

Dancing on Knives

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For The Twin, because we grew up reading the same books, at different times, on opposite sides of the city, with thanks for letting me use your telling of the Vasilissa story.

And thanks to everyone who read the manuscript and gave me feedback, with special thanks to Russ, for sharing his Cinderella expertise, and to Clare, Helen and Robin, for teaching me how to run a bookshop.

THE CLOUD BOOK

There is a room.
There is a table.
There is a chair.

On the table, four books are piled together. The first book has a picture on the cover—grey clouds, dark v-shaped birds and a man in a long overcoat, arms spread like the birds' wings. He could be flying or he could be falling.

The second book is an ordinary school exercise book.

The third book has a cover-picture too — a girl in ragged brown clothes, coming into an old-fashioned cottage and handing a pumpkin to a grey-haired woman, who has a professional-looking plan of a coach on the sewing table in front of her. (In other words, it's a picture of Cinderella, a few minutes before her fairy god-mother turns the pumpkin into a coach and changes her rags into a beautiful dress and sends off her to the prince's ball, but the artist makes you work that out for yourself.)

The fourth book is a loose-leaf folder, so full that it's bulging.

And all the pages in all the books are covered with lines of clear, round, definite printing in blue biro. Anyone with x-ray eyes could see that.

On the chair, a girl sits, frowning at the books. Blonde hair hangs down straight to her shoulders, shifting like a curtain in the wind when she moves. Her eyes are blue in some kinds of light, grey in other kinds of light.

There are smudges of blue-grey shadow under her eyes and faint shadow-freckles across the bridge of her nose.

She is a hundred and seventy centimetres tall and weighs fifty-eight kilos. Good teeth, good posture, good skin. She is wearing a short brown t-shirt and a low-slung orange skirt and six red leather bangles.

Her name is Rochelle Parfitt.

Rochelle picks the books up, one by one. She flicks through them, reading sentences here and there. *'Skipping school was totally sensible'* and *'Jake and Bel are, like, in this competition for Hal'* and *'I'm not doing too well with this project of matching people and stories'* and *'I guess listening to fairytales was no big deal, compared to the stuff I used to do in Sydney, but face it, those times are over.'*

'But,' she says to the room, 'but that's not exactly how it was. I thought I'd written it all down, so I could remember it.'

But obviously she hadn't.

So Rochelle stacks the books into a pile again and puts her hand on top of the first book. Her palm throbs, as if the book is sucking at it. When she closes her eyes, her hand feels swollen, as if the book is pumping the past into her veins. Rochelle remembers.

Thursday

She woke in a strange room and had to stare at the bare walls for twenty seconds, before she recognised them.

Rochelle thought: oh, okay, the new Melbourne flat, not the old Sydney flat. She rubbed her eyes, went looking for the bathroom and turned the taps on in a strange shower. Out in the strange kitchen, her mother was standing by the bench, drinking strong black coffee. Her shirt was creased and her fair hair was wisping in all directions, which made her look strange too. She was usually as perfect as a model on a catwalk.

'I wish I could drive you to school,' she said, before Rochelle had a chance to say anything. 'Especially since you're two days late for your first day, if you know what I mean.'

Rochelle shrugged. 'Nah, that's cool, she said.

She tried to dodge round her mum, to see if there was any hot water left in the electric jug, but her mum didn't seem to notice. She leaned back against the bench, blocking Rochelle's way.

‘I still can’t believe I forgot what time our plane was leaving Sydney,’ she said, sounding surprised all over again. ‘I’ve never done anything like that before. The look on your face, when you came in from saying goodbye to Tez and Kerrill and realised I hadn’t even started packing the last of our things! That’ll stay with me forever - that and the sight of the plane taking off without us.’

She stopped for one of her music-box laughs, the ones that were supposed to make people think she was charmingly silly. Rochelle knew her mother could organise cocktail parties for fifty guests, when she was in the mood, so she didn’t laugh along.

Her mother frowned slightly, wrinkling her smooth forehead. ‘It was really too late for you to go off to Helvellyn Girls’ Grammar, when we finally got here yesterday,’ she said, as if Rochelle had been arguing about it. ‘Besides, we had to start unpacking all those boxes the removal men kept carrying in.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ said Rochelle.

A trickle of steam wafted out of the electric jug. She edged forward, getting ready to make a grab for the jug, but her mum cut her off, resting a hand on her arm and looking straight into her eyes.

‘You’ve been so supportive,’ she said. ‘I know I owe you a lift to school, at the very least. But my first-thing-in-the-morning class is in the opposite direction ... and I’m a bit nervous about the new car ... and there’s a tram right outside the flat that’ll take you straight to school ... and you’ve got the piece of paper, with the instructions that woman gave me when I phoned the school office to explain why you’d missed your first two days. So you’ll be fine, won’t you?’

Actually, her mum hadn’t needed to tell her any of that. Rochelle had heard it half a dozen times already and she’d been there for most of it, anyway. She gave up on the idea of breakfast, hugged her mum to prove she’d be fine and went downstairs to the tram stop.

She didn’t mind going to school. Basically, she was glad to get out of the flat. She was good at talking to people, so she felt pretty sure she’d have a bunch of new friends by the end of the day, and plus teachers usually liked her. There was nothing to worry about.

The tram was packed with girls in the grey-and-maroon Helvellyn Girls’ Grammar uniform. Rochelle hung onto a metal pole and swayed back and forth, feeling hungry and sleepy. She got off the tram at the right stop, which wasn’t hard, because she just followed the grey-and-maroon uniforms. She went on following them down to a gate in an old grey wall.

The gate was old too, made of wrought-iron curlicues around the Helvellyn crest, an iron mountain with an iron scroll saying, ‘Aspire’. It was really narrow. The girls were going through it in single file, pushing and

shoving, swinging their bags at each other's legs. Rochelle didn't feel like pushing, not just then, so she stepped back, took out her wallet and hunted for the piece of paper that would tell her what to do.

Yeah, sure, it would've been nice to start school on Day One, same as everybody else, but she was only two days late. The school had given her mum the details about her form room and everything. It was all on the piece of paper. She just had to walk through the gate and do what the piece of paper said.

But she didn't. She stood and stared at the grey wall for a while. She stared at the grey-and-maroon uniforms filing through the gate. She stared at the Helvellyn Girls' Grammar crest. She stared at her piece of paper.

Then she turned and crossed to the opposite side of the road. A tram was pulling up, its doors unfolding. Rochelle climbed the steps and collapsed onto a seat as the tram jerked forward, heading away from the school and into the centre of the city. She sat and stared out of the window, watching hundreds of grey-and-maroon uniforms march down the road, wondering why she wasn't there with them.

Five stops later, she decided she'd made a mistake but she couldn't handle the idea of getting off the tram and onto another tram, going through the iron gate and walking into a class full of complete strangers, with some lame excuse why she was late. First impressions counted for a lot. Rochelle didn't want the grey-and-maroon girls to think she was a loser.

It wasn't a problem, though. She had money in her keycard account and six hours before her mother was expecting her home from school.

So she went shopping.

The city opened out in front of her, full of things to see and do and buy. She had breakfast at a sidewalk café, then hit the biggest department store and cruised their Junior Miss section. A daggy sort of name; Rochelle decided to give it a miss. But while she was giggling at her own joke, she bumped into a tall, pale girl with a black-lipstick mouth, like a vampire disguised as a shop assistant.

'Dead right,' the assistant said, when Rochelle tried out the 'give it a miss' joke on her. 'Most of the stuff here's for, like, business types or kids from the suburbs. There's a few okay places in the city but for really cool gear, you need to catch the tram over Brunswick Street - or, if you want something totally off the wall, you can go to Smith Street, which is two blocks further down.'

She drew a map of the best city shops on the back of Rochelle's hand. Rochelle followed the map along tiny arcades with black and white tiled floors and through big shopping complexes, sun-baking in fluorescent light. Dress shops and shoe shops, Goth shops and twenty-first century gift shops. She bought herself a gift - an astronaut pen and a notebook with clouds and birds

on the cover, wriggled into a dozen dresses and tried on a pair of soft black boots.

Except that somehow she couldn't get into buying clothes without Tez going, 'That's perfect, Rochelle!' and Kerrill going, 'You look like a complete dork' and her trying to decide which of them was right. Besides, four hours of walking round a new city had made her tireder than the longest school-camp hike, so she limped into the next café she came across.

Wrong move. It turned out to be an old-lady-type café with red-and-white checked tablecloths and bunches of fake primroses in plastic pots. Rochelle ordered a cup of tea but as she took the first sip, she realised the old-lady-type waitress was standing half a metre away, arms folded across her chest like a prison guard, to make sure Rochelle didn't steal the teaspoon or whatever.

Her eyes hazed and the café melted into a multi-coloured blur, crisscrossed with red and white cracks. Rochelle felt as though she might fall down one of the cracks if she didn't do something fast. She leaned sideways, to escape from the waitress's stare, and pretended to hunt for something in her school bag.

The cloud notebook seemed to jump into her hand. Rochelle focused on the cover and saw a man in the clouds. She hadn't noticed him before, but there he was, arms spread like the birds' wings, as if he was flying or falling. She scabbled round the bottom of the bag, found the astronaut pen and started to write.

Stop looking at me like that. Go away. Leave me alone.

Stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it.

Yes! It worked. The waitress was going to tell me to get lost, I know it. But the minute I started writing, the look on her face switched from 'bad kid, skipping school' to 'good kid, doing homework'.

So, I'll keep writing.

I'm supposed to be at school but I'm not, because I caught a tram into the city. Why did I do that? I wasn't feeling scared or freaked. Actually, I wasn't feeling anything. I just did it, like my feet had made the decision, not me.

It wasn't typical. I've never nicked off before. Never done anything worse than spending most of a maths class messaging Tez and Kerrill, the time they realised James Chappell had asked both of them out in the same week. We copped it when Ms Stanmore caught on, but it was worth it.

It was worth nicking off from school, too. I've had some time out and I'm actually looking forward to school tomorrow.

And guess what, the stupid cuckoo clock on the wall says it's three o'clock.

Oh, great. I can go home now.

Friday

Another day, another cafe. Nothing old-ladyish about this one, though. The walls were covered with black-and-white photos of syringes in puddles and the tables were full of posers with purple hair, checking to make sure everyone had noticed their tongue studs.

Rochelle thought: big deal. I'm from Sydney. I went to the Mardi Gras parade with Tez and Kerrill and Kerrill's gay uncle and his boyfriend, when I was thirteen years old. Like I'd be impressed by a *tongue stud*.

She leaned back and stretched her arms out, admiring the red leather bracelets she'd just bought in one of the Brunswick Street shops. A waiter with cheekbones like a male model skidded over and slammed a cup of coffee onto the table.

'Relax, sweetie,' he said, as he took off again. 'It's never as bad as you think.'

Rochelle blinked. The waiter sounded like he was sorry for her. Why? She blinked again and felt tears stick to her eyelashes, as if they'd been there all along but she hadn't noticed. That was freaky. She reached into her school bag and whisked out her pen, flipped the cloud book open and started writing as fast as her hand knew how.

So, okay, a guy just said something nice and I almost burst into tears. What's the matter with me?

It's not the school thing. Skipping school was totally sensible. Fact is, I've missed most of the first week already. If I rocked up on Friday I'd be stuck on the sidelines, outside the main action. If I rock up on Monday, it'll be the start of a new week and I'll just be, like, fashionably late. I can suss out the scene, identify the in-crowd, pick up on the kids who started hanging with the wrong people by mistake and want something better.

A smart move, really.

She hadn't thought it through quite that clearly, of course. Her feet had just walked her onto the city tram, instead of the school tram. On the way, she'd remembered what the Junior Miss assistant had told her, so she collected a map of Melbourne from an information booth in the city mall and caught the tram out to Brunswick Street.

She'd slotted straight into Brunswick Street as if she belonged there. The styles were right. The colours were right. Even the flower shops had weird stuff like giant sunflowers and spiky blue thistles, not just boring chrysanthemums and carnations. In her first hour there, Rochelle bought a green t-shirt, a skirt, black pants, a see-through shirt, the bracelets and a pair of chunky shoes. She changed into her new clothes in a cafe toilet and cruised some more shops, where she bought a goldfish key ring, two postcards and a plastic purse with hologram roses that opened and shut when she tipped it backwards and forwards.

Then she'd seen one of the Japanese t-shirts that Tez liked. That was where the trouble had started. Rochelle had been unhooking the tee from the rack when her eyes had blurred and the hairs on her neck had prickled and her shoulder blades had tingled, as if someone was watching her.

As if she was made of clear plastic and everybody in the shop could look through the gap between her tee and her skirt and see everything that was going on inside her.

Now she was feeling transparent again, because the waiter had seen through her cool act. Worse still, a tear seemed to be tricking down the side of her nose and she didn't have any tissues. Rochelle ducked her head and noticed a serviette dispenser beside her. She tugged out a wad of paper and blotted the tear, then went back to her book.

I'm supposed to be sitting her deciding whether to buy that tee for Tez. But maybe that's why I started to feel lousy. Something tells me I can't buy it – like, if Tez got a parcel from me right now, she'd think I was a total suck.

She frowned down at the blank space of the next page, pretending that, if she looked up, she'd see Tez and Kerrill smiling at her from the other side of the table. But it was getting hard to remember the good times. The truth was, they'd ended nine months ago, when the Big Drama had started. For a while there, she'd been the centre of attention, because Tez and Kerrill wanted to know all about her dad's slut and how her mum was taking it and everything: and then, between one day and the next, the Big Drama turned into old news.

After that, Rochelle could see Tez and Kerrill zoning out every time she tried to talk about Dad or Mum or the Slut, but she couldn't work out how to stop. She hadn't felt mad at them. Really, truly. She'd been bored with all the drama, too. It was just that she was stuck with it and they weren't.

And she knew Tez and Kerrill were basically on her side, not like that bitch Siobhan who dropped Rochelle off her party list, just because she wasn't living in a big house on the North Shore with a famous CEO-for-the-ArCon-corporation father any more. But being dropped by Siobhan meant Rochelle had to sit there with her mouth shut for a week, while Tez and Kerrill worked through the gossip from Siobhan's party.

Then it was exam time and she couldn't get into all the exam drama - 'I just know I failed English', and 'No way, Kerrill, you always come top' - because it didn't seem important, compared to the Big Drama.

Then Kerrill asked Tez and her to their beach house for a week but Rochelle couldn't go, because her mum needed her at the Sydney flat to help with sorting through all their stuff.

Then, a week before they left for Melbourne, Tez rang to ask whether Rochelle wanted to see a movie. She'd gone into her room to get changed and when she came back into the lounge, her mother was standing by the phone, big-eyed and breathless.

'I've just asked your father not to call us for the first two months, after we've moved,' she said. 'I think that's the best thing for everyone.'

She started to explain why it was the best thing and then, all of a sudden, the explanation turned into a long list of all the ways that Rochelle's father had let them down. It was the only time, in the entire nine months, that her mother had ever said anything against him. The only time, bar one, that her mother had ever cried. Impossible to walk out and leave her in the middle of that. Rochelle had to sit and listen for ages before she got a chance to nick out to the bathroom and ring Tez on her mobile and by then Tez had been waiting at the cinema complex for twenty minutes.

Yes! Got it! she wrote. When I phoned Tez that last time, she yelled at me and I lost it and she said I was a wuss and hung up. So that's why it feels like I'd be sucking to her if I bought the Japanese tee.

She peeled another serviette off the dispenser and mopped up another tear. It was too much, trying to handle all this stuff on her own, when she'd been used to talking everything through with Tez and Kerrill. She missed them so badly that her stomach hurt.

Well, tough. She was in Melbourne now and Tez and Kerrill weren't. Rochelle lifted her head and stared at the empty chairs opposite her until her eyes were completely dry.

Then she remembered a pink t-shirt she'd seen on the rack next to her green one and decided to go back and buy it, to cheer herself up.

Saturday

Rochelle woke feeling guilty, without knowing why. It took her a few minutes to remember that she'd skipped two days of school.

She'd got away with it, though. There hadn't been any phone calls from Helvellyn Girls' Grammar - maybe because Rochelle was having a run of good luck or maybe just because her form teacher assumed she was still stranded in Sydney - and her mum didn't seem to have noticed anything. She just drifted into the flat on Friday night, saying, 'Who knew that going back to study at my age could be so tiring?' Then she switched on the TV, stretched out on the couch and fell asleep. When she woke up, they ordered home-delivery pizza and decided to leave the rest of the unpacking till Saturday morning.

They'd unpacked the basics on the day they arrived - cups and plates, sheets and pillows, that sort of thing - so the rest of it was mainly the fun stuff. Shunting the furniture round to see how it looked in different corners; having a cushion fight while they piled silky cushions onto the couch; hammering nails into the walls and arguing about which paintings to hang. (Rochelle's mother usually won. She had very definite views about paintings.)

Her mum talked to their things as she took off their newspaper wrappings.

'Now, where do you want to go?' she asked a tall vase. 'Over on the coffee table? No, you look a bit lonely there. How about the top of the bookcase, with the Chinese boxes to keep you company?'

Her mum consulted Rochelle about the look of the place, as if Rochelle was her favourite interior decorator.

'Do you think there's too much green?' she wondered. 'I'd forgotten about that lovely tree outside the window, when I packed the green curtains. Should we move the blue curtains from my bedroom into the lounge room, Shell?'

It was - almost - like old times, till the phone rang. Her mother was closer, so she leaned over and picked up the receiver.

'Oh,' she said, frowning. 'I wasn't expecting to hear from you yet.'

Her voice sounded so cold that Rochelle froze halfway through reaching up to hook the last ring over the curtain rod. She held her breath and listened hard, as if she had a chance of hearing the voice in her mother's ear.

She thought: what if that's Dad, even though he's not supposed to call us for two months? What if Mum cries again?

'Yes, thanks,' her mother said crossly. 'Yes, we're settling in nicely ... What? But I'm here to do a social work course, you know that. I won't have time to...All right, all right, don't go on about it. I'll phone them.'

She slammed the phone down and turned to Rochelle. 'That was your uncle Tony,' she said. 'He told one of his business friends we're in Melbourne. It's a nuisance but - oh well, I suppose we might as well ask her and her husband to afternoon tea tomorrow, to get it over with.'

After that, the fun turned into hard work. They had to scrape all the scrunched-up newspaper together, carry the garbage bags down to the bins, vacuum the carpets and straighten the painting, with her mum stepping back every five minutes to look at the flat through strangers' eyes. Rochelle had to admit the flat seemed pretty small and cramped and sad, if you looked at it in an Uncle Tony-ish way.

But neither of them wanted to say that out loud. They just ordered more home-delivery pizza and watched an American teen movie on TV, while Rochelle brooded about Helvellyn Girls' Grammer and her mother dozed on the couch.

Sunday

Next morning was even harder work, because her mum insisted on scrubbing all the surfaces that had looked clean enough yesterday. After that, they flattened the removal men's cardboard cartons and crammed them into the hall cupboard. Rochelle found her mobile phone at the bottom of one of the cartons, smashed in half.

'Oh, spit,' she said. 'How did that get in there? I was sure I'd stashed it in my bag.'

'It must've fallen out when we were packing,' her mum said. 'Don't expect me to buy you a new one. We can't afford too many luxuries now.'

She bustled off to iron all her clothes, while she tried to decide what to wear for Uncle Tony's friend's visit. Then they had to drive round the suburbs for an hour, looking for a cake shop that was open on Sunday. After all the fuss, Louise and her husband turned out to be as boring as most of Uncle Tony's friends. Rochelle's mum put on her social act, smiling and asking dozens of questions, but Rochelle tuned out and spent the next two hours

imagining the moment when she'd walk through the gate into Helvellyn Girls' Grammar.

Over and over, to make sure she'd be ready for it tomorrow.

As soon as Louise and Mr Louise left, Rochelle's mum collapsed on the couch, but a few seconds later the phone rang. Her mum sat up and put on her social act again, even though this time it was just Ruth, her best friend and Rochelle's godmother, calling to see how things were.

'It's sweet of you to think of us, when your kids are doing the back-to-school number too,' her mum said, smiling at the phone. 'So strange to be going back to school myself. I'll have lots of stories to tell you ... Yes, yes, I'm fine, Ruth - but terribly busy. I'll be in touch, just as soon as I get a spare moment, I promise ...'

Rochelle's mouth curved into the same smile. She thought: oh yeah, of course. Now I know how to deal with Helvellyn Girls' Grammar. I can put on an act, like Mum. That'll get me through the first day of school, for sure.

So there was nothing to worry about.

Monday

Rochelle got up and put on her grey-and-maroon uniform. She picked up her school bag, realised it looked wrong with no books in it and stuffed it full of the clothes she'd bought on Friday. She caught the tram. Stared at the grey-and-maroon uniforms on the tram. Got off at Helvellyn Girls' Grammar. Stared at the grey-and-maroon uniforms filing through the gate.

But she couldn't go in.

No reason.

She just couldn't.

She was in deep shit now. Deep as.

On the tram into the city, she tried to think it through. No matter how hard she worked at it, she couldn't see herself filing through the narrow gate into Helvellyn Girls' Grammar. But she couldn't see herself explaining that to her mum, because her mum had enough problems already. And she'd hardly spoken to her dad since the day she'd met the Slut, so he was no help either.

Anyhow, no way would her mum or her dad, or even Tez or Kerrill, say that skiving off was okay. Kids had to go to school. There were laws about it. Any minute now, someone from Helvellyn Girls' Grammar would be ringing her mother and going, 'So where's this daughter of yours?'

Unless ...

Omigod, could she?

Why not? It was the only way.

'Just do it, girlfriend,' Rochelle said to her smudged reflection in the tram window.

In the city, she went to the toilets on the Junior Miss floor of the department store and changed into her Brunswick street gear. That was a psychological tactic; she felt better when she was looking good. There was a red phone outside, in the room where old ladies rested their feet and mums fed their babies. Rochelle looked up the Helvellyn Girls' Grammar number in the tatty old phone book, put on her mother's social voice and started to tell a charmingly silly story about how their move to Melbourne had been delayed and could the school please cancel Rochelle Parfitt's enrolment.

The woman in the office said, 'We'll need a letter from you, confirming that request.'

Her mother's voice said, 'I'll send it straight away. And once you receive the letter ...?'

'Rochelle Parfitt will be cancelled from our data base,' the woman said, as if everyone ought to know that. 'Although, if you wish to enrol your daughter for second term, I'd advise you to apply within the next two weeks.'

'Yes, of course,' her mother's voice said. 'I'll be in touch as soon as we've finalised our plans. Thank you for your help - and I do apologise for all these changes.'

'Not at all,' the woman said, sounding bored out of her brain. 'Thank you for letting us know, Mrs Parfitt.'

Mrs Parfitt! The woman had fallen for it! Rochelle punched the air, then grinned at a startled baby, watching her over its mother's shoulder.

'I'm a genius,' she told it.

While she was on a roll, she found a computer shop, flirted with one of the guys and got him to let her write a letter and print it out, 'to show my dad, so I can convince him Macs are top'. She raced over to the post office and mailed the letter to Helvellyn Girls' Grammar, before she could go cold on the whole idea. Then she walked out into the street and looked round, tingling with excitement.

She thought: now I can do anything I like.

Rochelle was strolling up the mall, past the department store, when she remembered the Junior Miss assistant saying that if she wanted something even wilder than Brunswick Street, she could go to Smith Street. So she did.

Smith Street rocked. There were shops selling groovy clothes, next to Vietnamese groceries, next to hippy-trippy shops with crystals and dolphin posters, next to a giant supermarket with scary mullet-and-stubble guys in tracksuits chain-smoking in the doorway; a van on the corner, making fat

blobby doughnuts; the biggest video store ever; an Italian cake shop with a window display of pink and white sugared almonds in little net bags; a Chinese shop with rows of jars full of dried roots and herbs; a shop that sold nothing but beads. There were ferals and Italian granddads, Goths, and Aussie blokes in blue-checked flannel shirts, junkies, and Vietnamese mums with quiet, watchful Vietnamese babies.

Halfway down the street, Rochelle saw a great dress in the window of shop called Retro 21 - green smudges on a cream background with gold stripes across the smudges, short as, high in front but cut away down the back. She walked in and found herself facing a rack of great shirts, patterned with cowboys or dancing poodles or maps of the world.

'Amazing,' she said, and two people beamed at her from opposite sides of the shop - a tall guy with eyes like a cocker spaniel and a woman with short, spiky blonde hair.

'It's genuine 1950s material but we make the clothes ourselves,' the woman explained. 'We just finished a design course at RMIT - "we" being me, Digby, and my partner, Mario.'

'Cool,' Rochelle said admiringly. 'So that's why your stuff looks retro and twenty-first century, both at once.'

'I like this girl,' Mario said to Digby. 'She's my kind of customer. Shall we show her the skirts we're working on, to match the shirts?'

While she tried on four shirts, a skirt and the dress, Digby told her how they found the material by checking the newspapers for auctions selling stuff that had belonged to old ladies who'd died without making a will. Rochelle had the best time. Mario even made her a cup of coffee and congratulated her on choosing a poodle shirt, as well as the dress.

'My friend Tez couldn't wear the dress, because her boobs are too big, but it works for me,' she told him. 'If the two of you become famous, it'll be a collector's item. My mum does that too - like, she finds new designers, before everyone else gets on to them, and helps to make them popular.'

Something about that last sentence wasn't quite right. Rochelle thought it over and added, 'Well, she used to, anyway. She's turned really weird about money, since her and Dad split up.'

'Tell me about it,' Mario sighed. 'My mother got religion when she and my dad separated but, oh well, I guess it keeps her happy ... Now, Rochelle, do you want me to find you a bag for those two items or do you want to put them on straight away?'

The dress was definitely for special occasions but Rochelle decided to wear the shirt. She wandered on down the street, browsing through a two-dollar shop, checking her poodle-patterned reflection in every mirror. The only thing she didn't like about Smith Street was the girl who followed her for a whole block, asking for money. She was the same age as Rochelle, with bad

dreads and bad skin and wrinkles in her skirt as though she'd slept in it. In other words, a loser.

So Rochelle ducked into a health-food cafe, to get away from the girl, ordered a banana smoothie and sat by the window writing in her book.

Tez and Kerrill would go wild about Smith Street. I just saw: a girl in a short pink party dress and ginormous construction worker boots, a black guy as tall as a basketballer, an old lady wearing a purple t-shirt and green tights. Amazing. You could walk down the street wearing a ballet dress and gumboots, carrying a fish bowl and crying your eyes out, and no one would even bother to look at you twice. I like it here.

This has been the best day.

I'm a genius, right?

Tuesday

At the information booth in the city Rochelle found some leaflets advertising tours of Melbourne, so she spent the morning travelling round in a bus full of American, Japanese and German tourists. To make things more interesting, she pretended to be a French girl called Martine in Australia on a working holiday, because she and Tez and Kerrill used to imitate Martine Boulanger in primary school. She liked seeing how the different parts of Melbourne fitted together and everyone on the bus liked Martine.

'Why don't you come on up to Sydney with us, Marty?' the chatty American backpacker said at the end of the tour, while the silent American backpacker nodded behind him. 'We could take you round, show you the sights?'

Rochelle was so into her Martine act that she almost said yes, but just in time, she remembered. 'I am sorry,' she said. 'Malheureusement, now I must work at my uncle's restaurant at St Kilda, down by the bay.'

For a moment there, after the American guys shook her hand and headed off, Rochelle felt a bit lost and lonely without Martine. Then a tram pulled up with a sign saying St Kilda, which seemed like an omen, so she climbed on board. The St Kilda shops were okay but not great - she hardly bought anything - but she found a street that was like Cake City, with window after window full of ten-layer chocolate cakes and shiny fruit tarts, baseball-sized rum balls and cakes like green frogs, pink cakes and yellow cakes and cakes with red jelly on top. She sat at a table on the footpath and told the cloud book all about it.

I've had two cups of coffee and two doughnuts and now I'm totally hyped, so I'm going for a walk on the beach. That means I won't be home by four but not a problem, I'll just phone Mum and tell her I'm visiting one of my wonderful new friends from school.

Like she cares, anyway. She's so out of it. She's hardly even asked me about school yet. She just comes home from her lectures and falls asleep on the couch. I probably don't need to ring her but I'd rather play it safe.

This is the best holiday. I want to make it last.

Wednesday

Next morning Rochelle went back to Smith Street again, touching base. The beach at St Kilda had been a letdown. Flat grey sand and flat grey sea -totally boring compared to the bay near their Sydney house.

Although, of course, it wasn't their house any more. It was her father's house now. Rochelle still thought her mum should've made him sell it and split the money but her mum didn't seem to mind the idea of the Slut sitting on their patio or eating breakfast in their kitchen, the way Rochelle minded.

'Your mother's too nice for her own good.' That was what Gran had kept saying and, for once, her gran had been right.

Still, even if Melbourne beaches were boring, there was plenty of other stuff to do. Rochelle started by dropping in on Mario and Digby. They were really pleased to see her but then one of their friends from the design course turned up, so she headed off to check out the rest of Smith Street. She found a shop called PsychoDelic that sold seventies gear, including a swirly black crepe jacket with green satin lapels that matched her new black pants.

But she didn't buy the jacket. Okay, she had her keycard account, but she still had to be careful, because her mother had turned stingy and no way was she going to ask her father for money. And plus, she'd already bought a jacket from Mario and Digby, to match Monday's dress, so she didn't really need another one.

Rochelle though: sensible or what? See, I know about budgeting.

Besides, window shopping was almost as good as buying things. She spent the next ten minutes staring at a painting. It was so dark and smudgy that she'd nearly walked past it but something about it must have grabbed her, because she stopped to take a second look.

There was a bright patch in the top left-hand corner, where a mother and a father and their boy and girl posed like a family photo outside a fancy new house. Then, when Rochelle looked closer, she spotted the parents again, leading the kids into a big park like the Botanic Gardens where she'd gone on yesterday's tour. So the painting was like one of the comics that Kerrill's totally-ex-boyfriend Josh had been crazy about - not the Disney type of comic, one of those alternative comics where the frames were all different sizes and the story jumped around all over the place and it took ages to figure out what was going on.

Now she'd got the hang of it, Rochelle searched the next section of the painting and found the kids under a tree, having a picnic. Then the colours turned darker and, in the shadows between the trees, she saw their parents tiptoeing off, leaving them behind. In the bottom right-hand corner, which was the darkest of all, the kids were wandering round the city at night, looking small and lost and lonely.

And that was it. No happy ending. Just two kids sleeping under a bridge, with newspapers for blankets and the moon shining down on them.

Rochelle couldn't work out whether she liked the painting or hated it but she had to admit it'd sucked her in. She even thought about going inside, to see if there was any more stuff by the same artist. It would've been easy to fake the art-talk; Rochelle had followed her mother round dozens of galleries while she went talent-spotting for the latest thing in art, to impress the corporate types that her father invited to dinner. But when she peered through the window, the place turned out to be a bookshop, not an art gallery.

'Hello?' she said. 'A painting, in a bookshop window? Someone's got their wires crossed.'

A shadow smeared the glass. As Rochelle turned round, to see who'd caught her talking to herself, a girl with bad dreads and bad skin and wrinkles in her skirt smiled and stuck her hand out.

'Got any spare change?' she asked.

There was something off-centre about the smile, as if the girl didn't really expect anything from her. As if she was sending Rochelle up or something.

Rochelle thought: hang on. That's the junkie girl who trailed me down the street on Monday. So, she knows I don't give money to beggars. Bitch.

She circled round the girl and dodged into the health-food cafe, where she ordered a smoothie, took out her cloud book and started to write about the painting. When she finally looked up, the junkie girl was over at the van on the counter, buying a bag of doughnuts. Somebody must've given her some money, more fool them. Rochelle decided to nick across to the tram stop while the junkie girl was busy, just in case the girl tried to hassle her again.

She scribbled a few more lines at the bottom of the page.

*Goodbye, Book. Talk to you again tomorrow.
Joke. I don't really think this book is my new best friend.*

Thursday

While she was getting dressed that morning, Rochelle had a brilliant idea. She put on her tee and skirt, then pulled her school uniform over the top. Now she didn't have to wait and change her clothes in a cafe. She could just duck behind the plane tree near the tram stop, pull off her blazer and dress, stuff them in her school bag and - zap!

Goodbye, boring grey-and-maroon Rochelle. Hello, SuperRochelle, the holiday girl.

As the next part of her holiday programme, she went into the city for a movie marathon, because their DVD player had been left behind in the Sydney house and she'd seen most of the movie on TV. She started with the new Julia Roberts movie at one of the cinema complexes, then decided to go to a science fiction movie, but she had to wait for an hour before the sci-fi movie started, so she treated herself to lunch at a cafe nearby.

Looking out of the window, people-watching as usual, Rochelle counted two guys who kept coming back to the same corner, over and over; three people waving money around; four arguments; five kids who disappeared down a land and staggered back, looking wasted.

Junkie Street. There must've been places like that in Sydney but she'd never noticed them before. Actually, if she'd been walking down this street with Tez and Kerrill, they would've just gone, 'Oh, gross', and walked faster and missed it.

Somehow she seemed to notice a lot more, now that she had to do everything by herself.

On her way home, Rochelle bought a container of Mamma Sofia lasagne and put it in the oven but by the time her mother arrived, the lasagna had gone black and curly around the edges, so they ordered more pizza instead. Her mum turned the TV on while they ate - a stalker movie, filling the flat with high-drama music. After watching movies all day Rochelle felt like talking to someone, but her mum used the music as a lullaby, leaning back on the couch and closing her eyes and falling asleep.

Rochelle couldn't get into the stalker movie, because she had too many movie-images in her mind already. She thought about going off to her

bedroom but her mum kept twitching and whimpering like a sick puppy, so Rochelle figured she'd better stay and guard her. She was squashing the leftover pizza crust into tiny crumbs when her mum opened one eye and squinted sideways.

'Don't you have any homework?' she asked with a sleepy frown.

Rochelle thought: oh spit, she's not even grateful for being guarded.

Then she thought: oh good, I can go to my room instead of being stuck here with Mum.

She wandered round the bedroom for a while, hanging up her clothes and tidying her drawers. Picked up a novel and put it down again. Plugged into her portable CD player, remembered the Brunswick Street postcards and settled at her desk, to think of anything to say when they hadn't run or written to her.

The astronaut pen quivered in her hand. Rochelle jumped up, snatched the cloud book from her school bag, flattened it on the desk and wrote:

I'm addicted to this book!

Mum's been so off the planet lately. I thought she was just tired, from organising the move and worrying about money and heaving boxes, but she doesn't seem to be getting over it.

So, basically, my book's the most fun there is.

She wrote about her brilliant idea and the Julia Roberts movie and Junkie Street. Then she laced her fingers together like a hammock and rested her chin on it, remembering all the cool special effects in the science fiction movie - weird landscapes and scaly monsters and glittering laser wands, like the fairytale books her kindergarten teacher used to read to the class. Car brakes screeched in the street outside and high-drama music echoed from the lounge. Rochelle wrote:

If I had a magic wand right now, I'd wave it over Mum and me and send us back to our house - and Dad and the Slut would be stuck here in this tiny flat, which would serve them right.

Friday

Rochelle groaned, thumped the alarm clock with her fist and pulled the doona over her head. A few minutes later she felt the doona tugging against her grip and heard her mother say, 'Time to get up.'

‘Can’t,’ Rochelle told her. ‘I think I’m, like, catching flu or something.’

Her mother’s footsteps went away and Rochelle snuggled under the covers, smiling at her own cleverness and the idea of a day in bed. Then the doona was whisked off her and slid to the floor.

‘I found our thermometer in the bathroom cupboard,’ her mum said. ‘Wasn’t that lucky? Now, let’s see whether you’ve got flu or just Friday morningitis. Open wide.’

Rochelle tried to think hot thoughts while the thermometer was in her mouth but when her mum pulled it out and studied its silver line, she could tell that the thoughts hadn’t worked.

‘Sorry,’ her mum said briskly. ‘Your temperature’s absolutely normal. Up you hop.’

So much for the idea of a day in bed. Rochelle showered and struggled into two layers of clothes and stumbled down the stairs. As she wrestled with the outside door, the old dragon from the flat below sneaked out and cornered her.

‘Your television was blaring away again last night,’ she said. ‘And I can hear your footsteps banging on my ceiling. I don’t think it’s unreasonable to want a bit of peace and quiet. If you could just keep the volume down, dear, and try to walk a little more softly ...’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Rochelle said, heaving the door open and escaping. ‘Yeah, sure.’

