole lot of different ones the next. And he didn't stick to his own rules. All these months of not having a dad around gave Bill an empty feeling, but life was less bumpy, too.

Bill felt comfortable in Matty's home. He knew his mum would like the Grubes. When he was little, his mum used to do Folk Art, painting pretty flowers on tin cans and wooden things like clothes pegs. Maybe the Grubes would let her work at the craft markets, too.

Bill was just perfecting the spoked wheels on his car when Mat went all floppy with heat and tiredness.

'Gotta have a swim,' she said. 'C'mon, Bill.'

Bill followed Mat out onto the wide, vine-covered verandah where Nan was now deeply asleep on a cane settee.

'Where's your pool?' asked Bill.

'There,' said Mat.

Bill peered over the verandah railing.

'That?'

'Yep,' said Mat.

'That's just an old bath!' said Bill.

'We like it,' said Mat.

The bath was an old-fashioned sort – deep, with four claw-feet. It sat in the open air, flowering

shrubs all around. Mat and Bill walked down the verandah steps and climbed fully clothed into the sun-warmed water, one squashed in at each end so that their knees met in the middle. Bill gazed up into the blue summer sky and then he looked around him. Tiny striped birds smaller than sparrows darted about in the bushes.

‘Those are zebra finches,’ said Mat. ‘They have the red beaks. The ones with the black and white spots are double-barred finches.’

The sun was sinking lower in the sky and made everything golden, even the two children’s faces.

‘This is the life,’ said Mat.

‘You’re not wrong,’ said Bill.

‘You could visit whenever you want if you belonged to my club,’ said Mat.

‘How do I join?’

‘You have to pass four tests of courage and endurance.’

‘What does endurance mean?’

‘What you have to go through is horrible but you stick at it – like school. Are you game?’