

Notes from the Sick Bay

by Nova Weetman



UQP

CREATIVE VICTORIA

Dash

I was in hospital last week with an asthma attack that knocked me around. It's sometimes triggered by dust storms and allergies, and winter is always the worst. Usually I'm not bothered by my asthma. It's been with me as long as my winning sense of humour (Mum's expression not mine). But this time it meant I missed out on a winter solstice bonfire night at Sammy's grandad's farm.

I'm a regular in the ward and sometimes the nurses make sure I have the window seat; the bed with the view. They also sneak me little things, like extra afternoon tea and paper and pens. Drawing isn't usually my thing, but last week I did use the rainbow connector pens to make a cheesy card for Fred.

It's her birthday today. We bonded back in

Grade 3 when we were the last to be picked for the soccer teams in our weekly PE class. I was used to being picked last, but she was picked last because she was new. Once everyone saw her play, she became the first one picked because she's the fastest kid in the school. I'm still picked last unless she's captain, and then I'm the first name called, even though my most useful skills are collecting the equipment and then returning it.

Fred's having a roller-skating party this afternoon. Mum wasn't going to let me go because it's so close to me coming out of hospital, but Dad convinced her it would be okay. He laughed at the idea of me on skates and said he didn't really think I was about to speed skate my way to an asthma attack. Even Dad doubts my physical abilities.

It's always a bit odd when I come home from hospital. Even if I'm only away a couple of nights, there are always little changes. New flowers in the vase, an orange turning mouldy in the bowl, the carpet in my room freshly vacuumed and the Toy Story sheet set on my bed. Mum changes my sheets as soon as I'm gone. She always picks the Buzz and Woody ones which have been washed so many times they feel like skin. I've pointed out that maybe it's time to buy a more teenage-approaching set, but she doesn't hear the words.

She likes them because they remind her of when I was little. I let her because if I'm honest I still quite like Buzz and Woody.

My sister Elle used to make a fuss when I came home by lending me one of her special things, but that stopped a while back. Now I might be lucky enough to be grunted at. Once I would have asked her opinion on a roller-skating party, but she's in her room and her door is closed which is a clear signal for "enter and die."

So, I clean my teeth until my breath smells minty, smile at myself in the mirror, grab Fred's present and head out to the car where Dad's waiting. If Mum's not with us worrying about loud music affecting my long-term hearing, then Dad and I prefer punk music to conversation when we drive.

Today we sing along, out-of-tune and yelling, until he pulls in to the carpark and checks I have my Ventolin before letting me out of the car. There are a couple of instructions about taking it easy and having fun, but I see Fred arriving too so I nod, slam the door and head for my friend.

She's wearing so many different colours and patterns that my eyes hurt to look at her.

'Skates not blades, promise?' She has been chanting this mantra for weeks now.

‘Happy birthday,’ I tell her.

‘Thanks ... skates?’

One thing I’ve always enjoyed about Fred is her lack of small-talk.

‘Are they the ones with all the wheels?’

She rolls her eyes at me and snatches the present from my hand, ripping off the paper.

‘Manners! Card first!’ I tell her.

‘Yep, sorry ...’ but she keeps opening the present. She tips the paper up and a small harmonica on a silver chain drops out into her hand.

‘Does it work?’

‘Yeah ... course,’ I tell her, enjoying the smile that’s flooding her face as she holds it up to her mouth and blows. Another thing I’ve always enjoyed about Fred is how excited she becomes about things like miniature harmonicas.

‘Best present ever, Dash!’ She spins around holding up her long black hair, directing me to help her fasten it at the back.

My fingers feel too big for the job, and they keep brushing against the warm of her skin. Finally, I clip it in and she runs ahead to show her Mum. I dawdle behind, breathing in all the outside air I can.

I’m not entirely new to roller-skating. Elle has a pair at home that I used to wear with two pairs of

Dad's socks. Clinging to the wall of our house, I'd roll up and down the hallway, until I was confident enough to let go. I liked the sound of the wheels rolling on the wooden floorboards, and the slight fear of what would happen if I fell.

But I am new to the disco lights and blaring music of this place. As Fred's mum pays for skates and birthday food, our other friends arrive. There's state-champion butterfly swimmer Sammy who is so tall I have to shout sometimes so he can hear me. And JJ who can shoot a hoop from twenty metres away. And Mila who lives on her skateboard and is small like me. Of the five of us, I'm the one who spends the most time in Sick Bay, and the least time running.

Sammy is already lacing up his skates as Fred and I stand with our socked feet on the sticky carpet outline on the floor, trying to work out what size will fit.

'You're a six,' says Fred, bending down to check my toes.

I do the same for her. 'Yours are four.'

Laughing, she kicks her foot out at me. 'As if!' Her feet are huge. Like skis plonked onto ankles.

Behind us, as Sammy stands up, one foot slides out from under him and then the other and he's down, his long legs bent and crumpled like a foal

learning to walk. Fred laughs and helps him up. This time he doesn't move, just stands really still, clutching the wall, pretending to be waiting for us, but looking terrified. 'Maybe I'll watch,' he says.

'No way,' says Fred. 'If Dash is skating, so are you!'

I'm the litmus test for not being able to do something. I know it's true, but it's not always easy to hear. Running is mostly out. I'm okay on a bike until I have to pedal fast. And playing chasey used to end in all sorts of visits to the Sick Bay. I carry a Ventolin puffer just in case, sometimes even two. I'm not sporty, but I am prepared. I make a great camper. Extra matches in a waterproof bag? That's me.

I lace my skates as tight as I can, and my ankles feel like they're in irons. Mila and JJ both refuse to wear skates so they're wearing blades. Fred tells them it's cheating.

'Lean forward and keep your knees bent,' says Fred. 'If you're going to fall, go front not back. Don't want to hit your head.'

Little kids on blades that look bigger than their bodies scream past us as we all make our way onto the rink. Mila takes off, with JJ trying to catch her.

Sammy is gripping onto the wall, and Fred is trying to help him. I decide to push off, and go

slow until my feet can understand what they are supposed to be doing. The rink is crowded with skaters. Most are clumsy and wobbly, but some are already speeding through the middle, taking corners without effort and dodging the crashes.

I hum along to the song, wishing I knew the words. Elle would know them, but I like pretending current music is a bit below me. A boy teeters right in front of me and brings down two others as I turn sharply to avoid them. My feet seem happy skating, like they are surprised that the rest of me is actually managing to keep up.

So far, I haven't needed to pull out either of the Ventolin inhalers that wait quietly in my pockets. I've just glided from foot to foot without any effort. Some of the better skaters lean right down with their hands clasped behind their backs like they are proving to the world how easy it is.

I try this. My left hand clasping my right, touching the plastic of the hospital band that is still around my wrist. Sometimes I snip them off when I first get home, and other times I leave them as a reminder to the world my asthma is real.

I think I left this one on just in case skating was hard.

Mila speeds past me with a grin. I power up and take off after her, determined not to be the last

pick for once. After another couple of laps, my feet have started relaxing and the rhythm of skating is worming itself into my body, but I still can't catch Mila. This may actually be the longest time I've ever moved fast without feeling short of breath.

I skate towards Fred and Sammy. They haven't moved far. I slam into the wall behind them, not knowing how to stop.

'You can actually skate,' says Sammy, sounding surprised.

I shrug. 'Yeah, for once, I'm better than you!'

'I haven't left the wall,' he says laughing.

Sammy is always in the newsletter at school for sporting achievements. We joke that he has so many trophies at home his parents had to boot out his older brother so they could store them in his room.

I have one white ribbon from the only athletics day I've ever competed at. It was last year and I didn't tell my parents that I was planning to run. I came fourth in the 400 metre and had an asthma attack as I crossed the line. The teacher on duty called Dad and he came to collect me with a frown and a reasonably-detailed lecture. I had to rest across three chairs, but Fred made sure that my white ribbon was pinned onto my t-shirt in the same spot as her twelve blue ones. I still have it at

home. Stuck onto my wall with Blu Tack. I wrote the date on the back of it just in case I was ever tempted to forget.

Fred's dad calls out from the tables. He has his camera ready and tells us to smile.

Sammy tries to let go of the wall, but his feet shoot out in different directions and he clutches it again.

'I'm going to see if your Mum needs help with the chips,' he says.

'You mean you're giving up?' Fred says.

'Temporarily!' he says, inching back towards the exit, against the stream of skaters.

'You can't go that way,' I tell him.

But Fred shrugs like it doesn't matter and heads out onto the rink. I skate after her.

Mila and JJ blade up behind us. Mila and JJ want to race, and as the two of them take off, I wait for Fred to skate off and leave me at the back of the pack like always. But she doesn't.

Instead we just skate. Round and around, weaving and dodging.

Another song starts as we glide around the corner and Fred sings her own version of the lyrics loud and out of tune. I laugh at her until we see a cluster of bodies on the rink and Mila crouched down looking on.