She was standing at the tram stop, sweating and shivering as if she really was sick, when it hit her. This was supposed to be her special secret holiday, right? Nobody was actually forcing her to go into the city every morning. She could do whatever she wanted - like, for instance, wait till her mother went off to college and then sneak back into the flat...

For the next fifteen minutes she wandered through the side streets, marking out a circle that brought her right around to the tree by the tram stop. She flattened herself against it like a spy, peering at the car park beside the flats. No white Toyota, meaning no Mum. Rochelle grinned and darted across the road, eased the outside door open and padded quietly up the stairs. She should’ve felt safe by then but when she pushed the key into the lock, she noticed that her hand was shaking.

She thought: yeah, right. Like Mum’s going to be hiding behind the door, ready to jump out and yell, ‘Gotcha!’ I don’t think so.

The flat was empty, of course. Rochelle made cheese on toast and sat by the lounge room window, people-watching. After a while she noticed an old woman parked on the seat beside the tram stop, who was looking up at the flats and watching her. That reminded her of the old dragon in the flat below. If the dragon saw someone at the window, when Rochelle and her mum were

supposed to be out, she might think she'd spotted a burglar - and she was such an interfering old bitch that she could easily call the cops.

All right, forget the window. Rochelle shifted across to the couch but the minute she stretched out and tucked a cushion behind her head, she started to feel like her mother, taking naps all the time. She rolled off the couch and shoved a CD into the sound system, planning to bop around for a track or two and wake herself up.

Big mistake. If the dragon could hear the TV, she'd definitely hear the music. Rochelle hit the Stop button, just in time, and went to get the headphones from her portable player. But the headphone wires tied her to the sound system which made it hard to dance, and after a while her head started to fill up with paranoid thoughts - 'What if a burglar really does break in and I can't hear him?' or 'What if I really am catching flue but it hasn't shown up on the thermometer yet, and plus Mum's catching it too and she comes home early and finds me here?'

In the end she had to take the earphones off and listen for her mother and the burglar. The flat was full of noises. Rochelle had never heard any of them before, when she'd been there with her mum, but now the air crackled with strange sounds. She drifted round aimlessly, jumping every time her shadow loomed up on the wall ahead of her. Thought about tidying the kitchen: then realised that, if her mum noticed, she might guess that Rochelle had been there during the day. Thought about having a bath: then realised the dragon would hear the water when she took the plug out. Thought about giving up and going out: then realised she couldn't think of anywhere to go.

She reached for the cloud book and started trying out alternatives.

Not the beach - too grey and boring. Not Retro 21 - I don't want Mario and Digby to think I'm this nuisance kid. Not the movies - I've seen enough movies for one week. Not -

Oh, spit! The door at the bottom of the stairs banged and I nearly wet myself.

This is hopeless. I can't stay here. Gotta get out.

She snatched up her school bag and bolted from the flat. But she didn't have the energy to go far, so she ended up in The Olde Tea Shoppe in the local shopping centre, where she sat by the window with her cloud book, drawing doodles down the side of the page, while she waited for the waitress to bring a cup of coffee. Rochelle sighed. It seemed like she spent her whole life waiting, these days.

Waiting to find out why her mother and father had started to go tense and awkward every time they were in the same room together. Waiting to find

out what they were talking about behind closed doors. Then the Big Drama happened and Rochelle and her mum had gone to Gran's house for another round of waiting. Her mum had probably been waiting to see whether her dad would ask them to come back but Rochelle had just been waiting to get away from gran; she didn't care how or where.

Her grandmother was the most ferocious dragon in the world. For six weeks Rochelle had to tiptoe round that big echoing house and wear her daggiest clothes and only talk about things that Gran wanted to talk about - and even then, Gran picked on her all the time. And at the end of six weeks, she folded her linen serviette after dinner, put it down in the exact centre of her plate and cleared her throat.

'I'm sorry, Jilly,' she said to Rochelle's mum. 'It's just too much. I have to ask how long you're intending to stay.'

Her mother had cried. Gran was the only person who could do that to her. She'd never cried during all the talks behind closed doors, not even when Rochelle's dad had told her about the Slut.

They left Gran's house two days later and moved to a flat near Rochelle's school. Rochelle had been sure things would get better then, but her mother had started to worry about money by that time, so she'd picked a flat that was so small and dark and horrible that Rochelle couldn't ask anybody home. The Melbourne flat was nearly as bad. Not quite as dark, that was all ...

She frowned down at the cloud book. Her doodles had turned into a series of black holes, as strange and spooky as the noises that had chased her out of the flat. Rochelle shifted her pen up to the top of the page and wrote in fierce, spiky letters:

I still don't see why we can't have a proper house. Dad's got heaps of money, it's just that Mum doesn't want to use it, probably because she hates his money as much as she hates him.

Fact is, he's wrecked my entire life.

The pen skidded off the page. Rochelle rescued it, read the last line and blushed. Divorce wasn't that big a deal. The fact was, heaps of kids at her old school had parents who were divorced. Fleur Gill reckoned it'd been a relief when her folks split, because they'd argued all the time, and Kerrill said she saw more of her dad after the divorce than when he was living in the same house as her.

But for one thing, Rochelle's mum and dad had never really argued, right up until the last minute, and for another thing, her dad hadn't just split,

he'd gone off with the Slut. She was almost closer to Rochelle's age than to her mum's age. It was so gross. She didn't want to think about that.

Actually, she didn't want to think about any of it.

She turned the page, blotting out the black holes, and tried to write about how her life used to be. Her beautiful room, looking out across the tree tops, with a triangle of blue water in the bottom corner of the view. Tez and Kerrill at school, friends forever. Her mum at home, totally cool, calm and perfect.

But it didn't seem real any more. Rochelle couldn't even remember it properly. She couldn't remember her dad, either. When she tried, she could only hear Gran's voice, saying, 'He's not our type. You should never have trusted him. I always knew he'd do something like this. I warned you, Jilly ...'

A coffee cup came sliding across the table. Rochelle jumped, gave the waitress a shaky smile and bent over her book again. She wrote:

*Five more hours before I can go back to the flat.
Even Helvellyn Girls' Grammar would be better than this.
No, it wouldn't. I'm having fun, most of the time.
It's just that I'm tired today. There's a park at the far
end of the shopping centre. Maybe I'll buy the new
Girlfriend magazine and go and sit in the sun for a
while.*

*Sounds good. See, writing in this book always cheers
me up.*

Saturday

Rochelle and her mother slept in late. They bumped into each other on their way to the bathroom at ten o'clock.

Her mum laughed. 'We'll turn into a pair of old bachelors, if we're not careful,' she said. 'Just look at us - eating pizza and sleeping odd hours and forgetting to do the laundry. We'd better get organised, Rochelle.'

So they drove to the supermarket and wandered up and down the aisles, collecting bread for their breakfast toast, cheese for snacks and all the ingredients for dinner. Then they went back to the flat and spent two hours chopping and grinding and blending the herbs and spices for one of her mum's speciality Thai green curries. And because her mother had slept for half the morning, she actually stayed awake long enough to watch a car chase movie on TV.

Rochelle was so busy that she didn't even have time to write in her cloud book.

Sunday

'What a lovely sunny day,' Rochelle's mum said over lunch. 'We really ought to take advantage of it. I know, why don't we go to the zoo this afternoon?'

Rochelle thought: The zoo? Oh, please. I'm sixteen years old not six.

But she said, 'Why not?' At least it'd be something to do.

On the way to the zoo her mum told funny stories about her social work lecturers but once they arrived, she started to get quieter and quieter. It wasn't hard to work out why. Zoos at the weekend were Family Time. They walked along behind a mother and father, who were smiling at each other over the head of a little girl as blonde as Rochelle. Rochelle could tell that she and her mum were both thinking the same thing but they had to pretend they weren't thinking it.

They weren't allowed to say, 'We used to look like that', or 'Wish Dad was here with us', or 'Remember when ...' That was against the rules.

Rochelle tried to think of some funny stories, to cheer her mum up, but it wasn't easy. She wasn't a good story-teller like her mother and besides, she couldn't talk about what she'd really been doing, so she had to watch every word, which didn't help. Luckily, they came across a cage of marmosets - tiny monkeys with round eyes and yellow-grey fur that sat really still, then went leaping wildly from branch to branch, then went still again. They leaned on the rail and watched, giving the marmosets names and making up stories about them.

'Oh dear, Mavis Marmoset jumped too high,' her mum said. 'She's wobbling on the end of the branch, waving to Baby Marmoset and calling out, "Help me, help me".'

'But Baby Marmoset just keeps going, "Come back, Mum",' Rochelle said. 'No, hang on, it's okay. Look, she's climbing up to rescue Mavis.'

They watched the marmosets for half an hour, which meant they were heading home at the same time as all the families who'd been to the zoo or the beach or the hills. Rochelle's mum didn't like driving in heavy traffic. She was stressed again by the time they got back to the flat, so she settled on the couch for a nap before she cooked tea. Rochelle sat in the armchair, guarding her, while she described the marmosets in her cloud book. She wrote:

Mum said she'd just lie down for a few minutes but she's still asleep. It's 8:30 now and I'm starving.

Yes! She just made this little grunty noise and turned over. I'll drop my book on the floor and see if that wakes her up.

Monday

Most people hated Mondays but Rochelle was glad to turn back into SuperRochelle, the holiday girl. There was only one problem. She'd forgotten to wash her holiday clothes and they smelt a bit stale, plus there was an ice cream mark on the skirt. She could've put on some of her Sydney clothes but somehow they didn't feel right for Melbourne, so she decided to start the day by going back to Smith Street and buying a new skirt at Retro 21.

She'd skipped breakfast, because she was sure Mario would make her a cup of coffee, but he and Digby just said, 'Oh, hi,' and went on bustling around, even though they couldn't have been that busy on a Monday morning. Not that Rochelle cared, of course. She tried on half a dozen skirts and picked a grey one with a poodle patch to match her poodle shirt. When she took it over to the counter, she had to stand there for ages while Mario talked to some guy on the phone.

'Back again, Rachel?' he said, after he put the phone down. 'You're practically living here, aren't you?'

Rochelle thought: Rachel? Excuse me. And plus, that's so not true. I haven't been to Smith Street for days.

She pulled out her wallet, planning to slam a fifty-dollar note onto the counter and walk out of Retro 21 forever. It would've been a great gesture, if she hadn't flipped the wallet open and discovered that she only had a ten-dollar note and some change.

'Sorry, gotta zap down to the ATM,' she mumbled. 'Back in a minute, okay?'

The bank was half a block away. She punched the \$100 button, to cover her next shopping spree, and held her hand under the money slot. As she waited for the notes to slide out, two lines of flowing green letters flashed onto the screen.

'Declined. Insufficient funds.'

Rochelle stared at the screen till the green letters melted and ran together. It had to be a mistake. No way could she have spent so much money in just one week. She was about to check the ATM receipts she'd collected, when she remembered Mario and the skirt, waiting for her at Retro 21, so she pushed her keycard back in and hit the \$50 button.

The screen said, 'Declined. Insufficient funds.' Again.

The new ATM receipt told her she had twenty-five dollars left. Okay, she could handle that. Rochelle took out twenty dollars, leaving five dollars there to keep the account open, and went back to the shop. When Mario saw her through the window, he made a dash for the work room, so Digby came swanning over.

‘Sorry,’ Rochelle said, counting her change. ‘I’ve only got, um, thirty-seven dollars.’

‘Never mind,’ Digby said with a fake smile. ‘We’ll put the skirt aside and you can come back later.’

Rochelle frowned. That didn’t seem fair. Her mum’s favourite designers in Sydney used to give them special deals all the time. Digby could’ve easily knocked twelve lousy dollars off the price of the skirt.

But her mum’s favourite designers knew her mum was rich as. Digby and Mario obviously thought Rochelle was tragically broke. She worked that out when she said, ‘Yes, please do’, in her Mum-voice and stormed out of the shop ... then turned to see Digby putting the skirt back on the rack, as if she was sure she’d never see Rochelle again.

That was a worse shock than the ATM. Rochelle said, ‘Screw you’, loud enough for Digby to hear through the window, then swung away and started to run. It felt as if the whole world was against her. Mario and Digby. Tez and Kerrill. That bitch, Siobhan. The grey-and-maroon clones at Helvellyn Girls’ Grammar. Her father. The Slut.

She ran faster and faster, as if they were all snapping and snarling in a pack behind her, not even looking to see where she was going, just trying to get away.

By the time she pulled herself together, she was down at the far end of Smith Street, outside a shop that sold coffee beans and fancy chocolate. The chocolate seemed like a message. She walked into the shop, bought a bar and ate it in ten seconds flat. Instant sugar hit. Her brain started working again and so did her nose. Rochelle looked round, to make sure no one was watching, lifted her arm and sniffed at her t-shirt.

‘Euw!’ she groaned. ‘Now I’m really, really stinky, after all that running.’

Okay, that settled it. Even if she couldn’t afford the poodle skirt, she definitely had to buy a new tee. Forget Mario and Digby. She didn’t need them, anyway, not when she could get a second-hand t-shirt from the seventies shop on the other side of the road.

Buying stuff always made her feel better. Rochelle bounced back up Smith Street, making lists of t-shirt colours in her head, but the first thing she saw when she bounced into PsychoDelic was the black crepe jacket with the green lapels that she’d almost bought on her last visit. The price tag said thirty-three dollars and she had a twenty, a ten and a five in her wallet, plus enough change for a coffee, so that seemed like a message as well. She

whisked the jacket off the rack and bounced over to fan the notes out on the counter.

‘Sorry, mate, that’ll be thirty-seven dollars,’ the shop guy said.

When Rochelle blinked at the price tag, the second number changed from a three into a seven with a fine line across it. That meant the jacket was really too expensive but she couldn’t hand backing down twice in a row. She shook two extra dollars out of the change purse in her wallet, slid her arms into the slippery crepe sleeves and blinked at the three coins left in the purse. Two twenty-cent pieces and a ten-cent piece, making a total of fifty cents in all. No coffee, then. She’d have to think of something else to do.

As she headed for the door, she came face to face with a girl in a grubby skirt and tee. Her eyes were poking out, her skin was grey and her hair hung round her face in yellow strings, except where it stuck to her sweaty forehead. As if that wasn’t bad enough, she was wearing an over-the-top jacket that practically begged everyone to stare at her.

A black crepe jacket with green lapels.

‘Me?’ Rochelle whispered. ‘That’s a mirror? That’s me?’

The sugar high wore off as fast as it had hit. She stepped out into the street, looked round blurrily and spotted a seat on the opposite corner. Yesterday she would’ve said that only derros and single mums with two toddlers ever sat on those public benches but today the bench looked like a palm tree in the desert. Rochelle crossed the road, collapsed onto the seat and stared down at her dusty shoes.

She thought: I really, really don’t believe this. No way can I have spent all that money.

Her heart was louder than the traffic and her stomach gurgled, begging for breakfast. She fumbled around in her wallet and pulled out the ATM slips. The pieces of paper curled into scrolls and slithered off her knee. Rochelle had to keep stopping and putting them in order and starting all over again.

But after she’d added up the numbers three times, she had to believe them. The bank hadn’t made a mistake. She’d spent her entire keycard account. Nothing left, except fifty cents and her weekly travelcard.

She’d wrecked her special secret holiday, as efficiently as if she’d done it on purpose.

Rochelle sat on the bench for half an hour, staring straight ahead like a paraplegic in a hospital bed. Every five minutes, she’d think, ‘I am sooo hungry. Gotta buy a sandwich’, and then she’d remember again. She went through the receipts, one by one, talking to herself.

‘If only I hadn’t bought the fridge magnet.’

‘If only I hadn’t gone on the tour.’

‘If only I hadn’t bought those silver earrings in St Kilda.’

In the end she managed to stand up, screw the ATM slips into a ball and toss them into the bin on the corner. After that, she went back to the seat again, because she couldn't think of anywhere else to go. Time passed. The side of her face began to itch, as if somebody's eyes were tickling it. Rochelle glanced sideways and saw the junkie girl sitting next to her on the bench. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one, took a few puffs and waved the cigarette at Rochelle.

'Here,' she said. 'Go on.'

Rochelle hesitated. She didn't smoke, not usually, but the junkie girl was being kind and she didn't want to knock her back. Besides, Tez had taken up smoking while she was trying to lose weight for the school social, so Rochelle knew it helped when you were hungry.

'All right,' she said. 'Thanks.'

She clipped the cigarette between two fingers and sucked on the filter, the way Tez had shown her. Smoke rasped down her throat and zapped every cell in her body; an even bigger hit than the chocolate. Rochelle took two more drags, then handed the cigarette over and flopped back on the seat, watching the world spin around her.

She thought: oh, wow. What if the junkie girl asked me to share a needle next? Would I give it a go? Would it make me feel any better?

The world went into slow motion. Freeze frame: Rochelle and the junkie girl, flopped side by side on the bench. Freeze frame: a woman with a stroller giving them a dirty look as if she thought they were both junkie girls. Freeze frame: a man heading in the opposite direction glanced across as well, focusing on Rochelle, because she was wearing the 'look-at-me' jacket she'd just spent her last thirty-seven dollars on.

Rochelle's tongue flicked out - she always licked her lips when she was nervous. She tasted something bitter on her mouth. It was only leftover nicotine, but for some reason, that flashed her back to the moment when she'd sucked on the filter which had been wet, because the junkie girl had been sucking it a few seconds before.

She thought: oh, gross.

She thought: junkie spit. I bet it's full of diseases.

She thought: have I gone crazy or what?

And at the same time, the junkie girl picked up on the man's look and reached across to stroke Rochelle's satin lapel.

'Nice,' she said. (Stroke, stroke.) 'Great jacket, mate.' (Stroke, stroke.)

Rochelle stood up and hauled the jacket off. 'Here,' she said. 'Please. I want you to have it.'

Then she pushed the jacket into the junkie girl's arms and turned away and went skidding across the road, moving faster than a speeding bullet, dodging cars, getting out of there.

She ran away because a week ago she'd thought the junkie girl was a loser and now the girl was practically her best friend. And she ran to the bookshop with the painting in the window. Not on purpose. She just wanted to make sure the girl wouldn't follow her and she couldn't go into a cafe, because she only had fifty cents in her wallet, and she didn't intend to go into Retro 21 ever again.

So the bookshop was the only place left.

Inside, the shop was shadowy and cluttered and cosy, divided into sections by bookshelves that jutted out into the middle of the room, making the most of the space. Rochelle ducked into the second section, away from the window, and picked up the nearest book. It turned out to be a book of fairytales, so she was about to slam it back onto the shelf when she noticed that one of the stories was 'The Little Mermaid', which had been her favourite video when she was a kid.

She thought: oh well, I guess I might as well read the story while I wait for the junkie girl to piss off.

But the book was a disappointment. For some reason, the writer had got it all wrong. Rochelle flicked through the pages for five minutes, then let the book dangle loose in her hand while she thought about the video instead.

She'd loved *The Little Mermaid* because Ariel was so spunky. All her sisters did what King Triton wanted but Ariel kept sneaking off to study the way humans lived, even though it drove her father mad. When she saved a prince after his ship was wrecked, Ariel went to the sea witch and traded her beautiful voice for magic legs, in order to follow the prince onto the land - but the wicked witch tricked her, which meant she was entitled to turn Ariel into a monster. Then, at the last minute, her father rushed in and told the witch to take him instead, which proved that Ariel was really his favourite daughter.

And after that, Ariel and the prince fought the witch and there was a happy ending - but when Rochelle was eight, she'd liked the part about Ariel's father more than the love stuff.

She straightened her wrist and focused on the book again, wondering why the writer had skipped most of the good parts. The father hardly featured, the Little Mermaid wasn't even called Ariel and no way was she a spunk. She didn't sneak off to watch the humans. She just hung around till she was fifteen and her bossy grandmother said she was allowed to go up to the surface of the sea. Rochelle turned the pages faster, to get it over with. The Little Mermaid was making a move, at long last, saving the prince and then swapping her voice for human legs, the way Ariel had done. But as well as that -

'Oh, gross,' Rochelle breathed.

As well as that, the sea witch actually cut the Little Mermaid's tongue out. Even worse, the witch-magic made her dance better than anyone else at the prince's palace ... except that every step felt as if she was treading on the blade of a sharp knife.

Rochelle dragged her eyes away from the page, feeling sore all over. Cutting tongues out and dancing on knives seemed more like a horror story than a fairytale - although, come to think of it, she'd watched dozens of horror movies with Tez and Kerrill, giggling the whole way through. But she couldn't giggle about what the writer had done to the Little Mermaid. She could only stand there, rubbing her tongue against her teeth and wriggling her toes inside her shoes.

That was when she heard the voices. She must've been more caught up in the story than she'd realised, because they'd obviously been arguing for a while.

'It's too much,' a guy's voice said. 'Driving halfway across the city every morning, then driving back in time to open the shop. You're exhausted.'

'I'm fine,' said a woman's voice. 'Stop fussing, Hal. You're not making things any easier. I've got enough on my plate already, without worrying about you worrying about me.'

As a matter of fact, the woman didn't sound fine at all. She sounded totally stressed. But Rochelle hated people fussing over her too, so she started to barrack for the woman, especially when the guy refused to lay off.

'Well then, don't worry,' he said. 'Just let me do the morning shit.'

'No,' the woman said, almost yelling but not quite. 'We've been through this before. You've got an accountancy lecture at nine a.m. every Tuesday and Thursday. I'm not going to mess up your course, along with everything else.'

'So I'll go to the evening lectures,' the guy said with a shrug in his voice.

'What a brilliant idea,' the woman said sarcastically. 'That way, you can miss your lectures at the law school, instead of your accountancy lectures.'

The guy laughed. 'Your memory's too good,' he said. 'I forgot I told you Business Law and Accounting Concepts are on at the same time. All right, Mum will you please, please think about hiring some else, just for a few hours in the morning?'

'Fine,' she said. 'I'll think about it. When I have time.'

'Yeah, right,' the guy said, taking his turn at being sarcastic. 'In other words, never. That's the whole problem. You don't have any time.'

By that point Rochelle had completely forgotten the Little Mermaid. She just wanted to find out which of the voices would win. Then, as she leaned round the corner of the bookshelf to take a look at them, her brain started to

whirr like a dynamo and she pulled back again, before they could get a look at her.

One minute she was standing there, eavesdropping. Next minute she was tucking the book under her arm, licking her hanky and rubbing at the mark on her skirt. She was combing her hair with her fingers, blotting her sweaty face, clamping her arms down, to shut out the smell from her armpits, and remembering what her dad always said before he went into an important meeting: 'If you believe in yourself, other people will believe in you too.'

'Rochelle Parfitt, I believe in you,' she whispered and went strolling across to the counter. She smiled at the woman and the guy, put on her best Helvellyn-Girls'-Grammar-type accent and said, 'Hi, my name's Rochelle and I'm looking for a job. Just part time. Weekday mornings would be best.'

'What a coincidence,' the woman snapped. 'You heard what we were saying, didn't you?'

Rochelle flinched. While she was deciding how to answer, she ran a quick check on the woman, who was smaller than her voice had sounded, a few centimetres shorter than Rochelle. Her dark brown hair could have used a rinse to cover up the grey streaks and her big brown eyes had brown shadows underneath. She was one of those people who looked speedy, even when they were standing still.

And she was glaring at Rochelle as if she was about to include her in the family argument.

Rochelle thought fast. Her mum reckoned you should tell people what they wanted to hear but her dad said it was usually safer to tell the truth. Since she was using her dad's believe-in-yourself method, it made sense to go with him on this one.

'Yeah, I heard you,' she said truthfully. 'That's why I asked about the job.'

It worked. The woman started laughing, which gave Rochelle time to check out the guy. If she hadn't known he was the woman's son, she would never have guessed it. He was tall and chunky, with ginger hair and pale brown freckles. His pale brown eyes had double-thickness eyelids, which made him look as though he was about to fall asleep.

And he was staring at Rochelle like a chess player who'd just found an extra piece on the board.

'G'day, Rochelle,' he said, getting her name right, unlike Mario. 'I'm Hal and this is my mother, Gwen. We're pleased to meet you, even if Mum doesn't look it.'

'Oh, I'm pleased,' Gwen said with a sigh. 'Apparently, the universe agrees with you, Hal. It's sent a part-time worker along straight away. Mind if I ask you a few questions, Rochelle?'

Rochelle thought: the universe? Oops. Sounds like Gwen's some kind of hippy nutcase. No way did the universe send me into her shop.

Then she realised that if she hadn't run away from the junkie girl, she wouldn't have been there ... and if she hadn't been there, Gwen probably would have gone on stalling. So maybe the universe *had* pushed her into the bookshop at the right moment for all of them - for her and Gwen and even for Hal, because it meant he won the argument.

Oh sure, Gwen asked lots of questions, but from the moment she started talking about the universe, it was obvious that Rochelle had got the job. There was only one dicey moment, when Gwen noticed the book she was still holding.

'So you're a Hans Andersen fan?' she said. 'Which story were you reading?'

'"The Little Mermaid",' Rochelle said. 'It's so not like the video.'

Gwen pulled a face. 'Yes, the video's disgustingly sweet and cute, isn't it?' she said. 'I suppose Andersen's story was too sad for the feelgood Hollywood movie industry. Jake says I shouldn't stock the Disney books, because they give people the wrong idea, but I think a fairytale bookshop ought to include all the different versions.'

Rochelle wasted half a second wondering who Jake was - probably Hal's brother - before she realised she'd nearly made a big mistake. She should've known that the story was older than the video. After all, the book usually came before the movie.

On the other hand, she would never have believed, not in a million years, that there was nothing but fairytales in Gwen's bookshop, so the universe had helped her again. If she'd said she liked the video better - or if she'd said fairytales were for babies - Gwen might've thought she was wrong for the job.

Instead she taught Rochelle how to work the cash register and gave her the key for the door. She was about to take Rochelle on a tour of the shop when a teacher came in with a mile-long booklist, so Rochelle hurried out, before she could say anything else that might make Gwen change her mind. She caught a tram into the city centre and out again and spent the afternoon in the park near the flats writing down everything she could remember about the morning, to fix it in her mind.

Two hours later, she flicked back through the book, nodded with satisfaction and added:

My hand is so sore! I can't believe I just wrote 14 pages. That's, like, Guinness Book of World Records material. I wish there was someone I could tell but I'm

telling everything to this book at present and the book knows about its 14 pages already. (Joke.)

She stopped to look up at the trees, then flexed her wrist and started writing again.

I've really, truly got a job. It didn't seem real at first but it does now. I won't have to crawl back to Helvellyn Girls' Grammar - or hang round in the park all day - or hit Mum or Dad for money.

A genuine happy ending.

Yes! I believe in fairytales. (Joke.)

THE EXERCISE BOOK

There is a table.

There is a stack of books on the table.

There is a hand on the stack of books.

Rochelle pulls her hand back slowly, as if it's almost too heavy to move. She picks up the first book and balances it on her palm, to weigh it. The cloud book feels lighter now. All the memories have been siphoned out of it, into Rochelle.

'Whoa!' she says. I was right on the edge, back then. Didn't realise it at the time. I guess you don't.'

Her hand swings around in a half-circle, like the minute hand on a clock marking out half an hour. When she tips her hand upside down, the cloud book drops into a shoe box waiting on the floor. That's where Rochelle usually keeps the four books. She has a genius hiding place for the box – in a pile of other shoe boxes at the bottom of her clothes cupboard.

She thinks: okay, did things get worse or better after that? Better, of course. No, worse. Um ... I'm not sure.

So she places her hand on the second book, which is on top of the stack now. The second book is the ordinary school exercise book – from her Sydney school, not Helvellyn Girls' Grammar. Rochelle chose it because she thought a school book would be a good disguise if her mother looked in while she was supposed to be doing her homework, although as far as she knows her mother never got around to checking on her.

As she frowns at a mental snapshot of her mother, napping on the couch in the flat, a breeze drifts through the window and across the table. The curtain of Rochelle's hair shifts and the exercise book's pages twitch under her hand like something alive.

Rochelle remembers.

Tuesday

Rochelle set the alarm for six-thirty, just to be sure. When she went out to the kitchen, to grill cheese on toast for breakfast and make cheese sandwiches for lunch, her mum's purse was sitting on the bench. Rochelle played with the catch while she waited for the toast-cheese to brown. She flipped the purse open and counted her mum's money, then closed the purse, then opened it again and whisked a ten-dollar note into her pocket.

Her mother came into the kitchen just as she was dropping the purse back on the bench. 'I'm leaving early today,' Rochelle explained, to make her mum look at her face, not her hands. 'Gotta go to the library before school starts.'

'Oh, that's nice,' her mother murmured. 'I'm glad you're making friends already.'

Rochelle thought: huh? I didn't say anything about making friends.

But she said, 'Yeah, right. See you later,' and left, taking the toast with her to eat at the tram stop.

She arrived at the bookshop at twenty to nine, which was a bummer, because she'd been sort of hoping Gwen might come back early from wherever she went, just for the first morning. Well, too bad. Gwen wasn't there and Rochelle didn't want to hang around in the street, in case the junkie girl spotted her. She fished the key out - no problems there, she'd checked it ten times on the tram - and pushed it into its slot.

'Yow!' she yelped as an alarm went off, right beside her ear.

She poked the key desperately at the panel above the door, while the alarm screamed like a baby that knew she wasn't its mother. Rochelle whimpered in sympathy. She'd been so sure she'd listened carefully while Gwen explained the security system but it looked like she must've missed something, after all.

Her ears hurt and her hands were shaking. It took three tries before she managed to turn the key and switch off the alarm. Silence at last. Rochelle glanced round, expecting to see dozens of people rushing over, yelling, 'Stop, thief!' But Smith Street was empty, apart from a guy in lime green lycra bike shorts, speeding past on a racing bike, and a derro asleep on the bench, who hadn't even bothered to wake up.

‘Excellent security system,’ she said. ‘Not.’

It wasn’t a good start to the day. When Rochelle tried to remember what she was supposed to do next, she kept hearing alarm bells inside her head. She wandered round in circles for five minutes, getting used to the idea of being in charge, then stopped in the middle of the shop and clutched two handfuls of hair.

‘Oh, spit!’ she groaned. ‘What if the alarm’s the sort that rings at the cop shop and tells them to come and arrest the burglar?’

At that exact moment, the door opened and someone walked in - a tall guy, with fox-coloured hair and a friendly face and a neat blue shirt with a button-down collar, just like the plain-clothes cops on TV.

‘Omigod,’ Rochelle blurted. ‘This is so embarrassing. I totally stuffed up the alarm.’

She tried to tell the cop the whole story but he kept trying to interrupt. When she calmed down enough to listen, she realised he’d been saying, ‘Excuse me, can I collect the book I ordered?’

‘Oh,’ Rochelle said. ‘So you’re not a cop?’

‘Not even close,’ Tall Guy said. ‘As a matter of fact, I’m a primary-school teacher.’

It was such a relief to find she hadn’t called in the cops on her first day that Rochelle started giggling like a primary-school kid. Even better, Tall Guy turned out to be a regular customer, so he showed her where to find his book, then helped her to turn on the cash register. He was so nice that she was about to ask if he wanted to adopt her, when he glanced at his watch and scooped up his book.

‘I’m late, I’m late for an important date,’ he said and hurried out, leaving Rochelle on her own again.

It didn’t feel so bad this time. Her head wasn’t full of alarm bells any more. Instead, she could hear Gwen’s voice telling her what to do.

Take two: Rochelle put the door mat out, heaved the A-frame onto the footpath and noticed the name of the shop for the first time. (The World Tree? Better ask Gwen what that meant.) She turned the lights on, collected the float from behind the middle row of books near the back door and arranged the money in the cash register tray.

Then she perched on the counter and spent the next few seconds feeling cool about knowing that the signboard was called an A-board and the loose change was called a float, which she hadn’t known yesterday. But as her muscles relaxed, she realised she needed to go to the toilet. Badly. And she’d forgotten where Gwen hid the key to the back door.

So, of course, that was when the next person walked in.

Rochelle slid off the counter and squeezed her legs together. ‘Hi,’ she said. ‘Can I help you or do you just want to browse for a while?’

The person laughed. 'Neither,' she said. 'I know this shop backwards - I work here in the afternoons. My name's Bel Antonelli. Gwen asked me to drop in and make sure you were coping okay.'

'Oh, brilliant,' Rochelle grumbled. 'First I think one of the customers is a cop, then I think you're a customer. Nought out of ten so far.' To make things worse, she relaxed again.

'Yow!' she squealed. 'Where is it? The key. I gotta pee.'

She wouldn't have been surprised if Bel had laughed even harder. For one thing, she was talking in rhyme, like Tall Guy, and for another thing, she sounded so first-day-at-a-kindergarten-busting-for-a-leak. But Bel just smiled at her, like those older kids who helped you find the toilet on your first day, even if they'd never met you before. She leaned over the counter, straightened up with a key in her hand and tossed it over.

Rochelle caught it and ran.

When she got back, Bel was checking the float, so Rochelle leaned in the doorway and examined her. Bell looked like Xena Warrior Princess, only blonde. She was way tall with solid arms and shoulders, long ragged yellow hair hanging round her face, a superstraight nose, olive skin and dark shirt and army disposal pants - and she could've easily lost ten kilos. But somehow that didn't matter, not when it was Bel.

'You're doing fine,' she told Rochelle. 'Have you sold any books yet?'

'One,' Rochelle said proudly. 'Some book this really tall guy wanted.'

'And did you write it on the list, in case Gwen needs to order a new copy?' Bel asked.

Rochelle's confidence melted into a sticky puddle. 'Oh no!' she wailed. 'No one told me about the list. This is too hard!'

Bel grinned. 'A tall guy, huh? That'd be Russ. Don't worry, I can leave a note for Gwen on a post-it.'

It was starting to look as if Bel could fix anything and everything. Rochelle edged closer, watching her stick the post-it onto the list.

'I made another mistake,' she confessed. 'I set the alarm off, when I was opening the door.'

'Relax,' Bel said. 'We've all done that. The thing is, they installed the lock upside down, by mistake. You have to unlock the door, line the key up at the exactly right angle, then open the door and lunge. Here, I'll show you.'

She switched the alarm on, hauled Rochelle outside and gave her a door-opening lesson. The first time she tried, Rochelle held the key the wrong way, the second time she moved too slowly and on her third try, she set the alarm off again, because she was laughing so much that she couldn't move.

Bel turned the lesson into a comedy routine, teaching Rochelle to lunge like a Jedi knight with a laser sword, bossing her around in a kindergarten-teacher voice. Then she put on a different voice, like Rochelle's mum at a

dinner party, to introduce Mr Lee from the Vietnamese grocery on the left hand side of the bookshop and Artemis Georgiou from the health-food cafe on the right-hand side.

By that time half a dozen people were lined up along Smith Street, watching them. It was like a street party. When Rochelle finally got it right, everyone clapped and a kid who was cycling past almost fell off her bike. She straightened up, steered the bike across the road and practically rammed it into Bel.

‘Traitor!’ she said. ‘You stole my job!’

‘Oh, hi,’ Bel said. ‘What are you doing here? Rochelle, this is Jake, Jake, Rochelle’s the new girl Gwen’s taken on, to help with the morning shift.’

‘What am *I* doing here?’ Jake snarled. ‘I live two blocks away, Antonelli. The question is, what are *you* doing here? No, don’t bother to answer. I can work it out for myself. You’re teaching Miss Priss how to do my job.’

‘Her job, actually,’ Bel said.

Jake scowled and jerked her bike back, so Rochelle sidestepped in case Jake decided to ram her next. Jake was totally feral, dressed in four layers of black, with blacker-than-black hair and serious piercings, just like the Brunswick Street posers, except that on Jake it looked kind of dangerous. She had bright blue eyes under her black hair: Rochelle couldn’t help noticing that, because Jake was staring at her so intently. And then there were the boots - black, of course, and knee-high, with seven straps and silver buckles up the sides.

Rochelle thought: yep, definitely dangerous.

‘All right, Miss Priss,’ Jake said, ‘you must’ve done something to make Gwen think you’re better than me. What are your qualifications? Are you writing a PhD about world tree symbolism? Or maybe you’re an expert on modern fairytales? Don’t be shy, Priss. Tell me all about it.’

A memory clicked into place at the back of Rochelle’s brain. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘So you’re Jake. Gwen was talking about you yesterday but I thought you were a guy.’

