

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

# SIX MISFITS

## A MAN AND HIS DOG

DYLAN LEWIS



*Being LGBT or Teen Baby is no reason to  
be angry, afraid or alone.*

# Author's Note

The story is set at the present time (2018) on the eastern, inland edge of the wheatbelt region of the State of Western Australia.

The wheatbelt is a vast swathe of thinly populated land fringing the south western corner of Australia, largely devoted to broad acre wheat and sheep farming. It is a flat, sparse, monochromatic landscape but it has its' own beauty if you give it a chance. At its' eastern edge, close to where the story is set, runs the rabbit proof fence immortalized in the movie of the same name. Beyond the fence the land gives over to even more thinly settled sprawling cattle stations, amidst scrub and natural pasture and vast salt lakes. In spring the massed wildflowers light up the drab bush with vast carpets of pink and white, bringing in the tourists.

The town of Gabberin is fictional – although you can drive through many like it across the wheatbelt. The other towns are real.

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### I. Reunited [Day 1]

Chloe Petrovic looked out the window of the coach, scanning the group of people waiting for the vehicle as it pulled in. Most looked like parents waiting for their kids.

It was the start of school holidays and the big long-distance coach was full, mostly with teenage kids from boarding schools in Perth going home for the spring holidays. It was near midday and they were pulling into the coach stop in the center of Dalwallinu, a country town in the Western Australian wheatbelt. The stop was on a layup outside the small weatherboard railway station.

“They’re not here! They said they’d meet us,” Chloe turned and announced to her companion.

Dylan Lawson heard the disappointment and anxiety in her voice. He could almost hear the fears running through her thoughts because they mirrored his own.

What if no one came for them? What if they got stuck here in a town in the middle of nowhere where they didn’t know anyone? What if they got separated from their luggage?

“It’s okay. It’s the middle of the day, everything’s open, there’s plenty of time for them to get here. We’ll wait at the café like they said,” Dylan soothed his friend.

He took her hand in his. He didn’t want her to have a panic attack and she didn’t need that downward spiral again. She saw the care in his face and smiled weakly.

“I’ll be okay,” she said, as much to convince herself.

Chloe was a pretty girl with a pleasant, rounded face framed by long glossy brown hair. At fourteen, she was beginning to develop a rounded feminine figure. As was often the way of teenagers, she looked older than the boy who was her companion, even though they were the same age. With her careful makeup and

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designer clothes, she could readily pass for several years older. She wore black jeans, white sneakers and a pink T-shirt, expensive necklace and bracelet. Dylan looked no older than his lanky, gawky fourteen years. His looks were nondescript. His department store blue jeans and khaki shirt suggested he dressed for practicality and was happy to stay in the background. Several of the pair's teenage companions on the coach had speculated, either idly or maliciously, on the unusual pairing.

But at the moment, the anxiety that hunted across her face accented the suggestion of heaviness in her features and made her seem more like a nervy girl, than a confident young woman.

"I won't leave you. We'll do it all together, get our bags and stuff," he told her.

She saw him push down his own anxieties to be a comfort to her. As unlikely as it seemed, he made her feel safe. He was brave, but he didn't have the confident, easy-striding masculinity she might have thought would make her feel protected. She knew he was probably as anxious as she was, but he wanted to be there for her, and he didn't hold her anxiety against her. She tried desperately to stay the fears racing through her thoughts.

"Us princesses gotta stick together," she told him squeezing his hand.

He grinned at the reference to their shared secrets. Not in a million years would any of their fellow passengers have guessed that she was a devotee of 'Sweet Lolita' cosplay and he was a Teen Baby – nappies and all. Some of the tension between his shoulders eased. He liked being gallant, but she knew him as well as her knew her. He didn't have to pretend to be something – or someone - he wasn't.

They were joining four of their friends to spend the holidays at a remote campsite, Klontarie, on the edge of the wheatbelt. It was

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where they'd literally battled local rednecks several months earlier. The six of them were members of a counselling group for teenagers with identity issues run by social worker Georgia Jackson. During their shared adventure they'd become strong friends. Unlike Chloe and Dylan, the other four were in foster care and had been taken to Klontarie several days before. Georgia had arranged for Chloe and Dylan to be met at Dalwallinu and be driven to Klontarie.