An attendant in a fluoro top is trying to help some of the skaters up, and as he does, I spy JJ lying on the rink at the bottom of the pack. I speed up, managing to turn sharply and stop just before I reach him.

‘A little kid skated out in front of him and he went over the top of her,’ says Mila.

I bend down. ‘You right, JJ?’

‘Yeah, just my knee.’ He tries to get up, but then he stops. ‘Nah, it hurts.’

Fred’s dad has rushed over as well and he and the attendant lift JJ up and carry him off the rink.

‘I need a break,’ says Mila. ‘You coming?’

I follow after her, but as I reach the exit, I see JJ sitting on a chair with Fred and Sammy and Fred’s parents all crowding round him and Mila on her way, and I stop. I know I should check on my friend, but JJ looks okay. They don’t need me too.

I push off from the wall and into the tide of skaters. I’m two laps in when I realise that right now, I’m the last one standing. I’m the blue ribbon. I grin to myself as I speed up along the straight, feeling the thump of my heart and the burn in my legs.

And I know that soon someone is going to call me away to eat cake and watch Fred blow out candles, but right now, I could keep going all day.

As I pass the rink entrance, Fred skates into my path and reaches for my hand. She's not usually a hand-holder. The last time was when we were paired up on a school excursion in Grade 3 before getting on the bus so that nobody was lost. She'd been eating chocolate cake and her fingers were all sticky with icing. Now they are smooth and cool and holding on like she doesn't want to let go.

A little kid skates right in front of us and Fred drops my hand so that we can avoid collecting him. I expect her to skate past and show me that she's faster, but instead she glides closer and reaches across and slides her hand back into mine and swings our arms high up in the air, like we are the champions.

Then she looks over and grins at me, and I yell *Happy Birthday* over all the noise as we speed up to take the corner.

Lina

Mum left this morning when I was still asleep. I asked her to wake me to say goodbye, but she didn't. She texted later from the airport to apologise, but when I rang her back before she boarded, she didn't answer. Her phone went straight to message.

Now she's probably closer to Hong Kong than she is to me.

Dad will be here soon, and I was going to spend the morning cleaning my room and wrapping the presents I bought for my second family, but I've done none of that. Instead, I had an hour-long shower, shaved my legs with Mum's razor, and finished the tub of salted caramel ice-cream.

I posted a photo of the empty tub on Instagram,

and immediately both Elle and Tessa called. I ignored them both, so then a long stream of emojis and heartfelt messages flooded my phone. Elle even said I could come and stay with her family until Mum's back, but that would be worse than spending the next 174 hours with Dad and the steps. That's what I call his wife and kid. They aren't my real family. They're the stand-ins, like that emergency tin of baked beans at the back of the cupboard that will do if you've run out of everything else.

At least I can be ignored at Dad's place. I'm well practised in exactly how surly I have to be so they prefer me disappearing into my room than hanging out in the lounge. Elle would want to chat endlessly, and I'd have to watch her cheery family exchange presents on Friday. Knowing her mum, there would probably even be a present for me. This way, I can sleep through Christmas morning, and wake up when it's almost over.

I hear Dad's knock on the door. I know it's him because he always does this little rhythm if Mum's not here. It's like he's worried I'll open the door to a murderer or something. Thing is, I've been staying home alone for years. Not like Mum cares. She thinks the double security door will keep me safe.

‘Hi, honey,’ says Dad, leaning down for a kiss on the cheek.

‘You look tired.’ I tell him.

He laughs and the sound irritates me.

‘Your brother thinks the morning starts at four.’

‘Not my brother,’ I say quietly as I turn around and head back in to grab my bags.

‘You ready to go?’ He never walks into the house. We conduct entire conversations this way, with him out and me in.

‘Do I have a choice?’

Dad reaches for my backpack and slides it over his shoulder. I always forget how big he is until I see him. It’s like he fades in size and memory in between visits.

‘Benny’s been saying your name for days,’ says Dad, unlocking the boot and tossing my bag in. ‘He’s really excited that you’re coming.’

‘He’s two, Dad. The only thing Benny gets excited about is eating yoghurt with his hands.’

Dad laughs and I climb into the passenger seat, relieved that he didn’t bring the steps with him to collect me. I dread awkward car rides.

This is Dad’s work car, so I’ve only been in it a handful of times. It’s fancier than his family station wagon, and there’s no car seat in the back for Benny. It also smells clean, and there are no

handprint food stains on the leather.

I Bluetooth my phone and turn up a song I've been listening to a lot. It was one Riley's sister introduced me to. Not that I'd admit that to anyone. I like pretending my music is my music, not hand-me-downs from some cool teenager that I don't even know.

'Bit loud, honey,' says Dad.

I pretend to turn the volume down, wondering why parents always seem to have such delicate hearing.

'Sam has a few things planned for the next few days. She'd really love it if you'd visit Santa for a photo with Benny.'

This I have to laugh at.

'I'm serious, Lina,' says Dad. 'It would be nice for Benny.'

Everything's nice for Benny. Nobody ever thinks about the fact that Benny took my childhood. I stopped believing in Santa when I was about five because after Dad left, Mum couldn't be bothered pretending.

'No thanks,' I tell him. I sing along to the harmony.

'This week is a big deal for us. I think we should make it as nice as we can,' he says, shooting a quick look my way as if his sweet dad glance will seal the

deal.

‘Dad, I’m here because I have to be. Let’s not pretend to be happy families. Okay?’

Mostly, I avoid staying over at Dad’s in the large suburban dreamhouse with Barbie and her kid unless I absolutely have to.

Dad sighs twice and stops talking, which is so unlike him. Usually he fills any gaps with chatter.

As we pull up outside his three-storey house, I match the sigh. ‘Goody, we’re home,’ I say in my best mock cheery accent.

Dad married Sam about five years ago and she’s perfectly fine for a step. She opens the front door before he can and plants a kiss on my cheek.

‘Benny’s asleep,’ she whispers. ‘So, can we just keep it down? He cries if he gets woken,’ she says.

I shrug and step inside to Christmas winter wonderland. The loungeroom is bursting with decorations. A tree is sparkling in the corner and presents circle the base. I wonder if any of them are for me or if they are all Benny’s.

‘Is the WIFI code the same?’ I have my phone out and am trying to get on to Dad’s server.

‘Sssshhh,’ he says behind me.

‘Isn’t Benny upstairs?’ I say.

‘He’s a very light sleeper,’ says Dad. ‘Like his Mum.’

I roll my eyes at the framed photographs of my steps that line the mantelpiece. I'm there too if you search. I know because I have. There's one of me as a baby wrapped in a family heirloom rug. And one of me starting school grinning at the camera like I was living my best life.

Dad places my backpack carefully onto the chair in the corner that I always like to think of as mine. It means I don't risk touching anyone on the couch.

'Do you need some breakfast?' Sam asks. Her long hair is tied back in a ponytail, and she's in jeans and a t-shirt that would fit me. She's a runner and, before they had Benny, they used to train for marathons together. Now Dad leaves the hardcore fitness to her and plays golf. He's a right middle-aged cliché.

'I had ice-cream,' I tell her, enjoying the frown it causes.

'Tea? Coffee?' Sam is already heading into the kitchen to turn on the machine.

I don't drink coffee. Not because I'm not allowed to, but because I don't like it. It tastes like everything I imagine is hard about being an adult. It's bitter, it makes your breath smell, and I don't believe anyone actually likes it, they have just learned to pretend. I decide that right now is

all about pretending.

‘Coffee, white, no sugar,’ I say.

Dad is heading towards me with his arms out. I need to duck away before this becomes a hug. I’ve only been here five minutes.

I join Sam in the kitchen and sit at the long wooden table covered in paper and crayons. There’s a couple of sheets with coloured scribbles on them and I hold one up.

‘Benny’s?’ I ask, as though maybe Dad’s drawing style hasn’t developed.

Sam turns from frothing the milk and smiles. Love spreads across her face as she talks. I want to screw the sheet up and toss it at her.

‘He loves drawing,’ she says. At least she isn’t telling me he’s the next Picasso.

The sound of the coffee machine drowns out the rest of her sentence and I watch Dad through the doorway as he fixes the fallen tinsel on the tree.

I haven’t been in a house with a Christmas tree for years. Mum doesn’t like the real ones. Says they drop needles all over the floor and are a pain to dispose of after the big day. And we’ve just never bothered with the fake ones. Instead, we sit by our window in matching dressing gowns to exchange presents. And then go to our favourite restaurant for lunch. By the time we come home

in the afternoon, Christmas is over. Not even the wrapping paper hangs around.

As Sam slides over my coffee, there's a scream from upstairs. She runs, as does Dad from the other room. And I sit in the empty first floor, while Benny the King commands all the attention.

I leave the coffee and drag my backpack up the stairs to the room at the back where I always sleep. I'm not sure what this room does when I'm not here. It must have some small function because I only fill it for about twelve nights a year. Usually if Mum's away I head to Tessa's house or my aunty comes and stays.