Jake sighed. ‘That says it all, doesn’t it? If you can make an elementary mistake like that, you’re obviously an expert on being stupid.’

She propped her bike against a lamp post and ran both hands down her body, drawing the outline of her breasts and hips. Jake looked like a girl, for sure. A dangerous type of girl. Rochelle was relieved when Bell stepped in between them.

‘Lay off, Jake,’ she said. ‘You know what Rochelle means. Jake *is* a guy’s name, normally, only in your case it’s short for –’

Jake made a karate-chopping movement, cutting Bel off. ‘Thanks a lot, Belladonna,’ she snapped. ‘If Miss Priss really needs to know my name I’ll tell her myself. My mother’s the last of the hippies, Priss. She was convinced that

“Galadriel Jacobs” sounded groovy. Now do you understand why I’d rather be called Jake?’

Rochelle glanced down at Jake’s seven-buckle boots. ‘Yeah, sure,’ she said. ‘You are so not like Cate Blanchett in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. More like Aragorn, really.’

As Jake glared back, Bel yawned and stretched, arms spreading wide and separating the two of them. ‘Coffee time,’ she announced. ‘Come on, team.’

Two seconds later Jack was locking up her bike and Rochelle was out in the shop’s tiny kitchen, filling the electric jug. She thought back through the last ten minutes and decided Bel was the kindest person she’d ever met. First she’d sorted out that business with the alarm and then she’d bought up the subject of Jake’s name on purpose, to make Jake forget about Rochelle stealing her job.

Okay, Jake hadn’t completely forgotten. The minute they settled down with their coffees, she started picking on Bel again. Rochelle sat and listened, till she’d worked out that Jake spent a lot of time at The World Tree and Gwen had sort of promised her the next job that came up. After that she was forced to admit that Jake had a point. If Rochelle hadn’t needed the job so badly, she might even have given it back. But Bel kept saying, ‘Get over it, girl,’ and besides, Jake had accidentally calmed down while she was explaining about her name.

So, basically, it seemed smarter to keep her mouth shut.

Halfway through their second cup of coffee, a customer came into the shop. When Rochelle went over to serve her, Jake started a new argument with Bel. She could hear their voices in the background, while she wrapped a picture book in green tissue paper for a kid’s birthday present.

‘Be real, Jake,’ Bel was saying. ‘The Internet’s not just, like, a theme park for you and your geek mates. If some multinational company decides its workers want too much money - enough to live on for example - it can consult its cyberdata and move to some place where they don’t have unions, practically overnight.’

‘Yeah, and your activist mob can rush straight to their keyboards and fire off a global petition,’ Jake sniped. ‘I reckon I get at least four bleeding-heart petitions a week.’

‘And do you sign them and send them on?’ Bel asked. No answer. She sighed and said, ‘Thought not. Besides, even the biggest e-petitions never make front-page news, not like those huge demos against the Vietnam War, back in the seventies.’

Jake sniffed. ‘The seventies,’ she said, as if she’d heard it all before. ‘You sound just like my mum.’

‘It doesn’t matter who I sound like,’ Bel said. ‘What matters is whether I’m right.’

Rochelle had to tune out after that, because the customer was repeating all the cute things her grandson had said about his Christmas present. She figured she wasn’t missing much, though. Bel cared about everyone in the world and Jake was totally self-centred; she might’ve only just met them but she’d figured that out already.

They were still arguing when the customer left. As Rochelle headed over to watch, the shop bell tinkled again. She looked round, expecting another customer, and saw a chunky silhouette in the doorway, like a big ginger teddy bear.

‘Hi, Hal,’ she called, switching on her best smile for the boss’s son. ‘Have you come to check on me, too?’

That turned out to be a mistake. As soon as Jake heard Hal’s name, she abandoned the argument with Bel and started laying into him instead. Hal leaned against the counter and listened till Jake ran out of words, which took a while, because she knew a lot of words.

‘Sorry, Jake,’ he said finally. ‘But you know what Mum’s like. I had one small window of opportunity, so I grabbed it.’

‘You grabbed a window?’ Jake said. ‘Watch it, mate. You could cut yourself, doing that.’

Hal grinned. ‘Jake, I’m studying Commerce, not English,’ he said. ‘Let me put it this way. Rochelle was here. Mum was prepared to consider hiring someone, for once. I didn’t want to give her time to change her mind, so Rochelle got the job. Learn to live with it, okay?’

That shut Jake up for five seconds: Rochelle counted them. Then, six seconds later, she dusted her hands together, wiping out the whole discussion.

‘Come on, Prince Hal,’ she said. ‘If you help me convince Bellissima that she’s paranoid about globalisation, I’ll even make you a cup of coffee.’

‘Not now,’ Hal said standing up to Jake twice in a row. ‘I need to talk to Rochelle about money.’

‘Oh, money,’ Jake said. ‘Go ahead, then. Don’t talk about anything interesting - it might strain your brain. Talk to Miss Priss about boring old money.’

She turned her back and sat down on a child-sized stool to read one of the fairytale books, while Hal launched into a long explanation about two different methods of paying Rochelle’s wages. By the time he got to the second method, Rochelle was so confused that she just stood and blinked at him, till Bel came to the rescue.

'The thing is, once Hal enters your name in the account books, you'll have to fill in forms and get a tax file number and everything,' she explained. 'But if you don't want to do that ...'

Rochell didn't, of course. Forms sounded risky. What if some tax guy sent a letter to the flat or rang when her mum was there?

'No, thanks,' she said and Hal looked relieved.

'Excellent,' he said. 'In that case, I'll just pay you in cash. I mean, I believe in the taxation system, okay, but since you're only working for a couple of hours a day and Mum's got loads of extra expenses at present and no one ever got rich running a specialist bookshop and -'

He got lost in the middle of the sentence and stopped.

'And Rochelle isn't too keen on filling in forms,' Bel said, finishing the sentence. 'That means everyone's happy, right?'

Rochelle nodded. It sounded as though Bel had guessed there was something dodgy about her - but it also sounded as though she wasn't going to ask any difficult questions, which proved she was definitely the kindest person in the world. She was smiling gratefully at Bel when Jake did a backflip, landing with her hands on one side of the stool and her feet on the other.

'Have you stopped being boring?' she asked, upside down. 'Can we finish the globalisation argument now?'

Rochelle sighed. Jake always had to be the centre of attention. She was glad Gwen hadn't asked Jake to look after her; she didn't like her half as much as she liked Bel. Jake didn't seem to like her, either. At any rate, she dragged Bel and Hal off to the back room to continue their discussion, so Rochelle couldn't even listen in.

While she was tidying the mess on the counter, a customer asked her to recommend a book for his ten-year-old daughter. Rochelle opened her mouth to say, 'How am I supposed to know what ten year olds read?', then shut it so fast that her teeth clicked. It was her job to help the customers. She had to say something. But what?

Then, just in time, the door blew open and a brown blur whirled in like a tornado. It was Gwen, back from wherever. She took over straight away, sold the man two books instead of one and dusted the New Books display stand with her sleeve on her way to the back room.

'How nice,' she said, sounding more stressed than ever. 'You've all come to help Rochelle.'

Rochelle recognised that tone of voice. She'd heard it a thousand times from her mother, saying 'How nice' when she meant 'How ratshit'. Hal seemed to recognise it as well, because he mumbled something about going off for coffee and left, towing Bel behind him. Jake tagged along, of course, and next minute the shop was almost empty.

'Thank heavens,' Gwen said. 'A bit of peace and quiet, at last ... Oh, I'm sorry, Rochelle. I forgot you were still here. Do you want that tour of the shop now?'

Rochelle had a dozen questions lined up but when she checked Gwen's tone, she decided she'd better split. She was cruising down Smith Street, peering into all the coffee shops to see where the others had gone, when she passed Retro 21 and remembered Mario and Digby treating her like a nuisance kid.

Her feet took over and marched her up the next side street. Okay, Bel and Hal had been really nice but they were older than her, so they probably thought she was a kid too, even though Rochelle didn't feel like a kid these days.

She thought: truth time - I know it's risky, skiving off from school like this, but I'd rather be around the bookshop people than the grey-and-maroon clones at Helvellyn Girls' Grammar.

She wasn't sure why. It just seemed more real somehow.

She caught the tram into the city and browsed through the shops for a while, treated herself to a coffee out of her mum's ten dollars and went back to the flat. They had pizza for dinner again, because they'd used up most of the stuff they'd bought at the supermarket. Her mother gave the delivery guy twenty dollars, passed the pizza to Rochelle, shut the door and went on riffling through the notes in her purse.

'Strange, I was sure I had more money left,' she said. Then she glanced sideways at Rochelle and pulled out a twenty dollar note, adding, 'Here, Shell. I haven't given you any pocket money lately, have I? Sorry about that.'

Rochelle felt a blush burn up from the neck of her t-shirt and prickle her hairline. She turned away to hide the blush from her mother, swallowed two slices of pizza, almost without chewing, and hurried off to her room. One of the exercise books from her Sydney school was lying on her desk. She'd left it there as camouflage, in case her mum looked in and wondered why she couldn't see any signs of homework.

When her hand brushed past the book, it fell open, as if it had been waiting for her. Rochelle was blushing again as she started to write.

Mum knows I nicked the \$10, I'm positive about that. So, why didn't she say anything?

I guess it's not her style. Dad was always the one who told me what to do. Mum just makes me wish I hadn't done it.

I wish I hadn't stolen that money ... only, this way, Mum finally remembered to give me an allowance. The other way, I'd still be tragically broke. I guess I would've coped but somehow everything feels easier with money in my pocket, even if it's only \$27 – like, for example not enough to buy the cheapest shirt in Retro 21.

Never mind, it'll be payday on Friday. I can get back to some proper shopping then.

Busy day, the most action I've seen since we came to Melbourne. I think I'm going to like working at the fairytale bookshop.

Wednesday

Her second morning in the bookshop was easier than the first. After Bel's lesson, Rochelle unlocked the door, lunged like a Jedi knight and fitted the key straight into the upside-down slot without setting off the alarm. Over the next three hours she sold six cards, four books and a Cinderella finger puppet to five different customers and remembered to write it all down in the order book.

But the best part was when she was alone in the shop. She dusted the shelves, even though Gwen hadn't told her to do it, as a way of getting to know the place. The blue feather duster whisked across the bright covers of picture books and the spines of new and secondhand fairytale collections, serious-looking books with titles like *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and *The Uses of Enchantment*, a rack of posters, a display stand of cards and a table down the middle of the shop piled with fairytale-type toys.

It flashed Rochelle back to when she was little, playing shops with Tez and Kerrill under the jungle gym in the junior school playground. There'd been a tiny window, wedged between the ladders and slides. They'd taken turns at sitting there and selling leaves to the other kids, in return for bits of gravel. Tez always jacked up and refused to let anyone else have her favourite leaves. Kerrill always remembered exactly how much everybody owed from last time.

And Rochelle had been the best at selling stuff. She could make the other kids believe that a grotty old leaf was something they really needed. It had felt good. She used to go home afterwards and tell her parents that she was going to run her own corner shop when she grew up. Her father had just laughed and said, 'You can do better than that' and her mother had tried to convince her that she'd rather run an art gallery or whatever.

But she had a shop of her own now, just like she'd always wanted.

Of course, it was only her shop until Gwen came back. She turned up while Rochelle was selling a Cinderella poster to a woman who'd thought she only wanted a Cinderella book.

'Nice work,' she said after the woman left. 'You're a natural sales woman, Rochelle. Have you done this before?'

'Sort of,' Rochelle said, thinking about the window under the jungle gym. 'But not in a bookshop.'

Gwen's eyes narrowed, as if she was wondering whether to trust her. 'If you're interested, you can take some of the books home overnight,' she decided. 'Just as long as you don't crack their spines or drop crumbs on the pages.'

Rochelle thought: yeah, right. Like I want to spend my nights reading fairytales.

Then she remembered the man who'd asked her to choose a book for his daughter. 'Okay,' she said. 'Where's the best place to start?'

'*Grimms' Fairytales*,' Gwen told her. 'That'd have to be the best-known collection.'

She pulled a book off the shelf and held it out, like she was handing over the Bible or something. Rochelle had been planning to ask what the shop's name meant and where Gwen went in the mornings but somehow she found herself standing outside on the footpath, clutching the book and wondering what to do with the rest of the day. She grinned reluctantly. Gwen was a smooth operator. She hadn't exactly pushed her out of the shop but she wanted peace and quiet and she made sure that she got it.

A tram pulled up while Rochelle was hesitating on the footpath. She dropped *Grimms' Fairytales* into her bag and climbed on board. As she pushed her travelcard into the ticket machine, she remembered that the card would take her anywhere she wanted. So, back in the city, she caught the first bus that went past, without even looking at the front to check where it was going.

The bus took her down to the docks, where she wandered along a pier, studying the rows of ships from overseas and trying to identify their flags. After that, she bought fish and chips from a van and crouched in the corner of a stone wall on a strip of beach, hiding from the wind. The sea was as grey as ever, but Rochelle didn't mind this time. She leaned back, hugging the fish-and-chip- parcel to keep her warm, and listened to the whisper of waves across the grey sand. She looked up, watching white clouds billow across the grey sky, and felt small and secret and safe.

When she crunched the last chip and glanced down at her watch, she was surprised to see that it said three o'clock - time to go back and find the bus stop, in order to get home before her mum. But the bus got stuck in a

rush-hour traffic jam. By the time Rochelle hurtled into the flat, her mother was lying on the couch with her eyes closed and a text book spread across her stomach.

'Sorry I'm late,' she panted, breathless from the stairs. 'I was, um, talking to some of my friends after school.'

Her mother shifted the text book and sat up, 'So you're settling in all right - not finding the work too difficult?' she said.

Rochelle grinned. 'Earth to Mum, where are you? When I tell you about my friends, you think I'm talking about my school work - and yesterday, when I said I was going to the library, you thought I was talking about my friends.'

A fine line appeared between her mum's eyebrows, the nearest she ever let herself come to a frown. Rochelle bit the insides of her cheeks, to hold back another grin. It looked as though her mother was still half-asleep. better not to stress her - and better not to keep raving on about her school friends in case her mum realised they were just imaginary friends.

'What's for dinner, Mum?' she asked instead.

'Just salad,' her mother said, looking guilty. 'Unless we go to the supermarket again.'

The fish and chips turned over in Rochelle's stomach. 'Nah, salad'll be fine,' she said.

They watched the latest sitcom while they ate and then her mum tapped the remote till she found a cop movie. Back in Sydney, she always used to check the TV guide in advance and mark her favourite shows - mostly BBC series like *Pride and Prejudice*, where the hero and heroine wore old-fashioned clothes and argued till they fell madly in love - but right now she seemed happy to watch whatever was on.

Rochelle had seen enough car crashes for one week, so she said, 'Homework', like a password, and went off to her room with Gwen's book. To start with, she just flicked through the stories in *Grimms' Fairytales*, going, 'Oh yeah, why does everyone have to talk in that old-fashioned language?' and 'Oh yeah, why do they have to do everything three times?' Even more annoyingly, the same things kept turning up in different stories - kings and queens, lost children, wicked stepmothers, talking animals and youngest sons who won the princess's heart.

There were so many youngest sons that Rochelle wondered why the writer couldn't think of any other kind of hero. She was about to give up on the book when her hand slipped and flicked her back to the first page. The introduction informed her that the Grimms were two brothers who'd lived in Germany in the 1800s and gone round collecting all the fairytales that people used to tell each other round the fire at night. That explained the old-fashioned language and the way the stories kept repeating themselves. Rochelle shrugged and decided to give the Grimm brothers one last chance.

Turning the pages more slowly, she found a bunch of stories she knew from kindergarten and the Disney videos, although, like the Little Mermaid story she'd read at the bookshop, a lot of the details were different. Cinderella was called Ashputtle. Snow White was called Snowdrop. 'Beauty and the Beast' was called 'The Lady and the Lion'.

That was interesting but not so exciting. Rochelle turned the page, read a few lines of the next fairytale, laughed and started to pay attention. The minute she finished the story, she reached for her exercise book and astronaut pen.

She wrote:

I just got sucked into reading a story called 'Rumpelstiltskin', about this girl whose dad's so proud of her that he tells everyone she can spin straw into gold. The dad's just boasting, right? But the king believes him and shuts the girl into this room full of straw, going, 'Turn that into gold by tomorrow or I'll kill you.'

Lucky for her, this little weird guy rocks up and says he's ace at gold-spinning. The first night, the girl gives him her necklace as a reward. The second night, she gives him her ring. And by the third night she's got nothing left, so the little weird guy goes, 'Okay, give me your first baby.'

The girl things, 'Big deal, I don't have a baby' ... but guess what, the king's so pleased with all the gold that he marries her. They have a kid and the little weird guy turns up and says, 'Come one, hand it over.' The girl cries and cries, so he gives her a second chance – like, if she can guess his name in three days, she can keep the kid. She's getting totally desperate, when someone tells her how they saw this weird guy, dancing round a fire and singing,

*'Little does my lady dream
That Rumpelstiltskin is my name.'*

And when she tries that on him, he goes, 'Oh, spit' and stamps his foot so hard that it goes right through the floor and everyone laughs.

She tapped her pen against her teeth, wondering why that story had grabbed her more than the others. After all, the ending wasn't exactly fair. Rumpelstiltskin had saved the girl's life. She should've been grateful, instead of letting everyone laugh at him.

Then, as Rochelle glanced back at the end of the story, something shifted inside her head. She closed her eyes and saw Rumpelstiltskin, clear as a carton frame: small and dark and dangerous, with knee-high, seven-buckle boots. A giggle bubbled up from her stomach. Oh yes, of course. Rumpelstiltskin reminded her of Jake, because both their real names were supposed to be special secrets - and if the little weird guy was as irritating as Jake, you could hardly blame people for laughing when he screwed up.

Spotting Jake in 'Rumpelstiltskin' made her think twice about the other fairytales. Rochelle sucked meditatively on the end of her pen and started to read the Grimm version of 'Snow White' for the second time. After the wicked stepmother dressed up as a witch and gave Snow Drop a poisoned apple, the handsome prince came along to rescue Snow Drop and they asked the stepmother to their wedding, which sounded too nice to be true.

But – get this, she wrote, they make the stepmum put on these red-hot iron shoes and dance till she falls down dead.

Grim or what? That's beyond horror, same as the Little Mermaid having her tongue cut out and dancing on knives.

Her bedroom door rattled. 'Yeah, sure,' Rochelle called out automatically, then scribbled a few more lines.

Oops, Mum just banged on the door and told me to turn my light out. With any luck, I'll dream about the Slut dancing in red-hot shoes.

Thursday

While she was heaving the A-frame onto the footpath, a man circled round her, dodged into the shop and stayed there for the next hour, sidling from one self to another. Rochelle didn't take much notice of him, to begin with. He wasn't the sort of person you noticed - halfway between short and tall, fat and skinny, old and young.

As she was stashing the float in the cash register, she looked up and caught his eye. The guy backed off and hid behind the nearest bookshelf and after that, she couldn't stop watching him, in case he was a shoplifter or a serial killer, until he sidled over with a copy of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

The book cost \$24.95, so the guy gave her a twenty-dollar note and counted out five dollar coins, one by one, making sure he didn't touch her hand. The coins were warm, as though he'd been clutching them for the last hour, and when she handed him the five cents change, he pulled back so fast that he dropped it on the floor.

So he wasn't a shoplifter or anything. Just creepy.

After Mr Creepy left, she put *Grimms' Fairytales* back in its place and looked for something else to borrow. The next book on the shelf was called *Favourite Fairytales*, which sounded pretty basic. Rochelle was checking the list of stories when somebody coughed at her.

She spun round and saw a woman waiting at the counter, colour-coordinated in shades of navy blue, with big TV-screen glasses and brown hair that flipped up at the ends. The brown colour must've been a dye, because her face was wrinkled like an apple that had been left in the fruit bowl too long.

'I hope I'm not interrupting,' she said, being sarcastic. 'Are you supposed to be in charge of the shop?'

Rochelle opened her mouth to explain that Gwen wanted her to read the books. Then she decided it was none of the woman's business and said, 'Yep. Can I help you?'

'You certainly can,' the woman said. 'I'd like to know why you put that painting in the window. I thought this shop was trying to promote the real fairytales, not those modern versions, but the story of Hansel and Gretel doesn't end with two children lost in a city.'

She pulled her glasses down her nose and frowned, as if it was all Rochelle's fault. That made Rochelle want to argue back, even though she hadn't realised that the painting was about Hansel and Gretel. She did a quick Internet search of her memory, checking everything Gwen had told her.

'Actually, we've got all different kinds of fairytales here, old ones and modern ones,' she said. 'And plus, I reckon the painting's supposed to make you think how it'd be if Hansel and Gretel were around today - like, they'd be streetkids or whatever.'

She thought the last part sounded pretty good, considering that she'd made it up as she went along, but the woman just pushed her glasses back in place and changed the subject. First she started to pick on the way Rochelle talked - like, she shouldn't say 'like' or 'whatever'. Then she told Rochelle how, when she'd been a teacher, she'd only used the real fairytales. Then she said she'd never, ever let her sons watch the Disney videos when they were little.

'I was bringing them up on my own, so I had to be particularly careful,' she explained. 'I didn't want people saying the boys had missed out because they didn't have a father.' She pulled her glasses down again, gave Rochelle

a witchy look and added, 'My husband died of a heart attack, of course. I don't approve of divorce or single mothers. There's too much of that around these days. That's why it's so important to keep in touch with old values - the sort of values you find in fairytales.'

By that time the woman had been talking for almost half an hour and Rochelle was tired of arguing with her. The minute Gwen walked in, she backed off and went to collect her bag. On her way out, she could hear the Old Witch complaining to Gwen.

'People aren't interested in reading, the way they used to be. I've joined over three different book groups since I retired, but every single one of them closed down.'

Rochelle thought: yeah, right. I bet the other people left because they got sick of the Old Witch telling them what to do. I've been totally turned off fairytales by listening to her.

But then Gwen waved and called out, 'G'day Rochelle,' as she went past, so she whisked *Favourite Fairytales* off the shelf, after all. Gwen winked at her behind the Old Witch's back, which made her feel a bit better.

And that made her realise how bad she'd been feeling before.

She cancelled the window-shopping trip down Brunswick Street that she'd been planning, walked straight past an interesting bus in the city and went back to the park near the flats, where she sprawled on the grass, reading *Favourite Fairytales*. The wind made soothing noises in the trees and leaf shadows danced across the pages of the book.

Nice. Even if she'd had seventy dollars in her wallet, instead of seven, she would've still wanted to be there.

Halfway through *Favourite Fairytales*, Rochelle found the story of Hansel and Gretel. Their father and stepmother were running out of money so they took the kids for a walk in the woods and left them there. When they found a gingerbread cottage and started to break off bits off it to eat, they were caught by a wicked witch, who tried to turn Gretel into her slave and cook Hansel for dinner. But Gretel pushed her into the oven, instead of Hansel, and they bought the witch's treasure back home, where, best of all, their father told them that the stepmother was dead too, just like the witch.

So the Old Witch was right, worse luck. The story didn't end with Hansel and Gretel lost in the woods, although Rochelle liked the way it ended, all the same. She lay on her back, watching leaves and thinking about the painting in the bookshop window. As the knot in her stomach unravelled, she started to argue with the Old Witch over again, so she rolled over and reached for the exercise book, to write down her side of the argument.

I hate all that garbage about single mums and divorces. I mean, it's not Mum's fault that Dad went off with the Slut. She was the best mum when I was little and she's doing her best now. She never let anyone see how the stuff with Dad was cutting her up. Hey, she doesn't even let me see it, except for that time when I was supposed to be meeting Tez at the movies, plus the time when Gran made her cry.

That's the down side of working in a bookshop. Anyone can walk in off the street and creep you out or dump all over you. It's not fair. I don't think

Her head felt heavy. She rested it on the book for half a second and when she opened her eyes, there were shadows on the grass instead of sunshine. Rochelle gathered up her books and her pen and her bag with one sweep of her hand, struggled to her feet and went racing across the park to the flats.

Later, while the light from the TV strobed through the lounge room and her mother dozed on the couch, she opened her exercise book and frowned at the unfinished sentence. There was a crease on the page, where her cheek had rested, and a dead leaf caught in the staple. Rochelle shivered coming to cover with leaves, like the Babes in the Wood from *Favourite Fairytales* - two little kids who were abandoned by their parents and froze to death, after which all the birds and animals dropped leaves on them to bury them.

That wasn't her idea of a happy ending, so she thought about Hansel and Gretel instead. She wrote:

No matter what the Old Witch says, I reckon the painting in the window rocks. It shows you how fairytales are still true. All those stepmums and witches and babes.' Just like me. Kerrill's totally-ex-boyfriend Josh used to call me 'babe'. Well, he calls everyone 'babe' or 'dude', unless

Oh, spit. I had this genius idea about how fairytales work but it's not making sense, because I'm falling asleep again. The last few days have been pretty tiring. Better go to bed now.

Goodnight, Book.

Friday

Rochelle kept waiting for Mr Creepy or the Old Witch or some other weirdo to walk into the shop but all her Friday customers were completely normal, so she decided that Thursday must've been Weirdo Day. She'd just sold a normal fairytale collection to a normal secondary-school teacher, when a knee-high boy came in with his mother and sister and fell in love with a stuffed dragon on the toy shelf.

It was a lovable type of dragon, with a bronze stomach and pointy green wings and a red felt tongue hanging out of its mouth like a tiny flame. The boy wasn't tall enough to reach the toy table properly, so he stood on tiptoe and poked at the dragon till it fell into his arms. Then he clutched it to his chest and tugged on his mother's skirt, signalling at her with hopeful eyes.

'Sorry, Zac, it's not your birthday,' his mother said, reading the signals. 'It's Rhianna's birthday today. You'll just have to wait.'

As she prised the dragon out of Zac's grip, tears filled his eyes, magnifying them to double their size. Rochelle's heart swelled in sympathy. She wanted to say, 'Here, kid, take it,' except that she knew Gwen wouldn't be too pleased if she started giving the stock away.

Zac's sister chose a set of Snow White finger puppets - Snow White, seven dwarfs, the wicked stepmother and the prince: one for each finger - and they left, with Zac walking backwards and staring at the dragon till he tripped over the door mat. Rochelle was cuddling the dragon, to make it feel better, when Gwen strolled in.

'Yikes!' she said, whisking the dragon behind her back. 'Is it time for me to knock off already?'

'No, she let me go early today,' Gwen said with an ear-to-ear grin. 'Do you want some lunch?'

Rochelle thought about the wilted cheese sandwiches at the bottom of her bag and nodded. She was expecting Gwen to go out and buy something from Artemis Georgiou or the Kentucky Fried Chicken shop but Gwen walked straight past her and next minute Rochelle heard footsteps thumping across the ceiling. She jumped and then laughed, realising for the first time that Gwen and Hal lived above the shop.

Gwen came back five minutes later with two jaffles and a pot of tea. It was rainy and grey outside the shop and the jaffles were warm and golden and cosy. Even better, Gwen was perched on the counter, swinging her feet, instead of speeding round and looking stressed, so it seemed like a good time to ask some of her questions.

'Who's "she"?' Rochelle said, for starters. When Gwen looked puzzled she added, 'She as in "she let me go early".'

Gwen smiled. 'Oh, haven't I told you why you're working here? My mother ...'

She stopped and kicked the counter, then went on, 'My mother's in the early stages of dementia, which means she's starting to forget things and she finds it hard to get organised. But she doesn't want to leave her house and move into residential care, so I go over to Camberwell first thing in the morning and last thing in the afternoon to make sure she's okay.'

'Where's Camberwell?' Rochelle said, trying to remember whether she'd seen the name on any of the trams and buses.

'About half an hour's drive from here,' Gwen told her.

Rochelle counted it up. 'So you do, like, fourteen hours extra driving a week? Heavy. Can't anyone else help?'

Gwen sighed so hard that she breathed in a piece of jaffle. 'My father died three years ago,' she said, when she'd finished coughing. 'My sister lives in Sydney and my brother's working in Canada at present. They do everything they can. My sister phones Mum every day and my brother -' The cough came back. Gwen gulped down a mouthful of tea and said, 'Hal told him I'd hired someone to cover the morning shift, so, as a matter of fact, my brother's paying your salary. And the local council provides Meals and Wheels and someone to do the cleaning, but the rest of it's up to me.'

Rochelle did some more sums. 'That's a lot of looking-after, just for one person,' she said.

Gwen shrugged. 'Parents spend the same amount of time looking after their kids. When the parents get older, it's the kids' turn to look after them. Now, tell me about yourself, Rochelle. I'm sorry I was too rushed to have a proper chat earlier on.'

She obviously didn't want to keep talking about her mother. Rochelle could relate to that. As a matter of fact, she didn't want to talk about her mother either.

'We just moved down from Sydney,' she said, hoping that would be enough.

But it wasn't. Gwen asked who 'we' were, which meant Rochelle had to explain that there was only her and her mum.

'So, we're one of those divorce-type families the Old Witch doesn't approve of,' she finished up.

'The Old Witch?' Gwen said. 'Oh, you mean Beverly Tanner. Beverly does the rounds of the local shops, looking for company. She seems to have lost touch with her own children - from something she let slip, I get the feeling she's never even seen her grandchildren. I feel sorry for her, in a way.' Then she grinned and added, 'On the other hand, she never buys anything, so I don't have to feel *too* sorry.'

Rochelle decided all over again that she loved working at the bookshop. Gwen was talking as if they were both the same age. Not 'Never mind, Rochelle, lots of parents get divorced, it'll work out fine in the end, blah

blah blah.' Just telling her about the Old Witch's family, which proved the Witch didn't have any right to criticise other people's families.

She was having the best time, eating her jaffle, listening to Gwen and thinking, 'Stuff you, Witch' - and then Jake had to barge in and spoil it. She marched through the door in her seven-buckle boots, wearing three op-shop skirts, all different lengths and shades of black, and a black t-shirt with a silver spider's web. Even her bike helmet was black, with an old Darth Vader sticker on the front.

Rochelle thought: yeah, that'd be right. Jake's definitely on the dark side of the Force.

'Hi, Guinevere,' she said, looking straight past Rochelle, as if she wasn't even there.

'Gwen Ever?' Rochelle said, to push herself into the conversation. 'Is that your surname, Gwen?'

'No, Jake gives everyone nicknames,' Gwen told her. 'Guinevere comes from the stories about King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. Oh, that reminds me. Jake, let me introduce you to -'

'We've met,' Jake said, still refusing to look at Rochelle.

Rochelle giggled. It looked as though Jake had gone on hating her because of the job. That was fine by her. She was happy to hate Jake right back.

'I'm glad you dropped in,' Gwen said, ignoring Jake's bad manners. 'I need to talk to you about the painting. Lots of customers have commented on it but nobody wants to buy it. I have a feeling it might be too dark for most people. Could you bring in another one, Jake - something a bit more cheerful?'

Rochelle's brain fused. So *Jake* had painted the Hansel and Gretel picture? For the first few seconds, she couldn't believe it. Then she remembered the time when her mother had invited an artist to one of her dinner parties, after she'd bought a painting of his. The guy ate an entire plate of tiny quiches before dinner, then got pissed and told her father that multinational companies were wrecking the planet, even though the money for his painting came from the multinational company that her dad headed up. Her dad had been furious afterwards but her mum had just laughed.

'My mistake,' she said. 'I forgot that the artist and the painting aren't the same thing.'

Jake proved that Rochelle's mum was right, by scowling at Gwen and saying, 'Sorry, Guinevere. I don't do cheerful.'

Rochelle would've said, 'Get stuffed' but Gwen was too nice for that. 'Your paintings are wonderful,' she said. 'I'd love to have one in the window ... but can you pick one that's less dark and gloomy'

'Most fairytales are dark and gloomy,' Jake told her. 'Kids die, the three wishes never work out and even if the youngest son marries the princess, his older brothers usually end up miserable.'

That wasn't the way Rochelle saw *Grimms' Fairytales* and she didn't want to hear any more about Jake's version. When the shop bell rattled and clanged, she turned away and waved at Bel, who strode in swinging a carrier bag.

'Hi, how's things?' she said and listened while Rochelle answered. Rochelle glanced at Jake, making the point that *Bel* noticed her.

'How about you?' she asked. 'You've been shopping, right?'

'Not really,' Bel said. 'It's just a book I bought in the city, after I went on this demo about letting more refugees come here.'

Straight away, Jake stopped arguing with Gwen and started to argue with Bel. 'What's the point?' she said. 'The politicians won't take any notice. They're only interested in votes and most people don't like change, so they'll vote against the refugees.'

'Exactly,' Bel said. 'That makes it even more important to show that some of us care.'

'Why?' Jake asked. 'You could sit at home and care. It'd have the same effect.'

'No, it wouldn't,' Bel told her. 'I feel way better, after seeing that crowd on the parliament steps. It's a buzz, knowing hundreds of people think the same way I do. You ought to try it some of the time.'

She had an answer for everything but Jake kept on arguing, all the same. Rochelle watched them, her head turning back and forth like a tennis audience, until a couple of customers arrived. She was adding up the prices of five cards and a 'Magic Happens' sticker, when she looked around and saw Hal waiting patiently beside her.

'Yes!' she said, punching the air. 'Payday!'

The customer grinned and told her to have a good one. Rochelle checked her watch to make sure she was off-duty and followed Hal to the back room.

'Listen, Gwen told me your uncle's paying my salary now,' she said, while he counted out her money. 'Do you want to, like, do that tax thing, after all?'

Hal's pale skin went scarlet, in between his pale freckles. 'Um,' he said. 'Actually, I had another idea. Mum and I usually do the mail orders on Friday night, so I thought I'd use that money to pay Jake to help me. It'd give Mum a break and - well, I figure we owe Jake a job.'

Rochelle grinned. Apart from being so freckly, Hal was definitely as nice as his mum. Only a really, really nice guy could feel sorry for someone like Jake.

As she tucked her pay into her wallet, Hal shut the cash box and cleared his throat. 'By the way,' he said, 'could you give me your phone number?'

Rochelle thought: oh help, is he interested in me or something?

'It's not crucial,' he added, like he'd guessed what she was thinking. 'I just want to be able to ring if Mum needs to change your shift.'

She thought: oh help, actually that's even worse.

Pictures went spooling through her brain, faster than a music video. Hal phoning when her mother was home, saying, 'Hi, can I speak to Rochelle about her job in our shop?' Her mother turning to stare at her, breathless and big-eyed, maybe even crying, making Rochelle wish she'd never skived off from school. Her father finding out and shouting at her over the phone. The grey-and-maroon clones lined up, pointing and laughing, while the cops marched Rochelle through the narrow gate into Helvellyn Girls' Grammar ...

But none of that had to happen, because she was brilliant at lying by now. She thought for half a second and invented a story about how they didn't have the phone on yet. Then Jake stormed in, getting her timing right for once, and started to tell Hal that Bel was totally illogical.

'Shut up, Jake,' he said. 'I've got news for you.'

Jake shut up, the same as she'd done on Tuesday, which surprised Rochelle. Hal obviously had some special superpowers, hidden behind his pale skin and freckles. She sneaked off, in case Hal used his powers to make her say when their phone would be connected, and went to ask Gwen the question that had been on her mind, back when Jake had barged in.

'So, okay, why's this shop called The World Tree?' she said, but before Gwen had time to answer, Jake barged in again. She was actually smiling - or at least Rochelle thought it was a smile. On Jake's face, it was hard to tell.

'Thanks for the job, Guinevere,' she said. 'I'm taking Prince Hal out for coffee, to celebrate.'

'If you're paying for me, I can pay for Rochelle,' Hal said, coming up behind Jake. 'And Bel too,' after he spotted Bel, browsing through the New Books display.

Rochelle turned pink with pleasure. First a jaffle from Gwen, then a coffee from Hal. It made her feel like one of the family. Gwen handed her a book, saying, 'You'll find the World Tree in here,' and off they went to Artemis Georgiou's cafe.

That was exactly what Rochelle had wanted, back on Tuesday. She was rapt to have become part of the gang so fast, although actually it was pretty boring at first. Bel and Hal and Jake talked on and on about their courses - what subjects they were doing that year, what marks they were getting, what the other students were like. Rochelle couldn't say much but she

didn't really mind, because she found out what they were all doing. She made a note of it in her exercise book later on.

(1) Bel's doing third year Drama at the Victorian College of the Arts, on the far side of the city.