The driver announced the coach would be stopping for fifteen minutes only and invited passengers not finishing their journey in the town to stretch their legs. With a loud hiss of the air brakes, the coach stopped. Chloe and Dylan claimed their place in the queue in the central aisle and followed it off the coach. It was a pleasant spring day with no need for jackets. The main street of the town opposite the coach stop looked well-kept and busy. They watched the reunions, glad or perfunctory, of teenagers and parents while they waited for the driver to extract the luggage from the coach's hold. Some of the through-passengers dismounted and walked around, while others stayed in their seats.

As Dylan hovered by the driver clutching their luggage tickets, Chloe glanced around again looking for their friends. There was no sign of them. Two of those waiting for passengers also seemed to be unmatched. They weren't like the other hovering parents. They were brawny men, one young and clean shaven, the other older and bearded, each with tattoos liberally adorning any uncovered skin. They wore jeans, boots and army style field jackets. While the older one stood back, the younger one walked up to the door of the coach. One of the disembarking passengers newly reunited with their luggage turned quickly and collided with the younger man. The passenger all but bounced off the brawny stranger and bleated an instinctive apology. The stranger only scowled. The passenger looked at the other and shrunk back and the young man boarded the coach. Chloe followed his progress

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down the aisle to the rear, and back. He was getting off again when he came face to face with the driver.

“Can I help you?” said the driver in a tone that was perfunctory rather than inquiring. The young man repeated his earlier scowl and pushed past without responding. Chloe watched the driver’s face recoil. The driver muttered under his breath, but did no more than watch the other depart.

Chloe joined Dylan standing with their luggage on the curb. The people at the coach stop were quickly dispersing and then, the coach pulled away.

“I’ll give Lil another try,” Chloe told him, as she pulled out her mobile phone.

“Says it’s turned off or not in service,” she announced glumly.

He nodded saying, “She’s probably saving battery or they’re on their way and they’re in a black spot. We’ll go over to the café and get something while we wait. But I gotta go to the loo first.”

“Don’t leave me alone,” she told him in an insistent undertone, “I don’t like the look of those two. They’re scary.”

Her nod sent his glance over to where the two tattooed men in field jackets were standing by two large motorbikes with bedrolls fastened on the back. One was smoking and the other was talking on a mobile phone. Besides the two teenagers, the men were the only ones left at the coach stop. Dylan wasn’t arguing with Chloe’s impression.

He looked longingly at the nearby public toilet. It looked well kept. In unfamiliar surroundings he was always worried about being caught short and being able to find a toilet. It started as a mental ache and then grew to fill his thoughts. He knew it was anxiety. It was something he’d talked about with Georgia in counselling. However, that didn’t stop him being embarrassed and a

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little ashamed of the way it drove his thoughts and behavior. It was unmanly. It made him feel like a scared little kid. Ironic for a Teen Baby, he thought with some irritation.

“You should’ve worn a disposable nappy under your jeans. I told you I wouldn’t have minded,” Chloe told him.

It was a reference to his ‘thing’ for wearing nappies. A look at her face told him she’d guessed his preoccupation with being caught short. Her face was kindly and he relaxed a bit. At least he wasn’t isolated in his own thoughts and didn’t have to hide his preoccupation. He shrugged and smiled gratefully.

The two men donned their helmets and mounted their motorbikes. The black helmets were open faced, not the modern sort with full face protection and a visor. Instead, the men had mirrored sunglasses. With a throaty roar, the two bikes departed. The two teenagers shared a look of relief. They were now the only ones left at the coach stop.

“Go,” Chloe told Dylan. He went to the toilet while she stood by their luggage, trying her mobile again.

They briefly talked about the motorbike riders and then walked across the highway to the café. Dylan swapped his big canvass sports bag for Chloe’s suitcase. The case’s wheels weren’t much good on the gravel and rough bitumen and he grunted with the case’s weight.