I creep past Benny's room and hear Sam singing a song about a train. It makes me hurry. I don't want to be dragged into family hour.

My room is like living in a hotel. White sheets, clean folded towel, and a small television set. It has a door that shuts and a bed that is large enough for two.

I'm tossing up between putting away my clothes neatly or living out of my bag, when the door pushes open and Benny waddles in wearing only a singlet and nappy. He says something that sounds like my name and then holds up his arms like he expects me to pick him up. Dad always tells me Benny and I look like siblings, but I can't see it. He

has blonde hair and I don't. Our eyes are different colours and he's always dribbling.

'Sorry, can't play, just about to check Instagram,' I tell him.

He responds with a squawking sound that's possibly a complaint. 'Lina, play,' he says.

I haven't seen Benny in a while, and the fact that he can actually make words sort of shocks me. Maybe he is gifted.

'I can't,' I tell him again holding up my phone.

'Benny, phone,' he says.

'No, Lina's phone.'

He smiles at me like he understands my need for technology. I see the dimples that make his cheeks look soft and cute. He walks up to my leg and slides his arms around it, holding on at knee level.

I've always treated Benny like he's Dad's new pet. If I pat him occasionally and comment on how big he's getting, I seem to be allowed to ignore the fact that he exists. But Dad's not in the room. He's not hovering and Benny's holding my leg because he wants to hold my leg. It seems he's changing the rules.

I pat the top of his head. His hair is soft and flyaway. Hope he outgrows that. Flyaway hair is not good on a boy.

‘Lina, come,’ he says, moving backwards and trying to pull me along. No two-year old tells me what to do. I stay fixed where I am.

‘Lina, come,’ he says again.

‘No.’

‘Yes.’

I shake my head knowing he can’t see me because he’s still looking at my kneecap. And then I wonder if he’ll bite me, like a cat would.

‘Okay.’ I shake him free and follow him out the door, down the hall to his room where Dad and Sam are cuddling. I can’t remember my parents ever standing so close. And I’m pleased when they leap apart as we walk into the room.

‘Benny wanted me to come,’ I tell them, not looking at either of them very closely.

‘He knows what he wants,’ says Dad laughing.

‘He probably wants to show you his new train set,’ says Sam. ‘My parents sent it over for Christmas, but it arrived early.’

She busies herself, pulling something out from under the bed. It’s a large wooden board covered in track. ‘Sorry, Lina. He might bore you with this.’

‘I’m sort of busy,’ I tell her.

Sam has never parented me in any way. She’s always respected the step rules. But the look she gives me as she stands up, is pure parent

disapproval. If I knew her better, I might argue that playing trains with Benny is not my job.

Instead I sit on the ground, almost at the feet of my father, as Benny hands me sticky carriage after sticky carriage, and I have to make them move. At some point in the chugging trains episode, Dad and Sam sneak out of the room. I'm aware of them leaving but figure they'll be back soon.

But they aren't. I'm not sure how much time passes before I realise that even Benny is no longer playing trains, and it's all me. I'm the only one loading up the carriages with coal and packages and joining them up magnetically so they can glide through tunnels and up over hills and down into the station.

'Benny turn?' I look up into the eyes of my step. He's smiling at me like he understands why I fell under the spell of his toy.

'Yeah, Benny turn ...' I say, shuffling over so he can reach the carriage with the engine. But instead of sitting down next to me and leaving a decent, polite distance between us, Benny backs into place with his nappy-covered bum and lands hard on my lap. He sighs just like my Dad does.

Within seconds of him sitting on me, my legs start tingling and going slowly to sleep. I could straighten them and wriggle my way out from

under his weight, or I could just suck it up and stay here.

I lean forward and breathe him in. He smells sweet like apples and milk. And I let my legs go numb, and I keep as still as a fox, as he explains in single words and broken sentences the rules of the game.

It seems like days pass before Sam appears in the doorway. Her smile is like an audition tape for the weather channel. I wait for her to start telling us the humidity over Melbourne, but instead she scoops Benny up in her arms and leaves. No words. No explanation to the twelve-year-old babysitter who has suffered through train-land while her legs have officially gone to sleep. Not even a thank-you.

I lie backwards, my head resting on an oversized brown teddy-bear with very dirty paws. Benny's room is like a toyshop, complete with ceiling-height display cupboards stuffed full of games and books.

Mum promised to buy me a new phone in Hong Kong for Christmas. And duty-free make-up. I wanted to give her the present I'd bought, but she told me to wait until she was back.

'Comfy, Lina?' Dad says from the doorway.

'Not really. I think Teddy's eyes are pushing into my skin.'

‘We’re taking Benny to the park. Do you want to come?’

I laugh thinking he should be able to translate. ‘You sure? We usually get ice-cream after,’ he says. I’ve never heard my dad use the word ‘we’ so often. It throws me for a second.

‘Lina, come,’ says Benny pushing past Dad and walking over to where I’m lying. He leans down and rubs the side of my face. Looking at him upside-down is odd. He looks like a different person. Not Benny the step. But some random kid who I’m not related to. It makes it easier to say no. But he doesn’t seem to hear me, because he pushes his little strawberry stained hand into mine and pulls.

Dad is laughing and egging him on. Mum better buy me a really great phone because she owes me for this. I let myself be pulled up, but as soon as I’m on my feet, I break free and wipe my fingers on my shorts.

‘I’m staying here,’ I tell Dad, as I head back to my room where this time, I shut the door until it clicks.

It seems to take them ages to leave, but finally after the front door shutting and opening and shutting again, I hear the car pull out.

There are messages from Tessa and Elle and a

boy from school but nothing from Mum. I snap a photo of my green toenails from the pedicure I had last week, but don't bother posting it because my big toe looks ugly. Now that I have the house to myself, I don't know what to do. I decide to unpack a few things into the top drawer of the shelves but leave the rest in my backpack for a quick escape. Then I head downstairs to the kitchen.

Sam is a health nut. The fridge has more vegetables than ours has seen in a year. And the pantry is full of labelled jars. Flour, oats, seeds, nuts and other things that need cooking.

Mum and I don't do much of that. We mostly reheat. I grab a block of chocolate, but it's super dark and vegan. It doesn't even smell good. Then I spy a packet of dried fruit sticks that I guess are probably Benny's. Mashed up apricot and apple tastes pretty good, so I eat half the pack.

I'm digging around in the back of the pantry for crackers when I hear a car pull into the drive. I hurry over to the window just in time to see Benny being lifted out of the backseat and carrying an ice-cream cone with a pile of scoops balancing on top.

Fastest park trip ever.

'Lina, ice-cream,' shouts Benny through the window.

I open the front door as he hurries towards me.
'Is that for me?'

He grins and holds it up, managing somehow not to drop the lot.

'Thanks,' I say. But before I can take it, he licks across the top and upends the chocolate scoop onto the ground with his tongue. His eyes grow wide and I know there are tears somewhere in there because it's exactly the expression I pull in the mirror when I'm practising.

Surprised, I realise I don't want him to start crying. And maybe I actually care enough not to be the reason that he does. After all, he is only two. And possibly gifted. And I can make him feel better really easily.

'All good, Benny. I hate chocolate ice-cream,' I tell him, taking the cone. I wonder if I have to pretend to hate chocolate ice-cream forever now. Hopefully little kids forget things like this.

His grey t-shirt is covered in smears of drying ice-cream. 'Strawberry,' he says making it sound like a different fruit altogether.

'That's my favourite,' I tell him.

'Benny favourite.' He grins and I smile back, licking the top of the melting pale pink scoop.

'Benny picked the flavours,' says Dad climbing out and walking over. As he does, he whispers,

‘Thanks, Lina, that was really kind.’

I could say something smart, but for once I don’t. Instead I shrug like thinking of someone else’s feelings is no big deal for me.

‘Now we’re going to the park,’ says Dad.

‘Lina come,’ says Benny.

My phone beeps and I pull it from my back pocket. It’s just Tessa texting me a photo of her new lip-gloss. I could go inside and lie on my bed and message her back. Or I could let myself be taken away for an hour on the swings with the steps.

‘Lina, come,’ says Benny again walking back towards the car like he knows I’ll follow.

And strangely enough, he’s right.

Jenna

Tonight, my best friend Violet is having a party. It's a house party because she lives with her dad, and he's fine about it as long as she doesn't invite more than thirty people. We've been talking about the party for weeks. Of course, I helped with all the organising. We decided on the date together, and on the invite list, and we even went shopping for fifty large packets of chips (maybe a bit of an exaggeration, but I'm trying to make a point). Now instead of planning my outfit to wear tonight, I'm on my way to the beach with my family for a last-minute weekend getaway.

Seriously.

I woke up four hours ago thinking I was about to have the best day of my summer holidays, and ten minutes later Mum ruined it all. Apparently, it

was supposed to be a surprise, but I refused to get in the car until she told us where we were going. Then she acted all surprised when I lost it.