(2) Hal's at Melbourne Uni, just up the road, studying Commerce, and he's in his second year.

(3) Jake's in the first year of an Art course, also at VCA which is where she and Bel met up.

In the end the three of them stopped being boring and started teasing each other. Jake kept calling Hal 'Prince Hal' and 'Harry Potter'. (Apparently, Hal was short for Harry and there was a Prince Hal in one of Shakespeare's plays.)

'Harry Potter?' Bel said with a grin. 'Hadn't heard that one before. Yeah, Jake, you could do a painting of Hal as a financial wizard.'

'No, thanks,' Hal said, blushing again. 'I'm not the wizard type ... or the prince type either. You'd be better off painting Rochelle. She looks like someone out of a fairytale, with that long blonde hair of hers.'

'Too easy,' Jake said. 'I don't do pretty.'

Rochelle said, 'Bitch,' under her breath, but she didn't say anything out loud. Jake was better at put-downs than she was and besides, she preferred to listen.

'I don't do made-up fairytales, either,' Jake went on. 'The Harry Potter writer puts the old stories together in her own way but I'd rather stick with the original stories. So I won't be painting you just yet, Prince Hal.'

She stared at Hal and so did Bel, as if they were studying him to see which fairytale he fitted into. Hal wriggled in his chair. 'That's fine,' he said. 'I can wait.'

Bel patted him on the back. 'Relax,' she told him. 'If you don't want to be turned into a painting, I'll protect you from Jake's evil paint brush.'

'Rack off, Bellona,' Jake said, switching sides. 'I might want to put Potty Harry in a painting some day. Don't talk him out of it.'

Hal laughed. 'No need,' he said. 'I can talk myself out of it, easy as.'

Rochelle was having fun, so she was sorry when Hal said he had a lecture and the other two headed off to college. It wasn't a problem, though. She remembered what she'd done the day before yesterday, waited for the tram that stopped in front of the supermarket and travelled all the way to the end of the line.

By the time the tram stopped, it was practically out in the country. There were paddocks and gum trees and distant blue hills - as different from Smith Street as you could get. Rochelle had spotted a Vietnamese noodle

shop near the second-last tram stop, so she walked back there and had a bowl of noodle soup for lunch, while she wrote down all her new facts about Bel and Hal and Jake.

She was about to shut the exercise book, when an idea exploded in her brain, like a light globe switching on inside a cartoon character's head.

Rochelle clicked the astronaut pen and wrote:

I can't believe I took so long to get this. Stupid or what? It's about Hal and Bel and Jake, okay?

Fact Number 1: Hal lives above the shop with Gwen.

Fact Number 2: Bel and Jake are always inventing excuses to drop in.

Conclusion: I reckon they're both keen on him.

She read through the list, tapping the pen against each line. It sounded logical, although it had taken a long time to sink in, because Hal was so not the sort of guy she would ever fancy. Too pale, too freckly and way too nice: Rochelle went for good-looking guys who acted kind of dangerous, like Kerrill's totally-ex-boyfriend Josh. (Not that Josh had ever noticed her, really.)

Then again, Jake was dangerous enough for two people and Bell was good-looking enough for two people, so they probably wouldn't care about Hal being nice and freckled. Rochelle squeaked, making the Vietnamese waiter turn to look at her and started writing again.

Hang on! If Jake and Bel are, like, in this competition for Hal, which one of them's winning???

She had to think about that for ages. Even when she was tipping her bowl back, to get the last spoonful of soup, she still couldn't come up with an answer. Hal had organised Jake into working with him on Fridays, which made it look as though she was winning at present. On the other hand, he'd asked Bel to the cafe as well as Jake, and he hadn't liked the idea of being in a painting, which meant he wasn't jumping at every possible chance to be alone with Jake.

Oh, spit, Rochelle wrote. I can't figure it out. Wish I could talk to Tez and Kerrill and see what they said. I really miss them at times like this.

Still, even if I can't work out what Hal's thinking, I know what I think.

I hope Bel wins.

Saturday

Rochelle woke with the leftover bits and pieces from a dream rattling around her head - a gingerbread cottage and a witch who looked like the Slut, which made sense, then suddenly started to look like her mum, which didn't make any sense at all. She shook her head so hard that her hair stung her eyes and by the time she stopped, the dream was just a memory.

All the same, when she went out to the kitchen, it was a relief to see her mum looking very un-witchy in a pink shirt and cream pants, instead of the navy tracksuit she wore for sleeping on the couch.

'Oh good, you're up, Shell,' she said. 'One of the students from my course offered to lend me a couple of books. I'm going out to collect them now, but I thought I'd wait and see if you'd like to come too. It might be fun to meet some new people.'

Rochelle groaned. Her mum didn't know it but she met dozens of new people every day at the bookshop.

'Now way,' she said. 'I'd rather stay home and have a rest.'

Then, two seconds after the door closed, she started to worry about letting her mum go off on her own, although she couldn't work out why. It wasn't as if they two of them used to do everything together, back in Sydney. Her mum had her own friends there, same as Rochelle had Tez and Kerrill, and even when she was at home, she'd spent more time with her dad than her mum - before the Slut came on the scene, anyway.

But she still felt so miserable and restless that she couldn't bear to stay in the flat, so she took her bookshop money down to the local shopping centre, where she studied a display of mobile phones, like small bright jewels, then remembered that nobody ever rang her and bought a portable CD player and next week's travelcard instead. That left enough money for a week of lunches and a few treats. Rochelle took one last look at the mobiles and dragged herself away and went for a walk around the park.

Halfway through her second circuit, she thought: got it! I know why I'm worried about Mum. We've been here for two weeks and she's collapsed on the couch every night. What if she's got Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, like that woman on *All Saints*?

She did a third circuit of the park and planned half a dozen ways to talk her mum into seeing a doctor, next time she caught her napping on the couch. But when she got back to the flat, her mum was bustling around energetically, building a wall of text books across the lounge-room table.

'Huh?' Rochelle said, frowning at the wall. 'I thought you were borrowing two books, not twenty.'

‘The rest of them come from the library,’ her mother explained. ‘Didn’t I tell you? We got our first assignment on Friday. It has to be handed in at the end of term, so I need to start work straight away.’

‘No, you don’t,’ Rochelle objected. ‘If it’s due at the end of term, you’re not supposed to start till, like, two days before that.’

‘You’re wrong there,’ her mum said. ‘They wouldn’t give us the topics now unless they thought the assignment was going to take the full six weeks.’

Rochelle sighed. ‘Nerds spend six weeks on their essays. Cool kids wait to the last minute. Which do you want to be?’

Her mother gave her a funny look. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not a kid. I don’t fancy my chances in the cool stakes.’

Rochelle bit her lip and realised she’d been snapping at her mum, almost as though she was pissed off that her mum had got her act together, just when she’d had that helpful idea about Chronic Fatigue.

‘What’s your class like?’ she said, as a kind of apology. ‘Are they all oldies, same as you, or are there young ones as well?’

Normally, that would have set her mum off on a round of funny stories about everyone in her class but this time she just vaged out. ‘A bit of both,’ she said, waving her hands about. ‘Some of them are more or less straight from school but I’m not the oldest. I don’t know much about the other students, though, because I spend most of my free time in the library. I really ought to start sorting through all my notes ...’

She waved her hands harder, as if she was shooing Rochelle away. Rochelle could take a hint, so she went off to her room and spent the next few hours listening to all her CDs on her new player and reading *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes*, the book Gwen had lent her.

By the end of the afternoon she was pretty sure she’d found the tree that Gwen was talking about. It was an ash tree called Yggdrasill and it had three roots. The first one went down to a dark, misty world called Niflheim; the second ended up in Midgard, where the ordinary people lived; and the third was in Asgard, the home of the Norse gods. Around each of the roots there was a pool. In the Niflheim pool, a dragon gnawed at the root, trying to kill the tree. Three sisters lived beside the Asgard pool, sprinkling Yggdrasill’s leaves with its water to keep the tree alive.

And drinking from the Midgard pool made you wise.

Odin, the leader of the Norse gods, went to the Midgard pool one day and asked the giant who guarded it to give him some of the water. The giant told him that even the gods had to pay for wisdom, then asked for one of Odin’s eyes. Rochelle had been trying to make a picture of the tree in her head, like one of Jake’s paintings, but she drew the line at picturing the moment when Odin pulled his eye out and dropped it into the pool. Still, he

obviously thought it was worth the sacrifice, because after that he knew everything - past and present and future - although there always seemed to be a catch in fairytales.

In this case, Odin could see all the bad stuff coming before it even happened, which made him pretty miserable, Rochelle told her exercise book. And trust me, he had a lot to worry about. The Norse story isn't one of those happy-ever-after fairytales. The gods spend most of their time fighting the giants and in the end they have this major battle where everyone, including Odin, ends up seriously dead and the whole world goes up in flames.

She stared at a window of blue sky, feeling sorry for Odin; feeling glad that she hadn't had to spend the last sixteen years waiting for the moment when her dad would run off with the Slut. Sometimes she was convinced that her entire life had been a lie, but at least it had seemed happy, at the time.

If she'd known the end in advance, like Odin, she might never have managed to get through the good years.

Sunday

'You're right,' her mum said after lunch. 'I'm worrying too much about this assignment. Why don't we go for a drive down to St Kilda? We can walk on the beach and blow the cobwebs away.'

Rochelle nearly said, 'Don't bother, the beach at St Kilda's totally grey and boring' - but just in time she remembered that, as far as her mum knew, she'd never seen it. For a moment, she felt like a secret agent in a movie. She was good at lying now but it was a lot harder to keep track of what she *wasn't* supposed to say.

Since she couldn't say St Kilda was a waste of space, she had to go there. They looked at the beach and decided it was grey and boring, then her mum asked whether she wanted to go to Luna Park and try some of the rides.

'With my *mother*?' Rochelle said. 'I don't think so.'

Her mum twitched, as if the knockback had hurt her feelings. Rochelle couldn't understand it. Her mother had been the style queen of Sydney and it wouldn't be a good look, riding the merry-go-round with your sixteen-year-old daughter - although, actually, they'd gone to the zoo last weekend, which was a little-kid thing as well. Maybe her mum had got trapped in a time warp or something.

Luckily, there was plenty of other stuff to do in St Kilda. Rochelle nudged her mum towards the main street, without letting on that she knew where the shops were, and they had a mother-and-daughter moment, eating slabs of ten-layer cake at one of the tables on the footpath.

‘Now, tell me all about your new friends at school,’ her mother said, just when Rochelle had decided she was never going to ask.

She panicked for half a second, then thought of another brilliant lie and turned Bel and Jake into girls at Helvellyn Girls’ Grammar and Hal into a guy from the boys’ school down the road, who caught the same tram as them.

‘It’s like they both fancy Hal, even though they’re way cooler than he is,’ she ended up. ‘Why do you reckon they’re interested?’

Her mother gazed down at her plate with her head on one side, as if she was studying a photo of Bel and Jake and Hal. ‘Well, they say opposites attract,’ she suggested.

‘Yeah, that’s basically what I thought,’ Rochelle agreed, ‘except that Hal’s so not attractive. Those pale freckles! Yuck. And plus, he’s studying to be an *accountant*.’

‘Those freckles probably don’t matter to your friends,’ her mother told her. ‘Women don’t generally care about the way men look.’

‘You reckon?’ Rochelle said. ‘Kerrill’s totally-ex-boyfriend Josh’s body is the best thing about him.’

Then she blushed, because she didn’t usually rave on to her mum about guys’ bodies. It didn’t matter, though. When she glanced sideways, her mother had vagued out again, tapping her fingernails on the empty cake plate and frowning at the couples who strolled past their table, hand in hand.

‘Be careful, Rochelle,’ she warned. ‘Some women get very competitive, if they’re interested in the same man. You don’t want to find yourself caught up in anything unpleasant.’

Rochelle giggled. ‘Not a problem,’ she said. ‘It’s cool fun, watching Bel and Jake in operation.’

Her mother’s fingernails tapped faster, like a Morse code message. Rochelle tried to decipher the code, failed and started to tap her foot impatiently.

‘Come on, Mum,’ she said, to stop all the tapping. ‘We’ve finished our cakes. It’s time to hit the shops.’

But, for some reason, her mother’s warning stuck in her brain, like the piece of hazelnut from the cake that had wedged in her back tooth. Two hours later, back at the flat, Rochelle was still poking her tooth and trying to decode the message, while her mum changed her mind, chose a different assignment topic and built another wall of text books down the opposite side of the table.

I think I've finally cracked the code, she wrote on the last page of the exercise book. What if Mum was really talking about her and the Slut and Dad? It's possible. Mum doesn't like things being unpleasant. That's why she backed off after the Big Drama and ran away to Gran's house.

She closed her eyes and saw faces merging together, like the witch-face in her dream - Bel and Hal and Jake, gradually morphing into her mum and her dad and the Slut. Then she opened her eyes and wrote:

Hmm. Actually, if Mum's right and there is some sort of connection, that'd make the bookshop people even more interesting.

THE CINDERELLA BOOK

There is an exercise book.
There is a shoe box.
There is a girl in ragged clothes, peering up from the
cover of the next book.

Rochelle lifts the exercise book off the Cinderella book and drops it into the shoe box. She's getting closer now: but not too close. The really hard part won't turn up for a while yet. She still has time to idle through her memories, poke into the dark corners and make connections that she didn't notice while they were happening.

And the Cinderella book's her favourite, the one she totally chose for herself. The cloud book chose her, the exercise book was there already and the loose-leaf folder was given to her but she picked the Cinderella book.

She wasn't all that keen on it at the time. The picture on the cover seemed brown and dull then - Cinderella too ragged, the fairy godmother too old and neat and respectable - but now Rochelle enjoys spotting the clues that the artist has hidden in the picture. The plans for the pumpkin-coach, spread out on the sewing table. The dressmaker's dummy, with the design for a ballgown pinned to it. The wizard's hat, royal blue with gold stars, on the floor beside an armchair where Cinderella can't see it: but Rochelle can.

She places her left hand on the third book, covering Cinderella completely. Just before she closes her eyes and pushes her middle finger and her ring finger apart in a V, letting Cinderella look out through the gap, ragged but hopeful.

'Yeah, sure,' Rochelle says to Cinderella. 'You got to go to the ball and live happy ever after. But you were in a fairytale. I'm not.'

As she squeezes her eyes shut, blotting out Cinderella, the book quivers under her hand.

Rochelle remembers.

Monday

Mr Creepy came back first thing and bought another book, paying Rochelle with another handful of warm sticky coins. When she held the book out, her hand accidentally touched his. She could see him scrubbing the patch of skin with his hanky as he sidled through the door.

She thought: he's a weirdo, for sure, but he didn't creep me out as much as last time. I guess I must be getting used to him.

After that, a uni-student-looking guy browsed round the Aboriginal section and went off without buying anything, while Rochelle sold a couple of cards. There were some fancy notebooks in the card section, with creamy white pages and fairytale covers, which reminded her that she'd finished her exercise book. She lined up the notebooks in a row and studied their covers, eliminating flower fairies in bluebell mini-skirts (too babyish) and dreamy-eyed mermaids (too like the Little Mermaid, dancing on knives), until finally she ended up with the Cinderella book, even though it wouldn't have been her first choice.

And that was it, till Gwen came back, but she was in a chatty mood, so Rochelle got a chance to ask some more questions.

'I found a tree in the book you lent me,' she said straight away. 'But I still can't see why you called the bookshop The World Tree.'

‘Fair enough,’ Gwen agreed. ‘I just wanted you to read the story first. The thing is, Yggdrasill has roots in three different worlds - so, as far as I’m concerned, “The World Tree” means I’m collecting stories from all round the world.’

That sounded like a stretch, as far as Rochelle was concerned, but at least Gwen wasn’t trying to make her feel stupid because she hadn’t guessed right.

‘Awesome,’ she said politely. ‘Where did you get the idea for a fairytale bookshop?’

Gwen twiddled an earring, while she thought about it. ‘In a way, the last state premier gave me the idea,’ she said. ‘He wanted to save money by cutting back the state school system, which meant he was offering big payouts to any teachers who were interested in retiring and - well, I’d been teaching for almost twenty years, so I thought, “Why not live dangerously?”, took the package and used it to start the shop.’

Rochelle’s dad would’ve accepted that answer, because it was all about money, but Rochelle was getting to know Gwen by now, so she was sure there’d be more to it than that.

‘Hmm,’ she said in an encouraging way and Gwen laughed.

‘If you want the full story, you’ll have to time-travel to the 1960s,’ she said. ‘When I was a kid, libraries only let you borrow four books at a time - two fiction books and two non-fiction. I loved stories, so I used to hunt through the non-fiction shelves for books with stories in them, like biographies and travel books, history and ...’

She stopped and waited. ‘Fairytale,’ Rochelle said, remembering that Gwen had been a teacher; for some reason, teacher liked to make you fill in the gaps.

‘Very good,’ Gwen said in a teacher-voice. Then she switched back to her normal voice and added, ‘Anyhow, as I got older, I thought I’d grown out of fairytales but I hadn’t. If you asked me to describe my ex-husband, I’d say he was like Thor, the thunder god in the Norse myths. And when we separated, I felt like the girl in “East of the Sun and West of the Moon”, who married a white bear that turned into a man at night, then spoiled it by breaking her promise and looking at him while he was asleep ...’

She stopped and sighed, as if she still missed her white bear. Rochelle said ‘Hmm,’ to get her going again.

‘Yes, well,’ Gwen said, knuckling her eyes like someone who’d just woken up. ‘I went to three libraries and four bookshops, searching for “East of the Sun and West of the Moon”, but I couldn’t find it anywhere - and the shops didn’t have many other fairytale collections, either. So that’s why I started The World Tree. I want people to be able to find the old stories and use them to -’

She tugged at her earring and said, 'Wait a minute,' hurried over to the opposite side of the shop and came back, flicking through a book.

'This'll say it better than I can,' she told Rochelle. 'It's one of my favourite quotations, from a poet called William Yeats. He said: "*There is some one myth for every man which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he thought and did*" - and he would've said "every woman" too, if he'd been writing now, instead of last century.' When Rochelle stared blankly, she said in her teacher-voice, 'A myth's a type of story, much the same as fairytales.'

Rochelle shivered and glanced round the shop, convinced that a breeze was blowing down the back of her neck. She heard the rustle of invisible leaves and remembered the leaf from the park that had stuck in her exercise book and the moment when she'd written, 'Fairytales are still true.'

'Unreal,' she said. 'I was thinking almost exactly the same thing last week. Okay, the guy uses fancier language but I have to be on to something, if dead poets are saying it too. Can I copy that into my notebook?'

Gwen said yes, of course - teachers always liked it when you made notes - so Rochelle went to collect her Cinderella notebook. She was writing down the quotation when another student came in, wanting a book for a course on Aboriginal culture. Gwen, who seemed to know every book in the shop, said, 'Yes, I've got a copy right here,' and bustled over to the Aboriginal section. She reached out, hesitated and frowned at an empty space. Rochelle looked up from her notebook and froze.

She thought: oops. That's where the other uni-student-looking guy was standing ...

For the next few minutes she prowled round the shop, hoping that the first guy had picked the book up, decided he didn't want it and put it down again in the wrong place. People did that sometimes. But not this time. In the end, she had to tell Gwen that she'd let somebody steal one of her books.

'Don't worry,' Gwen said. 'It happens.'

'Maybe it does,' Rochelle said, clutching her hair. 'But I still feel bad about it. What should I do, if I spot another shoplifter?'

Gwen shrugged. 'It depends. Sometimes I go and fiddle with the books on the next shelf, till they decide it's time to leave, or I corner them at the door and say, "Excuse me, I think you might be walking out with a book by mistake." But if they're six feet tall, wearing a kickboxing t-shirt, I steer clear of them. There's no point in getting into trouble, just for the sake of a book.'

Rochelle sighed. Gwen was incredible. One minute she was telling Rochelle that the bookshop was her dream-come-true - and next minute she was telling her that she shouldn't stress herself, 'just for the sake of a book'.

Still, even though Gwen had been cool, the shoplifter had spoiled Rochelle's morning. She filed the rest of her questions, said goodbye to Gwen

and took herself off on another mystery bus ride. But that line ended in the middle of nowhere. Rochelle frowned out at acres of dry grass, dotted with warehouses like giant metal containers, and decided to stay on the bus and return to the city. She got home earlier than usual and sprawled on the couch, admiring the cover of her Cinderella book and reading Gwen's quote out loud.

'There is some one myth for every man which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he thought and did.'

It sounded even better than before. Rochelle sat up straight and blinked, as another cartoon light globe switched on inside her head. Brilliant. The dead poet guy had given her a new project. If she was working in a fairytale bookshop, she might as well make the most of it and find the right stories to help her understand everyone she knew.

She was out in the kitchen, making coffee before she started her project, when the phone rang. 'Hi,' she said, tucking the receiver between her ear and her shoulder.

'Rochelle!' her father bellowed into her ear with his usual gale force energy. 'It's wonderful to hear your voice!'

Rochelle's hand stalled, halfway towards the electric jug, and her mouth automatically clamped shut. Her dad was such a con merchant. He could've heard her voice any time in the last few weeks, if he'd really wanted.

'How are you?' he went on. 'Are you settling in okay? Do you like your new school? What do you think of Melbourne?'

'Fine,' she said to all of that, because he didn't deserve more than a one-word answer.

Her father got the message. 'Never mind, we can have a proper talk some other time,' he said. 'I actually rang to speak to Jilly.'

Rochelle remembered her hand and dropped it to her side. 'Well, you can't,' she told him. 'Mum's not here.'

'Oh!' he said, as though that had really thrown him. 'Will you tell her to phone me as soon as she gets in?'

Rochelle groaned out loud. Her dad always acted like everyone should spend their lives sitting by the phone, in case he wanted to ring them - probably because his personal assistant lined up all his calls for him when he was at work. Then she took in the second part of what he'd said and her stomach did a backflip.

'Da-ad!' she wailed. 'Mum told you not to call for the first two months. I thought that was supposed to be cool by you.'

'This is business, Rochelle,' he said. 'It won't take long but I need an answer straight away.'

Rochelle frowned at the phone. Her mum had cried, that day in Sydney, after she'd told her dad to leave them alone. If she got a message to

call him, without any explanation, she might cry again. Rochelle knew she couldn't handle that.

'What sort of business, Dad?' she asked.

Silence. A rush of anger gusted through her, like a hot north wind.

'Oh, great,' she said. 'So I'm just a kid who can't be trusted with adult stuff? Is that it?'

'All right, all right,' her father sighed. 'I don't know why you're making this so difficult but - all right, I'm ringing because Helvellyn Girls' Grammar returned your first term fees. I was going to send the cheque straight back, to make sure they didn't give you any trouble, but Sara ... but I thought I'd better consult with your mother first.'

Rochelle's anger blew away, as suddenly as it had come, and left her cold and shaking. How could she have been so stupid? She'd known her dad was paying her school fees. She should've realised the school would have to do something with the money, after she un-enrolled herself.

Then again, Gwen would say the universe was looking after her. If her father had run an hour later, her mother would've been there to answer the phone but this way, Rochelle had a second chance.

'Oh, that,' she said casually. 'Chill, Dad. Mum had, like some money left over, so she paid for the first term. You get to pay the next round, okay?'

More silence. Rochelle held her breath while she waited to see whether the lie had worked, but in his usual slippery fashion her father changed the subject.

'Listen, Shell,' he said, using her baby-name, 'there's a couple of things I'd like to remind you about, while we're talking. For one thing, don't forget you can fly up to Sydney for the weekend, any time you want. Just say the word and I'll organise your plane ticket straight away. And for another thing, you'll be coming here for half the school holidays, of course.'

It took Rochelle a few seconds to catch on but then she remembered. Sara. Her father had said 'Sara' before. That was the Slut's name. If she could look down the phone, like a telescope, Rochelle was sure she'd see the Slut standing beside her dad and telling him what to say, the way her mum used to do.

Her mother had spent years protecting her father from difficult phone calls and weirdo artists at dinner parties and all the other people who bothered him. If the Slut was doing that now, it seemed only fair that her mum should have Rochelle to protect her.

'You said you'd let us settle in,' she yelled. 'You said you wouldn't call. Just lay off, okay? If you leave us alone, I'll think about the holiday deal. But if you keep hassling Mum ...'

She didn't need to finish that sentence. Her father knew exactly what she meant. He really, really wanted her to visit. He kept saying so, every time

they talked on the phone. That gave Rochelle a vote and she'd used it. She could tell he'd won when her dad went back into sleaze mode, complaining about how much he missed her.

Rochelle figured she was supposed to burst into tears and go, 'Oh wow, I changed my mind, can I come to Sydney this weekend?' but actually, it was her father who almost burst into tears. He'd always been more emotional than her mother. He got mad easily and he got sad easily ... and then he got over it, so Rochelle had learned not to take too much notice.

'Can I go now?' she asked and when her dad said, 'Yes, of course', she said, 'Talk to you in two months,' and put the phone down.

Just in time. A key slotted into the front door lock. As Rochelle backed away from the phone, her mother came in, waving a bunch of purple chrysanthemums.

'Look what I just got from a boy in my tutorial!' she said. 'He bought them to take home to his mother but then he had to work instead, so he gave them to me, because he says, "Mums are for mums". Shall I put them in the blue vase or do you think they'd like the green vase better?'

Rochelle shrugged. 'Actually, flowers don't have feelings,' she said. 'You can put them wherever you want.'

Her mother looked hurt, which made Rochelle feel mean, especially after she worked out that she was jealous of the chrysanthemum boy. *He* was a big hero, just for passing on some tatty old chrysanthemums. *She* guarded her mother all the time and never got any thanks - although, come to think of it, her mum didn't actually know Rochelle had saved her from a freaky phone call, so she couldn't really expect to be thanked for that.

'I'll get the green vase,' she offered, to make up for being mean. 'We can try them both ways, to see which is best - hey, and tell me about this boy. He sounds cool.'

They chatted about the boy and the flowers but it felt weird, talking to her mum with a secret inside her. Rochelle went on feeling weird, until she escaped from the lounge room after tea. Alone in her bedroom, she tried to read *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes*, looking for stories that'd help her understand everybody she knew, but her eyes kept slipping from one line to the next, muddling the sentences. In the end she jumped up, jerked the Cinderella book out of her bag, slapped it onto her desk and started to write.

Okay, stop nagging me, Book. I admit it. Look, I'm even writing it down.

I didn't make Dad back off just to protect Mum. I did it for me, as well.

Are you happy now, Book?

She stared at her reflection in the night-dark window, facing facts. The truth was, she'd lie and cheat and do whatever it took to stay on at the bookshop. It wasn't just some sort of game. She needed to be there, way more than she needed to be at Helvellyn Girls' Grammar. She knew enough about other kids already. It was time to figure out how adults' minds worked.

She'd never thought about that before. Never had any reason to think about it. She'd had a great life - and then adults had gone and wrecked it. Her father copped out on being a father and run off with the Slut. Her mother had moved them into that tiny flat in Sydney, then moved them right down to Melbourne. The Slut was supposed to be an adult too but that hadn't stopped her from conning Rochelle's dad off, when she must've known it was wrong.

And Rochelle had just sat there like a stupid kid and let it all happen. Maybe, if she'd been paying more attention, she could've said something or done something that would've made a difference. But she hadn't realised her parents were screwing up, until the Big Drama hit, and by then it was too late.

Rochelle wrote:

Well, they won't catch me the same way twice. Next time, I'll remember adults do what they want, not what kids want.

And I'll look after myself from now on, instead of expecting them to look after me.

Tuesday

Rochelle spent the morning watching out for shoplifters but her first four customers were major Gwen-fans who kept telling her how wonderful The World Tree was. Then a woman came in to buy a book for her five-year-old daughter, because the kid had let the doctor across the road give her a needle, without crying. The three of them were sitting on the floor, sorting through the picture books, when Rochelle spotted a book called *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*.

That was the story Gwen had been talking about. She sat on the book, to hide it from the kid and then felt guilty - but in the end the kid picked *Snow White*, because she'd seen it on TV, so that was all right.

After that, things went quiet for a while, which gave Rochelle a chance to read the bear story. She even had time to summarise it in her Cinderella book.

So, okay, a white bear turns up at this poor guy's door and asks if he can buy the guy's daughter. The girl's, like, 'No way known' but then she does it anyway, to help her family. The bear takes her to this awesome palace and turns into this awesome guy every night, only she's not allowed to turn the light on and look at him. (So they're doing it, right?)

But after a while the girl gets lonely and the bear lets her go home for a visit. She's telling her mum the whole story, like you do, and the mum goes, 'What if he's a troll or something?' and gives her a candle to take back to the palace. When the girl lights the candle, she sees this gorgeous guy and falls madly in love - but the candle drips wax on him and he wakes up.

'Oh, no!' he goes. 'You've ruined everything. If you'd hung out for a year, it would've broken the bear-spell. But now I'll have to go away to a castle that's east of the sun and west of the moon and marry a princess with a three-foot-long nose.'

The girl spent seven years searching for her white bear. When she finally found him, he was about to marry the long-nosed princess but the girl swapped her best treasures for the chance to sit in his room for three nights, telling the whole story, and on the third night he woke up and realised she still loved him and they ran away together.

But Rochelle didn't need to write that part down, because it was the same as 'The Lady and the Lion' in *Grimms' Fairytales*, even though the Grimm brothers were German and the blurb on the back of the picture book said 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon' came from Iceland. Almost exactly the same story, turning up at opposite ends of Europe.

Rochelle thought: amazing. That's like magic ...

The shop bell clanged. She slammed the Cinderella book shut as Gwen stormed in, talking so fast that it took Rochelle ages to work out what had happened. Apparently, Gwen had made an appointment with a social worker to come and assess her mother, as the first step for getting her into residential care, but at the last minute the social worker had rung to change the appointment to four in the afternoon.

'Not that Mum's ready to move yet,' Gwen said, tugging at her earring. 'But this is the first time she's even agreed to see anyone, so I don't want to cancel the appointment. I tried to ring Bel and ask whether she could come in early but I can't get hold of her.' Tug, tug. 'Of course, I don't know what you do in the afternoons, Rochelle.' Tug, tug. 'You may be busy but ...' Tug, tug.

She looked as if she was about to tug the earring right out of her ear lot. 'That's fine,' Rochelle said quickly. 'I'll come back here at three.'

Actually, it was more than fine. She was still weirded out by talking to her father and a mystery bus ride would've given her too much time to stare out of the window and think. Instead, Rochelle strolled down Smith Street and then bought a salad roll at the health food cafe, although, after she'd had a chat with Artemis, she ended up staring out of the cafe window and thinking about the day she'd met the Slut.

She'd been hoping the Slut would have a three-foot-long nose or whatever but in fact, she was pretty normal, except that she badmouthed Rochelle's dad all the time. She kept saying things like, 'Stop fussing, Jim. Rochelle and I won't claw each other's eyes out, if you leave us alone for two minutes.' Her father had just taken it and gone off to get them a Coke, like he was the Slut's servant.

But I wouldn't go along with it, Rochelle scrawled furiously in the Cinderella book. I just sat there, totally silent, till he came back - and on the drive home, I told him I wasn't ever going to their house again.

Her dad's face had crumpled, like he was about to burst into tears. He'd looked the way he sounded on the phone yesterday. It wasn't fair of him to look and sound so sad, when he had the Slut and her mum had no one - well, no one except Rochelle. She fidgeted and glanced at her watch, then slammed the book shut, as if she was trapping her father between the covers.

It was quarter to three. She might as well go back to the shop and tell Gwen she could leave a bit early.

Afternoons in the bookshop were different from mornings - busier but fewer people buying and more people browsing. Rochelle was keeping an eye on five customers at once, in case any of them were shoplifters, when Jake staggered in, hauling an enormous square parcel, almost as tall as her.

'Where's Gwen?' she said in typical Jake-style. Not 'Hi, Rochelle' or anything. Just: 'Where's Gwen?'

'Gwen's not here,' Rochelle said to annoy Jake, which it did.

'I can see that,' she said. 'When will she be back? I've bought in two of my paintings and want her to choose.'

There was something familiar about that. When Rochelle searched her memory, she realised Jake sounded exactly like her dad. If either of them wanted something, they expected the rest of the world to stop whatever they were doing and make it happen.

'Who knows?' she said, stalling Jake, the way she stalled her dad. 'Some social worker's coming to see Gwen's mum. She mightn't be back for ages.'

'Trying to get rid of me, Miss Priss?' Jake said, refusing to be stalled. 'No such luck. I can wait.'

She started to unwrap the parcel, folding the brown paper and stowing it in her backpack. No Darth Vader bike helmet today. It looked as though Jake must have conned someone into driving her and her paintings to the shop, in which case Rochelle was stuck with her. She didn't feel like talking - it would only give Jake a chance for more put-downs - so she dodged round the counter to look at the pictures, because she liked Jake's painting better than she liked Jake.

The first picture was in the same cartoon style as the Hansel and Gretel one. The left-hand side was grey and gloomy - a street corner with an overflowing rubbish bin and a skinny kid with dreads, sticking a needle into her arm. Rochelle glanced at the kid in passing, then focused on the big blazing sun at the top of the canvas.

A pathway of bright yellow light opened out from it and a skinny angel with white wings went flying up the path. Rochelle had just noticed that the wings were dripping at the edges, as if they were melting, when her eyes were drawn across to the right-hand side of the painting. Six different versions of the skinny angel-kid - clutching her wings, watching them drop off, falling, falling, falling and lying dead in the gutter, next to the bin.

She thought: it's awesome. Sad but ... oh, I don't know, more than sad.

Then she thought: hang on, I recognise the angel-kid.

'That's the junkie girl!' she said. 'What's she doing in your picture?'

'I live around here, remember,' Jake sighed. 'I know this street way better than you. That kid's been hanging round for ages but she disappeared about a week ago. She's been chasing the dragon, so I guess it turned round and caught her. That's why I did the painting, as a memorial.'

Rochelle flinched. It was true. She hadn't seen the junkie girl since she'd started working at the bookshop. She could almost believe that the two of them had somehow swapped places. Or worse. What if the girl sold the coat Rochelle gave her and used the money to buy smack and ...?

'No,' she whispered, looking away from the painting. 'Don't go there.'

When she glanced up, Jake was watching her with an irritating smile. 'Any more questions, Priss?' she asked.

Rochelle glared back. Jake probably thought she didn't know what 'chasing the dragon' meant but she wasn't totally ignorant. She didn't need to ask Jake about that.

'Yeah, one question,' she said. 'What fairytale does the picture come from? It's not in *Grimms' Fairytales*, that's for sure.'

‘It’s not a fairytale, Priss,’ Jake said impatiently. ‘It’s one of the Greek myths - the story of a boy called Icarus, actually, but I turned him into a girl. His dad, Daedalus, pissed off one of the local kings, who trapped them in a labyrinth, but Daedalus was this amazing inventor and he made wings out of wax and feathers, so they could escape. He warned Icarus not to fly too close to the sun but Icarus couldn’t resist. He went way high and the wax melted and he fell into the sea and drowned. Only I changed the story, to make it about –’

‘Junkies,’ Rochelle said. ‘I know that. And plus, I know myths and fairytales are the same thing.’

She was trying to score off Jake, which was a big mistake. For the next fifteen minutes Jake lectured her about how myths and fairytales were not-so-too the same thing. Rochelle couldn’t even pretend she had to go and help the customers, because they all came over and listened. She started taking notes on a piece of scrap paper, to show Jake she was acting like a teacher, but that didn’t work either. Jake had such a big ego that she just kept stopping and saying, ‘Have you got that, Priss?’

Rochelle copied the notes into her book that night, to make sure she’d never let herself in for another Jake-lecture. (And because it had been kind of interesting, although she’d never admit that to Jake.)

(1) Fairytales (also called folk tales) are stories people used to tell each other in the olden days, before they had TV or even books.

(1a) Made-up fairytales are about princesses or talking animals or whatever, same as proper fairytales, but they’re invented by one person - like, Hans Andersen made up the Little Mermaid but the Grimm brothers went round listening to ordinary people’s stories and writing them down.

(2) Legends are about heroes, like King Arthur or Robin Hood.

(3) Myths are the hardest. They’re stories too, except they’re stories that people actually believed in. In other words, people are Iceland really believed in Odin and the rest of the Norse gods. And people in Greece believed in a different bunch of gods. And so on.

She hadn’t realised that people used to take the Norse gods as seriously as Christianity or Islam or whatever - although, on second thoughts, she wondered whether Jake was having her on.