“Sorry,” she told him, “I brought two Lolita outfits and my big makeup case. I couldn’t *not* bring the makeup case. Lil would’ve been gutted.”

“Your new dress?” Dylan asked.

Chloe could tell he was interested, excited to see it. She smiled and nodded. Neither he, nor her friend Lily, had seen the dress and she was dying to show it to them.

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How good is it to have a boy as a friend who shares my love for my gorgeous dresses?

Dylan had an alter, an alternative personality, who was a baby girl named Deanne. Chloe's Sweet Lolita fashion was for an older little girl, perhaps seven or so, and certainly didn't include nappies or baby paraphernalia. But they delighted in sharing with each other their passion for clothes and accessories that were 'authentic'; that made them look, and more importantly feel, like their younger alters.

They ordered at the café's counter and sat with their luggage at a table on the footpath outside. With a coffee and food in front of them, they fell into a discussion of the clothes they'd brought with them for their alter selves. Chloe's mobile rang.

"It's Lil!" she exclaimed happily.

Chloe confirmed their location and happily advised Dylan that their friends would be here soon. Shortly, an old white king-cab ute pulled up at the kerbside by the café. The vehicle had barely stopped before a door was flung open and a petite teenage girl raced over to embrace Chloe. The newcomer's pretty features and long jet black hair suggested Vietnamese extraction. She was dressed like Chloe in black jeans although unlike Chloe, only her T-shirt was designer label. Very few would pick the newcomer as transgender, a boy, Liam Nguyen, now Lily to all.

Chloe and Lily hugged ferociously, then stepped back, and with matching feminine gestures tidied their long straying tresses. Dylan was treated to an only slightly less ferocious hug by the newcomer. To the ute's bemused driver, the two girls seemed to treat the boy like one of their girlfriends. The boy's reciprocating happy chatter and platonic touching seemed to match their interactions rather more than the driver's experience of young teenage boys.

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The ute's other passenger stood back with a wry smile waiting for the huddle to subside. She was a strapping fit-looking girl in department store blue jeans, boots and a black T-shirt. Her dark hair was short like a boys, which gave a gamine-like appeal to her pleasant rounded features and lively dark eyes. The piercings in her nose struck an oddly discordant note. Her features and her cappucino complexion suggested Indian extraction.

"Oh, good grief, the three princesses!" she said, with mock exasperation.

"One for all and all for one," retorted Chloe, adding happily, "Hello Daria. I love your hair. It suits you having it longer."

Daria da Costa scowled at Chloe. The expression changed her face completely, replacing the nearly gamine looks with a masculine air.

"It's Lily's fault. I let her convince me," said Daria. She seemed slightly embarrassed.

"You look lovely," said Lily. Dylan smiled and nodded.

"That's not the look I was looking for," retorted Daria, darkly.

"Perhaps you could just snarl a bit more," offered Dylan, with a grin. Despite the girl's ferocious look, he stepped forward evidently expecting a friendly hug. The watching ute driver's eyes tightened. From the girl's looks, he thought the lad might be in for trouble. Instead, Daria wrapped Dylan in an enveloping embrace. Its avowedly platonic character seemed like the kind of hug an affectionate sister might give a younger brother, even though the two seemed the same age. Chloe received a somewhat more reserved embrace. The driver was surprised the lesbian's hug for the other girl was as platonic as the one she gave the lad. He'd never met a lesbian before, but weren't they supposed to fancy other girls?

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While the others were occupied, Lily unobtrusively took Chloe's hand and asked, "Are you okay?" They'd talked on the phone since Chloe's last bad panic attack, but they'd not seen each other face-to-face.

"Yeah. I get a bit wobbly at times, but I'll be okay. Like I said, Dylan came around to my place as much as he could. Georgia was great, and having you on the phone was untold good. I'm just looking forward to chilling with everyone and having some princess time with my besties," said Chloe. Lily squeezed Chloe's hand and smiled.