Refusing my mum isn't really an option in my house. Not unless you want to move out and leave home at fifteen and a half. So now I'm sitting behind Dad in the backseat while Mum checks the weather on her phone and my sister Riley reads *Anne of Green Gables* next to me.

Dad offered to cheer me up with some music. But of course it's not one of my playlists. It's Mum's favourite classical music channel. Two hours of violin concertos are accompanying us to the beach. While Violet works out the perfect dance tracks and decorates her backyard with someone that isn't me.

'Get off my side,' I snap at Riley, pushing her bag towards her.

She ignores me. Mum doesn't. I see her head raise so she can pin me with her death stare in the rear vision mirror. I look out the window and glare at the trees.

'We can go for a night walk,' says Dad.

'Bo-ring.' I don't even aim for discrete.

'Come on, Jen,' says Dad, in his jolly voice, shortening my name like we are besties.

'You love Wilson's Prom.'

‘Loved, Dad. Past tense. The bush isn’t my thing. Now I love parties and my friends and dancing.’

Riley turns the page in her book and the sound makes me want to scream. I shove her bag harder, so that it squashes her leg, but she doesn’t even give me a look. She just keeps reading.

Dad turns off the windy road through the tea tree covered hills to the entrance of Wilson’s Prom. It is beautiful. It is wild and windswept and all the things I loved when I was young. But now I’m nearly sixteen and spending three days collecting shells (that you’re not even allowed to take home) and digging holes in the sand with my parents is the worst. No, not the worst. The worst is that all four of us are sleeping in the same bedroom, and I don’t have enough data left on my phone to message my friends and of course there’s no WIFI.

Mum only ever picks places with no WIFI and then tries to sell it to us like she’s giving us all a giant technology holiday. Except she has mobile data, but she won’t let me use it.

I barely wait for Dad to stop the car before opening my door and heading for the cabin.

‘Jenna, take your bag,’ shouts Mum. I pretend not to hear her, and head for the path. We’ve stayed here enough over the years for me to know my way around. There are wombats that

should be avoided. Beaches that can sweep you out to the sea if you don't watch for rips. And cheery night-time activities meant to entertain the young ones so their parents can watch the sunset and pretend to be romantic.

'Jenna, help your father,' says Mum bustling past to unlock the cabin with her secret code.

Riley is carrying one of the boxes of food and Dad is struggling with the esky. I grab a couple of pillows and my backpack full of clothes that deserve a better audience than wildlife. Mum manages another glare in my direction as she heads back to the car for the bedding and towels.

'Bags top bunk,' I say, tossing my stuff onto the bed.

'Too late,' says Riley.

'No way,' I tell her.

She grins at me. 'My book's already up there.'

I reach up and grab Anne of Green Gables and throw it on the bottom bed. 'Not anymore.'

'Dad!' She says.

Dad looks over from where he's pouring himself a glass of water from the bottle in the esky. 'Bottom's better, Riley.'

I fake smile at her and head back outside. I can hear her complaining, but I know that Dad just wants to keep the peace, and today that means

making me happy. He doesn't always take my side, but maybe he understands I'm still feeling angry that I'm not at Violet's. At least he tries to understand.

I carry the beach towels and flippers to the cabin and dump them just inside the door for maximum impact.

'Not there, Jenna. Put them on the chair,' snaps Mum.

I toss them towards a ratty-looking armchair in the corner that a million bums have probably sat on. Dad and Riley are already making the beds and Mum is putting away all the food in the little cupboard under the cooker.

'I'm going for a walk,' I tell them.

'Not yet you're not. It's lunch time,' says Mum, standing up too quickly and banging her head on the edge of the stove. She swears quietly and I laugh.

Mum gives me a look that says everything. She hates losing control. 'We can all go for a walk after sandwiches,' she says.

'Not hungry.' I didn't eat breakfast this morning, so I'm actually starving, but I need to escape.

'Would you like company?' Dad says, moving towards me.

'No.'

I turn away from him so I can't see the damage I just caused and grab an apple from the box of food. Mum would probably make Dad stay and eat lunch anyway, so it's not like he can drift out like I can, but still, after he let me keep the top bunk, maybe I should have been more polite.

I slip off my sandals and walk on the warm sand. Tiny gumnuts stick into the skin on the bottom of my feet, and I have to keep stopping to brush them off. But as I duck under the tea tree that has grown over the path, the ground softens, and I see the beach.

There are a handful of kids in the shallows. Most of them are lying in the water, stomachs flat on the sand, laughing. I head for the edge.

Even though it topped forty degrees last week in the city, and the sea has had time to warm-up, my toes curl in the cool. It makes me want to march back up the path to the cabin and pull on my new bikini that Mum hasn't seen yet and run into the waves. But she'll probably guilt trip me into covering up with a rashie and thick white sunscreen, and maybe even a hat and sunglasses, so nobody will even notice the cute little ribbon ties on the sides of the bather bottoms.

I decide instead to walk.

About two years ago, Dad and I did the

two-night hike around the circuit, where we had to carry all of our stuff. Mum and Riley were supposed to come too, but then Riley had gastro which can be pretty frightening for a diabetic, and they couldn't get her levels under control, so it meant just the two of us.

I remember feeling apprehensive about spending so much time alone with one parent because we might run out of things to talk about. But it wasn't like that. Dad pointed out wildflowers I'd never seen. He could name a bird from its morning song. He taught me how to cook using only one pan, and how to sit quietly for hours and listen to the bush. We hardly talked in three days, and it was strangely peaceful.

Now the thought of it makes me want to scream. Three days with no phone and no friends and no access to the world, talking about whether some manky bird is a Black Currawong or a Pied Currawong.

I keep walking. Here the rocks are craggy and jut out around the edge of the beach, so I have to step carefully. Tired of carrying things, I toss my thongs and the apple core down onto the sand, knowing they'll still be there when I head back.

I keep expecting to hear Mum yelling my name and holding up my ham and mustard sandwich.

I've told her a million times I'm a vegetarian, but she refuses to listen. I have to pick out all the pieces of pink floppy meat and leave them on my plate, so I'm just eating mustard on brown grainy bread.

I can never tell whether the tide is coming in or going out. The foamy line on the sand looks like it's fading so maybe the water is receding, which means I should be able to make it around the edge without walking too high on the rocks.

My toes sink into the wet sand, and my footprints are gone in seconds as I dash around the headland to the much wilder and longer stretch of beach. Dad explained why we shouldn't swim here years ago, but I can't remember what he said. Something about the waves being bigger and there were rips and we should stay away.

I wonder what Violet ended up deciding to wear for the party. I hope she chose the black velvet slip dress that we bought together at the second-hand market months ago. We have the same style, so we often share clothes, passing them back and forth until we tire of them and sell them onto someone at school.

If she wasn't wearing the dress tonight, then I was going to wear it. Fix my fringe, smoky eyes, salt spray my hair so it curls, and wear my Docs. Remembering where I am, I kick the sand.

There's a boy going tonight. He might not even notice I'm missing. Violet tried to sell it to me, that perhaps my absence would make him like me more, but I bet instead he hooks up with someone else.

I glare at the sun. It's a blinking contest and I am not going to look away first. Except then I do. Flashes of bright red stain my eyes as I screw them shut.

When I open them, I notice some large shape on the sand. There are always deaths along this beach. Birds and jellyfish. The whitewashed bones of unidentifiable creatures.

I hurry towards it. Leaving behind the cool wet sand of the shallows, I head up, to where the sand burns underfoot. It's a seal lying on its stomach. Brown matted fur and small flippers. As I edge closer, it shudders, a ripple running through its body like it's trying to take a breath.

I rush to it, believing for a second I can help. Maybe I can pull it back into the water. Maybe I can run back for Dad. He'll know what to do.

But as I drop down onto the sand alongside it, I see the gaping cut on its side. I move away from that, towards its head, where the brown glassy eyes are staring. Is it watching me? It seems to be. I start talking to it. Like I would if it was some kid

fallen off a bike on the road and I was first on the scene.

It's okay. Just stay calm. Everything's okay. I'm here.

Meaningless words. As if it can understand. It looks like its smiling, but I think that's just the way seals' faces work. It has whiskers like a cat, and I force myself to stay.

I'm here.

I'll stay until it goes. Until its chest stops moving. Until it takes one last breath. I lie down next to it on the sand. The waves smash down the beach, the sun warms my skin and I imagine the yelling when I come back with burnt legs. But I can't leave.

'Jenna!' I hear Mum's voice. I sit up and see her scrambling across the rocks. She's just a large straw hat on legs. Now she's found me there is no way she'll understand that I want to wait here until this creature dies.

Then I notice the water is closer. The waves are reaching out, coming for me. The tide must be rolling in.

Mum gets near enough to see the seal. My muscles tense, ready for her to have a go at me about walking out, about missing lunch, about not playing happy families. I'm ready to fight back.

But instead she walks over and kneels down on the sand, dropping her striped cotton bag so that it spills open. I spy a tube of sunscreen and a floppy orange hat, knowing that's why she's here.