‘You’re kidding me, right?’ she asked, to test her out. ‘They’re stories, Jake. No one thinks stories are for real.’

'Well, the ancient Greeks used to sacrifice animals to their gods,' Jake told her. 'How much more real can you get?'

'Yuck!' Rochelle said, revolted. 'I really, really don't believe that.'

'You don't know much about myths, do you?' Jake said, putting her down again. 'Actually, the world runs on them. The Aboriginal idea of history still starts with the Dreaming and the Bible's full of myths, like Adam and Eve and the apple tree.'

One of the customers - an old guy with shiny white hair - looked shocked by the last example. 'Young lady,' he said, 'are you aware you're talking about a religion that millions of people all round the world believe in?'

Jake frowned. 'Yeah, that's what I said. Myths are stories that people believe.'

They launched straight into a long, complicated argument about whether myths and religion were the same thing. While the other customers drifted away, Rochelle ducked round Jake and the old guy and went to check out the second painting. It was a proper fairytale picture this time, not Jake's usual grunge. Bright colours - a whole rainbow of them - like the Disney cartoons, only better. A room in a castle, where the walls looked rock-solid and the curtains on the bed looked touchably silky and the view through the arched window looked as if you could walk straight into it.

There was a girl in a silky green dress lying on the bed, eyes closed, hands folded across her chest. She had long dark eyelashes, a superstraight nose and long blonde hair that piled up on the floor, like you could practically see it growing.

Rochelle thought: no prizes for guessing who she is. That's Sleeping Beauty.

Then she said, 'Hang on, it's Bel!'

'No, it's not,' Jake said, exiting from her argument with the old guy. 'Don't be an idiot, Priss.'

'Actually, you're the idiot, if you didn't know what you were painting,' Rochelle said, scoring off Jake at last. 'Look at her nose. That's Bel's nose, for sure, and plus Bel's hair is that exact colour.'

'So, young lady,' the old guy said, half a beat later, 'are you telling me you think Jesus Christ is a myth?'

That wasn't a problem for Jake, of course. She was perfectly capable of arguing with two people at the same time.

'But Bel bleaches her hair,' she told Rochelle. Then she turned to the old guy and said, 'Weren't you listening? Jesus is a legend.'

Rochelle said, 'Big deal,' and the old guy said, 'That's absurd,' and she couldn't hear what Jake said, because they were all talking at once by then. After that, they all stopped talking, like the times when Rochelle almost bumped into someone in the street and they both stepped back, then both

stepped forward, as if they were dancing together. She and Jake and the old guy were staring at each other, trying to decide who would go first, when someone else beat them to it.

‘What are you arguing about?’ Bel asked from behind them.

Rochelle swung round and focused on Bel’s nose. She could tell Jake was doing the same thing, because their eyes met in the middle. Jake looked surprised and helpless, as if she really hadn’t known that she’d stolen Bel’s face for her painting and now she was begging Rochelle not to tell.

A great moment. Rochelle had power over Jake, for once. She wouldn’t do on her, of course, but she figured she was allowed to tease Jake, just a bit.

‘Actually, we were arguing about whether you bleach your hair,’ she said to Bel.

‘Some argument,’ Bel said. ‘I’ve got brown eyes and olive skin. Obviously I bleach. Jake’s the blonde, underneath all that black dye.’

That knocked Rochelle out of the discussion for the next few minutes. Jake was the fair one and Bel was the dark one? It was like finding out that Cinderella and the wicked stepsisters had swapped places. She was too busy studying the two of them to keep on arguing but the old guy was still pretty steamed.

‘This young lady’s just joking, he said, pointing his chin at Rochelle. ‘As a matter of fact, I was telling the other young lady that it’s offensive to describe Jesus Christ as a myth - I mean, legend.’

Bel grinned. ‘Jake can make “good morning” sound offensive,’ she said. ‘But she’s got a point, y’know. Some English guy called Lord Raglan did a study and worked out this hero pattern with twenty-two stages that turn up in a whole lot of legends ... and actually, Jesus scores pretty high on it.’

She sounded so friendly and helpful that the old guy calmed down and started listening. Next minute Bel was carting the Lord Raglan book across to the counter and adding up Jesus’s hero-score. The book said you scored a point if your mother was a virgin; and if someone tried to kill you when you were a baby; and if you grew up in another country; and went back to your own country after that; and won everybody over and made laws; and then got driven out and killed, usually on top of a hill.

According to Bel, Jesus scored eighteen and a half out of twenty-two, which was one of the highest scores. In the end, the old guy got so interested that he actually bought the book. As he left, clutching Lord Raglan, he passed Gwen coming in, looking even more stressed than usual.

‘Oh good, you’re here already, Bel,’ she said, hurrying past them. ‘I’m going upstairs to have a rest.’

Jake tilted her head and listened to the sound of Gwen's footsteps, rapping across the ceiling. 'Guinevere's cranky today,' she commented. 'Her mum must've been hassling her again. She can't stand the old bitch.'

Rochelle scowled. Jake could put a bad spin on anything, even Gwen travelling halfway across the city to look after her mum. She collected her school bag from under the counter and headed for the door but Bel hurried after her.

'Wait a minute,' she called. 'I've been meaning to give you a leaflet, about this story-telling session I'm doing here on Saturday arvo.'

Rochelle folded the leaflet, as carefully as if it had been a note from Bel saying, 'Don't let Jake get to you.' The minute she stepped outside, she wished she'd stayed. Bel was nice enough to cancel Jake out and besides, Hal would be home from uni soon. She could study the three of them, to see whether her love-triangle theory was right, and maybe even help Bel make a good impression on Hal.

Then, as she turned back towards The World Tree, she noticed the time on the old post office clock. Half past five. For some reason, it hadn't occurred to her when she took over Gwen's shift that she'd get home later than late. But her feet wouldn't carry her across to the tram stop. Rochelle dawdled along the footpath, peering into all the shop windows, until she finally admitted that she didn't want to go back to the flat.

She wanted to take off - not just for a mystery bus ride this time but on a plane that'd fly her away to her old life in Sydney. It was impossible, though. She couldn't take her dad's side, after the Slut, so she had to be on her mum's side.

Otherwise, she wouldn't have anyone at all.

Wednesday

Towards the end of the morning, Rochelle had to sell Zac's dragon. It was the worst thing that had happened to her since she'd started working at The World Tree. For a second or two, she even wondered whether she could pretend to find something wrong with it and say, 'Sorry, we'll have to send it back to the dragon factory.'

But then the customer sighed and said, 'Isn't it beautiful? My little niece loves dragons,' so Rochelle had to let it go.

She was watching the dragon bounce out of the shop in a carrier bag, when Jake arrived to collect her Hansel and Gretel painting and her Icarus painting. (Gwen had picked Sleeping Beauty, of course.)

'I can't stay long,' she said. 'One of my friends is waiting outside in his car. Give me a hand, okay?'

'You've got friends?' Rochelle asked, opening her eyes wide. 'Like my gran says, "Wonders will never cease".'

'Hey, not bad,' Jake said, as they carried the paintings out into the street. 'I didn't know you could do bitchy, Miss Priss.'

Rochelle scowled. 'Quit it, Jake,' she snapped. 'I really, really hate that name.'

Jake looked puzzled. 'Oh, right,' she said, after a few seconds. 'I didn't even notice. I give everyone nicknames but if you don't like Miss Priss, I can try something else. How about Shell? You look like a mermaid, with that long blonde hair.'

She pushed the paintings into the back seat of a car waiting at the curb, then jumped in and slammed the door, before Rochelle could say she didn't want her name messed with at all. When she turned round, Hal was leaning against the shop wall, watching the car drive away.

'Looks like I just missed Jake,' he commented and Rochelle said, 'Lucky for you.'

Then she blushed twice - the first time, because she heard her mum's voice, saying, 'If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all'; and the second time, because the look in Hal's eyes reminded her that she was fifty per cent convinced that he fancied Jake.

'So you're not a Jake fan?' he asked, stepping back to let her go into the shop first.

Rochelle wasn't going to say anything at all but just in time, she remembered she was barracking for Bel in the Hal-competition so she gave him the full story, making Jake sound as bitchy as possible.

'Jake always knows how to press people's buttons,' she ended up. 'It's like she looked into my mind and saw how the Little Mermaid story freaked me, then looked even deeper and saw my folks calling me Shell, back when I was a kid.'

Hal laughed - a polite, adult laugh that showed he thought Rochelle was exaggerating. 'Just tell her you don't like being called Shell, either,' he advised.

'No way,' she said. 'If I complain about that, Jake'll only think of something even worse.'

'You could be right,' Hal admitted. 'Oh, and by the way, Mum's been held up, so she asked me to take over for the next hour. You can go now, unless you want to stick around and share my lunch.'

That was tempting, especially since it was a cheese sandwich day. On the other hand, Rochelle wanted to get away and congratulate herself on scoring a point against Jake in the Hal-competition.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘Maybe next time’, and she whisked her Cinderella book off the counter, collected her school bag and headed for the door.

She wasn’t in the mood for a mystery bus ride, because she still felt sad about Zac’s dragon, so she spent the afternoon in the park near the flats, hunting through *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes* for myths that would help her understand everyone she knew. She began with the myths about Thor, the thunder god, because Gwen had said that Hal’s father was like Thor, but before long she found herself concentrating on the stories about Loki, the god of fire.

Loki was a dangerous type of guy. He played tricks on the other gods all the time, just like Kerrill’s totally-ex-boyfriend Josh, who used to annoy Kerrill by leaving weird messages on her mobile or sneaking up behind her and making her jump. Rochelle grinned at the memory and went on reading about the time when Loki sneaked up on Thor’s wife, who was famous for her long golden hair, and cut it so short she was practically bald. Thor was furious, of course, but next minute he and Loki were heading off for an adventure in Giantland. The two of them seemed to hang out a lot, even though Loki was smarter than smart and Thor was a typical tough guy, incredibly strong but not exactly bright.

Then again, guys like that often teamed up together. Rochelle rolled onto her back and gazed at the sky, thinking about Uncle Tony, her mum’s brother. Uncle Tony was really built and really thick. He and her father had been best mates at university and Uncle Tony helped her dad get his first job, because he’d gone to the best school in Sydney and knew all the right people - but after that, everyone realised her dad had more brains than Tony, so these days he helped Tony to get jobs.

Rochelle frowned at the clouds. If Uncle Tony was like Thor, did that mean her dad was like Loki? He was smart, for sure, and actually he was tricky as well. She closed her eyes and time-travelled back to the nights when Tony used to come over to their house and talk business.

‘You can’t do that, Jim,’ Tony and her mum would keep saying. ‘It’s too risky. You’re going too far this time.’

But her dad would just grin. ‘Watch me,’ he’d say. ‘For one thing, I can get away with it - and for another thing, it’s exactly what ArCon wants.’

And sure enough, a few weeks later the company would be giving him another enormous bonus, because he’d made even more money for them.

Rochelle sat up and leafed through *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes*, to find out what happened to Loki. It wasn’t a happy ending. Loki went too far when he played a trick on the most popular god of all, one of Odin’s sons, called Baldur the Beautiful.

Odin loved Baldur so much that he made everything in the world swear not to hurt him but he forgot to ask the mistletoe that grew on a tree in Asgard. Then the gods started to play a game where they threw spears at Baldur, because they knew it couldn't hurt him ... and Loki made a dart out of the mistletoe and gave it to Baldur's blind brother to throw. When the dart hit, Baldur fell down dead and Loki ran away. The gods tracked him down, tied him to a rock in a cave and hung a snake from the roof above him, dripping poison from its mouth. But his wife Sigyn stayed with him forever, catching the poison in a cup.

Mum would've done that for Dad, Rochelle wrote in the Cinderella book. She would've done anything for him. But he went off with the Slut, just the same.

I bet Uncle Tony's hanging with Dad and the Slut now. He didn't back Mum in the Big Drama, that's for sure.

She shut *Tales of Norse Gods and Heroes* and kicked it across the grass, out of reach. Her project wasn't working. Myths didn't always match real life. Loki was punished for going too far but her father got away with everything.

Although maybe myths didn't have to be a perfect match. Gwen reckoned her ex-husband was like Thor - except that Thor's wife was mainly famous for being beautiful and Gwen wasn't exactly good-looking, so her husband couldn't have been totally like Thor. But maybe Gwen's husband thought she was beautiful, even if Rochelle didn't.

And maybe, if Mum read *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes*, she wouldn't think Dad was like Loki at all.

Rochelle sighed and wrote:

Maybe, maybe, maybe. I'm not doing too well with this project of matching people and stories.

Maybe that dead poet guy was talking through his arse, after all.

Thursday

Her mother hadn't got back to the supermarket, because she was still obsessed with her assignment, and Rochelle was tired of eating cheese on toast for breakfast, so she went to a McDonald's on her way through the city.

She was slurping up the last drops of her thickshake, when Bel arrived with some more story-telling leaflets.

'Oh, right,' she said, scowling at the logo on the paper cup. 'Supporting your local multinationals, are you?'

Rochelle thought: that sounds like a put-down but it can't be. Jake's the Queen of the Put-downs, not Bel.

She dropped the cup into the bin and started arranging the leaflets on the counter. 'What stories are you going to tell?' she asked, to get Bel off on another track.

'Dunno,' Bel sighed. 'I keep changing my mind. That's the other reason I dropped in. I'm looking for this story I sort of remember - something about two girls in a cottage and a bear and, um ...'

Rochelle snapped her fingers. 'Hold it right there!' she said. 'I know that one. I read it the other day, which means it's either in *Grimms' Fairytales* or *Favourite Fairytales*.'

She whisked both books off the shelf and checked the index to *Grimms' Fairytales*, spotted a story called 'Snow White and Rose Red' and handed the book to Bel.

'Yep, there's a bear on the second page,' Bel said. 'Good one, Rochelle. I'll make a copy of it before I go.'

'Why's that story so special?' she asked, following Bel across to Gwen's tiny photocopier. 'I can't even remember it properly.'

'Well, it's about two girls,' Bel told her. 'I've been looking for something a bit different from all those fairytales about princes saving princesses and guys setting out to seek their fortunes. I found this collection called *Feminist Fairytales*, about women saving princes and seeking their fortunes - but then I noticed that, even though lots of the guys have helpers, the women mostly have to do it all on their own. If you had to rely on fairytales, you'd never know women could be friends.'

'Huh?' Rochelle said, puzzled. 'What's so feminist about having friends? I've been friends with Tez and Kerrill forever but that never stopped us from being interested in guys - and plus, I thought feminism was totally over.'

'Oh, sure,' Bel said. 'Feminism's over. Women are fine now. Tell that to the girls throwing up in school toilets, so they'll be skinny as the latest TV star. Or the women outworkers, slaving away for two dollars an hour, making shirts that'll sell for seventy-five dollars each. Or -'

She went on for a lot longer but Rochelle zoned out, around the time when Bel was telling her how women still got landed with most of the housework and never scored the top jobs and had to feel guilty if they worked and had kids and even more guilty if they had kids and didn't work.

Okay, she was right about the last part. When the people at her dad's dinner parties asked what Rochelle's mum did, she always used to say, 'Oh, I'm just a housewife,' like she was apologising. Then again, her mum wouldn't want to have a bunch of feminists feeling sorry for her. She didn't let *anyone* feel sorry for her. Some of her friends had tried, when she split up with Rochelle's dad, but her mum wouldn't have a bar of it.

'Please, you're not helping me by criticising Jim,' she'd say. 'We had a good life together, while it lasted, and we want to stay on friendly terms, for Rochelle's sake.'

'Oh, Jilly!' the friends would go. 'That's so typical! First you had the perfect marriage and now you're doing the perfect divorce.'

Then they'd start talking about the latest party or the book they were reading for book club and her mum would sit there, looking pleased with herself, because she'd made them lay off. Her mum was ace at keeping her mouth shut, way better than Rochelle. She'd told Tez and Kerrill all about the Big Drama, although at least she hadn't gone round blabbing to everyone in the world.

Like Bel, for instance. When Rochelle surfaced from thinking about her mum and feminism, Bel was watching her with a worried frown. 'Are you feeling okay?' she asked.

Rochelle could've told her the whole story - Bel obviously wouldn't have minded - but instead she looked around for something to get Bel off her case and spotted the painting in the window.

'So, does Jake believe in feminism, too?' she asked.

It turned out to be a good question. Bel stopped looking worried and started laughing. 'Jake doesn't believe in anything,' she said. 'At least, that's her story - but she'd flatten anyone who told her she couldn't do what she wanted just because she's a girl.'

That was more interesting than being lectured about bulimia and outworkers. Rochelle decided she liked it better when Bel was talking about people she knew - although maybe Bel came across as nicer than Jake because she cared about everybody in the entire world. After she'd finished the photocopying, she thanked Rochelle for finding the story, which Jake would never have done, then checked her watch and said, 'Oops, gotta go.'

She didn't get far, though. Rochelle could see her through the window, staring at the Sleeping Beauty painting. She was wondering whether Bel had recognised herself, when somebody even taller appeared behind her - Hal, resting a hand on Bel's shoulder. The minute she saw them together, Rochelle had two ideas at the same time.

Idea Number 1: Sleeping Beauty couldn't wake up till she'd been kissed by a prince.

Idea Number 2: what if Jake is on to something with her painting? What if Bel is so busy saving the world that she won't wake up to the fact that she fancies Hal, unless he actually makes a move?

Two ideas at once was a powerful combinations, like the chemicals in her science class that flashed white light when she put them together. Rochelle's ideas exploded and sent her rocketing out into the street.

'Hi, Hal,' she said, talking at twice her usual speed. 'I just switched the jug on. Do you want some coffee? And you too, Bel, of course?'

Then she went racing back to fill the jug before they came in, to make sure they didn't realise it was a set-up. Set-ups never worked if they were too obvious, like the time when Kerrill organised Rochelle into a double date with Josh (while he was still Kerrill's boyfriend) and Josh's best mate. She hadn't been able to relax with the best mate, because she'd felt as though Kerrill was watching her all the time.

Although, come to think of it, Rochelle had been watching cool, dangerous Josh and trying to pretend she wasn't, which probably hadn't helped.

She was still thinking about Josh, when Hal and Bel crowded into the tiny kitchen. 'Listen, I can't stay,' Bel said. 'I just came back to ask if you could take my shift on Saturday, while I'm story-telling.'

'Sure,' Rochelle said. 'Like I'd miss out on you telling stories.' Then, to stop Bel from leaving, she added, 'Did Gwen ask you to do the story-telling or was it your idea?'

'A bit of both,' Bel said. 'Gwen's always looking for new ways to get people into the shop - and if I can get someone to video it, it'll count towards my drama course. I had this guy from college lined up but he just phoned to say his camcorder's stuffed. That's why I have to go. I need to ring around and find someone else.'

She looked stressed for half a second, which wasn't typical. Hal noticed, of course.

'I've got a camcorder,' he said helpfully. 'Do you want me to tape your session?'

Rochelle beamed. That was so perfect. Hal was used to looking after stressed people, because of Gwen being stressed all the time. While he and Bel talked about checking the lights in the bookshop and borrowing a tripod to hold the camcorder steady, she made the coffee and shoved their cups in front of them, then left them to it and tiptoed back into the shop to read 'Snow White and Rose Red'.

But four customers turned up in a bunch and after that Gwen arrived and took over, so Rochelle bought a copy of *Grimms' Fairytales* and headed

off on her next mystery bus ride. The bus route ended up at a big shopping complex. Rochelle was pleased at first but after she'd wandered round for a while, she realised she wasn't in a shopping mood. She found a cafe on the fourth floor and sat by the window, looking out across kilometres of suburbs and gloating about Bel and Hal.

Okay, Jake had Hal all to herself when they did the mail orders but that was just work. The video was way more creative. With any luck, it'd give Hal and Bel time to realise how nice each other was.

Rochelle thought: and I started the whole thing. Bel's so cool that Hal would never have known she was stressed, if I hadn't asked that question.

Her heart was pounding like a jack-hammer. Tipping the balance between Jake and Bel had made her feel hyped - so hyped that she had to haul out *Grimms' Fairytales* and read Bel's story to calm herself down. Snow White and Rose Red turned out to be sisters who lived in a little house in a big wood and one day an enormous black bear knocked on their door. The sisters were scared but after their mother let him in, they got over being scared and started playing with the bear, so they were sorry when he had to go away and guard his treasure from an evil dwarf.

Then, later on, while they were exploring in the forest, they met a dwarf hiding some bags of jewels. When the bear rocked up to rescue his treasure, the dwarf said, 'Please, Mr Bear, eat the girls, not me.' But the bear killed the dwarf instead and instantly changed back into a handsome prince, because the dwarf had put a bear-spell on him.

And after that Snow White married the bear-prince and Rose Red married his brother and they all lived happily ever after.

Rochelle was copying the story into her Cinderella book, when she realised she'd been reading it like Tez's grandma read the leaves at the bottom of tea cups, to tell her about the future. She wrote:

In one way, 'Snow White and Rose Red' seems like a good omen. Gwen reckons Hal's dad was like a bear and I already described Hal as a teddy bear in my exercise book. If Bel's keen on bear stories, that shows she could be keen on Hal as well, even though she mightn't have noticed it yet.

But in another way, the story was a bad omen. When he thought about it, Rochelle had to admit that Jake was really pale and Bel was more rosy, so it was a bummer that the bear-prince (meaning Hal) married Snow White (meaning Jake), not Rose Red (meaning Bel).

She laughed at herself and wrote:

Yeah, right. Be real, Rochelle. It's just a story. It doesn't prove Hal's going to fall for Jake, instead of Bel.

Besides, why should I care? Okay, I like Bel best and it's fun, being her secret helper. But it's not as if it really matters to me.

Truth time: in the end, someone'll catch me skiving off and I'll have to leave the bookshop and go back to school and after that, I'll probably never see

Her hand lifted from the page, so abruptly that the astronaut pen went into orbit. Rochelle chased it across the cafe, crawling under a table to retrieve it from between two women's shopping bags, then skidded back to her table and wrote:

No. That's not true. I could always drop in and visit the bookshop people.

She sighed with relief but the astronaut pen kept on scribbling across the page.

It wouldn't be the same, though. It never is. Look at me and Tez and Kerrill. Friends forever ... and we can't even write to each other.

She turned her head away, gazing out across rooftops and back yards and the thick black line of the freeway, as though she was convinced she'd find Tez and Kerrill somewhere, if she only looked hard enough. Then she bent over her book and wrote:

Oh, spit. This is so not what I need. Forget about Hal and Bel and Jake. I'm going home now.

Friday

The phone rang first thing that morning. Rochelle's mum listened and frowned, tapped on the kitchen bench and thanked the person at the other end.

'Oh, lord,' she said, putting the phone down. 'That was - bother, I've forgotten his name. I'll have to call him Mr Louise. You remember him, don't you, Rochelle? The husband of Uncle Tony's friend.'

Rochelle nodded. 'Sorry, I don't know his name either. What did he want?'

'He and Louise have invited us to a party tonight,' her mother said with a sigh. 'They left it till the last minute, so I should've been able to wriggle out of it, but I couldn't think of a good excuse. Still, Mr Louise says there'll be lots of young people at the party. It might be nice for you to meet some more girls your own age.'

'Maybe,' Rochelle said, not very enthusiastically. 'What time do we have to be there?'

'Half-past six - it's a combination pool party and cocktail party - so don't be too late home from school.'

The word 'school' made Rochelle twitch. She sometimes forgot that her mum still thought she was going off to Helvellyn Girls' Grammar every morning.

'Okay, see you then,' she said, and hurried out to the tram before she said the wrong thing by mistake.

The bookshop stayed empty for the first hour, which gave Rochelle time to buy a secondhand book of Greek myths, as a payday present for herself. On the front page somebody had written, 'To Sue, from Auntie Dell, with all my love. Sept 1960' in old-fashioned slopey writing. It made Rochelle wonder where Sue was these days and whether she still remembered the stories. If she was a kid in 1960, Sue probably had nieces of her own by now.

And Rochelle had her book. Weird or what?

She was stashing the book in her bag when Bel and a guy with gym muscles staggered in, carrying tall stacks of tiny cushions. 'Cute, aren't they?' Bel said, as she dumped her cushions. 'Vince and I borrowed them from the church round the corner - they use them for kneeling on when they say prayers. I thought they'd come in handy for my story-telling session tomorrow.'

They started shifting the bookcases back to make more room in the picture-book section. As they clowned about, pretending to be a pair of furniture-moving guys called Darren and Craig, Rochelle found herself wondering whether Vince was Bel's boyfriend.

She thought: oh well, I guess Bel's allowed to choose her own boyfriends.

Then she thought: and so am I allowed to keep hoping she'll end up with Hal.

But after a few more Darren and Craig jokes, she worked out that Vince was (a) one of Bel's friends from drama school and (b) totally gay, which settled that problem. They shunted the bookshelves round till Gwen arrived, then Bel swept Rochelle and Vince off to the housing commission flats a few streets away, to hand out more of her leaflets.

The flats were a world of their own. four tall towers blocked out the sun and little bunches of people huddled on the grass between the towers - men in flannel shirts and men in old-fashioned grey suits; women wearing black Chinese slippers and women wearing looped-up head scarves; long skinny black kids and short stocky black kids. Rochelle would've been nervous if she'd been by herself but the other two walked straight in - Vince banging a drum slung round his neck, Bel calling out, 'Hi, do you like stories?' Everyone started at them but then almost everyone started smiling.

So, in the end, she didn't find it too hard to go over and pass round the leaflets.

After that, Bel and Vince headed back to college and Rochelle collected her pay and went home to prepare for Louise's party, although for a while she thought they'd never get there, because her mum took an hour working out what to wear. It wasn't like her. Back in Sydney, she just used to sidestep into her bedroom and come out ten minutes later, looking perfect.

Then again, she'd been dagging around in a grungy old tracksuit ever since they arrived in Melbourne, so Rochelle figured she must've forgotten how to dress up.

'Heavens, that was hard,' her mum said, as if she'd overheard Rochelle's thoughts. 'I'm exhausted already. Your turn now. Hmmm, I can't remember seeing that dress and jacket before. They're rather elegant but I don't think they're quite right for a pool party.'

Rochelle folded her arms protectively across her Mario and Digby green-and-cream outfit. 'Stop it!' she said. 'We had enough drama about your clothes. Are we going to this party or what?'

For half a second, she wasn't sure whether her mum was going to laugh or yell at her but, luckily, she laughed and picked up the car keys and off they went. Louise's house was like something from a fairytale - old red bricks, mossy roof, diamond-paned windows and tall English-style trees - and the pool wasn't bad either, although it felt strange to be looking at trees, instead of looking out across Sydney Harbour.

And Louise's middle daughter was the same age as Rochelle, plus some of her friends were there. That should've been good news but, after Louise introduced Rochelle and drifted off, a tall red-haired girl called Camille took two steps backwards and ran her eyes up and down the Mario and Digby outfit.

'Euw!' she said, wrinkling her nose. 'Is that supposed to be the latest Sydney style?'

'Actually, I bought it here,' Rochelle said. 'In Smith Street.'

'*Smith Street?*' Camille repeated, as if she'd said she found the clothes in a neighbour's wheelie bin. 'You mean Smith Street in *Collingwood?*'

She started to laugh - a sitcom-soundtrack-laugh that told the other girls to join in or be a loser, like Rochelle. They all laughed, of course. Then they listed off their favourite clothes shops and talked about the boring parties where they wore their boring clothes. It was all so incredibly boring that Rochelle wanted to scream.

Emma, Louise's daughter, was the only one who wasn't totally self-centred. When three gorgeous guys dived into the pool and the other girls turned to watch, Emma actually looked across at Rochelle and said, 'So, what do you think of Melbourne?'

She was trying to be nice but by that time Rochelle had reached screaming point. 'It's okay,' she replied. '*If* you like grey rainy places with no harbour views.'

Camille sighed. 'Sydney people are so shallow,' she said. 'It's like their brains are solar-powered. If there's no sun, they can't operate.'

When Rochelle thought about it later, she had to admit that was quite clever. If she'd met Camille somewhere else, she might've even laughed. But after her mother and Camille had both dumped on her Mario and Digby outfit, she wasn't in a laughing mood.

'Shallow?' she said. 'Excuse me. I better go and dive in at the deep end, to see whether that'll fix it.'

She turned her back on the girl-group and marched off to change into her swimmers. After she'd swum five laps, fast as an Olympic champion, she paused for a rest and started talking to one of the gorgeous guys, who turned out to be Emma's older brother. It was beginning to look as though the party wasn't a complete write-off, when Camille came heading towards them.

'Hi, Rochelle,' she said with a toothpaste-ad smile, mainly aimed at Emma's brother. 'Emma's mum reckons you go to Helvellyn Girls' Grammar. That's strange. So do I ... and I've never seen you there.'

The ground under Rochelle's feet dropped away like a superfast lift, making her sick and giddy. Her stomach cramped so hard that she thought she was about to throw up but she forced her face into a matching toothpaste smile.

'What year are you in?' she asked and Camille said, 'Year 11.'

'That explains it,' Rochelle said. 'I'm in Year 10.'

Camille ditched her smile and started to sulk. It looked as though she'd been trying to turn Emma's brother off Rochelle, by proving she was a hopeless show-off who actually went to state school. Rochelle had shut her up for a few seconds ... but she'd had lots of practice at lying now, so she knew that wasn't enough. What if the next thing Camille said was, 'Who's your form teacher?' or 'Are you in the same class as my younger sister?'

She thought: I won't have a clue how to answer. I'll be totally stuffed.

But the universe was still on her side. At that exact moment, a red beach ball came skimming across the blue water. Rochelle grabbed it and hurled it at another of the gorgeous guys - and next minute she was down at the far end of the pool, playing water-basketball, and Camille was chatting up Emma's brother, just like she'd wanted.

All the same, Rochelle could see it would be smart to stay out of Camille's way from then on. After the basketball game finished, she ducked into the house for the world's longest shower and when she came downstairs, Louise was going past with a plate of tiny spinach tarts, so she hijacked them and started handing them round.

Her mum was over by the window, smiling at Mr Louise and asking her special tell-me-more questions. Rochelle tried to steer past them, in case her mother mentioned Helvellyn Girls' Grammar, but Mr Louise waved her over.

'Ah, Louise's famous spinach tarts,' he said. 'Jilly, you have to sample one.'

Her mother reached out, with an odd twist of her hand that made her sleeve slip back from her wrist. 'Oh dear,' she said, frowning at her watch. 'Is it that late already? Rochelle, we can't stay here, enjoying ourselves. We've got homework to do.'

'Oh, too bad,' Rochelle said, while at the same time she thought: oh, excellent. Goodbye, Camille. I'm out of here.

Some hope. It wasn't that easy. First, Mr Louise made some stupid flirty remarks like, 'Homework, Jilly? Yes, I thought you and Rochelle looked more like sisters than mother and daughter.' Then Louise made some stupid unflirty remarks about how it had been wonderful to see them and how they could give Rochelle a lift home later, if she wanted to stay, and blah blah blah.

Rochelle dug her fingernails into her palms, muttering, 'Shut up, shut up,' under her breath. She was sure the adults were going to rave on till Camille caught her but all of a sudden, the blah blah blah ended and she and her mother were outside, hurrying across to the car. Her mum slammed the door and her smile vanished, as though she'd sucked it in and swallowed it.

'Thank heavens that's over,' she said. 'I wish Tony hadn't told Louise and Frank we'd moved to Melbourne. But never mind, we've done all the right things now. We won't have to see them again.'

Rochelle stared. 'I don't get it,' she said. 'Why did you ask them to our place, if you don't even like them?'

'You don't need to like someone in order to have a meal with them,' her mother said patiently. 'Besides, we have to put on a good show. If we went round looking miserable, people might blame your father for the divorce, which wouldn't be fair, would it?'

She started to rev the engine, so loudly that she couldn't have heard if Rochelle had answered. That was fine by Rochelle. For one thing, she didn't

want to ask whether her mum had actually hated all those people at her dad's dinner parties, for all those years. And for another thing, she didn't want to tell her mum that *she* blamed her dad for the divorce.

She just wanted to go home and start reading her book of Greek myths.

As she settled herself on the bed, Rochelle heard Tez and Kerrill's voices, saying, 'Unbelievable. You actually *left* a pool party stacked with gorgeous guys?' For a moment she wished she'd stayed, but then she remembered Camille and how close she'd come to being busted and losing The World Tree. She shivered and pushed the pool party out of her mind and reached for her book.

She'd thought the Greek myths would be new to her, like *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes*, but they turned out to be full of things she already knew. For instance, her English teacher back in Sydney used to call Siobhan 'narcissistic', because Siobhan was always checking her face in her pocket mirror, and in *The Greek Myths* Rochelle found a guy called Narcissus, who was totally beautiful and totally vain.

Everybody kept falling for him but he knocked them all back, including a girl called Echo, who was so miserable that she faded away until only the echo of her voice was left. Finally a goddess (named Artemis, like Artemis Georgiou) decided to punish Narcissus by making him fall for his reflection in a pool of water. He stayed there, staring at himself, till he turned into a flower that was also called a narcissus.

Rochelle had seen one. Her gran grew them in her front garden. They looked like fluffy jonquils.

And there were other things she recognised, as well. The goat-god Pan who kept sneaking up on people and making them panic. A girl called Psyche, meaning 'spirit', as in psychology. A guy called Tantalus who messed with the gods, so they tantalised him by hanging him on a tree with fruit that he couldn't reach, over some water that magically drained away when he tried to drink it.

Rochelle thought: so, even if no one sacrifices animals to the Greek gods any more, it's like people still believe in them in a way, because they keep on using the stories.

There was one empty page left in the Cinderella book. She stared at the white space, wondering how to fill it, and then wrote about how the Psyche story was almost the same as 'The Lady and the Lion' and 'East of the Sun, West of the Moon'. One story from Germany, one from Iceland and one from Greece, which proved that some stories just wouldn't quit.

That happened in real life, too. The same stories kept repeating, except that the details were different. Rochelle wrote:

Look at the way Bel and Jake are arm-wrestling over Hal right now, just like Mum and the Slut were arm-wrestling over Dad nine months ago.

By that time, she was running out of space but she added a few more lines in really tiny writing.

Ouch. Is that why I want Bel to win the Hal-competition - because she's nice, like Mum, instead of horrible, like Jake and the Slut?

Well, why not? It'd be cool if I could make the story turn out differently this time.

THE LOOSE-LEAF FOLDER

There is a shoe box.
There is a window.
There is a green cloud of treetops,
 outside the window.

Rochelle settles the Cinderella book in the shoe box and stares out of the window at the tree tops. Only one book left on the table now. She'd like to go floating off on a green cloud but she licks her lips, the way she does when she's nervous, and makes herself look away from the trees and down at the table.

The loose-leaf folder is crammed full of pages. Now that there are no other books on top of it, the cover bulges dangerously, trying to burst open. When Rochelle touches it, her hand pulls back instinctively, as if she's touched a hot saucepan on the stove.

She thinks: doesn't matter. It's too late. I've thought about the rest of it. Can't pike out now, just because I'm getting near the tough stuff.

But her eyes drift away from the folder, all the same, exploring her bedroom. There's a row of books from The World Tree on the bookshelf - *Grimms' Fairytales*, *Tales of the Norse Gods and Heroes*, *The Greek Myths*, *The Arabian Nights*, *Bunjil's Cave* and *Stories by Hans Andersen*. Even though she hasn't had time to read them for ages, Rochelle likes to know that they're there.

And there's a painting on the wall by the table. Cloudy green water and an undersea garden, round and red as the evening sun, with a seaweed tree and a white stone statue of a handsome prince. A girl's leaning against the

statue. She has blue-grey eyes, a curtain of blonde hair and a silver-blue fish's tail.

It's the Little Mermaid, when she was young, before the sea witch gave her human legs. Before every step felt as though she was dancing on knives. Without looking away from the painting, Rochelle lifts her hand and slams it down onto the loose-leaf folder and holds it there, breathing fast and shallow.

Rochelle remembers.

Saturday

Rochelle invented a complicated lie about a special Saturday afternoon sports practice at Helvellyn Girls' Grammar. But her mother was working on her assignment and didn't seem to be listening, so she stopped halfway through and headed off to The World Tree.

