

I thought about a park bench with a little lichen growing under it. I decided to put a boy with slightly curly hair on the bench. I like brunettes. The boy has a father who is too strict and a mother who forgets to smile too often. Siblings; he is to have two older siblings. The first sister is an exact replica of the mother and the second sister is an unfortunate combination of both parents. The father tells the boy not to smile so much or to sing so much. There were newspapers to be read, news to be watched and time to be sat through. The mother would agree with his father with fervent nods. Listen to your father. The sister directly above him had more gold stars than he did. The only time the boy saw her smile was when the gold stars next to her name climbed higher than his. The first sister liked to talk on the phone as she watched television.

The boy's mother could see the bottom of her mug as the coffee receded. The clock ticked towards dinner. The boy's two older sisters watched cartoons expressionlessly downstairs. The boy's father stumbled around in the hallway as he removed his socks. He heard the neat click of the pantry being closed and water running in the sink.

"I'm home! Where are the kids?" he yelled in the direction of the kitchen.

"You're home? Watching telly and out in the park. I'm making chicken", a voice floated down the hallway.

"Still not back again? Christ, that boy doesn't listen."

The boy with peanut butter coloured hair sat on the park bench with a little lichen growing under it. The bench was cooling and slowly releasing its warmth from the sunlight it had collected during the day. The lime green lichen faded into a dull marble colour as the sun began to wane. The boy knew he should be getting home. Mum and Dad were not happy the last time he came home late, I reminded the boy.

'Bye bye fishies', he whispered to the goldfish in the murky pond beside the bench. He dusted the last particles of fish flakes from his fingers and twisted the small jar of fish food shut. There were teenagers screaming from the swings at the playground. Young mothers in black jogging outfits with matching strollers were hurrying home. Men with loosened neck ties and slouchy shoulders were walking home outside the bush hedges of the park. People know when it's getting close to dinner time and the danger of running their mother's worry high. The little boy neared the south entrance of the gate with the ornate drinking fountain.

And then there was a dog. The dog was dirty blond colour. It did not have a collar. The little boy knew that this was a bad thing. To be nameless and homeless was a very bad thing.

"Go away! Go home!" he commanded the dog in a faltering voice.

The dog responded by barking twice. Its tongue, a brilliant shade of sunburn, disappeared into its mouth as it sniffed the ground. It picked up a thin kowhai branch and paced about, begging the boy to play. The boy's face opened into a smile and he wanted to stay with his new found friend, with more fur, fun and legs than anyone in his family. But I sent him home. I didn't know

the boy-equivalent to Mary Janes, so he was wearing brown Mary Janes and I wanted him out of the park before anyone noticed this embarrassing detail. And I didn't want his mother to worry.

The boy wouldn't have minded if he was wearing pink Mary Janes; he wanted to stay with the sand coloured dog with a stick in its mouth. He was such a little boy and a little sadness filled up a lot of him. Too much. I wanted him to cheer up by singing the song his best friend Andy Pearson had taught him. But in the story, the little boy hadn't met Andy Pearson yet. He is to meet Andy Pearson tomorrow during storytime on the mat in school, learn a new song that would initiate him into Andy's gang, not be sad and arrive at the park early to play with the sand coloured dog. The thought of tomorrow and the dog quickened his steps home.

His eldest sister was still watching cartoons. His second sister sat on the kitchen bench watching their mother prepare the table for dinner. Honey soy chicken breast, carrots that had sweetened through roasting, potatoes in salty crispy jackets followed by a delicate chocolate sponge their aunt had dropped off earlier that afternoon. She shouldn't have but it was no fuss at all.

"I think someone's going to miss out of desert again because he's late. Very late" his mother was talking into the fridge as she took out a can of beer for his father.

"Shame! Auntie Julie's sponge cake is so good", quipped his sister from the kitchen bench.

"Be a good girl and pop down from there to help me set the table, won't you? And darling please don't be late again, alright?" His mother raised an eyebrow at him.

Andy Pearson smiled devilishly when the boy told him the dog. The dog seemed much more interesting than the fish. Time always pricked the good natured boy ten minutes before the last school bell rang. Time disappeared into shadow when the boy ran out the classroom door. The boys laughed at the overweight relatives waiting at the school gate, at Andy Pearson tripping and almost falling on a girl, at the bright orange car and at the pale half nude lady made of stone. "So where's this dog?"

The thin kowhai limb was where it was yesterday but the dog was nowhere to be seen.

The sand coloured dog had turned into night from standing through the darkness all night long, waiting for the little boy. The dog could now only be seen when you were gazing out, not concentrating or looking for anything in particular, and simply seeing. The dog could be seen when the wind pushed clouds across the sky and their dalmation shadows hurried over the hills.

The search for the dog turns into a game about astronauts and they forget to feed the fish. The fish could not be seen properly in the dark ink the pond had become as sunlight crept behind the trees. The boys walked home in school uniform black leather lace ups, not laced up, as the shadows of the trees stretched out a little longer than usual.

The boy did not smile and did not sing and did not run. His mother thought he was ill. She wrinkled her brow and gave him some raspberry cobbler.

"Eat up" his mother said gently, "feeling alright love?"

The raspberries were fresh, sticky and sugary. He was quiet as he pushed his raspberry cobbler, drowning in vanilla ice cream, around his bowl. He blinked and thought for a second that he saw the dog. Not like a sharp camera flash but like remembering where you left your umbrella.