I wait for her to pass them to me. To say something. To have a go.

Then she reaches over and rubs my shoulder and for once it doesn't feel too heavy. Her fingers are warm and soft and make me almost smile. And I think about Violet again and decide that whatever she's wearing tonight she'll have a great time.

Eleanora

I'm supposed to wear my pale pink t-shirt and denim shorts today, because Lina wants the three of us to look the same for our last-ever primary school day. And I was going to wear it, but this morning when I tried it on with my denim shorts, I decided I didn't want to. Instead I pulled my striped t-shirt out of the dirty-clothes basket, sniffed the armpits and smothered it in deodorant.

Besides, we're all wearing our grey Year 6 graduation hoodies, so it's not like anyone can even see our t-shirts, until it gets really hot after lunch and we take our jumpers off.

My brother Dash crashes into me as we wait for the lights to change so we can cross. I glare at him, but he doesn't notice. He's reading an old Archie

comic of Dad's and hasn't even noticed that I'm here.

I think about telling him how pleased I am that I don't have to walk to school with him anymore, but I'm not sure if it's true. Sometimes we talk on the journey, and it's actually nicer than being alone.

I pluck the comic from his hands and close it, deliberately losing his page.

'You really are the kindest sister,' he says.

'I know. You're so lucky to have me.'

The green man starts flashing and Dash walks ahead of me. Usually at this point I hurry off, because we're almost at the school gate, but today I let him go first. I'm in no rush to finish primary school.

My two best friends, Lina and Tessa are waiting for me at the gate, and they are wearing their t-shirts with their hoodies tied around their waists. We hug in the elaborate way that we do, the three of us crashing together and then springing back before we really touch.

'Um, hoodie around waist,' says Lina, pulling at my jumper.

I shake my head. 'I want everyone to sign it first.'

It's always been a tradition to have your jumper

signed on the last day of school.

That's why the jumpers remain a pale grey colour so that sharpies of all colours can be seen scrawled across the back.

'We can sign it now and then you can take it off,' says Lina.

'I want *everyone* to sign it!' I tell her.

'No, you don't.'

'I do.'

Lina frowns at me and for a second I wish I wasn't heading to the same school as her next year. Then she shrugs like I'm a lost cause, slips her arm through Tessa's and heads for the Year 6 building. I follow along behind them. This is Lina's way of telling you that she's unimpressed by something.

Walking through the schoolyard I start silently farewelling things like the admin building and the gym, the monkey bars we used to play on until it was no longer cool, and the Sick Bay where my brother spends half his life.

We only make it as far as the sea of grey hoodies on the senior school oval, before we're stopped by some of the girls in our class. Maxine holds out a black sharpie.

'Who wants to go first?' She says, turning around so we can see all the signatures she's already collected. There are smiley faces and love-hearts

and lots of names scrawled in illegible writing.

‘I will,’ says Lina, plucking the pen from her hand and manoeuvring Max into place. I watch as Lina writes in large looping letters *Lina woz ere*. I’m pleased because for a second I imagined her writing something cruel.

‘I’ll do yours,’ says Maxine to Lina.

‘No thanks.’

I see Maxine swallow hard and one of her friends slide her arm through and pull her gently away.

‘You can sign mine, Max,’ I say, pulling my green sharpie from my pocket. I turn so that Max can scribble something on my shoulder and then return the favour. Of course, then I get all tangled up having to sign the other girls’ jumpers too, until Lina coughs loudly and says she’s going.

I traipse after her, heading for the classroom.

‘You don’t even like Maxine,’ Lina says loudly enough for her to hear.

‘I do.’

‘Liar. Just because you’re finishing primary school doesn’t mean you need to get all sentimental,’ she says.

Hoping nobody can hear Lina, I shrug because I don’t know what to say. Luckily the classroom is so busy and loud with chatting and laughing that

nobody seems to even notice us.

‘Six hours until we’re officially done with this place,’ says Lina, opening her locker and tossing the last few things into her schoolbag. We were supposed to empty our lockers by the end of last week, but Lina never plays by the rules.

‘Hoodie off now, E,’ says Lina.

‘I’m cold.’

Lina rolls her eyes at me, and then stops mid roll as she obviously guesses why I don’t want to talk my jumper off. ‘Wait, you didn’t wear your t-shirt, did you?’

I could pretend not to know what she’s talking about, but it’s going to hit 35 degrees later today, so I’ll have to lose the hoodie at some point. ‘It was dirty. Sorry.’

‘You should have washed it. We agreed.’ I smile lightly, trying to make Lina remember how much she likes me. But there’s no change to her expression. It’s just cold. She slams her locker shut and spins away from me like I’ve hurt her.

I notice that Meg is staring at me from the other side of the class. She doesn’t have a hoodie on. She’s wearing the Gumby t-shirt she always wears. She smiles and it’s such a strange thing that I immediately smile back. We were friends way back when, before Lina chose me, but we haven’t

had anything much to do with each other for a very long time.

Our teacher rings the little bell to let us know that we should be taking a seat in the large communal space, but nobody is listening, so she keeps ringing it until finally people start shuffling into the room.

I look around for Lina and Tess but can't see them anywhere, so I just take a seat at one of the booths with a couple of others.

'Listen up everyone,' says Kate, one of the leading teachers. She has a very bright pink dress on and her hair which is usually messy, is neatly brushed. 'I'm going to hold off on soppy speeches until the assembly this afternoon, but I did just want to say that as today is your last day here, it should be filled with things like emptying bins and cleaning up the yard.'

A collective groan drowns out her words. But she grins. 'Just kidding. It's morning tea over in the gym. Try to remember your manners and share the scones. Just one each.'

Sensing that we can shortly leave, people start moving towards the door. Kate holds her hand up. 'Walk slowly... slowly... to the gym!'

Of course, as soon as she says it, we start running like a herd of thirsty elephants for the waterhole. I

don't even like scones but the last day morning tea for Grade 6 is legendary, and one of the teachers always makes these amazing decorated cupcakes but never brings enough for more than twenty kids, so there's usually a playful fight over that plate.

The gym is on the other side of the oval and we must look hilarious as we sprint for the doors. I'm somewhere in the middle of the pack as I burst into the gym. In the foyer are two long trestle tables groaning with cakes and biscuits and scones. I scan for the cupcake. There are a couple left on the stand. I push past some of the boys who are working their way through an entire platter of honey joys and grab the second-last perfectly iced cupcake. It's covered in a beehive of yellow icing with tiny little sugary bees jutting out. It almost looks too beautiful to eat.

I move away from the shove around the food, back into the echoey gym. Little groups of kids stand around chatting and I look for Lina and Tess again. I'm about to lick the top of the hive, when Lina grabs my arm. She holds out a sad looking piece of chocolate slice on a napkin.

'What even is this?' She says.

'I think it's hedgehog.'

'Gross,' she says, and I wonder why she took it.

Tess bounds up with half a scone covered in jam. She has crumbs all around her face.

‘Good?’ I ask her. She nods and then notices that I’m holding the beehive cupcake.

‘You got one?’ She says. ‘They’re famous!’

I smile, sort of pleased with myself.

‘Trade, Elle?’ Lina asks.

I laugh. ‘No way. I risked injury for this!’

‘I was waiting for you in the classroom. That’s why we took so long.’

I shrug, doubting the truth of that. Lina rarely waits for anyone. We usually have to find her. ‘Sorry.’

‘Come on, E. It’s our last day. Share your cake,’ she says again.

The thing is, usually I would. On any other day, I would just hand it over. But this day is different. Mum even packed my favourite lunch, took a photo of me for her phone, and gave me money for ice-cream after assembly. Then she kissed my cheeks and told me she wanted my day to be perfect.

I shake my head. And Lina rolls her eyes like she does. She’s so good at it. I remember filming myself once on my phone to see if I could be an expert too, but my attempts look goofy in comparison.

‘I bet Tess would give up her scone,’ says Lina.

Chewing, Tess stops. She holds out what's left on her hand. There are crumbs held together with a bit of strawberry jam.

'No thanks,' snaps Lina.

Tess tips the last of it into her mouth. Lina turns her attention back to me. She reaches for my cake. I pull it away, and it must slip out from inside the patty-pan because it flies through the air and plummets, landing icing down on the dirty gym floor.

Maybe it's the emotion of the morning but I feel this flash of rage shoot through me. Tess has her mouth open and looks sort of shocked that the cake is on the ground.

'Oops,' says Lina. 'You'd better pick it up!' I glare at Lina as fiercely as I have ever dared. This is just like that time when I tripped over the hurdles, and instead of helping me up, Lina stood over me laughing.

'Here, use this,' says Tess handing me her napkin. 'Thanks.' I bend down and scoop the mess of the cake up. There's a patch of yellow icing on the floor and before I can deal with it, Lina steps onto it, grinding her Converse back and forth so that when she moves, it's just a sugary smear.

Standing up, I notice that she's now eating the hedgehog. "This is actually quite good. If you

hurry, there might still be some left, Elle,' she tells me.