Bel's story-telling wasn't due to start till 3.00 but the shop was packed already. Two tiny kids perched on two of the tiny cushions and Vince was tapping the *Play School* theme on his drum, to keep them happy. Gwen was dealing with four customers; a middle-aged couple had settled in the back row of chairs and Tall Guy, from Rochelle's first day at the shop, was reading in a corner.

She was about to go and say hello to him when she spotted Bel, dressed in silk pants and a spangled veil, talking video-talk with Hal. That would've been great, except that Jake was hanging round and criticising everything, as usual. Rochelle thought about saying, 'Oh, Jake, please come and give me another lecture about myths and legends,' to draw her off.

Then she thought: nah, I'd just crack up laughing. Jake wouldn't believe me.

Before she had a chance to think of a better plan, Gwen caught her eye and asked her to take over, so she could go off to visit her mother. By the time Rochelle had finished serving everyone, the cushions were filling up. She was chatting with Vince and Hal on the sidelines, when Bel raced over and grabbed Hal's arm.

'Help!' she said. 'Should I start now or wait a bit longer?'

Rochelle had never heard Bel ask anyone for advice before. She looked closer, noticed a little sweat-moustache on Bel's upper lip and grinned. Apparently, Bel got nervous too, just like everybody else.

‘Relax,’ Hal said, patting her on the shoulder. ‘There’s no hurry. You can take all the time -‘

Then Jake butted in again. ‘Start now,’ she said. ‘Otherwise the kids’ll be rioting in ten seconds.’

As Bel wiped off her sweat-moustache and went threading between the cushions, Rochelle looked round at the crowd and realised she’d caught Bel’s nerves. They were a really mixed bunch - half a dozen Asian kids; five girls wearing head scarves; four big-eyed black kids and some other brownish kids who were ... Rochelle wasn’t sure what, but definitely non-Anglo.

She thought: multicultural, right? Dunno how they’ll relate to all those stories about princesses and witches and little cottages in the woods.

She was still worrying about the audience when Vince thumped his drum and Bel bowed her head, saying, ‘For starters, I want to acknowledge that we’re on Wurundjeri land and give my respect to the elders and ancestors and future generations of the Aboriginal people.’ Then she pushed back her spangled veil and said, ‘And now I want to zap across to the other side of the world and introduce you to a woman called Scheherezade.’

One the kids said, ‘Duh?’, so Bel sounded the name out carefully. ‘She-heh-reh-zard. She lived a long time ago and told a thousand and one stories called *The Arabian Nights*, but she didn’t tell them just for fun. The local sultan - that’s, like, the king of her area - thought women couldn’t be trusted, so he married a new wife every night and ... wait for it, he got his guards to strangle her in the morning.’

‘Oh, gross,’ Rochelle said, before she could stop herself.

Bel shrugged. ‘Well, Scheherezade could’ve run away,’ she said. ‘But guess what - she actually volunteered to be the next one to marry the sultan. She told him a story that lasted all night and in the morning she said, “Too bad, you’ll never know how the story turned out, because you’re going to kill me now”.’

She asked the kids what they thought Scheherezade would do next. One kid reckoned Scheherezade ought to karate-chop the sultan and another kid said that maybe the ghosts of the dead wives could come back and spook the sultan out of killing Scheherezade.

Bel laughed and said, ‘As a matter of fact, it was easier than that. The sultan couldn’t handle missing the end of the story, so he let Scheherezade stay alive for one more night. But next morning she was halfway through another story and he let her go on living for another night - and another night - and another night. And at the end of a thousand and one nights, the sultan admitted that women weren’t as bad as he’d thought and he decided to stop marrying them and topping them. So Scheherezade saved heaps of women’s lives, just by telling stories.’

Rochelle's spine tingled, as if someone had dropped an ice cube down the back of her poodle shirt. She sat very still and listened very intently while Bel told one of Scheherazade's stories, followed by a myth about a Maker who invented human beings and then got worried because they wore out too quickly.

When Bel said the Maker-myth came from Ethiopia, the black kids' eyes got even bigger and her third story was a Korean version of Cinderella, which made two of the Asian kids sit up straight. Rochelle found out later that Bel had talked to a teacher from the school and a guy who worked at the housing commission, to see what sort of kids were likely to turn up.

But at the time she was convinced Bel could reach into all the kids' heads and pull their stories out, like magic.

The next story made Rochelle sit up straight and widen her eyes. It was 'Snow White and Rose Red' but Bel changed some of it, turning Snow White and Rose Red into friends, instead of sisters, and the dwarf into a gnome. At the end, she paused and looked round with an evil grin, as if she knew Rochelle was waiting to find out who the bear-prince would marry.

'Anyhow, after Snow White and Rose Red chased the gnome away, the bear didn't need to guard his treasure any more,' she said. 'So he moved into the little house and they all lived happily ever after.'

That worked out for the kids - Rochelle could see they liked the idea of living with a big furry bear, way better than they would've liked a handsome prince - but it didn't give her any more clues about Bel and Hal. Still, she didn't have time to get annoyed, because Bel went straight into a Wurundjeri story about Bunjil the Eagle Hawk, who made the bay around St Kilda.

It felt strange to hear a story about a place where she'd actually been, when all the myths and fairytales she'd read so far had come from Germany or England or Iceland or Greece. Rochelle was still thinking about that, when Bel snapped her fingers and Vince tossed her a book.

'Now, to finish off, I'm going to read you a story by the Danish guy, Hans Andersen,' she announced.

Hans Andersen. Rochelle knew that name. He was the guy who wrote the non-Disney version of 'The Little Mermaid'. She'd had enough of it on her first visit to The World Tree, when she'd read the cutting-out-tongues and dancing-on-knives part. No way did she need to hear any more.

So she backed away towards the counter and went on thinking about Bunjil and the bay.

After Bel finished reading 'The Little Mermaid', half the kids mobbed her, while the other half mobbed the counter, waving the books they'd chosen. Hal, being nice, as always, came and helped Rochelle. They were arguing about who was going to put the Closed sign on the door - 'I'll do it', 'No, I'll do it', 'No,

I'll do it' - when Vince pranced over to tell them that Bel had organised a celebration dinner at the Vietnamese restaurant down the road.

'I'd like to come,' Rochelle said, because it was true. Then she remembered the rest of her life and said, 'But Mum's expecting me home for dinner, and plus she won't be too keen on driving all the way to Collingwood to pick me up.'

Vince waved his finger like a magic wand. 'Go on,' he said, pointing at Hal. 'Sort that one out.'

He'd only just met Hal, so Rochelle wasn't sure how he knew Hal was ace at sorting things out, but he was spot on, of course.

'Easy,' Hal said. 'I'll drive you home, Rochelle.'

Next minute she was over in the myth section of the bookshop, where it was quieter, tapping out the flat's number on Hal's mobile and pitching a story about how one of her school friends was having a last-minute birthday dinner and the friend's brother would bring her back afterwards. Her mother was silent for ten long seconds.

'That's nice, Rochelle. Have a nice time,' she said finally, in a bright, cheerful voice.

It was the same voice she'd used at Louise's party, except that on the phone Rochelle could hear an echo behind her words. An echo of sadness. She started to say, 'Don't worry, I'll come back and keep you company', then remembered that if she went home, her mum would just hide behind her wall of text books and she'd just sit in her bedroom, writing about the day.

So, instead, she said, 'Don't worry, I won't be late.'

As she headed back into the main part of the bookshop, she went on feeling sad about her mum feeling sad. But Vince was making everyone vote on whether Bel should wear her Scheherezade costume to dinner; and Jake had started an argument about fairytales with Tall Guy; and Gwen was whirling in like a tornado; and Hal was introducing her to the middle-aged couple, who turned out to be Bel's parents; and next time Rochelle checked, the sadness seemed to have disappeared.

At the restaurant, she sat between Bel's mum and dad - who were smaller and quieter than Bel - and listened to Vince cracking jokes, Gwen demanding a report on the session and Bel making everyone tell her how excellent she'd been. Then Jake said, 'You shouldn't've picked that Cinderella story, Bellbird. Cinderella's a wimp.'

Tall Guy dropped his china spoon into his soup bowl. 'What do you mean?' he asked, wiping off the soup-splashes and trying to sound calm and reasonable, even though Rochelle could tell he didn't agree.

Jake always sparked up when there was a chance of an argument. 'Be real, Russ,' she said. 'Sitting in the ashes, waiting for fairy godmothers and

princes to fix everything - or frog-goblins and magistrates, when it's Korea. How passive is that?'

'Come off it, Jake,' Bel snapped. 'I bet you'd look like a stunned mullet, if your mum suddenly died and then this stepmum walked in and announced that you were on kitchen duty for the rest of your life.'

And at the same time Russ said, 'No, no, Cinderella doesn't just sit in the ashes. She works hard and toughs it out. That's why she's rewarded in the end.'

Jake sniggered. 'Excuse me?' she said. 'Tough *and* a stunned mullet? You can't both be right.'

Bel and Russ took a deep breath, preparing to answer back, but Bel's father got in ahead of them. 'Rewards by marrying a prince?' he said. 'What kind of message is that? In my Communist Party days, we would've called Cinderella a class traitor.'

Rochelle jiggled a finger in her ear, to make sure she was hearing properly. She'd only ever come across communists in spy movies but it sounded as if Mr Antonelli believed in them, just like people believing in myths. Before she could check with Mr Antonelli, Russ took over again.

'You've got the wrong idea about Cinderella, all of you,' he said. 'She's more in control than you think. The Russian Cinderella doesn't marry a prince - the German Cinderella's very determined - and the British Cinderella makes some quite witty jokes.'

Mr Antonelli stared in surprise. 'How many Cinderellas are there?' he asked.

'Oh, hundreds,' Russ told him. 'I've come across Cinderella stories from Egypt, China, Portugal, Indonesia, Norway, Brazil, Iraq, Africa ...' He stopped and thought, then went on, 'Japan, the Philippines, France, Armenia, Ireland, Vietnam, the Micmac, who are Native Canadians, the Zuni, who are Native Americans ...'

By that time Bel's father was looking dizzy, so Russ stopped again and laughed. 'Sorry, I should've warned you,' he said. 'I'm one of Gwen's regular customers, because I'm doing a uni course in my spare time from teaching ... including a long essay on all the ways people have illustrated the Cinderella story.'

'More fool them,' Jake said promptly. 'You wouldn't catch me painting Cinderella. She's a wimp.'

Hal aimed his superpower-stare at Jake. 'Stop it,' he said. 'You can't keep calling Cinderella a wimp, without any proof. Me personally, I always felt sorry for her, like Bel - and face it, Russ knows more than the rest of us combined. I'd rather hear what he's got to say.'

Rochelle glanced sideways, to see whether Bel had noticed Hal backing her up, but she was helping herself to some more rice. As she looked back, Russ nodded at Hal.

‘All right, this is what I think,’ he said. “Cinderella” isn’t a rags-to-riches story. It’s not about waiting for your prince or marrying into money. First and foremost, it’s about a child who suddenly finds she’s not the centre of her parents’ universe any longer. She doesn’t whine about it, though. She just gets on with her life and in the end, she becomes the centre of someone else’s universe. So the message, if you want a message, is that it wasn’t the child’s fault, she doesn’t deserve it and things will get better. I reckon that’s something most children - and most adults - need to hear at some stage.’

Silence settled over the table. Rochelle wanted to tell Russ how cool that was but her throat seemed to have closed up, so she looked around, hoping that somebody else would tell him. Not a chance. They were all sighing or fiddling with their chopsticks or staring into their rice bowls.

She thought: yeah, I know why. Russ really, really meant what he was saying - and people don’t often say what they really mean.

After a while, Bel’s mother lifted her tiny tea cup, like she was proposing a toast. ‘You’re a clever man, Russ,’ she said. ‘I’m still not sure about those rich, handsome princes but - oh well, who doesn’t want children to be happy?’

Russ blinked back, as though he’d surprised himself, along with everyone else, and Gwen reached for her tea cup, clinking it against Mrs Antonelli’s cup.

‘I’ll drink to that,’ she said.

Everyone picked up their cups and leaned across the table, clinking in all directions. After that, they started chatting on again. Gwen and Russ and the Antonellis talked about house renovations, which was boring but peaceful; Vince cracked more jokes; Hal and Bel talked about the video (good) and Jake kept butting in (not so good). And Rochelle was listening to all of them and reaching for a leftover prawn cracker, when she looked down and noticed the numbers on her watch.

‘Time to go?’ Hal asked, before she even had to remind him, and whisked her straight out to his car.

Rochelle had never been alone with him for more than five minutes, so she wasn’t sure how she’d handle half an hour’s conversation. She was still trying to remember what her mother talked about at dinner parties, when Hal turned his head and smiled at her.

‘You kept pretty quiet during the Cinderella argument,’ he said. ‘Did it bother you, Rochelle?’

‘It was interesting,’ she said cautiously and Hal laughed.

‘Have you heard about the ancient Chinese curse?’ he asked. ‘They used to say, “May you live in interesting times”.’

Rochelle had to think about that for a few seconds but once she got it, she laughed too. ‘It wasn’t *that* bad,’ she said. ‘It’s just that my folks never argued, so I haven’t had much practice.’

‘Hey, Jake and Bel could out-argue anyone,’ Hal told her. ‘They come on pretty strong, at times.’

Rochelle sighed happily. No need to think of conversation topics now. Hal was practically begging her to pump him about Bel and Jake. ‘You must’ve known Bel for a while,’ she said, to start with. ‘So, what’s she really like?’

Hal shrugged. ‘Listen, I admire people like her who want to change the world, starting tomorrow but I guess I find it easier to help people I know.’

Rochelle thought: oh, spit. It’s good that he admires Bel - but nowhere near as good if he’d said he fancied her.

‘Okay, what about Jake?’ she said. ‘I mean, what do you think of her?’

‘Oh, *Jake*,’ Hal said in the cross-but-fond voice that people use when they talk about a naughty puppy. ‘Underneath the vampire look, she’s a complete softie.’

‘A softie?’ Rochelle yelped. ‘Are we talking about the same person?’

Hal grinned and said, ‘Look at her paintings, Rochelle. In her own way, Jake worries about streetkids and junkies, just as much as Bel does.’

That almost sounded as though he liked Jake better than Bel. Rochelle frowned at the stop sign ahead of them, trying to think up a better test.

‘So, okay,’ she said, ‘which of them do you reckon is more good-looking - Jake or Bel?’

‘Bel, for sure,’ Hal said instantly. ‘Jake’s a funny little thing. But she got it right when she painted Bel as Sleeping Beauty.’

Rochelle’s muscles relaxed and sent her sliding down in her seat. Sleeping Beauty and Prince Hal! That sounded good to her. She decided to quit while she was ahead, before Hal realised she was matchmaking, but he changed the subject anyway and started to talk about Gwen.

‘I worry about Mum,’ he said. ‘She’s wearing herself out with all that driving, so she won’t have to stop and think about bossing Gran into residential care. She won’t let me do any of the visiting either, which means I have to keep thinking of other ways to help her. Hiring you, for example. You’ve been a big help, Rochelle.’

Rochelle smiled sleepily and wished she had a brother like Hal. She felt too tired to confess that she worried about her mum, too; but she could have. There was something special about talking to people in a care. You didn’t have to look straight at them, so you could stare at the road and say whatever came into your head.

As she climbed the stairs to the flat, she could still see the world swishing past her and feel the car jolting along and hear Hal's voice rumbling gently. Then, as she opened the door, her mum peered over the wall of text books and frowned.

'Good heavens,' she said. 'Where's your school uniform?'

Rochelle started to say, 'What uniform?', then remembered her sports-practice lie. 'In my bag,' she said, like it was totally obvious. 'I borrowed some clothes from Bel, to go out to dinner, and she said I could wear them home.'

Her mother believed her. This time. But as she hurried off to her bedroom, Rochelle warned herself not to make any more mistakes.

She thought: I can't let Mum guess I'm up to something. I can't, can't, can't go crawling back to Helvellyn Girls' Grammar. Not yet.

Please, not yet.

Sunday

Rochelle opened her new book, a loose-leaf folder this time, which meant she could add extra pages if she needed them. Her mother had given it to her as a bribe, when she'd told Rochelle she wanted to stay home and do some more work on her assignment. She'd switched back to her first topic again—or, at least, Rochelle thought that was what she'd decided; she'd lost track by then, because her mum kept changing her mind.

I wasn't exactly disappointed, she told the first page of the folder. I mean, where would we have gone? To some other little-kid thing like an ice-skating rink or the museum? Oh, please.

She wrote steadily for two hours, recording everything about Bel's story-telling session, took a break and listened to a Sugar Babes CD, then went on writing about the Cinderella argument. An hour later, she flicked back through twelve pages of blue-biro sentences, flexed her wrist and added:

I've spent most of today writing about yesterday but it was worth it. I had the best time and I don't want to forget it. Oh sure, I guess listening to fairytales was no big deal, compared to the stuff I used to do in Sydney. But face it, those times are over.

Fact is, while I was cruising round Sydney, I never had time to write anything down. Now I've got time and the bookshop ... and that's about it.

The sun was sinking low in the sky, highlighting the dust on her window. Rochelle tugged at the neck of her t-shirt, feeling breathless and trapped. She marched back into the lounge room and hit her mum for twenty dollars, then walked all the way to the twenty-four-hour supermarket, where she bought chicken breasts and a tin of tomatoes to make a casserole, because she was sick of home-delivery pizza.

When she bought out the plates and cleared a space on the lounge-room table, her mother looked down sadly at the casserole. 'I'm sorry,' she sighed. 'I haven't been very organised lately. I promise things'll improve, as soon as I make some progress with this assignment.'

Rochelle thought: oh, sure. If you ask me, Mum's never going to finish that stupid assignment - and, even if she did, she'd just find something else to stress about.

Monday

It felt strange to be on her own in the bookshop, after having so many people there on Saturday. Rochelle drifted round, tidying the shelves, till a woman and two boys came in with a book voucher. One of the kids had won first prize in an essay competition and his mother was letting him cash in the voucher, as a reward after the dentist.

Gwen hadn't told Rochelle anything about book vouchers, so she hunted under the counter to see if there was any information in the account books. Some of the books crashed onto her feet and the taller kid helped her to pick them up.

'Thanks. Are you the prize winner?' she said, as a way of being nice to him in return.

The kid didn't get time to answer, because his mother started laughing. 'Oh no, it wasn't *Nathan*,' she said, as though Rochelle had made a really funny joke. 'He'd never win anything. *Michael's* the clever one.'

Rochelle's stomach clenched. That was so unfair. Mothers were supposed to build you up, not knock you down. When Michael came back with a book about the fairytale references in the Harry Potter stories, she gave Nathan a leaflet for Bel's second story-telling session, to show that she thought it was fine, even if his mum was a bitch.

But it didn't work. Nathan just passed the leaflet straight to his brother, as if he reckoned Michael was more important too. It was starting to feel like a bad news day - and sure enough, next minute Jake turned up, to check out some fairytale illustrations after talking to Russ.

Luckily, Bel turned up a few minutes later, returning the books she'd borrowed for the first story-telling. Since Bel knew how to keep Jake in line, Rochelle wandered over to the picture book section. To her surprise, Bel and Jake were actually doing girl-talk. She wouldn't have believed Jake was capable of it but when Bel complained about her hair being boring, Jake told her she ought to try cornrows and sat Bel down on the floor, dividing her hair into bunches, then turning it into dozens of tiny plaits, while they chatted about people they knew and movies they'd seen.

It was restful, like having the radio on in the background. Rochelle leaned on the bookshelf, listening in, till she remembered a question she'd wanted to ask.

'Bel,' she said, 'in the story-telling, you changed the dwarf into a gnome. Why did you do that?'

'Isn't it obvious?' Bel said. Then she sighed and said, 'Apparently not. Okay, I'll have to explain. "Dwarf" is what they used to call short-stature people and the dwarfs are usually the bad guys in fairytales. It didn't seem fair, so I used the word "gnome" instead.'

Rochelle's jaw dropped. No question about it this time. That was definitely a put-down. Bel kept picking on her, just because she bought stuff from McDonald's and didn't know about feminism or why it was wrong to say 'dwarf'. As she shut her mouth with a snap, Jake glanced up.

'Watch it, Bellissima,' she said. 'You're not being fair to garden gnomes.'

Her face was as blank and unsmiling as ever, so it took Rochelle a few seconds to work out that Jake was cracking a joke. She giggled and Bel glared at both of them but Jake got her revenge by tugging hard on the next tiny plait.

'Seriously,' she said, as Bel yelped, 'If you start making fairytales fair, where do you stop? Okay, you don't approve of dwarfs being the villains ... but after listening to your folks last night, I bet you don't approve of kings and queens and princes and princesses, either.'

'Hang on,' Bel said. 'I don't agree with my folks about everything. Calling the characters "princes" and "princesses" is just a way of saying they're the hero or heroine of the story - and the kings and queens are just symbols for their parents. Everyone knows that.'

Rochelle stared at her, thinking: hello? Everyone knows that? Well, I don't. Stuff you, Bel Antonelli.

‘You reckon?’ she said. ‘So, okay, why did you spend so much time looking for feminist fairytales about girls who tell the prince to get lost?’

Jake grinned and Bel said, ‘That’s different. You don’t meet princes and princesses every day but you *do* see guys trying to take over, all the time.’

The shop bell clanged. As the three of them turned in unison, Hal skidded to a halt, blushing between his pale freckles. ‘Oh, hi,’ he said. ‘I just dropped in to collect my jacket. Don’t let me interrupt you.’

Jake sniggered. ‘Perfect timing,’ she said. ‘That’s so not what you were saying about guys, Belladonna.’

Bel scowled back and then started to laugh along with Jake, while Hal went so red that even his freckles were blushing. Rochelle didn’t want him to think they were laughing at him, so she said quickly, ‘We’ve been talking about the princes and princesses in fairytales. Bel reckons they’re just ordinary people, really. What do you reckon?’

‘Hmm,’ Hal said, while the blush ebbed back under his pale skin. ‘Lots of fairytales are about the third son, going off to seek his fortune, right? I got the impression that they were ordinary blokes and the princesses were, like, special.’

Rochelle beamed. Actually, Hal had as many ideas as Bel, even though he didn’t bang on about them. He was definitely onto something there. Bel thought the kings and queens in fairytales were just ordinary dads and mums but Rochelle had met Bel’s folks and they *were* pretty quiet and ordinary - apart from being communists, at any rate.

Her own mother and father weren’t ordinary, though. They were special, just like Hal said. Everyone at Rochelle’s old school used to go on about how stunning her mum was, plus a journalist had written a story about her dad for the weekend magazine and all her friends’ parents had read it. All right, he and her mum mightn’t have been up there with the Queen of England but they were the nearest thing to a king and queen that she’d ever seen.

Rochelle thought: and I felt like a princess too, till Dad wrecked it by going off with the Slut.

She was still thinking about how much her dad bugged her, when Jake said, ‘Hey, Bella, for your next story-telling you should change the kings and queens into the heads of multinational companies. That’d bring it more up to date.’

Bel shook her tiny plaits. ‘As if,’ she said. ‘The fairytale kings and queens are mostly okay. The heads of multinational companies are bastards.’

‘What do you mean?’ Rochelle asked and Bel let out a dramatic actor-type sigh.

‘Where do you want me to start?’ she said. ‘I could talk about the way they close down factories at a moment’s notice and throw zillions of people

out of work. Or there's the way their companies wreck the environment. Or the way they bribe governments to change the laws, so it's easier for them to make money. Or -'

A small sound escaped from Rochelle's mouth - not actual words, just a squeak. Bel heard it and narrowed her eyes. 'Got a problem with that?' she said.

Rochelle did, of course. Oh sure, her dad bugged her but that didn't give Bel the right to blame him for everything in the entire world. So, even though it would've been easy to lie, she decided to tell the truth. '

'Yeah, well,' she said. 'My dad's the CEO for ArCon.'

'Then you know what I mean,' Bel said, like she'd just proved that Rochelle's father spent his life trashing people's jobs and wrecking the environment.

It was her biggest put-down so far. Rochelle wanted to argue back, but she'd never really listened when her dad talked about work, so she wasn't sure what to say. Besides, her heart was pounding so furiously that she was scared she might start yelling at Bel or, even worse, burst into tears.

As she clutched her hair, Hal leaned forward and cleared his throat. 'Do you disapprove of me too, Bel?' he asked. 'I'm studying Commerce, remember.'

Bel blinked. 'Yeah, but you don't have to work for the multinationals,' she said. 'I figured you'd get a job with the Greens or Community Aid Abroad or something.'

'I might,' Hal agreed. 'And then again, I mightn't, I haven't decided yet.'

Bel shrugged, to show that arguing with Rochelle and Hal was too much for her. She looked as though she might have stormed off, if Jake hadn't kept a tight grip on one of the plaits. They were all staring at opposite walls, avoiding each other's eyes, when an old woman staggered into the shop, red in the face and fanning herself with a sheaf of paper.

'Mrs Murphy!' Hal and Bel and Jake yelled, as if she was their long-lost grandmother.

Hal fetched her glass of water, Jake gave her the chair she'd been sitting on and Bel introduced Rochelle. Mrs Murphy gave her a grandmotherly smile and explained that she was one of Gwen's oldest customers.

'I used to live in the next street and drop round to buy presents for my eight grandchildren,' she said. 'Then I moved out to Wheeler's Hill to be with my son Sean and his family. It's a long way from the city but I don't let that stop me. I just catch a bus and a train and two trams, so I can come back for my next round of presents.'

She handed Bel the sheaf of paper, which turned out to be a list of all the books she'd ever given her grandchildren - three for each birthday and three at Christmas. While Bel read out the list, Mrs Murphy added comments,

like, 'Kieran enjoys adventure stories - do you have any Robin Hood books?' or 'Breanna has all the Harry Potter novels, so I thought she might like something about wizards.'

Hal frowned at Bel the whole time she was reading, which made Rochelle feel uneasy. She was supposed to be matchmaking Hal and Bel but she'd accidentally made them argue - and she hadn't even cared at the time, because she'd been shitty with Bel. Then as soon as Bel got to the end of the booklist, Hal grabbed his jacket, gave Mrs Murphy a hug and headed for the door.

Rochelle sighed with relief. It looked like he'd just been waiting for a chance to leave, not wondering whether Bel was wrong for him, after all.

For the next hour she and Jake and Bel raced round the shop, finding twenty-four books for Mrs Murphy. It would've taken even longer, if Gwen hadn't come back halfway through and helped. Adding up the total was Rochelle's job but Bel dragged Jake over to the counter and read out the prices for her, while Jake finished plaiting her hair.

Rochelle thought: so, okay, Bel hasn't totally turned against me. It's just she's got a nasty side, as well as a nice side.

All the same, she grinned secretly when Bel's cornrow look was a failure, with all the plaits on different angles and patches of scalp showing through the gaps. Bel claimed she liked it, though, and she wouldn't let Jake undo it. They went off to see a movie, while Rochelle carried Mrs Murphy's twenty-four-kilo book bag to the tramp stop. When she got back, Gwen was slamming the leftover books onto shelves.

'Why couldn't I have a mother like that?' she grumbled. 'My mother hardly even asks about Hal, let alone making lists of the books he's read. She's too busy telling me that I picked the wrong job and the wrong husband. Sometimes I want to strangle her and then I think, "No, it's the dementia talking." But the truth is, she's been criticising me ever since I was a kid. The dementia only makes it more obvious.'

She banged another book into place, as if she was banging her mother on the head. Rochelle thought: oh, spit. Jake was right, all along. Gwen does hate her mum.

Then she thought: well, not 'hates', exactly. Gwen's too nice for that. But it's more complicated than I realised, all the same.

It was a weird end to a weird morning. Up till then, she'd been convinced she was lurking on the sidelines, watching the bookshop people like she was almost invisible. Now, all of a sudden, Bel was getting mad at her and Hal and Jake were backing her up and Gwen was going on about her problems, as if she actually believed Rochelle could say something useful - all of which made her feel more visible than she wanted to be.

After that, Rochelle felt like some serious shopping, so she caught the tram into the city and spent every note from her wallet in an hour and a half. She bought two t-shirts that were on sale, a silver pendant with the Celtic symbol for good luck and a lime green fake-lizardskin shoulder bag with a long strap, to stash her wallet in, so she wouldn't need to keep fishing it out of her school bag all the time.

But it didn't work. She was still shitty with Bel, she still wondered why Jake and Hal had defended her and she still hoped Gwen didn't really hate her own mum.

Tuesday

Monday hadn't been easy but Tuesday was even worse. The trouble started at breakfast time, when the phone rang and her mum picked it up.

'Rochelle,' she said, 'someone called Hal wants to speak to you.'

Rochelle freaked. That was the main problem with lying: she felt guilty all the time, even when she didn't need to be. By the time she'd walked across to the phone, she'd remembered telling her mother about Hal down at St Kilda, so she hadn't blown it - but, come to think of it, she hadn't ever given Hal her phone number either, which freaked her all over again.

Luckily, the first thing he said was, 'Hope you don't mind me calling you at home. I got your number off my mobile.'

'Oh, right,' Rochelle said. 'I wondered about that. So, why are you ringing?'

'I meant to ask you yesterday but I forgot,' Hal said. 'Can you manage the Friday afternoon shift this week, to cover for Bel's next story-telling? I'll drive you home afterwards, same as last time.'

It felt odd, standing in the kitchen with a bookshop voice in her ear. Rochelle told Hal she'd need to check with her mum, to give herself time to chill out, and then invented an on-the-spot story about another of her school friends having another birthday dinner. It wasn't one of her top lies but she'd only been awake for fifteen minutes and her mum was even sleepier, so she just said "mmm", which Rochelle translated as 'yes'.

She raced back to tell Hal it'd be fine, then waited for him to hang up but he didn't. 'You told me you don't like arguments,' he said. 'So how are you feeling about that row with Bel yesterday?'

By that time, it was getting harder to think of things that'd sound right for both Hal and her mum, so Rochelle just said, 'Fine', and put the phone down, even though she would've liked to discuss the Bel-argument, if things had been different. She shoved her cheese sandwiches into her school bag

and hurried down to the tram, feeling jumpy because her secret life had almost become un-secret, for the second time in two days. If Camille had sidled up to her mother and said, 'I was sure Rochelle'd be in my year at HGG but she reckons she's in Year 10' - or if Hal had said, 'Hi, I'm Hal Jenkins from the bookshop where your daughter works...'

Rochelle thought: but they didn't, did they? So, don't go there.

She read her book of Greek myths all the way to The World Tree, to stop herself thinking about how close she'd come to being caught. After she'd unlocked the door, she went through the usual drill - heaving the A-frame onto the footpath, opening the cash register and stowing her school bag and her new lime green lizardskin shoulder bag under the counter.

Then she ducked into the back room to switch the jug on, for her morning coffee. When she returned, there was a guy in the shop: wraparound sunnies, yellow windcheater, backwards baseball cap, face like a weasel.

He was leaning on the counter.

No, he was leaning over the counter.

He was pulling out her lizardskin shoulder bag.

'Hey! Quit that,' Rochelle shouted and charged him.

The guy was still straightening up, which gave her time to reach past him and grab her bag. He clutched the strap and tugged but Rochelle hung on tight. She kept yelling, 'Quit that!' and 'Help!' and 'Stop, thief!' The guy kept tugging and tugging and tugging, until he backed into the card stand and knocked it over. As he hauled even harder on the strap, Rochelle jerked forwards and slammed into the poster rack, sending it flying as well.

Next thing she knew, she was flat on the floor, although she couldn't remember falling; she must've collapsed along with the poster rack. She was still clutching the bag and the guy was still heaving at the strap. He wouldn't let go and Rochelle wouldn't let go, so he dragged her towards the doo, centimetre, scraping her knees across the carpet. They collided with one of the picture book shelves and it crashed down, scattering books across the floor.

And at the same moment, the seams of the shoulder bag ripped.

That was a disaster. Rochelle was left holding an empty lizardskin sack, while the guy had the strap and the lining of the bag ... with her wallet and keycard in it.

'No way!' she said. 'That's mine, okay? Give it back!'

The guy said, 'Screw you,' and made a dash for the door but she flung her hand out and hooked it round his ankle. That started another tug-of-war, with the guy pulling at the door handle and Rochelle clinging onto his leg. She was screaming, 'Help, someone, please.' He was swearing, worse than anything she'd ever heard. Finally he managed to get the door open but Rochelle was still holding on, so he dragged her right out onto the footpath.

She thought: this is seriously crazy. I should just give up and let go.

But she couldn't. Two images kept flashing through her mind like a TV commercial - a keycard with her name on it and a cop at the door of their flat, saying, 'Mrs Parfitt, we found this card in a rubbish bin near Smith Street.' If the guy got away with his half of the lizardskin shoulder bag, she'd lose the bookshop half of her life as well. So she gritted her teeth and kept hanging onto his leg.

Even when he lifted his other foot and stamped it down on her chest.

The worst pain Rochelle had ever felt before was the time when she'd sliced deep into her finger, while she was cutting onions for her mum. She'd yelled like mad then - but not this time, partly because the guy had stamped the breath out of her lungs and partly because the pain went beyond yelling.

She lay there, waiting for the guy to stomp her again, but instead she heard two voices, shouting at him. Rochelle recognised one of them - Artemis Georgiou - and the owner of the other voice was pretty obvious, because he was shouting in Vietnamese. When she let go of the guy's leg and sat up, to find out what was going on, Mr Lee's hand was locked tight round the guy's elbow and Artemis had knotted her hand into the back of his baggy pants, as if she was about to give him a wedgie.

Rochelle started to cheer, then realised it wasn't over yet. Artemis and Mr Lee were way smaller than the guy, so they couldn't hold him forever -and besides, the guy was still lunging at her, like a Rottweiler on a chain or one of those movies where the maniac just won't quit. She shuddered and shuffled across the footpath, until she had her back against the wall of The World Tree.

There was something digging into her. A pair of sunglasses. Rochelle reached round and picked them up.

'Mine!' the maniac howled. 'They're my sunnies. Give them back.'

'You wish,' she said. 'Not till you give back my wallet.'

The next few seconds were the noisiest yet. Artemis was screaming at the guy in Greek. (She said afterwards that it was lucky nobody could understand her.) Mr Lee was screaming at his wife in Vietnamese, telling her to stay inside the grocery or go and call the cops or whatever. The guy was screaming about his sunnies with his face twisted up, as if he was the one who'd been stomped on.

And Rochelle was sitting on the footpath, thinking: this is all wrong. Aren't the bad guys supposed to give up, once the good guys come charging in?

As she bounced the sunglasses on her palm, a familiar voice said, 'What wallet, Shell? This one?' Rochelle looked up and saw her wallet, in Jake's hand. She grabbed it and tossed the sunnies to the maniac, who slammed them over his eyes and went limp, as though they were magic

glasses that had the power to calm him down. Artemis relaxed. Mrs Lee called out and Mr Lee turned towards her.

And the guy wrenched his arm away and powered forward, dragging Artemis with him, until she managed to unknot her hand from his daks. He went pelting down the street, faster than an Olympic runner, with people falling over their own feet to get out of his way. Artemis and Mr Lee looked at each other helplessly, as if they thought they ought to chase him but they didn't have the energy.

'It's okay,' Rochelle said. 'Let him go. He didn't get anything. Jake found the wallet.'

After that, everyone started to tell their sides of the story. Mr Lee said that he'd heard Rochelle shouting but at first he'd thought it was just kids mucking around. Artemis said that the guy must've been a junkie, because his eyes couldn't handle sunlight. Jake said that she'd been cycling past, so she'd dashed over and spotted Rochelle's wallet among the picture books on the floor. People from the other shops came over to ask what had happened. Rochelle filled in the details, then started to shake and shake and shake.

'*Po po po*,' Artemis said, still being Greek. 'You're covered in cuts and bruises. We'd better do something about that.'

She slathered the cuts with tea-tree cream, to stop them getting infected. Mr Lee looked down at Rochelle's shaking hands, said, 'Bad shock' and brought her some tiny black pills from the Chinese herb shop across the road. And Jake ran upstairs and raided Gwen's bathroom, to get bandages for her knees, then stuck around to tidy the bookshop. Rochelle was glad Jake had stayed but it was even better when the door opened and Hal walked in.

'Jake called my mobile,' he explained. 'She wanted to phone Mum and tell her what'd happened but she couldn't find the number for my gran's house.'

Rochelle thought: yeah, right. Hal's so easy to fool. Jake probably jumped at the excuse to get him on his own, without Bel around.