"Andy Pearson told me the dog might not be there tomorrow Mum"

"Is that right?"

The boy nodded. Best friends are always right for a boy aged eight. Fish are dumb, carrots are gross, rugby player trading cards are cool and Dinospace is a cool cartoon. The boy was afraid Andy Pearson was right. Andy Pearson had a song and freckles and had not been wrong before. A lump of pastry and berry inched past his larynx.

"What if he's right Mum? What if... what if the dog's gone? And it's not there tomorrow or the day after that?"

"Oh precious, there's no need to get so worked up over a stray dog. Maybe it found a home."

"Oh. Maybe."

The boy blinked thoughts of the dog away and resumed swallowing raspberries.

I stopped thinking about the bench with the lichen growing underneath, Andy Pearson, the fish living in the pond and the dog that had turned into night. I wanted some raspberry cobbler. I didn't know how to make it so I closed the word document of the boy and the bench and opened an internet explorer session. It took Google 1.00865 seconds to find my 'easy and tasty cobbler recipe'. I walked down to the supermarket and thought about money the entire way, there and back.

I mixed the flour and the carefully cut pea-sized pieces of unsalted butter together. The flour turned into dough on my hands as I washed the boxes of raspberries. I scooped a few into my mouth and let the acidic sweetness roll around as I dusted sugar off my fingers and sliced some lemon to float in the iced tea. I breathed easily as I baked; I liked doing things with my hands. The heat from the oven warmed my face as I placed the heavy baking dish in. After my hands were scrubbed clean, still smelling like citrus fruit and butter, I decided to finish my story with the boy. Perhaps I could have an unforeseen incident like Andy Pearson suddenly moving house and a girl wearing pink Mary Janes could move into Andy's old house and the dog could meet the cat the little girl had once seen in an alleyway.

I opened up my word document and the little boy was crying. The fish were dead. Andy Pearson had not moved houses but played on the jungle gym instead of sitting on the bench with the boy. Andy had grown tired of waiting for the fabled sand coloured dog and kicked the boy out of his gang. Various fetching sticks the boy had collected were discarded in a pile next to the bench. The little boy was crying and heaving in staggered breaths, brimful of sadness. I panicked and offered the boy some of my raspberry cobbler. It was warm and fresh from the oven and I could describe the taste to him in every sense possible: grains of sweet sugar were melting in the hot soft, buttery pastry and the raspberries were oozing dark burgundy syrup but the boy shook his head. The smell was nauseating and the berries were too moist. He did not want water or sugar. He wanted the dog. The boy was slightly thinner having missed desert from being late to the dinner table too many times. He smeared his tears over his face in an attempt to dry his eyes.

His mother had Spaghetti Meatballs, cool pitchers of Raro and a desert at home but he wanted to stay in the park.

I urged him to go home. There is a bath waiting for him at home with plastic dinosaur toys and bubblegum scented bubbles. I'll move Andy Pearson up North and Jessica Leery can move in. She'll be your childhood sweetheart and you can run into her in the supermarket later when you're a teenage student working part time bagging groceries. Your mother will sing high and low, vibrato and staccato and your father will laugh and your second sister will stop kicking you under the table and your first sister will let you watch Dinospace on Saturday mornings. Please go home; the street lights flickering on. My heart began to beat faster and my palms were getting sweaty. The shadows of the trees were losing their shape and the lines they cast on the grass grew fainter. Please go home. I needed a friendly adult. The head of Andy Pearson's mother bobbed around the corner of the bush hedge. She always gave the boy a warm smile when she came to pick up Andy from the park.

"Hello there, it's time to be getting home now isn't it? Are you waiting for your mother?"

The little boy nodded, suppressing a hiccough, knowing that his mother was at home serving dinner.

"Alright I'll see you tomorrow then sweet pea. Say goodbye Andy"

Andy mumbled goodbye. Andy is to be picked last in Saturday's soccer game this week.

I wanted to click the 'undo' function, again and again. I needed the dog to have been a man selling ice creams near the North entrance of the park. Or I needed the dog to have had a collar with a foreign name the boy couldn't pronounce so he didn't feel an affinity with the dog. The problem was that the boy didn't even know the noun affinity but still somehow knew and clung to the dog. The dog. I taught the dog a song, a familiar one but the title always escapes me. As far as dog's singing go, this dog was no exception. It was not all that good but the boy heard it. The boy had been standing in the dark for a little while as well. Not too long but long enough to make his mother worry and long enough to see and hear the dog. The dog barked, collected the stick and led the boy home, following the scent of pie with sweet corn and peas. Good girl.

Yelling ensued at the front door.

"Where have you been, your mother and I have been worried sick, we nearly rang the police boy! Why do you always do this? I don't understand what's so hard about coming home after school. Not even for mates or a game but a damn dog, what the hell."

The boy watched the back of his father's head as he yelled toward the inside of the house. The boy's mother frowned twice: one for the late boy with his arms full of sticks, two for the strange motley coloured dog sitting beside him.

"So this is the dog?"

There was a fine cloud of white where the salt had dried near the corners of his eyes. In the corner of her mouth was the faintest smile, a bare wrinkle travelling from her eyes.

"I made banana cake with cream cheese icing. Your favourite".