I push past Lina and head for the foyer. There is no bin anywhere, and the two tables of cakes are empty of anything that looks edible. There are just scraps of watermelon husks and dirty napkins, and half-eaten biscuits and crumbs. The sight of all the demolished plates of food makes me almost teary.

Or perhaps it's because everyone else seems so happy to be with their friends and stuffing their faces on the last day of school that I feel like I'm missing out on something. I'm about to head back to Lina and Tess, when Meg walks up. I notice she's clutching the brown paper bag she always carries around. The one that helps her breath.

'Sorry you dropped your cake,' she says.

If I'm honest I haven't been very nice to Meg since I started hanging out with Lina. Something that Dash points out as often as he can.

'Shame,' she says. 'They were really delicious!'

And then she grins at me and we both start laughing as if it's the most natural thing in the world. 'You could of course eat the bottom of that one. That didn't touch the ground,' she says. 'And I think the twenty second rule applies anyway.'

I know she's talking about how long something

spends on the ground before you rescue it from germs. 'I think the gym floor is probably next level dirt, though. Don't you?'

She nods. 'Definitely. All that sweat.'

'Gross.'

I notice that there are a couple of signatures on her Gumby t-shirt. Words scrawled in pen. I hold out the cake. 'Can you hold this a second?'

She narrows her eyes like she suspects I'm setting her up. 'Please,' I say.

With a sigh she takes the cake, wrapping it in the napkin so she doesn't have to touch the messy icing. I pull out my green sharpie.

'I'd really like you to sign my jumper,' I tell her. 'Is that okay?'

She nods. 'But you'll have to take this back,' she says, passing the cake back.

'Make it out to Eleanora,' I tell her, hoping she doesn't laugh at the idea of using my full name. The name I called myself when Meg and I were friends, before Lina decided to chop my name in half to make it cooler.

Meg takes the lid from the sharpie, and smiles at me, and it's the nicest thing I've seen all day. 'Hold this for me, will you?'

She hands me her brown paper bag.

'You can have some if you like,' she says.

I shake the bag and it rattles. Intrigued I open it and see hundreds of little coloured jellybeans.

‘The red ones are the best,’ says Meg, moving around behind me so that she can write on my back.

Maybe Mum’s right. Maybe today can be an almost perfect end to primary school after all. Maybe it’s just up to me.

Riley

Sometimes it's hard to know if the strange feeling in my stomach is caused by nerves or diabetes, but this morning it's definitely nerves. The only way my parents would agree to me going on the Year 7 school camp, was if I agreed to a two-day diabetes camp first. So here I am. Backpack shoved full of things I probably won't need, waiting in the car for Mum to make her thermos-cup of coffee and drive me to the wilderness huts about an hour out from Melbourne.

I could have taken the bus with the other kids, but I begged Mum to drop me off. I played the whole homesick card, telling her that I would really miss her and Dad, and amazingly she agreed. I'm sure she doubted my apparent homesickness, but I

actually haven't ever stayed away from my family for two nights before, so this is sort of a big deal. To say I don't want to go is an understatement. I cried, I ranted, I argued, but my parents banded together and wore me down. Mum said to look at it as a trial for the five-night camp that I really want to go on.

'Feet off the dash,' says Mum as she climbs into the car.

'Sorry,' I mutter, dropping my legs down.

Mum places her favourite ceramic keep-cup into the holder and turns on the classical music she always inflicts on us when she drives. Actually, even when Dad's driving, we have to listen to it.

'Have you got your test kit?' Mum says.

'Yep.'

'Undies?'

'Four pairs,' I tell her. 'And socks, a jumper, two pairs of jeans, my sleeping bag, a book and ... want me to tell you everything I packed?'

Mum looks across and smiles. 'Sorry, honey.'

I shrug like I'm fine with her stress on top of all mine. 'All good.'

'It will be fun, you know. The cabins look gorgeous.'

'Really? Is that a money back guarantee?'

Mum doesn't answer. At the lights, she sips

her coffee, and concentrates on the drive, leaving me to think about what the weekend will be. I'm imagining that I will be the only nearly thirteen-year-old, and that I'll either be stuck in a cabin with five-year-olds or sixteen-year-olds and I don't know which would be worse.

The camp brochure is filled with glossy photos of kids smiling with their arms around each other, like one big happy diabetic family. I know Mum expects me to make friends this weekend, and the thought of awkward conversations with strangers is not helping the nerves in my stomach.

I'm also not allowed to bring my phone, because they are trying to encourage everyone to make new friends. I was going to smuggle it in my bag like my ex-friend Lina used to but figured that I'd probably get found out.

'Have you checked out all the activities?' Mum asks.

'Not really.'

She starts to rattle them off in alphabetical order, meaning she has not only read the brochure but memorised my every-scheduled minute. When she reaches the part about the talent quest, I groan.

'That sounds fun,' she says.

'You can take my place.'

‘Don’t be sarcastic, Riley. It demeans you.’

I decide to stare out the window because this could be one of those car rides if we keep going down this path. She must feel it too, because at the next set of lights, she pats my knee. Her way of silently keeping the peace.

Mum turns off the main road towards the homestead. It’s a large property with a tree-lined driveway. As she parks, I try to take it all in. There are trampolines and a mini-basketball court and a line of little wooden huts that run away from the big property. And there are kids everywhere. The nerves in my stomach start to boil over at the sight of them all. Maybe I’ll be the only newbie without a friend.

‘Let’s go home,’ I say to Mum.

She gives me her famous psych-doctor look and unclips her seatbelt. ‘I have a better idea. Let’s go and find out who’s in charge.’

I panic as I realise that she plans on coming in with me. There are no other adults anywhere, and as much as I’d like her to lead the way, I know that it can’t happen. I should have just taken the bus. ‘No. I want to go on my own.’

‘Riley, I’ve driven you all this way ...’

I lean across to kiss her on the cheek. ‘I know.

And thanks, but I just want to do this bit myself.'

I wait for the argument, but she's obviously trying hard to give me some freedoms. She smiles tightly. 'Okay. I'll see you on Sunday. Have a good time.'

Mum's idea of a good time and mine are not usually the same. For her it's eating broccoli and reading a worthy book. I nod and hurry out of the car before she can change her mind about coming in. Knowing Mum, she won't drive away until she sees that I'm heading in the right direction, so I make it obvious that I'm scanning the signs for one that says *office*.

A girl walks past me, swinging a huge bag onto her shoulder that bashes into me.

'Watch it!' she says, spinning round, like it was my fault she almost knocked me over.

'But you hit me,' I say.

'Minor details.'

She's wearing denim shorts and an old floppy t-shirt and Converse that are the same as mine but without coloured laces. It's like we've turned up today wearing the same uniform.

Not wanting to be stuck with her, I keep walking and she trudges behind me. I can hear her shoes scuffing the dirt on the path. All the nerves are turning to dread as I remember that I'm going to

have to spend the rest of the weekend with a whole bunch of strangers.

As I've always tried to explain to Mum, having diabetes in common doesn't mean we'll all be friends.

'Do you know where the Koala Cabin is?' The girl says behind me.

'I just got here,' I say, heading up the ramp to the door at the front of the office. I'm not going to be helpful after she was so rude.

Before I can open the door, the girl launches ahead and grabs it and we both file into the office, pushing into each other like it's a race. A smiley woman with short hair and lipstick that reminds me of the old school administrator looks up from her lunch and waves us in.

'Let me guess ... Riley Jackson and Maddie Thomas?'

I pull a face. How does she know who we are? The woman laughs. 'Sorry. You're the only two left who haven't been marked off the roll!'

'Oh,' I say, relieved it's not because we've been lumped together.

'And it's perfect you two are here because you're both in Koala Cabin. We put you together because you're about the same age.'

This weekend is getting worse by the second.

‘Which one are you, Riley or Maddie?’ The woman asks me.

‘She’s Riley,’ says the other girl.

‘Thanks, I can speak actually.’

The girl laughs like I made a joke. Which I didn’t.

‘So obviously I’m Maddie.’

‘Great. Well girls, Koala Cabin is the last on the right. I’d suggest going and settling in because we’ll be meeting in the hall for dinner at 5.30.’

I bet even dinner will be a healthy disappointment, because Mum told me the food looked very impressive, which in her language means vegetables, vegetables, and more vegetables. The woman has returned to her sandwich, leaving us no choice but to head out and look for our cabin. This time I make sure I’m out the door first.

I’m not usually shy, but as I walk along beside Maddie, I can’t think of any questions to ask. Everything that appears in my head sounds like something Mum would say. It doesn’t help that we haven’t exactly started well.

‘Do you know anyone else?’ Maddie asks as we head up the ramp.

‘No. You?’

She shakes her head. And then we both go quiet again as we head down the long corridor to

the end cabin. Noise erupts in bursts as we pass other rooms, reminding me that everyone else has someone except me.