He didn't seem to mind the idea of being alone with Jake, either. He'd skipped his next lecture, to come speeding over to the bookshop, and he sent Rochelle straight off to have a rest in the back room. She thought about hanging round, to make sure he and Jake didn't get too friendly, but for one thing, she wasn't as pro-Bel as she used to be and for another thing, she was spacing out, so a rest sounded like a good idea.

She was curled up in an old armchair when Gwen hurried in, gasping, 'Rochelle, you're a hero!' and, 'Oh, your poor knees!' and, 'Jake says she'll mind the shop, while Hal and I cook lunch for you' - although, to start with, Rochelle wished they hadn't bothered, because they kept arguing the entire time.

When Gwen asked, 'Do you want the noodles on now?', Hal snapped back, 'Which part of "no" don't you understand? I told you, in five minutes.'

'I'm only trying to help,' Gwen said grumpily.

'Well, don't,' Hal said. 'I can cook, Mum. Just do what I say, okay?'

Then Gwen grinned and said, 'In that case, I'll make a cup of tea while I'm waiting' and Hal said, 'Yeah, that'd be great.'

Rochelle frowned. Maybe they weren't arguing, after all. Maybe they were just negotiating. How was she supposed to know? Her mum and dad had always been totally polite to each other ... but that hadn't stopped her dad from running off with the Slut.

The Slut was the opposite of polite. It was what Rochelle hated most about her - the way she'd kept commenting on things people usually kept to themselves. But, while she watched Gwen and Hal bicker about which plates to use, she found herself wondering whether her dad actually preferred being with someone who said what she thought. If Hal and Gwen could argue and still like each other, maybe her dad and the Slut liked each other too ...

Something clattered behind her. Rochelle glanced over her shoulder, as if her mum might've appeared and caught her making excuses for the Slut, but it was just Hal, putting the plates down on the table.

She thought: be real. No way does the Slut like Dad. She's just after his money, the way Mum said, that time when she lost it.

While they ate noodles and stir fry, Rochelle gave Gwen and Hal the full story on the maniac. After that, Hal had to go back to uni but he offered her a lift home, if she could wait around until four.

'Rochelle's not going anywhere,' Gwen said. 'She's staying right here, where I can keep an eye on her and make sure she's okay.'

So Rochelle spent the afternoon in the armchair with her feet propped on the child-sized stool. She read *The Arabian Nights* and discovered that she knew some of them already - 'Aladdin' and 'Ali Baba' and the story about the fisherman who fished up a genie in a bottle. Halfway through the genie story, she started to stress about the maniac again but she fixed that by thinking about Artemis and Mr Lee. So next time Gwen looked in, she asked for some Vietnamese stories, because she'd read an Artemis story already in *The Greek Myths*.

Gwen disappeared for a while and came back with a couple of picture books. The one Rochelle liked best was about a real lake in Vietnam, called Ba Be - although, according to the story, there wasn't a lake to begin with, just a village. One day the people in the village found a buffalo wandering around, so they decided to kill it and have a feast, but they were so mean and nasty that they didn't even invite the poor old widow who lived out at the edge of the village.

What the village people didn't know was that the buffalo belonged to the River Spirit. When his buffalo didn't come home, he dressed up as a beggar and went to look for it but the villagers just said, 'Get lost'. The old widow was the only one who invited him in and gave him a bowl of rice. After he'd finished eating, the River Spirit told her to sprinkle a circle of rice around her house and later on, in the middle of the night, it started to rain. The river flooded and all the villagers were drowned, except for the old widow. When the rain stopped, her house was on a little round island in the middle of a lake.

And the book said it was still called Widow's Island, even now.

After reading stories like that, Rochelle usually thought, 'Yeah, right, I wouldn't be as dumb as those village people', then moved on to another story, but Hal arrived just as she finished the book, so she went on thinking about the old widow. Something about the story bothered her. She even told it to Hal, while they were driving across to the freeway.

Then it clicked. 'That's like me and the junkie girl!' she said. 'I didn't give her any money while she was begging - and afterwards, when she was trying to be friends, I just gave her a coat that I didn't want. If we were in a fairytale, I'd've been drowned for sure.'

Hal laughed. 'You're a real convert, aren't you?' he said. 'The first time you came into the shop, I could see you didn't know much about fairytales but now you're as keen on them as Mum and Bel and Jake.'

It was another perfect chance to get Hal talking about Bel, except that Rochelle couldn't resist getting him to say more about her. 'So, why did you get Gwen to hire me, if you thought I didn't know much?' she asked.

'Well, we needed someone and you were there,' Hal told her. As she frowned at the dashboard, feeling disappointed, he added, 'Besides, I thought you'd brighten things up - and I was right, wasn't I?'

Rochelle thought: oh, yes! That's more like it.

For a while there, she'd almost forgotten how it felt to have people being nice to her. Tez and Kerrill never wrote, her mum was vaguing out and her dad was off in Sydney, romancing the Slut. Okay, she'd learned to live with that - but she could handle being told she was a brave hero who brightened things up, just the same. She went on chatting happily to Hal, till he parked outside the flats and hurried round to open the car door.

'How are you feeling?' he asked. 'Do you need any help with the stairs?'

Rochelle sighed. She should've realised Hal would want to help her. She *would've* realised, normally, but she'd been so busy talking that she hadn't thought up a good lie in advance. Since she couldn't let Hal anywhere near the flat, in case her mum was there, she had to say, 'I'm fine,' and march off, pretending her knees were okay, even though she was really in agony.

Now she knew how the Little Mermaid must've felt, when she was dancing on knives.

They had home-delivery chicken for dinner that night. When Rochelle stood up to get some more salad, the movement jarred her sore knees and jolted her bruises. Her mother stared at her for a moment, while the frown-crease between her eyebrows deepened.

'You're limping,' she said, like she'd made a major discovery. 'What's the matter?'

'No big deal,' Rochelle said. 'I just tripped while I was playing sport, that's all.'

She had to say something and she couldn't tell her mum the truth but this lie was harder to live with than all her other lies put together. For the rest of the meal, she kept getting shitty, because her mother wasn't as sympathetic as the bookshop people, then remembering that she hadn't told her about the maniac.

It was a relief when her mum went back to her assignment and Rochelle could escape to her bedroom. She dumped her loose-leaf folder on the desk and lay down for a few minutes' rest. When she opened her eyes, the room was as dark as her dreams. She panicked for a few seconds, before she realised that her mum must've tiptoed in and turned the light off, but the brief spurt of panic had woken her up, so she switched on the bedside lamp and wrote about the maniac, till her hand hit the back cover of the folder.

She grinned and added at the bottom of the last page:

Oops, there's not enough room left to finish the story. I've run out of paper. Better go and pinch some more off Mum's desk.

It felt strange, wandering round the flat in the middle of the night. Even stranger, when she went into the kitchen for a glass of water, there was a coffee cup on the sink that felt warm to the touch. Rochelle yelped, picturing ghosts or vampires, then remembered she wasn't the only person in the flat. Apparently, she and her mum were both wandering round in the middle of the night.

Come to think of it, that was strange as well.

Wednesday

When Rochelle woke next morning, her shoulders felt as if they'd been pulled out of their sockets and she had an odd kind of headache, like a spike driven up the back of her neck. She dragged herself out of bed and had a shower, which loosened her muscles, but as she limped into the kitchen, her mum's eyes widened.

'Rochelle, you look terrible!' she said. 'That fall must've been worse than it sounded. Do you want to stay home? I could ...' She paused and braced herself and said in a rush, 'I could skip today's lectures and take you to a doctor.'

It was obvious that she hated the idea of missing any classes. Then again, Rochelle wasn't too keen on being stuck at home with her mum, either.

'Not a problem,' she said. 'The matron at school reckoned it's better if I walk around, and plus I can get her to look at my knees again.'

Her mum turned away and fiddled with the toaster. 'I really ought to drive you to school,' she said. 'But my first lecture's on "existential social work", which is part of my assignment, so I'd like to be there. I suppose I could give you the taxi fare, although it seems like a dreadful waste of money, when I'm paying for the car already. Oh dear. Let me think about it for a moment ...'

She was stressing about money again, which always annoyed Rochelle. Besides, she had to stop her mother from driving her to school. And maybe, after yesterday, she'd got hooked on people being nice to her.

At any rate, when she opened her mouth, the words came rushing out, louder and angrier than she'd intended. 'Give me a break, Mum. We've got plenty of money. You can't tell me Dad doesn't pay what he said he would. So what's your problem? If you want to go to your lecture and my school's in the opposite direction - well, that's what taxis are *for*.'

Her mum stared back blankly, which was fair enough. She and Rochelle didn't usually yell at each other, not like Hal and Gwen.

'I'm not happy about throwing money around,' she said after a while. 'Who knows what's going to happen next? We might need it later on. But ... all right, one taxi fare won't break the budge. Here's ten - no, twenty dollars, Shell.'

So, instead of having to climb on board two trams, Rochelle went sailing across to The World Tree in a taxi. Artemis called in, to see whether she'd recovered from yesterday, and then Bel turned up as well. She'd heard about the maniac from Jake and she was so keen to get all the details that Rochelle even pulled up her t-shirt and flashed the foot-shaped bruise on the left side of her chest.

'Awesome,' Bel said. 'You're a woman warrior, same as the Amazons in the Greek myths. Did you know they used to cut off their left breasts, to make it easier to use a bow and arrows?'

Now that Bel was being nice to her again, Rochelle felt guilty about leaving Jake alone with Hal yesterday. When the door opened, she swung round, hoping to see Hal, but it was Gwen arriving back early. She joined in the Amazon jokes but it didn't take Rochelle long to notice she was stressing out.

'Come on,' she said, the minute Bel left. 'Tell me about it, Guinevere.'

'About what?' Gwen snapped, then tugged her earring and said, 'Oh dear, is it that obvious? Sorry, Rochelle. I had a pretty rough time with Mum this morning. She's getting closer to admitting that she needs residential care ... but she wants to make me push her into it, so she's got somebody to blame if she doesn't like it.'

Rochelle rubbed her forehead, wondering whether the headache had scrambled her brain cells. 'Um, what's wrong with you making the decision?' she asked. 'You said before that you're the mum and she's the kid now - and mums have to make decisions for their kids, don't they?'

Gwen blinked. 'That's very perceptive,' she said. 'I may have to do exactly that, in the end.' She blinked faster, as if she was trying not to cry, and added, 'I know Hal thinks it's crazy, running myself ragged like this, especially when Mum and I never got on. But she's my mother. She spent years looking after me. I don't mind giving her a year of my life, so she can stay in her own house until she absolutely has to leave ... just as long as I don't end up dragging poor Hal into my problems, as well.'

Rochelle thought: Gwen and Hal are so cute. Gwen's trying to protect Hal but she doesn't stand a chance, because I happen to know he's trying just as hard to protect her.

As she grinned to herself, the headache-spike stabbed deeper into her skull. 'Yow!' she squealed. 'My head's getting worse! What if it's a brain tumour or something?'

'Don't worry,' Gwen said, smiling. 'It's just a hangover from yesterday's excitement. Why don't you borrow another book and go home for a rest?'

Rochelle asked for the book with Guinevere in it and Gwen gave her *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*. Back at the flat, she took two headache pills and sat in a patch of sunlight, turning the pages of the book but thinking about Gwen and her mum. As the headache started to clear, her thoughts became clearer as well, so she reached for the loose-leaf folder.

I know what Gwen means, she wrote. You can owe people, even if you don't like them. I guess I liked Dad better than Mum - but I went with Mum after the Big Drama, because she was the one who bandaged my knees when I fell in the playground and nursed me when I had measles, so I owe her for that.

Even though she pisses me off sometimes.

Thursday

Rochelle got up and checked her knees, which were working better than yesterday. Had a shower and checked her bruise, which was turning brown and purple. Put on her poodle shirt, with her school uniform over the top, went downstairs and dodged behind the tree and whipped off her uniform, then caught the tram into town and out again.

She was starting to feel like she was back in her usual routine but when she arrived at the bookshop, three weird things happened in a row. She went to dump her school bag in the back room, away from bag-snatching maniacs, and when she came out, a woman in a green tracksuit was frowning at the toy table. There was something familiar about her, but Rochelle couldn't work out what it was till she started talking.

'G'day,' she said. 'Hope you don't mind me looking through your stuff. My kid's been going on and on about some toy he saw here, so I finally gave in and said I'd buy it for him.'

Rochelle thought: oh no, it's Zac's mum! She's come back for the dragon. I knew I shouldn't've sold it!

But before she could apologise, the woman reached into the pile of toys. 'There,' she said, holding a dragon up by the tail. 'That'll put a smile on Zacky's face. Kids! It's either heaven or heartache with them, isn't it? Although, mind you, I can see why Zacky likes this little bloke.'

It felt like magic, even after Rochelle had worked out that Gwen must've ordered another dragon. She was dancing round the bookshop, dusting the shelves and hoping Zac and his dragon would live happily ever after, when she looked round and saw the Old Witch peering through the window.

'Go away, Witch,' she whispered, as if she was casting a spell, but the magic didn't work this time. The old witch pushed the door open and came marching in.

'I'm looking for a book called - hmm, something like *Behind the North Wind*,' she announced. 'My father gave it to me for my tenth birthday and now I want to give it to my granddaughter but unfortunately, I seem to have lost my copy somewhere along the way.'

'*Behind the North Wind*?' Rochelle said. 'That sounds like a book of fairytales, which means it'll be in the bookcase over on the right.'

The Old Witch stared at her and she stared back, refusing to move. Finally, the Witch sniffed and stomped off to the bookcase on the right.

Rochelle was giggling with the sound down, when she remembered Gwen saying that the Witch had never met her own grandchildren. So either the Witch was trying to make up with one of her sons by giving his daughter a present, or else she was living in an imaginary dream world where she was a happy loving gran.

Rochelle thought: oh, spit. I don't need this. Now I feel sorry for the Old Witch.

Two seconds later the Witch stormed back, saying 'It's not on the shelf,' but now that she'd remembered Gwen's story, Rochelle couldn't just say, 'Well, tough.' She explained that the Witch could put in an order for the book but the Witch just launched into a rave about how she'd ordered a book from The World Tree once and it took ages to arrive and by that time she wasn't interested any more.

'Fair enough,' Rochelle said, still being polite. 'Not a problem. You can try somewhere else.'

'Oh, I'll give you one more chance,' the Witch said hastily.

Then she propped herself against the counter, pulled down her TV-screen glasses and went into another long rave about how important it was to keep in touch with the old values that you found in fairytales. She was acting like a world-class expert but Rochelle knew more about fairytales these days.

'Old values?' she said. 'You mean, like the parents who ditched their kids in "The Babes in the Woods" - or Sir Lancelot falling for King Arthur's wife - or Aladdin stealing the lamp in *The Arabian Nights*? Actually, I reckon fairytales have got the works. That's why I like them.'

The Old Witch pushed her glasses back into place, so fast that they slammed against her forehead. 'I wish I had time to chat,' she said. 'But I'm afraid I'm awfully busy. Don't forget to place that order, dear,' and she went hurrying out of the shop.

It looked as though the Old Witch didn't know how to argue properly, not like Bel and Jake and Russ. Rochelle giggled and bent to copy her phone number into the order book. When she straightened up, the third customer of the morning was walking in - a woman in her early thirties, with golden-brown hair and thick dark eyebrows, narrow red-framed glasses and an orange jacket.

There was something familiar about her, same as Zac's mum, but Rochelle couldn't place her until she strode across to the counter, saying, 'Rochelle. Remember me? Sara Mathiesson.'

Rochelle stared and gulped. She thought: Sara? Oh, spit. It's the Slut!

'I want to talk to you,' the Slut said, getting straight to the point, as usual. 'What time do you finish work?'

‘Eleven o’clock,’ Rochelle told her, before she could stop herself, and then her brain crashed into gear and she said, ‘How did you know I was here?’

The Slut shrugged. ‘I was waiting outside your place in a hire car this morning. I thought I’d give you a lift to school and talk to you on the way ... but then you disappeared behind a tree and came out wearing casual clothes. I could see something fishy was going on, so I decided to follow your tram. I’m good at that, because I worked for a detective agency while I was putting myself through uni.’

For a brief, crazy second, Rochelle almost asked what it was like, being a detective, but just in time she remembered she was talking to the Slut, who she hated. On the other hand, even though she hated the Slut, she couldn’t tell her to get lost - not unless she wanted the Slut to run straight back to her dad and inform him that his daughter was working in a bookshop, instead of going to school.

‘All right,’ she mumbled. ‘I’ll meet you in the cafe next door at eleven.’

The Slut said, ‘Thanks,’ and went, which was a relief - except that it left Rochelle in the shop on her own, shaking like she’d just had another visit from the maniac. When the door opened again, she shook her hair forward to hide her face, hoping the customer would just browse around and then piss off.

‘Hi, Mermaid,’ Jake said. ‘I called in to see how you were feeling, after ...’ Then she stopped and said, ‘Hey! What’s the matter, Rochelle?’

Rochelle looked up into Jake’s bright blue stare, took a deep breath and told her everything. The Big Drama. Moving to Melbourne. Nicking off from school. The Slut turning up at the bookshop.

Even after she’d finished, she didn’t think: oh no, why did I say all of that to *Jake*? She just leaned on the counter, feeling light and floaty, like the exercise in gym class where Kerrill had pressed down hard on her shoulders and when she lifted her hands, Rochelle had been convinced she’d fly straight up to the ceiling.

‘Ha!’ Jake said, looking pleased. ‘I always knew I’d make a good detective. You told Gwen you’d only just moved to Melbourne but you’ve got a Helvellyn school bag. I figured there was something strange about that.’

Rochelle blinked. Out of everyone at the bookshop, she seemed to have picked the right person to tell, even though she hadn’t done it on purpose. Jake could’ve said, ‘Hey, you can’t skive off from school,’ or ‘What will your mum think?’ or ‘Why did you do it?’ But in typical Jake-fashion, she took all of that for granted and cut straight to the part that interested her.

‘Actually, I wouldn’t mind a step myself,’ Jake added, drumming thoughtfully on the counter. ‘My mum doesn’t believe in The Family. She’s never even told me who my father is. She just calls him “the sperm bank”, because she picked him out when she decided to have a kid - like, she figured

he had good genes or whatever. So I've only got her and Zayde, my granddad, which is a drag sometimes.'

Rochelle's eyes opened wide. 'Unreal,' she said. 'I never thought of someone *wanting* a step. It's a drag, having, like, three parents.'

'Oh well, you don't have to take the stepmum on board, if you don't want to,' Jake told her. 'Listen, Mermaid, do you want to disappear before she comes back? I could do the rest of your shift and tell the Wicked Stepmother you went home sick.'

That should've been exactly what Rochelle wanted but she found herself saying, 'Thanks, but no thanks.' Now she'd had time to think about it, she figured she needed to know why the Slut had tracked her down. Still, she'd meant it when she thanked Jake. Hal and Gwen and Bel were naturally kind but it was an effort for Jake, which made it special.

Jake didn't stop there, either. She sat down on the child-sized stool and asked so many questions that Rochelle ended up telling her things she hadn't even told Tez and Kerrill. Then, just as she was beginning to worry about having spilled her guts, Jake glanced at her sideways.

'By the way, I don't do gossip,' she said. 'Rochelle Parfitt, your secret is safe with me.'

They giggled about that and Jake ordered Rochelle to do some busy work, so she wouldn't sit around stressing about the Slut. Rochelle spotted a pile of books on the counter and for the next twenty minutes they zoomed round the shop, shelving the books and having mock-arguments about whether they were fairytales or myths or legends. They were halfway down the stack when Hal called in. Rochelle made three cups of coffee, dropped an ice cube from the fridge into her cup and drank it in ten seconds flat, then said, 'I have to go' and left Hal and Jake there together.

She thought: more matchmaking. It feels right, thought. Amazing. It looks like I've switched from backing Bel to backing Jake.

Ten seconds later, Rochelle was pushing at the door of Artemis's cafe. She'd decided to get there early and plan her opening line but when she looked round, she realised the Slut had arrived even earlier.

'Hi, Rochelle,' she called. 'Do you want a sandwich or a coffee or a smoothie?'

Rochelle said, 'No' and 'No' and "No." that was supposed to prove she was an independent adult but it came out sounding babyish and sulky, although the Slut didn't seem to notice. She just leaned forward, till she was right in Rochelle's face.

'You must be wondering why I'm here,' she said. 'I had to come to Melbourne on a business trip and - well, Jim was so upset by your last phone call that I thought I'd front up and tell you how miserable you're making him.'

Then her mouth twisted into a grin and she added, 'Don't worry, I changed my mind after I saw you in the bookshop. Jim's not the only one who's miserable, is he?'

Rochelle's feelings weren't any of the Slut's business, so she didn't answer the last part. 'Are you going to tell Dad I'm skipping school?' she demanded.

The Slut prodded the froth on her coffee. 'I don't know,' she said, licking the spoon clean. 'I'm new to this parenting business. All right, I knew Jim had a kid, when I met him, but -'

'But you didn't give a stuff about me or Mum,' Rochelle cut in.

That wasn't a smart thing to say, if she wanted to con the Slut into keeping her secret. She clamped her mouth shut, to stop herself telling any more the truth, but when she glanced across the table, the Slut looked relieved, not angry.

'No, I didn't,' she agreed with an untwisted grin. 'I just concentrated on making sure Jim's marriage was well and truly over. Married guys are famous for saying their wives don't understand them, then running back home when it suits.' She hacked at the coffee froth again and added, 'But it's different now. For one thing, I know Jim's serious about me. And for another thing, I want to hear your side of the story.'

Rochelle's breath caught in her throat. She ducked her head, playing back her memory-tape of the last ten seconds. It was true. The Slut really had said 'for one thing' and 'for another thing'. Rochelle said it all the time too, because she'd picked it up from her dad. That made her almost smile. Not quite. But almost. Even though the Slut was saying -

Rochelle thought: no. Even though *Sara's* saying things I don't want to hear.

Sara must've noticed the almost-smile, because she leaned even closer. 'So, tell me,' she said, 'why aren't you going to school?'

'I tried,' Rochelle said. 'But I couldn't. I just couldn't.'

'Fair enough,' Sara said, taking it for granted, the way Jake had done. 'Okay then, how did you end up working at the bookshop?'

Rochelle hadn't told Jake that part of the story - there wasn't any point, when Jake knew most of it already - but apparently, now that she'd started spilling her secrets, she need to offload every single detail. Sara was good at listening. While Rochelle was telling her about the junkie girl, Artemis bustled past and said, 'Hi, can I get you something?' so she asked for a felafel sandwich and ate it while she told Sara about the bookshop.

Then she felt like a traitor. She'd sworn she'd never, ever speak to the Slut and there she was, talking to her and eating with her and calling her 'Sara'.

But before she could think of something bitchy to say, Sara leaned at her again. 'Listen,' she said, glancing over her shoulder as if she was worried someone might hear her, 'I probably ought to act like an adult and tell you to go back to school but frankly, I like the sound of the bookshop. It's not as if you've been getting into trouble. You just got yourself a job. Okay, you'll have to tell your parents some time but ... how about I give you a week to think it over? Here's my business card, Rochelle. Call me at work next Thursday afternoon, okay?'

Rochelle travelled home on the tram, holding herself straight all the way, as if she was a jug full of water that would spill if she tilted. She carried herself carefully into the flat and sat down carefully at her desk but she was still staring at a blank page, wondering how to explain that Jake and the Slut had turned into her best friends, when her mum knocked at her door and called, 'Your friend Bel's on the phone.'

Rochelle backed away from the desk, hurried out to the kitchen and picked up the phone. 'I'm desperate,' Bel said straight away. 'There's this last-minute demo in the city tomorrow morning, about a new boatload of refugees. Jake and Vince won't go, because the little creeps reckon demos are too twentieth-century, but I really want to be there, so ... will you help Vince hand out the leaflets for my story-telling session?'

'Yeah, sure,' Rochelle said. 'See you there.'

As she put the phone down, she noticed that this time she hadn't been freaked by talking to a bookshop-person with her mother in the background. The fact was, she felt lucky, for a change. She believed what Sara had told her. She trusted Sara not to dob her in to her dad, before she'd had time to work out what she wanted to say.

It should've been easier to write about Sara, now that she knew why she liked her, but instead Rochelle went straight back to her room, pulled *Grimms' Fairytales* from the bookshelf and turned to the oldest version of 'Cinderella'. She'd read it when Gwen lent her *Grimms' Fairytales* and Russ had mentioned it at dinner, but she'd blocked it out both times.

Rochelle thought: okay, time to let it in now.

She sat down at the desk and started reading. The oldest version didn't even have a stepmother. It began when a queen was dying. She made her husband promise he wouldn't marry again, till he found someone with hair as long and golden as hers ... but the only person with hair like that was the king and queen's daughter.

When the king said he was going to marry his daughter, the princess freaked. To put him off, she said she wouldn't marry anyone, unless they gave her three dresses - one that was gold like the sun, one that was silver like the moon and one that sparkled like the stars - along with a coat made of fur from

all the animals in the kingdom. That sounded impossible but the king managed it. The princess still didn't want to marry her father, so she sneaked off in the middle of the night, taking the dresses and wearing the coat.

But some hunters trapped her, thinking the furry coat was a wild animal, and carried her off to a prince's castle, where they called her 'Catskin' and made her work in the kitchen. Then the prince threw three parties in a row and Catskin washed her dirty face and put on a different dress each time.

And - surprise, surprise, the prince falls for her, Rochelle wrote in her folder, and she becomes a princess again and lives happily ever after.

There was a sour taste at the back of her throat. She hadn't realised why she'd hated that story before, but she could see it now, although she didn't intend to tell anyone ever - not Jake and not Sara, even though she'd blabbed most of her secrets to them today.

Well, especially not Sara, because it was about her, in a way.

Rochelle swallowed hard and wrote:

Truth time: when Dad fell for someone way younger than Mum, it made me feel sick in my stomach. But actually, now I've met her for the second time, it's obvious that Sara's way older than me. And actually, Dad's younger than his age in lots of ways. I can see why he and Sara would get on well together.

So, actually, Dad falling for Sara isn't the same as that king who wanted to marry his daughter.

She stood up and stretched and took *Grimms' Fairytales* back to the bookcase, wedging it between *The Greek Myths* and *The Arabian Nights*. When she sat down at the desk again, her head felt light and spacious and the astronaut pen went orbiting across the page. Rochelle wrote:

Omigod. I feel like I'm a completely different person. I miss Dad. I didn't realise it but I've been missing him so much.

I'm going to do it. I'll wait for a week, so I can think things through and say goodbye to the bookshop. Then I'll ring Sara and I'll ring Dad and I'll tell Mum what's been going down.

Awesome. I really, really think everything's going to work out okay.

Friday

Rochelle was so focused on saying goodbye to the bookshop that she forgot to watch out for bad omens. She was putting together a birthday present for an eight-year-old girl, based on the books Mrs Murphy had bought for her granddaughter Sinead, when a woman swanned over, looking like the wicked queen in the 'Snow White' video - long dark hair, big dark eyes, long purple silk jacket and a long skirt with purple and green diamonds.

'Where's Galadriel' she asked with a wicked-queen frown.

Rochelle thought: yikes, another weirdo. This one thinks Galadriel from *The Fellowship of the Ring* is a real person.

The woman frowned harder. 'Of course,' she said. 'I forgot. You probably know her as Jake. I'm her mother, by the way - Sonya Jacobs. I was sure Galadriel said she'd be here but perhaps I got the time wrong.'

'Oh, right,' Rochelle said. 'I guess Jake'll be dropping in for Bel's story-telling session this afternoon. Here, have on the leaflets, Mrs Jacobs.'

'Sonya,' the woman snapped. 'Or Ms Jacobs, if you insist.' She speed-read the leaflet, tucked it into her purple bag and said, 'Hmm, maybe I'll come to this story-telling. That might be the best way to corner my disappearing daughter. Besides, I could meet the wonderful Bel we keep hearing about and give my father an outing. He's always complaining that no one's interested in the old stories.'

'Actually, heaps of customers come in here all the time,' Rochelle said, defending the bookshop against Jake's granddad.

Sonya smiled, which was even scarier than her frown. 'I'm sure they do,' she said. 'The modern world can be very impersonal and soulless. A lot of people are searching for something more spiritual. As a matter of fact, I run a course for women called "The Goddess Within You". Do you understand what that means?'

'Sort of,' Rochelle said cautiously. 'Like, I do this thing of picking fairytales that match the people I know.'

'No, no,' Sonya sighed. 'Not that kind of party trick. I teach women to look into themselves and decide whether they identify as Cinderella the Mourning Maiden ... or Demeter the Great Mother ... or Morgan le Fay the Wise Woman.'

Rochelle blinked. 'I can't see how that's so different from my fairytale thing,' she said. 'Except that you're mixing up Cinderella, who's a fairytale, and Demeter, who's from the Greek myths, and Morgan le Fay from the King Arthur stories, which are legends.'

‘Good heavens,’ Sonya said, frowning again. ‘I can tell you’ve been talking to my daughter. She’s appallingly pedantic about the difference between myths, legends and fairytales, too.’

Rochelle thought: as a matter of fact, I can have my own ideas, without Jake helping. Still, I like Jake way better, after yesterday, so I don’t care if Sonya thinks I’m on her side.

When she shrugged, Sonya turned away in a swirl of purple silk. ‘If you see Galadriel, tell her I’ll be there at the story-telling,’ she said over her shoulder. ‘No, wait a minute - on second thoughts, maybe I’ll surprise her. That way, she won’t get the chance to avoid me again.’

She grinned - a real grin, not one of her witch-queen smiles, reminding Rochelle of Jake for the first time. As she swirled out of the shop, Vince came bouncing in. ‘Who was that?’ he asked. ‘She looks like Morticia Addams.’

Rochelle giggled. ‘You’re not wrong. But she’s Jake’s mum.’

‘Oops!’ Vince said, slapping his hand over his mouth. Then he opened two fingers and whispered through the gap, ‘Mind you, Jake looks kind of like Wednesday Addams herself.’

Vince could see the funny side of anything, even dressing up in an Arabian Nights costume and making a fool of yourself. Bel had sent along her story-telling outfit, so Rochelle had to change into Scheherezade clothes, in order to hand out the leaflets. She felt like a complete idiot when she stepped out into Smith Street, wearing silk pyjama pants and a spangled veil that blew into her mouth, but Vince kept cracking jokes until she started to giggle again. He marched her up to the housing commission flats, then down Smith Street, and after that they went back to The World Tree and waited for Bel to turn up.

And waited.

And waited.

A class from the primary school came in, along with some kids from the flats. Sonya steered an old man into the shop and grabbed the best seats for the two of them. Hal arrived and set up his camcorder. Jake walked in, took one look at her mother and grandfather and hid at the back of the shop with Rochelle and Vince and Hal. They went on waiting for Bel to arrive.

And waiting.

And waiting.

‘Where is she?’ Hal asked, looking worried. ‘Do you think she’s had an accident?’

‘She was going on some demo,’ Vince said. ‘Oh shit, maybe the silly girl got herself arrested. Should we call the cop shop and check?’

‘Bel wouldn’t thank us for giving her name to the cops,’ Jake said. ‘And there’d still be twenty kids out there, waiting to be told some stories. Someone has to do it. For instance, someone who’s excellent at acting ...’

‘Don’t look at me,’ Vince said, backing off. ‘You can’t tell fairytales unless you know some, and I don’t. But you do, Jake. You could give them the stories behind your paintings ...’

‘In front of my mum and granddad?’ Jake yelped. ‘You’d have to be joking. Hal, you grew up in a fairytale bookshop. Why don’t you ...?’

‘No, thanks,’ Hal said. ‘I know more about account books than story books. But Rochelle tells a mean story. She could do it.’

Rochelle said, ‘No way known,’ but the others weren’t listening.

Jake was saying, ‘Great idea, Hal. Rochelle’s been borrowing a book a night, ever since she started working here.’

Vince was saying, ‘Just look at those kiddies, Rochelle. You can’t let them down. The show must go on. You’ll be brilliant, sweetie, I know it.’

And Hal just said, ‘Please, Rochelle.’

That cracked Rochelle up. Hal and Gwen had been really nice to her. She couldn’t turn around and say, ‘Sorry, you’ll have to cancel the session and make the bookshop look bad’ - but she couldn’t walk into the middle of all those kids and act like Scheherazade, either.

‘Trust me, I’m nowhere near as good as Bel,’ she told Hal. ‘She’s an actor. I’m just -’

‘A story-teller,’ he cut in. ‘You told me that Vietnamese story the other day, remember. Just talk to the kids like that and you’ll be fine.’

Before Rochelle had time to argue, Vince started to bang his drum and shout, ‘Make way for Scheherazade!’ Jake said, ‘Good luck,’ and Hal gave her a gentle push and she went weaving between the kids. Then, as she turned back to see whether Bel was going to come and save her at the last minute, Mr Creepy came sidling in.

Her least favourite customer. That was a really, really bad omen. Rochelle wanted to make a dash for the door but she couldn’t, because there were too many kids in the way. She adjusted the spangled veil and forced herself to look straight at the audience.

‘Hi,’ she said. ‘I’m wearing this costume to remind you of Scheherazade.’

She explained who Scheherazade was, then told one of her stories - the Aladdin story from The Arabian Nights. The kids stayed silent the whole time, which made Rochelle feel a bit better and gave her the confidence to launch into ‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon’. They were still listening, so she told the Widow’s Island story, for the Vietnamese kids, and the story about Bunjil making Port Phillip Bay.

Then she checked her watch and her brain went blank. She couldn’t remember any other stories. Not a single one - and her watch said she had to keep going for fifteen more minutes.

A kid in the front row wriggled and two kids in the back row started punching each other. Jake's mother sighed, Vince filled the silence with a drum roll and Hal smiled encouragingly at Rochelle.

'Once upon a time,' she said. (Thinking: that's always a good start.)

'There was this girl.' (Thinking: like me, why not?)

'She lived in a little house in a forest with her dad and her stepmum.'
(Thinking: like they usually do in fairytales.)

But then she remembered that, in most fairytales, the mother had to die before the father remarried. Rochelle didn't want her story to be like that, so she started to change things around. She told the kids that the girl's mother had been carried off by a Roc (from 'Sinbad the Sailor') and after a while the girl's father decided his wife must be dead, so he married again. But the girl was convinced that her mother was still alive, and one night she climbed out of the window and went off to look for her.

By that time, Rochelle was really into the story. She didn't even need to think about what happened next, because the words just kept coming. On the way through the forest, the girl rescued a magic puppy with wings (Rochelle had always wanted a puppy) and then she helped a girl giant and a girl gnome (because Bel said there ought to be more than one girl in a fairytale and she'd made the puppy a boy already).

The giant built a magic boat for the girl and the gnome steered it down the river and the puppy flew ahead, warning them about any rocks or dangerous currents. They sailed to the end of the river and into the sea, past some magic islands that Rochelle borrowed from *The Greek Myths*. On one island there was a bunch of women who sang so beautifully that people normally jumped in the sea and drowned, except the girl told everyone to put wax in their ears. On another island there was a witch who turned people into pigs but the puppy bit her ankle and made her turn all the pigs back into people again.

Finally, they came to the island where the Roc lived ... and the girl's mother said she didn't want to go home.

'Oh, spit,' the girl said. 'What am I going to do now, Mum? I miss Dad, just as much as I missed you before.'

Then the giant and the gnome said, 'Hey, we'd like to keep on travelling round in the boat. We could come back and collect you in six months time and take you to visit your dad.'

But the puppy said she'd rather stay with the girl and when she kissed his nose, he turned into a really cute prince. After that, the girl and the puppy-prince spent six months with her mother, then six months with her father and the stepmother (who turned out to be nice, not horrible). And in between times, they sailed round with the giant and the gnome and had adventures and lived happily ever after.

Rochelle could see the whole thing in her head, just like one of Jake's pictures. Even after she'd finished, it felt like the story was still going on.

When the kids started to clap, she jumped, as though they'd woken her out of a deep sleep. Hal hurried forward, explaining that she'd stepped in at the last minute, because Bel had been injured at a demonstration and taken off to hospital. He gave Rochelle a bear-hug and everyone clapped again. Then six kids asked for her autograph ... and Jake's granddad announced that he was taking everyone out to dinner ... and Vince told her she was brilliant ... and Sonya said, 'Your last story was such an interesting variant of the Demeter and Persephone myth,' whatever that meant.