Now I'm wishing I read the timetable as closely as Mum did, because I have no idea what's expected of us. I stop as we reach the last cabin with a large brightly painted blue koala on the door.

'I guess this is it,' says Maddie.

'Why is it grinning at us?'

'Is it a grin? Looks like a sneer,' Maddie says.

'And those claws are long enough to do some damage,' I say lightly.

She laughs and the sound is friendlier than I expect. 'Do we brave it?'

'I guess. I don't want to sleep outside!'

She pushes open the door. Inside there are two beds on either side of the room.

'I thought this was a dorm,' I say wondering where all the bunk beds are.

'Looks like it's just us.'

I notice the freckles dotted across her nose like my best friend Meg. 'Can I take the bed near the door?' she says, tossing her backpack down like I've already agreed.

'Looks like you already have.' I tell her. The room is really simple, like what you'd expect of a cabin in the woods. There's a window with a coloured

curtain tied up, and an old red rug covering the floorboards. I can't imagine sleeping here tonight.

Unzipping my pack, I look for my sheet, which I realise I forgot to pack. I also forgot my pillow which Mum will realise when she goes into our room to tell my sister to get off her phone later tonight.

I unroll my blue sleeping bag and fold up a jumper for a makeshift pillow. Then look across to see Maddie making her bed with a pale pink sheet and doona. I can't check the time because I don't have my phone with me, so I sit down and count up the hours that I have left on camp.

'Are you done making your bed?' Maddie asks. 'Mum made me bring the whole catastrophe.'

I laugh at her expression as she waves her arms to indicate her very pastel looking bed. She walks across the room and sits down near me. Surprised, I inch a little back, because I don't want to bump knees. For some reason it reminds me of Sick Bay, a room I spent too much time in last year, where you couldn't help but crash into other people because it was so cramped.

'Sorry I was a bit grumpy before when I hit you with my bag. I'm really nervous,' she says and then bites her lip like she's making sure I understand. 'I only got diagnosed last year so this is a new thing

for me. What about you?’

I hadn’t thought about kids who were sort of new to diabetes. ‘I was diagnosed pretty young.’

She nods. ‘Can I ask you stuff?’

I shrug. ‘I guess.’

‘I don’t mean now, how about we find the trampoline first?’

‘Sure.’

I jump up before she can rummage through her bag and grab some massive book of questions that I have to answer, and head for the door. As I leave, Maddie comes with me. She’s like my new shadow.

There are kids on the basketball court and some just sitting on the ground chatting, but the trampoline is empty. Apparently, it’s only one person at a time, which sounds super safe and super boring. This place is all about safety, because otherwise parents like mine wouldn’t book it.

‘Of course, it’s shoes off,’ says Maddie bending down to untie her Converse.

I start unlacing mine too, but she’s faster. She unzips the front of the trampoline and squeezes in. I watch as she bounces in the middle, and lands on her knees and then back up again.

Her bumbag holding her test kit is too loose and it flops around all over the place.

‘Tighten your strap on your bumbag,’ I tell her. She stops and fiddles with the buckle. ‘It won’t budge.’

‘Here, turn around,’ I tell her.

I lean in through the zip and fiddle with the strap at the back until it slides along a little.

‘Better?’

‘Yeah, thanks,’ says Maddie, smiling as she starts to bounce again. ‘Do you play sport?’ she says.

‘Netball.’

‘Me too! Except I hate having to explain why I have a diabetes band on every week to the umpires!’

I laugh. ‘No matter how many times ...’

‘They never remember!’

‘Mum always storms onto the court,’ I tell her, explaining how embarrassed I used to get. Maddie tells me her Dad does the same thing.

‘My turn,’ I tell her unzipping the front. She bounds out and I squeeze in. As I bounce, we start talking about all the things that bug us, like parents or kids at school.

‘I’m not sure how I feel about starting high school,’ she says.

I bounce out and let her have a turn, while I chat about my new friend Meg and how lucky I am that we’ll be in the same class this year. Maddie

tells me about the time she fainted at school before she was diagnosed.

‘Do you think I should try a somersault?’

‘Yeah, go on!’

She bounces high into the air and swings her arms back and then stops. ‘I’m too scared!’ she says laughing.

‘Don’t go so high. Just a little bounce,’ I tell her, remembering the trampoline at my old house in Sydney.

‘You go,’ she says, clambering out.

I used to spend hours somersaulting, but now as I line up ready to flip in the air, my nerves are back. Determined, I edge backwards so that I don’t hit the sides with my feet. And then without overthinking it, I bounce three times and flip in the air, landing a little wobbly on my feet.

Maddie cheers and I take a silly bow. ‘I didn’t want to come on this camp,’ says Maddie looking at me through the net with a small smile. ‘I thought everyone would know each other and I’d be stuck with all the little kids.’

‘Yeah. I’ve avoided these things for years.’

‘I’m glad you’re here, Riley. It’s nice to meet someone who understands.’

I start bouncing again. I’m stalling so that I don’t have to answer. The thing is, she’s right. It

is nice.

Then I look towards the basketball courts and see that we're alone.

'Where's everyone gone?' I ask her, climbing out of the trampoline.

She looks around, noticing that we are the only two people outside. 'Maybe it's later than we think.'

I'm amazed at how quickly the afternoon has gone. Maddie pulls a phone of her pocket. 'It's almost 5.30. We should probably head to the dining room.'

'You have a phone?'

She grins at me. 'Yep. Don't tell anyone. We can watch something in the cabin later. I have snacks too!'

I grin back. 'Cool. I bet dinner is horrible so that might be good.'

'Didn't you read the menu? That was the first thing I did. Checked the food out. It's burgers and ice-cream tonight. Not together obviously!'

'I love burgers.'

'Me too,' she says. 'But not as much as ice-cream.'

And this time as we head up the hill, it doesn't feel like she's my annoying shadow. It just feels like we're two kids on camp wearing matching Converse who happen to understand the world of diabetes better than most.

I really hate to admit it, and I'll never tell my parents, but maybe, just maybe, this time Mum was right. Not about everything of course. The cabins are so not gorgeous.

Meg

I should be leaving now, but I'm still packing my bag. It's not that I have a long list of things to take with me, it's just that I don't know what to take. I've never done this before. Stayed overnight at a friend's place. This is my first official sleepover, and I've shoved the few things I'm taking in and out of my backpack so many times.

The thing is, I'm twelve and because of various reasons (namely the fact I haven't really had a close friend since Grade 3) sleepovers haven't been a part of my life. When Riley invited me last week to stay, I said yes without blinking because she's the best friend I've ever had. And I trust her, and I know it will be fun. But I'm still feeling all overwhelmed and nervous and unsure of myself.

My paper bag is lying flat and unused on the dresser and I'm yet to decide whether to fold it up, crease it a few times and tuck it in just in case. I haven't needed the bag for some time now. Not since I started seeing a psychologist called Ann. Sadly no e. She has given me other tools in place of my paper bags. Now if I feel panicky or need to escape a situation I don't need an old mushroom bag to do it.

Do I take my shabby copy of Anne of Green Gables that travels with me almost everywhere and has been my best friend for so long? Do I need deodorant? Toothpaste? Or do I just grab a jumper, a toothbrush and pyjamas like Riley told me to?

'Meg? Aren't you supposed to be leaving?' Mum says, poking her head around the door.

Her hair is up and she's wearing some of her own clothes. She looks her size again. Not like she's floating around in the ghost shell of Dad, wearing his oversized t-shirts.

'Maybe I won't go ...' I say quietly. 'I could stay here with you if you want.'

Mum steps one foot inside my room. It's a newish thing, her visiting my space. She still moves tentatively like this is unsure territory because she has spent the past eighteen months grieving in bed.

‘Have a night away from me, Meg. Have a night being twelve,’ she says, her hand hovering in the space just near my head. If I were to stand up, I’d bump against it.

‘I’m not sure I know how,’ I tell her. Mum hovers near my bed and I pull her hand so she knows she can sit. Our legs bump as she does. ‘Yes, you do.’

‘It shouldn’t be such a big deal,’ I tell her.

‘It’s okay if it is.’ She pulls me closer. ‘But it’s Riley’s house. Not some stranger ...’ I gulp in a huge fierce breath and slowly stand, shoving whatever I can into my backpack. It’s Riley. Just Riley. I’ll be fine.

Mum laughs as I try and close my bag, the pillow straining to fit. She holds it down so that I can clip it shut and then hugs me as I breathe into my hand, checking I don’t need to brush again.

‘Bye, Mum.’

‘Bye, honey. Have fun.’

I’ve walked to Riley’s house enough times to know all the turns and the shortcuts and the houses where the dogs bark and the roses droop over the fence, stabbing you with their little thorns. Today I take the slowest way, the one down the lane and across the main road, dithering when I reach the

place with the front garden full of roses. I lean over the fence and sniff one coloured rose after another, wishing I knew the names of each variety like Dad used to. There are some tiny bugs on one, so I leave that alone, but the rest all needed to be inhaled.

I know I'm stalling. But at least it's happening outside where I can pretend that I was just momentarily distracted by sniffing the flowers. Riley's Mum offered to pick me up today, but I told her that I like walking. It's true. I do. It means I can be in charge of my own time.

Reaching Riley's house, I'm about to knock when she yanks open the door and comes at me for a hug.

'Finally! It's been ages ...' she says, pulling me inside.

'About sixty-three hours actually. I wouldn't really define that as ages,' I tell her.

She raises an eyebrow. 'Stop being so Meg-like.'

I smile. 'But you love how precise I am.'

'I will love it. If we have maths class together. I hate maths,' she says.

In exactly 11 and a half days we start high school. We haven't been told our home rooms yet but we both requested to be together.

'By the way, why are you late?' Riley tells me. 'Not Meg-like at all.'

I vowed never to lie to Riley, so I just mumble a sort of sorry. She shrugs and hurries me along.

Her house is the sort of house you see on television. It could actually be a film set with its perfect staircase and white walls. Except for Riley's bedroom which she shares with her older sister Jenna and is a constant warzone of borrowed clothes and unmade beds. I've been jealous of it ever since I first visited Riley's house. It's everything my room isn't. Messy and full of life.

'Jenna's out for the night,' says Riley, sounding happy. I actually sort of like Jenna. She's spiky in all the right ways and because she's trying to prove to the world that she wants to help those less fortunate, she's always really nice to me.

'Meg, lovely to see you,' Riley's mum calls out from the kitchen before we can squeeze past. Riley pulls a face that her mum can't see and I bite my lip so I don't join her.

'Hi, Tina,' I call out.

'We have to leave in a minute,' says Riley's Mum. 'Not too long upstairs.'

'Bye, Mum,' shouts Riley, pulling me up the stairs so fast that my feet trip.

Riley's giggling by the time we reach the top and slam her bedroom door. 'I'm giving Mum

about ten seconds before she invents an excuse to come up here!

‘Leave? Where are we going?’ I’m still clutching my backpack as she bounces on the edge of Jenna’s bed.

‘I have a surprise!’

‘What?’ I snap without meaning to.

‘I can’t tell you. If I tell you then it’s not a surprise!’

‘Not sure I like surprises,’ I say.

‘You’ll like this one. It’s fun.’

‘That’s me out then.’

Riley rolls her eyes at me. ‘What’s wrong, Meg?’

‘Nothing.’ I force a smile.

‘Rubbish. You look like I’m going to eat you,’ she says.

This is Riley. Just Riley. I focus on her smiling face and her messy ponytail and her t-shirt that is the same as the one I have at home because she gave me a matching one for Christmas.

‘It just feels weird that’s all,’ I say. ‘First ever sleepover!’

‘Yeah ... what about if you eat all my jellybeans ... will that help?’

I think about that for less than a second. ‘Definitely.’

Dumping my backpack amongst the piles,

I sit down on her bed. The beds are lined up on opposite sides of the room and a month ago Jenna put Riley's netball tape right down the middle to mark different zones. Riley ignores it, particularly when Jenna's not here.

I take a handful of jellybeans, avoiding the black ones. They taste like burnt liquorice.

'So, what's the surprise?'

'It involves us leaving the house ...'

'Why?'

'That's the surprise!'

There is no point arguing with Riley because once she's made up her mind she won't budge. She is famous for her lack of budging. The thing is, because Riley is the first real friend I've had in a long time, and Mum has been missing in sad land since Dad died, I haven't had too many surprises. I sort of equate surprises as the hospital phoning when Dad had his heart attack, or one of the girls at school pulling my chair out when I went to sit down. I've never really experienced a surprise that's been enjoyable.

I watch Riley disappear under her bed and toss shoes out. She has one purple and one green Converse. She looks at me with a grin as she pulls them on and starts lacing.

'Mum will hate me wearing different colours!'

I know that means that she likes the idea because Riley's current favourite thing is winding her mum up. Where I've spent the last year and a half trying to make my mum talk to me, Riley spends most of her time trying to avoid hers.

'I'm ready!' She jumps up and holds out her hand for me.

'I'm not.'

I let her yank me to my feet, wishing I could be swept up by her enthusiasm. 'Does the surprise involve other people?' I ask.

Knowing how I feel about being forced to talk to people I don't know, Riley laughs. 'Trust me, you'll love it.'

Mum sold our car after Dad died, and so I haven't exactly been on many car rides in the last few years. Today I have the backseat all to myself, and after a brief battle over music choices, Tina is playing something classical that made Riley roll her eyes at me down the gap between the seats.

I'm still trying to work out where we are going when Tina pulls the car into a carpark. Riley spins around in her seat.

'We're here!'

'Where?' I look outside but all I can see is a big building that looks a little like a shopping centre.

‘You need to do a test before you eat anything,’
Tina says to Riley.

‘I know.’

‘Promise me,’ she says.

‘Mum! We already had this conversation,’ says
Riley. ‘Money?’

She holds out her hand. My stomach churns at
the thought I was supposed to have cash with me.
‘Um ...’ I start to say.

Riley shakes her head. ‘I’m paying, well Mum is.
You can’t pay for your own surprise!’ Tina hands
Riley some money and checks that Riley has her
diabetes testing kit. Riley sounds like she’s about
to bite her mum’s head off, and I realise that this
is a big deal for both of them. Usually Riley isn’t
allowed to have the sort of freedom I have, because
her mum has always been pretty protective.

‘I’ll meet you both here at five.’

‘Yep,’ says Riley hurling herself out of the car. I
follow after her.

Riley grabs my hand and squeezes it so tight I
think my circulation is getting cut-off.

‘Ow!’

‘Sorry. I’m just excited!’ She starts waving at
her mum as she drives away and then turns to me
with a huge grin on her face. ‘Come on.’

We head to the crossing and she jabs at the

button. I wish I felt as excited as her. It's not that I'm not grateful to have a friend who invents surprises for me, it's just that it's all so new.

The green man flashes and we dash across the road. Riley holds open the door for me and I realise we're going into a cinema. Before I can ask Riley anything, she heads over to the counter. I don't follow her because I'm all caught up in looking around the foyer at the posters and the candy bar. I haven't been to the movies for years. The last thing I saw was a Disney princess movie with Dad for my ninth birthday.

Riley comes back with two choc tops. 'Vanilla or choc-mint? You choose,' she says, holding them both up.

'Mm, vanilla.'

She hands me one. 'Surprise!'

'Thanks, so we're eating ice-cream?'

'Yep.'

'And watching a movie?' I ask.

'Yes ... but not just any movie ...'

She heads away from the foyer and starts walking towards the open doors of the cinema. 'I hope they're good seats.'

I follow her inside. The smell is buttery like popcorn and stale like old leather seats. The cinema is grand and half-full of chattering, laughing kids.

I traipse behind Riley as we wiggle our way past knees to sit down in the middle of a row.

‘Perfect!’ she says.

I start unwrapping my choc top, but she tells me I have to wait. If I eat it now then I’ll have nothing for the film.

‘Can you tell me now what we’re watching?’

‘You do like horror films, don’t you?’ Riley says, leaning over.

I shake my head so fast my brain wobbles around. She starts laughing and unzips her testing kit. ‘What about aliens?’

‘No!’

I watch as she pricks the end of her finger so that a drop of blood beads out, and she can test her blood sugar levels. ‘Action adventure? Anime? Documentaries about dogs?’

I shake my head. ‘No, no and no.’ The lights start to dim, and people shuffle and shush each other as they settle in.

Riley tells me I have to wait until the ads finish before I can unwrap my ice-cream, but I can’t hold it anymore without tasting it. I tug the wrapper off and tuck it in my pocket which makes her laugh. She tells me people are allowed to litter in the cinema.

I crack the chocolate with my teeth and then

wish I hadn't because they are plunged into the cold of the ice-cream.

The curtain widens and Riley elbows me hard in the ribs. 'Your mum said you'd never seen it and they only screen it once a year,' she says.

I'm stuck between the fact that Riley checked something with Mum and wondering what the surprise is. I'm nibbling the edge of the chocolate so that it doesn't drop onto my only clean t-shirt when the credits slowly present themselves on the screen.

My mouth grins before my brain works out what it's doing. 'Mum's right. I haven't seen it!'

'Good,' she says into the dark. 'It's the original and it's the best.'

As Anne with an e bursts onto the screen with her freckles and her red plaits, I lean across and whisper one of my favourite Anne Shirley quotes into my bosom friend's ear. *'After all, I fancy it's the unexpected things that give spice to life ...'*

'If that means thanks then it's my pleasure. Now shush and enjoy the movie,' whispers Riley.

And, with a giant smile on my face, I wriggle down in my seat and think how lovely surprises are after all.

Also by Nova Weetman

Middle Reader

The Secrets We Share

The Secrets We Keep

A Hot Cold Summer

Play the Game

Young Adult

Everything Is Changed

Frankie and Joely

The Haunting of Lily Frost