But the best part was when Mr Creepy sidled over and whispered, 'Thank you,' and shook her hand. His fingers were warm and sticky but Rochelle didn't mind. She knew he didn't like touching people, so it was actually the biggest compliment of all.

By that time, everyone had said something nice, except Jake - although she hadn't said anything bitchy, either; it was just that she wasn't there. After Rochelle had finished signing the kids' scraps of paper, she asked Vince where Jake had gone.

'Didn't you notice?' he said, rolling his eyes up. 'Bel came in at the start of your last story with a humungous bruise on her forehead, where some cop thumped her - by mistake, *he* said. Jake's been telling her how stupid she is for the last fifteen minutes, so we sent them off to the back room to argue in private.'

'Oh, right,' Rochelle said. 'I heard what Hal said about Bel being carted off to hospital, only it didn't sink in. Excuse me, Vince. I gotta see for myself that she's okay.'

As she sped across to the back room, she could hear Jake and Bel, still arguing, so she slowed down before she reached the door. 'It sucks, Bel,' Jake was saying. 'That cop could've scrambled your brain. Do you really think it was worth it?'

'*Someone* has to stand up for the refugees,' Bel told her. 'Why not me?'

'Because,' Jake said.

That wasn't up to Jake's usual standard. Rochelle figured she must be giving Bel a poisonous look but when she peered round the door, Jake was just touching the bruise on Bel's forehead. Bel put one hand on top of Jake's hand and the other hand round her waist, which pulled Jake closer - so close that, if Jake had looked up, they would've been practically kissing.

Then, a second later, they *were* kissing.

Rochelle backed away and leaned against the nearest bookshelf, giddy and breathless. Not because she was freaked by two girls kissing; she'd seen

it all before, at the Mardi Gras parade with Kerrill and her gay uncle. Not even because she should've seen it coming; after all, Bel and Jake had been arguing non-stop, ever since she met them, just like the couple in her mum's *Pride and Prejudice* video.

But changing her ideas about Bel and Jake changed some of her other ideas, as well. Rochelle clutched her hair and thought: oh, spit. If Bel and Jake are in love, where does that leave poor Hal?

To make things worse, Hal appeared beside her, like a genie from a magic lamp. Rochelle jumped, knocking two books off the shelf, and when they bent to pick the books up, their heads banged together. Most people would've said, 'Watch it, idiot,' but Hal was too nice for that.

'Steady on,' he said. 'If we're not careful, we'll both end up with bruises like Bel.'

That reminded her that Bel and Jake were probably still kissing, a couple of metres away. All right, Hal had to find out in the end ... but he didn't need to find out the way she had, so Rochelle grabbed his arm and dragged him down to the front of the shop. She was still babbling about how glad she was that he'd talked her into the story-telling, when Bel came striding towards them.

'Rochelle, you're a hero,' she said. 'Thanks for covering my back.'

She flung her arms wide and pulled Rochelle into a hug. For half a second, Rochelle thought: help, I'm being hugged by a lesbian ... and then, after that, she was just being hugged by Bel.

Jake stood on tiptoe and grinned at her over Bel's shoulder. 'Excellent story, Mermaid,' she said. 'I particularly liked the part where the giant and the gnome sail off round the world together.'

Rochelle grinned back. There was no need to worry about being hugged by Jake. She didn't even hug her mother or her grandfather and she scowled ferociously when he found out that Mr Jacobs was shouting them dinner. Vince had a hot date but everyone else piled into Hal's car (Rochelle and Mr Jacobs) or Sonya's car (Bel and Jake) and set off for St Kilda.

'To my favourite cafe,' Mr Jacobs said. 'You'll like it, Story Girl. It's called Cafe Scheherezade.'

Rochelle didn't recognise half the things on the menu, so Mr Jacobs told her to order chicken soup with kreplach (Jewish ravioli) and latkes (Jewish potato cakes). While they were eating, she watched Bel and Jake from the corner of her eye but they didn't seem any different, except that they weren't arguing this time, because Jake was too busy arguing with her mum.

It was like they couldn't help themselves. If Sonya said, 'There's a terrible draught in here,' Jake had to say '*I feel hot.*' And if Jake said, 'I'd like to paint St Kilda as the underworld from the Greek myths,' Sonya had to say, 'I think that's been done.' After half an hour of it, Rochelle decided she didn't

need to worry that Hal would guess about Bel and Jake but she kept talking to him all through dinner, just to make sure.

When the waitress brought their coffee and cakes, Mr Jacobs banged his spoon against his cup till everyone was quiet, then pointed the spoon at Rochelle. 'Today, the Story Girl told us a beautiful story,' he said. 'Now we're here in Scheherezade's cafe, so I want to tell her a story, as a *mitzvah*.'

'That means "thank you",' Sonya explained and Mr Jacobs's face creased into a Jake-sowl.

'Who's telling this story - you or me?' he asked. 'Me? I thought so. Then it's your job to listen.'

Rochelle liked that idea. She leaned back in her chair, tuning out the cafe noises and letting Mr Jacobs's words carry her away to a fairytale Russia where ...

Once there was a witch called Baba Yaga. She lived in a hut on chicken legs, enormous chicken legs, so it could go anywhere. She rode through the sky in a mortar and pestle, grinding the heavens.

One day a young girl named Vasilissa was sent out by her wicked stepmother, to borrow a cup of flour from Baba Yaga. When she came to Baba Yaga's house, the gate was made of the bones of men that the witch had eaten and the gateposts were topped with skulls. Vasilissa was frightened but then she heard a girl sigh and say, 'Oh, I am so lonely, so lonely,' so she told the gate, 'Open,' and it opened.

Inside the hut was Baba Yaga's daughter. The two girls sat down by the fire and sang and sewed and combed each other's hair. Then Baba Yaga returned, so Baba Yaga's daughter turned Vasilissa into a needle and stuck her in the broom.

'Darling daughter,' said Baba Yaga, 'why can I smell human blood?'

'An old man came past, Mama,' said her daughter. 'But he was too old and stringy for you to eat.'

Baba Yaga slept and went out again and her daughter magicked Vasilissa out of the broom. They sat all day by the fire, knitting and telling tales and drinking tea, so happy that they didn't notice Baba Yaga land her mortar and fling open the door.

'Darling daughter, what a treat you have found for your mother,' she said. 'Into the oven with her!'

'No,' cried her daughter, 'this one you shall not eat,' and she gave Baba Yaga such a push as sent her into her own oven.

The two girls snatched up their brush and comb and knitting and ran, taking one of the skull gateposts to light their way. Baba Yaga dragged herself out of the oven and flew after them but her daughter flung the hairbrush

behind her and it grew into a thorny bush. It took Baba Yaga an age to struggle through it but she came on.

Then Baba Yaga's daughter flung the comb behind her and it grew into a forest of tall trees. But the two girls were tired now. They hadn't got far before they heard the witch gnaw through the last of the trees, so Vasilissa threw down her knitting, which turned into a deep, wet bog. Into the bog Baba Yaga sank, first to her knees, then to her hips, her waist, her shoulders.

And finally Baba Yaga was gone.

The two girls hurried on to the stepmother's house. 'Have you brought the flour?' she asked and Vasilissa said, 'No, but I have brought Baba Yaga's daughter - and this ...'

Mr Jackbs paused for a moment, making them wait for it. 'Then the light from the skull burnt the stepmother to cinders,' he said. 'And after that Vasilissa and Baba Yaga's daughter lived together in the house, singing and knitting and combing each other's hair forever.'

Rochelle sighed contentedly. She'd just heard a fairytale told in the old way, like having a visit from the Grimm brothers - and Vasilissa and Baba Yaga's daughter had lived happily ever after, just like all the fairytale princes and princesses. She glanced across the table, expecting Jake to be pleased that Mr Jacobs had told a story especially for her, but Jake was glaring at her grandfather.

'That's so typical, Zayde,' she said. 'You can't help yourself, can you? Read my lips. My life's none of your bloody business.'

She pushed her chair back, stood up and stormed out of the cafe. Bel stood up as well, then paused to frown down at Mr Jacobs.

'Thanks a lot,' she said, part annoyed and part laughing. 'You know what Jake's like. Now I'll have to spend the rest of tonight calming her down.' And she went racing off after Jake.

Rochelle's heart turned a somersault. No way could Hal have missed that. He had to have guessed about Bel and Jake. She couldn't bear to look at him and she couldn't think of anything to say, so she was staring at her plate and chopping her cake into tiny pieces, when Jake's mum took over.

'Bel's right, you know,' she told Mr Jacobs. 'Galadriel's a very private person. I've given her plenty of opportunities to talk about her ... ah, friends, but she's made it quite clear that she's not interested in my approval.'

Mr Jacobs laughed like a naughty kid. 'You're her mother, Sonya,' he said. 'You have to make nice. Me, I'm an old man, eighty years in this world. If I want to tell a little Russian fairytale, to show my granddaughter there's no secrets in this family, who can stop me?'

Rochelle thought: actually, he's got a point there. Jake and Sonya are so alike that they could go on bickering forever but I reckon Bel and Mr Jacobs'll sort them out.

She just wished Mr Jacobs hadn't started his no-secrets campaign in front of Hal - and she wished it even more when Hal made some excuse and whisked them out of the cafe, as if he couldn't handle hearing anything more about Jake and Bel. They walked back to the car in silence but it was easier to talk while they were driving. Face to face and in daylight, Rochelle wouldn't have had the nerve to say anything, but sideways, and at night, she was able to say, 'I'm sorry, Hal.'

'Um,' Hal said, concentrating on the road. 'Sorry for what? You weren't the one who walked out and spoilt the celebration.'

He was pretending Jake and Bel were just girls behaving badly, which made Rochelle feel like Mr Jacobs. All right, she didn't feel eighty years old but she felt sick and tired of secrets.

'It's okay,' she said. 'You don't have to pretend. I know how you feel about those two getting together.'

'You what?' Hal said. 'So that's why you ... But I thought you knew ... Why did you think I ...?'

Rochelle made an amazing discovery. Apparently, when you really liked somebody, you could read their mind. She knew exactly what Hal was trying to say: '*So that's why you kept flirting with me, then backing off. But I thought you knew I fancied you. Why did you think I got Gwen to take you on?*'

'Me?' she squeaked. 'Me, not Bel or Jake?'

'Be real,' Hal said. 'For one thing, I'm not stupid enough to fall for someone who's obviously mad about someone else. And for another thing, I like story-tellers better than actors or artists.'

Rochelle stared. If Hal was starting to say 'for one thing' and 'for another thing', he must've been listening to her more than she'd realised. 'Me,' she repeated, testing it out, and Hal laughed.

'You're not sure yet, are you?' he said. 'Sounds like I need to convince you.'

They parked down by the river and talked. Hal told her she was gorgeous and smart, which was cool, and Rochelle worked out that she'd liked him for ages, except that she wasn't stupid enough to fall for people who were mad about other people, either. There was some kissing, as well. In fact, it was practically perfect.

Until she went and wrecked it.

Hal drove her back to the flat and they kissed a bit more and then it was time for Rochelle to go but she didn't want him to leave, so she said, 'Come in for coffee.' They held hands all the way up the stairs, until she had

to let go and fish her key out of her bag. It turned in the lock. The door opened, not completely, just a fraction, and there was her mother, behind her wall of text books.

Rochelle saw her every day, so she'd got used to the changes, but now it felt as if she was looking at her mum through Hal's eyes. Seeing a stranger. Her mum was wearing an old navy tracksuit, covered with fur balls. Her hair straggled limply round her face and she'd stacked on five kilos from eating pizza and sitting at her desk. And she looked so sad. Her eyes were shadowy and her mouth curved down and the frown-crease between her eyebrows was as sharp as a scar.

Rochelle thought: where's my fairytale-queen mother gone? How can anyone change so much, in such a short time?

Then she thought: hold on, Mum had to put on a big act to get through Louise's party. I can't land a total stranger on her, without any warning.

So she turned and whispered, 'Sorry, I made a mistake. I have to do my homework. Goodbye.'

And she pushed Hal backwards and shut the door in his face.

Saturday

Rochelle spent the entire day trying not to think, which was harder than it sounded. Her mind felt like a hall cupboard, so full of junk that she had to lean against the door to keep it closed. Every now and then, the door would burst open and she'd see Hal's face, looking hurt and puzzled, before she slammed the door shut.

And every now and then, she peered over the wall of text books and wondered where her fairytale-queen mother had gone.

The day seemed to drag on forever but night time went faster. Her mother took a break from her assignment and they watched an old seventies film called *The Sting*.

'Good heavens,' her mum said in one of the ad breaks, 'I just realised I was younger than you, the first time I saw that movie.'

After *The Sting* was over, she went and got some old photo albums, to show Rochelle what she'd been like when she was fifteen. She didn't look tall and glamorous, the way Rochelle thought of her. She just looked big and lumpy and in most of the family photos, her eyes kept sliding towards Rochelle's gran, as though she was comparing the two of them and deciding that she didn't measure up.

'Poor kid,' her mum said to the photos. 'No matter how bad things are, I suppose you can always remember a time when they were worse.'

Rochelle thought: that might be true if you're forty-one, like Mum, but if you're sixteen like me, you've only got fifteen other years to compare with. Fact is, this'd have to be the worst year of my life so far.

Sunday

Next morning Rochelle remembered that she'd filled her school bag with fairytale books on Friday, because she knew Hal would be giving her a lift, so she spent the day trying to finish her project and find stories to help her understand everyone she knew.

She'd found some of the stories already. Her father was Loki, the tricky Norse god who went too far but got away with it ... most of the time. Bel and Jake were Snow White and Rose Red or Vasilissa and the witch's daughter. And Hal was the bear in Bel's story, which gave Rochelle the clue to his story - 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon,' where the guy looked like a bear but turned out to be a prince.

I liked that story, right from the start, she wrote. Maybe it was trying to tell me something - like, forget about Hal's freckles and see how nice he is underneath.

He is nice. I wish I'd told him the truth on Friday, instead of telling that stupid lie. I'm supposed to be conning Mum that I'm going to school, not Hal. That stuff about homework must've sounded totally crazy.

He'll hate me now, for sure.

Thinking about Hal made the cupboard door in her mind creak on its hinges, so Rochelle grabbed the next book, which was called *Celtic Fairytales*, and started searching for a fairytale to fit Gwen. For some reason, she kept coming back to the story of a guy called Tam Lin, who'd been stolen by the fairies. His girlfriend Janet had to wait till the fairies went riding at midnight, then pull Tam Lin off his horse and hold on tight. The fairy queen changed him into a snake and a lion and a lump of red-hot iron. But Janet wouldn't let go, no matter what happened, and in the end he changed into himself again.

Rochelle read 'Tam Lin' three times and then it suddenly made sense. Forget about the love-stuff. Gwen's mother was off with the pixies, just like Tam Lin, but Gwen wouldn't let go - even when it hurt, even when her mum kept on changing, even though her mum could never get back to the way she was before.

Rochelle shivered and thought: oh, that's so sad.

If finding Gwen's story was hard, finding a story for Sara was even harder. When she'd started working at the bookshop, Rochelle had thought all the Wicked Stepmother stories were about Sara: but not any more. In the end, she settled for a story from the same book as 'Tam Lin'.

The woman who lived in the moon came down to earth, to deal with some evil creatures in one of the Welsh marshes. But the creatures pulled her under the water and dumped a huge stone on her. When the new moon didn't appear, the people living near the marsh went to Sara, the wise woman.

Sara told them to pick some hazel twigs for protection, then walk into the marsh, till they saw a coffin and a cross. In the middle of the marsh the people found a tree with two equal branches, like a cross, and a coffin-shaped stone beside it. As they lifted the stone, the moon woman's light flashed out, blasting the creatures, and she sailed back up into the sky, where she belonged.

Don't ask me how that story relates to Sara-my-stepmother, Rochelle wrote. Fact is, it's all I've got, so it'll just have to do.

Still, at least I found a story with Sara's name in. I can't find a story for Mum at all.

She'd always thought her mother was a fairytale queen but right now, her mum seemed more like Cinderella, sitting sadly among the ashes. Then again, Cinderella's life improved after the fairy godmother and the prince turned up - but Rochelle was too young to be a fairy godmother and her father wasn't coming back. So she couldn't use the Cinderella story to understand her mum and she couldn't find anything else ...

The door in her mind swung open and all the weekend's thoughts crashed down around her. Rochelle forced the astronaut pen to keep moving and wrote:

Truth time: my mum's depressed. Really, really, really depressed. I don't know what to do. I'm frightened.

There's no stories about it and there's no one I can tell.

Even writing in my book doesn't help.

I'm going to bed now.

Monday

Rochelle didn't want to go to work, in case Hal was there, but she didn't want to let Gwen down either, so off she went.

Monday mornings were always pretty quiet. That gave her time to think and thinking didn't feel too great, so she wandered around the bookshop, looking for something to read. There must've been thousands of books in The World Tree but Rochelle couldn't get interested in any of them, till she remembered Jake calling her 'Mermaid' and decided to finish the Little Mermaid story that she'd started reading on her first time in the shop.

She skipped straight to the part where the Little Mermaid swapped her tail for human legs, on the condition that, even though she'd move like a dancer, she'd also feel as if she was treading on knife blades. She had to give the sea witch her voice too, as payment, and if the prince fell in love with anyone else, the Little Mermaid's heart would break and she'd turn into foam and blow away on the wind.

Rochelle thought: tough conditions, right? But not a problem. I've seen the Disney movie and I know it'll all be fine in the end.

She went on reading. The Little Mermaid swam to the prince's palace, where she swallowed the sea witch's magic potion and passed out. When she woke, she had legs, instead of a tail, and the prince was bending over her. He took her back to the palace and after that, they went everywhere together. The prince kept saying he liked her best of all, except for one person - a girl he'd only ever seen once in his life, when she pulled him out of the sea, after the Little Mermaid had rescued him from the shipwreck.

Then one day his parents sent the prince off to visit a princess they'd chosen for him. On the way, he said to the Little Mermaid, 'They can't force me to marry her. If I can't find the girl I'm in love with, I'd rather marry you.'

So everything seemed to be working out - and then Rochelle turned the page and the prince arrived at the princess's palace, took one look at her and said, 'It's you! You're the girl I fell for, after the shipwreck.'

That didn't happen in the movie. In the Disney version, the prince married spunky Ariel but in the Andersen story, he married the princess and the Little Mermaid had to dance at their wedding. Dancing on knives. Rochelle felt so angry at Hans Andersen that she didn't want to read any more.

She couldn't stop herself, though. She had to keep turning the pages. Next minute, the prince and princess were going off to bed, in a gold and purple tent on the deck of the prince's ship, while the Little Mermaid leaned on the rail and waited for the sun to come up and turn her into foam. But, just in time, her mermaid sisters appeared and told her they'd gone to the sea witch, to ask how they could save her.

The witch had given them a magic knife, in exchange for their long mermaid hair. If the Little Mermaid stabbed the knife into the prince's heart, his blood would turn her legs back into a tail again. The sisters kept saying, 'Come on, kill the prince' - and so did Rochelle, even though it was a horrible idea. But when the Little Mermaid looked at him, lying there with the princess, she couldn't do it.

She just couldn't.

Instead, she jumped into the sea - but at the last minute, because she'd done a good deed by not killing the prince, she changed from a mermaid into an air spirit. According to Hans Andersen, if she flew round doing more good deeds for three hundred years, she'd get a human soul and go to heaven. That was probably supposed to be a happy ending but it didn't feel happy to Rochelle. By the time the Little Mermaid jumped into the sea, she was crying. She blew her nose and slammed the book back on the shelf, then started crying again.

She thought: crying about a story. How stupid is that? I never cry, normally. I didn't even cry when my parents split up.

But it didn't seem to matter how often she said, 'Stupid, Rochelle, stupid.' She just kept on crying and crying and she couldn't understand why.

It was scary.

For a while there, Rochelle thought she was going crazy.

She was blotting her face for the twentieth time, when Bel and Jake came in.

'Hi, Rochelle,' Bel said. 'Jake wants to apologise for walking out on Friday night.'

'No, I don't,' Jake said. 'That's the only way to deal with my bossy mum and my nosy granddad. But I'm sorry you got landed with them, Mermaid.'

Rochelle whispered, '*Mermaid*,' and burst into tears. Again. After that, she must've blanked out for a few minutes, because next thing she knew, she was sitting on the child-sized stool in a quiet corner of the bookshop. Bel was kneeling behind her with an arm round her shoulders. Jake was sitting beside her on the floor. And Rochelle was telling them how the Little Mermaid loved the prince so much that she danced on knives for him but he didn't love her back and she couldn't say anything, because the sea witch had cut her tongue out, so she jumped into the sea.

Then somehow she was telling Bel and Jake how her mum still loved her dad but he didn't love her mum any more and she didn't want her friends to feel sorry for her, so she'd moved down to Melbourne, where she could crack up without anybody seeing.

'Except for me, I mean,' Rochelle finished up. 'But that doesn't help, because I don't know what to do.'

Bel hugged her and Jake said, 'Life's a bitch,' and somebody squeezed her hand. It was Hal, appearing like a genie again.

'Why didn't you tell us, Rochelle?' he asked.

That was a good question but she didn't have a good answer. It was just that her mum had wanted to keep everything private and it'd seemed like the only thing Rochelle could do for her, so she'd done it. While she frowned down at her feet, trying to think of a more sensible reason, Jake poked her in the ribs.

'Talk to us, Mermaid,' she said. 'What's the matter? Has a witch cut your tongue out?'

Bel yelped, 'Jake! That's gross. Shut up!' but Rochelle was smiling for the first time in three days. It was true. Ever since the Big Drama, she'd been keeping her mouth shut and dancing on knives, just like the Little Mermaid – and like her mother. She was about to tell Jake she'd been on the right track with that 'Mermaid' business, when a shadow blocked the light out and she looked up into Gwen's eyes.

'What's happened?' she asked and Rochelle said, 'My mum's depressed. I'm scared she's going to top herself or something.'

Hal clutched her hand tighter and Bel's arm stiffened around her shoulders and Jake whispered, 'Oh hell, that bad?'

But Gwen smiled at her and said, 'Well, at least you know what the problem is. That's the first step.'

And it is, Rochelle wrote in her folder a few hours later. *But what's the second step?*

The bookshop people had tried to help her with that. 'It's hard to think of anything useful, when I don't know your mother,' Hal apologised. 'What's she like, Rochelle?'

'Like a fairytale queen - cool and calm and perfect,' Rochelle said. Then she frowned and said, 'No, she's a mess ... Oh, spit! it's like she's both those things at once.'

'I know what you mean,' Jake said. 'My mum looks totally in control but every now and then she loses it, big time, so she takes these tranquilliser pills. Maybe they'd help your mum too.'

'Maybe,' Rochelle sighed. 'Only, how do I talk Mum into taking pills?'

'Well, for starters, you need to tell her what you told us,' Bel said. 'That's what we do in my family, when things get out of hand. We have a major screaming match and clear the air.'

'Not a hope,' Rochelle said. 'Mum never screams. She'd just go, "I'm fine, leave me alone".'

Gwen nodded and tugged at her earring. 'You have to know what you feel, before you can say it,' she told Bel. 'I went to a therapist for a while, to sort out how I feel about my mother. Do you think your mother would consider seeing a therapist, Rochelle?'

'Same problem as the pill idea,' she said. 'If I knew how to talk to Mum about that stuff, I wouldn't be freaking now.'

The thought of confronting her mother made her head spin. She tilted sideways, leaning against Hal, who slid his arm round her waist and said, 'I could come and help, if you don't feel like doing it on your own.'

'Thanks,' Rochelle said, leaning harder. 'That's nice. You've all been really nice ... but I'll have to think about what you said later, because I'm zoning out now.'

Bel grinned. 'Crying's like that,' she said. 'It always makes you tired afterwards.'

It was comforting to know that Bel had cried sometimes, as comforting as the knowledge that Jake's mum got depressed and Gwen needed to sort things out and Hal still liked her. Rochelle went on thanking them, till Jake said, 'Oh, shut up, Mermaid,' and then Hal drove her home and they sat in the car outside the flats, cuddling but not kissing, because Rochelle's nose was so stuffed up that she couldn't breathe properly. Hal asked if she wanted him to come in but she shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I have to figure out what I'm going to say to Mum.'

That felt really adult at the time but two hours later, after she'd covered four pages in her folder with blue biro writing, Rochelle found herself wishing Hal was still there. She sighed and wrote:

It's no good. I can't work out how to stop Mum being depressed. She hates talking about stuff and I can't see myself bossing her into it. Fact is, I reckon it'd take serious magic, like a hazel rod for protection ...

She propped her elbows on the desk, thinking about the people who'd gone into the marsh and rolled away the stone that was holding the moon woman down. Then she snatched up her pen and wrote:

*Actually, that's not as dumb as it sounds.
Omigod, could I?
Why not? It's the only way.*

Leaves rustled outside her bedroom window, whispering, 'Fairytale are still true.' Rochelle put down the astronaut pen, hesitated for a second and then closed the loose-leaf folder.

'Just do it, girlfriend,' she said to her reflection in the window.

There is a shoe box.
There is a window.
There is a triangle of blue water
 outside the window.

Rochelle settles the Cinderella book in the shoe box and straightens up, facing the window, looking out at the triangle of blue water in the bottom corner of the view. It's a familiar view, the view from her bedroom in the house where she used to live with her mother and father, which is now the house where her father lives with Sara.

Rochelle keeps the shoe box of books in her clothes cupboard in this bedroom, although there was a moment, while she and her mum were packing up the Melbourne flat, when she'd nearly thrown the books out. She can remember standing there and holding them over a green garbage bag, as if she was preparing to sacrifice her bad memories to the good luck gods.

But she's glad she dropped the books into her suitcase, instead. Reading them has reminded her of things she'd forgotten, even just eight months later.

She thinks: I guess you have to keep emptying your brain out, like the cache on a computer, otherwise it'd get so full that it couldn't take anymore.

Rochelle's brain is almost full now but she needs to download a last few memories. She has a decision to make. Part of it depends on what happened in Melbourne - that's why she's been checking the books - but part of it depends on what happened after she moved back to Sydney.

So she turns to the end of her loose-leaf folder, unfastens the binding and takes out some blank sheets of paper. The astronaut pen rolls across the table towards her. As she picks it up, the bedroom blurs and shrinks and becomes her bedroom in the Melbourne flat.

Rochelle remembers.

Rochelle closed the loose-leaf folder, walked out to the phone in the kitchen and dialled the number on her stepmother's business card.

'I want to talk about Mum,' she said and Sara, direct as always said, 'Are you sure I'm the right person, Rochelle?'

'Yes,' she said definitely. 'Dad's, like, part of the problem. Gran and Uncle Tony wouldn't be much use either and the bookshop people were great for getting me started but they don't know Mum and Dad. I reckon I need someone who isn't family or a stranger. That means you, okay?'

'Okay,' Sara agreed. 'Well then, let's get started.'

Guess what, Sara is a wise woman, she wrote at the top of the blank sheet of paper. She didn't actually post me a hazel rod (joke) but she sorted through the whole story with me, one bit at a time, until I remembered about Ruth, Mum's best friend and my un-fairy godmother.

'Got it!' Rochelle said. 'I could phone Ruth and ask if she'd talk to Mum.'

'That might work. Why don't you try it straight away?' Sara suggested, so she did.

'Yes, I thought Jilly was making it all sound too easy,' Ruth said, ten minutes later. 'Thanks for telling me, Rochelle. What time does your mother usually get home from college? I'll ring her then.'

Rochelle put the phone down and swayed on her feet, suddenly exhausted. She stumbled off to her room and lay on the bed, listening to her Pink CDs, till her mother appeared in the doorway. Her frown-crease was still

as sharp as a knife cut, but her eyes looked brighter than they'd been for weeks, even though they were bright with tears.

'Rochelle, I'm a terrible mother,' she said. 'My brain hasn't been working properly. I didn't realise I was passing my problems on to you, until Ruth told me what you'd told her.'

Rochelle shrugged and said, 'Forget the Good Mother Award. The main thing is, what are we going to do now?'

The first thing we decided was that the Melbourne move had been a big mistake, she wrote. Mum's good at organising, when she's on the ball, and – zap! within two weeks she'd booked some moving men and our plane tickets, found a Sydney flat with a harbour view and re-enrolled me in my old school.

So I never had to go to Helvellyn Girls' Grammar, after all.

She'd gone on working at the shop for the rest of the week but after that she gave Jake her job and helped her mum to pack up the flat. And she spent every second evening with Hal but by then it was kind of sad, because they both knew she'd be leaving soon.

For her last day in Melbourne, Gwen turned on a farewell dinner at The World Tree. On her way through the city, Rochelle passed a McDonald's and saw a girl walk out, wearing the Macca's uniform and slinging a jacket over her shoulders. A seventies-style black crepe jacket with green satin lapels. No way could there be two jackets exactly like that, so Rochelle speeded up, to check the girl out. No dreads. No spots. No wrinkles in the jacket. This girl was neat and rosy and plump.

Rochelle thought: so it's true. The junkie girl flogged the jacket to Macca Girl and bought some smack that killed her and it's all my fault.

Then she looked closer and realised that Macca Girl *was* the junkie girl, only she'd put on some weight and smartened herself up.

So, maybe she used the jacket to make her look good at a job interview, which got her off the street and off the smack, Rochelle wrote. Or maybe the jacket had nothing to do with anything.

I'll never know, will I?

All the same, she was so pleased that she dropped into Retro 21 and bought the poodle-patch skirt, to celebrate - and to watch Digby's eyes bug out when she slapped a fifty-dollar note on the counter. When she arrived at the shop, Bel and Jake were there for dinner, as well. Bel gave her a book

about all the bad stuff multinationals did. (Rochelle read parts of it to her dad, when he annoyed her.) And Jake gave her a tiny painting of the Little Mermaid in her underwater sea-garden. (It was hanging on her bedroom wall now, beside the table.)

While they were saying goodbye, Jake gave her a long stare and said, 'So what's the deal with you and Prince Hal, now you're going back to Sydney?'

'I reckon Rochelle needs time to sort things out,' Hal said, which was the first Rochelle had heard of it. 'We'll see what happens later on.'

'You reckon?' Bel snapped. 'Does Rochelle get to have a say?'

For once, Rochelle agreed with Bel's feminist line but when she and Hal parked by the river and talked it over, she had to admit she wasn't exactly great at keeping in touch with people. And Hal pointed out that they wouldn't see each other for at least eight months, so it'd make sense to say, right from the start, that they could date other people in the meantime.

Hal is so sensible, Rochelle wrote. Almost too sensible. In fairytale terms, you'd have to say he's more like a wise old wizard than the handsome prince. There's no way of arguing with him, so you have to go along with his sensible plans.

She'd meant to email him, as soon as they settled into the Sydney flat, but for the first week she just sat on the balcony and stared at the harbour, catching up on a year of her own feelings, now that she didn't have to protect her mum any more. One minute she'd feel mad at her father for leaving, then next minute she'd feel mad at her mother for pretending everything was fine - or at herself for going along with it.

She told her parents about it, too. Her mother vagued out at first and her father got sad but Rochelle just kept talking, the way she'd talked to Ruth and Sara and the bookshop people, and in the end they both managed to listen.

Then, the week after that, it was time to go back to school. When she walked through the gate, she saw Tez and Kerrill, standing side by side.

'Bitches! You never wrote,' Rochelle said and they said, 'Bitch yourself. You never wrote, Rochelle Parfitt. Your mobile wasn't answering and we didn't have your bloody address.'

So that worked out okay.

She was still planning to email Hal when she bumped into Kerrill's totally-ex-boyfriend Josh at the mall. He looked as cool and dangerous as ever and Rochelle found herself thinking, 'Well, Hal told me to date other people,' so she started flirting with Josh and he said, 'You've changed, babe.'

What happened to Kerrill's quiet little friend?' and they'd been going out together, off and on, ever since. Kerrill kept saying, 'Watch it, the guy's a walking disaster area' but Rochelle liked the way Josh took charge. It was a rest, after dealing with her mum.

Her mother had a job running a new art gallery, which was more her style than the social work thing, but she still got depressed sometimes and she still wasn't totally over Rochelle's dad. On the other hand, she didn't hold everything inside herself these days - although Rochelle sometimes wished she would, especially when her mum and her mum's shrink got stuck into some wacky theory.

'I understand now why I married Jim,' she'd told Rochelle last week. 'He's like my mother, you see, and I'd got used to taking second place to your gran.'

'Oh, please,' Rochelle groaned. '*Dad* is like *Gran*? I don't think so.'

Still, even though it bugged her when her mum talked too much, it was better than when her mum wasn't talking at all. And if she started to get on Rochelle's nerves, she could always nick off to her dad's place. And somehow it was easier to love her mum, now she knew that her mum wasn't perfect.

So that was working out okay, as well.

She'd been so busy sorting things out with her parents, getting to know Sara, dating Josh and catching up with Tez and Kerrill that she hadn't written another word in her loose-leaf folder, until now. She hadn't had time to think about fairytales and myths and legends either, till her English teacher walked into the classroom at the end of term and told them to write something off the top of their heads.

Rochelle couldn't think of anything to write, so she did a remix of the fairytale she'd told at The World Tree - and the teacher said she should write a longer version for her VCE writing folio project next year, plus an essay on all the fairytales that she'd used in making the story.

She'd asked Josh what he thought of that idea, when they went to a movie on Saturday night, but he just stretched out his long legs and clasped his hands behind his head and waited for her to start talking about something else, meaning something about him. That made Rochelle feel like the girl in the Greek myths who fell for Narcissus and faded away, till there was nothing left of her but an echo.

It's funny, I kept looking for stories to help me understand my parents and the bookshop people but I never actually looked for my story, she wrote. I don't want to be Echo, though. I'd rather be Cinderella - the Russ-version, where the prince is just, like, a sign that she's getting over her folks.

As she leaned back and sighed, a piece of paper crackled in her skirt pocket. Rochelle tugged it out and unfolded it and read it for the tenth time. Last night, when she got back to her dad's house, she'd been so pissed off with Josh that she'd gone straight to the computer and emailed Hal, to ask what he thought about the writing folio idea.

His reply had been waiting for her this morning. She'd printed it out, before she went upstairs to her room and started flicking through her Melbourne notebooks.

Hal's email said: 'You tell a great story, Rochelle. Go for it - and can I ask you for some advice, as well? Mum wants to line up a holiday job for me in a Sydney bookshop, run by some people she knows. Do you reckon I ought to take it?'

I'm not stupid, Rochelle wrote. I know he's asking about more than the job. I've had eight months off, after all the stuff that happened in Melbourne, but now I have to decide about Hal and Josh.

She closed her eyes and lined them up side by side in her mind - Hal, who wasn't the sort of guy she'd ever fancied, and Josh who was the dangerous type, just like Narcissus. Then she opened her eyes and scanned the room, checking the bookshelf and the painting on the wall and notebooks in the shoe box and the view from the window.

Looking for answers.

There is a window.
There is a lawn, surrounded by treetops.
There are three people sitting on the lawn,
under the trees.

One of the three people – Sara – gets up and goes into the house, while the other two go on talking. Rochelle leans across the table and peers down at her mum and dad.

She thinks: who would've believed they'd end up chatting together, almost like old friends?

Then again, they mightn't have ended up that way, if Rochelle hadn't made a move. And she couldn't have made a move, if she hadn't come across The World Tree. The bookshop people and the bookshop stories had held her together, helped her to make sense of her parents and connected her to the world again.

Josh doesn't get that. But Hal would. That's why Rochelle's been avoiding him for the last eight months, because she needed a break, to sort out things and settle back into her old Sydney life.

Come to think of it, Hal told her she'd need to sort things out. Maybe she won't have to apologise for eight months of no emails. There are some advantages to Hal being so sensible, after all.

It looks like she might as well learn to live with it.

So Rochelle adds the new pages to her loose-leaf folder and returns it to the shoe box. She rests her hand on the four books for a second, then puts the lid on the box and

stashed it in the cupboard again. On the way back to the table, she collects her mobile, sits down in the chair and dials, making another connection.

'I can't answer right now, but leave a message and I'll get back to you,' says a recorded voice.

'Come to Sydney, Hal,' Rochelle says to the tape. 'It'll be great to see you again.'

As she gazes out at the summer sky, bleached by the sun and wisped with clouds, her mum glances up and waves, which means that she's ready to go home. Rochelle takes on last look at The World Tree books in her bookcase and the Little Mermaid painting on the wall. Then she stands and picks up her school bag and leaves.

There is a chair.

There is a table.

There is a room.

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