"C'mon let's get going. We want to get back to Klontarie in time to get dinner," Daria told the others.

"A curry?" asked Dylan enthusiastically.

"Maybe," smiled Daria.

"Tom, this is Dylan and Chloe. Guys this is Tom. He keeps Klontarie for the Department. He's okay," said Daria. The driver was a nuggety elderly man. His spritely movements and alert eyes belied the venerable age suggested by his lined face. His greeting was confined to a level "G'day." He was definitely old school.

He lifted Chloe's heavy case into the back of the ute with an ease that surprised Chloe and Dylan. Dylan heaved his large sports bag next to Chloe's case, while Daria jumped in the front passenger seat. Chloe, Lily and Dylan shared the back seat. The newcomers observed that the inside of the vehicle was noticeably clean and tidy.

The paddocks covered in young crops were soon sweeping past. The sunshine was bright, but had yet to acquire the harsh glare of summer. Under its benign light, the bright green of the crops and the vivid colours of the wildflowers in the road reserve smiled promise at the observer. The roads from Dalwallinu to

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Gabberin saw only local traffic. Lily told Chloe it would take them just under two hours to get there.

The teenagers chatted freely. Tom surmised they were old friends, catching up after a short interval apart. They seemed close. He didn't pretend to understand teenagers these days, or city kids. No matter. He took people as he found them and the lady social worker who'd made all the arrangements with him had her head screwed on right. The kid the others all followed, the lesbian girl, seemed sensible enough.

In a hushed but still clearly audible voice, Lily asked Chloe and Dylan, "So are you girlfriend and boyfriend?" Chloe gave her a look that was equal parts exasperated and happy. Dylan looked embarrassed and happy.

"Lil, I told you I'm not ready to have a boyfriend. If I was, it would be Dylan, but we're not girlfriend and boyfriend," said Chloe.

"But you've had your first kiss, haven't you? Was it good?" Lily continued, enthusiastically. Dylan scowled. Chloe shot him an apologetic look.

"Oh Dyl, don't be mad. She had to tell her bestie. That's what girls do," Lily said grinning.

"It was very nice, the best," said Chloe happily, "Now for goodness sake, let's talk about something else."

The two girls exchanged a look that said, *'we'll talk later'*. Daria turned in her seat and gave Dylan a bright smile. Daria looked at Tom to see what he was making of his passengers' conversation. He was looking with silent reserve at the road ahead trying to ignore them.

"I hope you're still taking good care of my bestie," Chloe said, leaning forward to address Daria in the front seat. Daria and Lily

The Misfits – a man and his dog SAMPLE were now living with the same foster family and going to the same suburban school. Georgia had arranged it.

“Yeah, babysitting princesses is my specialty,” said Daria, dryly.

“She’s been fantastic. There’s been no bullying since she shirt-fronted those arseholes that gave me a hard time. Of course, they started all these rumours that I’m Daria’s squeeze, but that was always gonna happen. I’m a runner for her soccer and hockey teams. It’s terrific. She still won’t let me paint her toe nails though,” said Lily. Chloe squeezed Daria’s shoulder.

“How are Martha and Steven?” Dylan asked. Martha and Steven were now with a foster family in Northam, a country town just outside of the city, again at Georgia’s arranging.

“Martha’s good. Steven not so much. His broken ankle pretty much wiped out his footy season. He’s gutted,” said Daria.

“Oh bugger, I hope he’s not going to storm out and get lost again,” said Chloe.

“Cut him some slack,” said Daria. “He’ll be okay. He’s stoked about having the holidays out here. Says he’ll teach us about country. Martha chills him out.”

“And he’s chuffed with the cool arrangements Georgia and Tom have fixed up so we can do for ourselves. We’ll show you when we get to Gabberin,” said Daria. She seemed proud and excited about it, but wouldn’t tell Chloe and Dylan any more details.

“What’s the weather been like?” asked Dylan.

“We’ve seen the last of the rain for a while. Skies are clear, it’ll be cold at night,” said Tom.

“The moon’s fantastic. It’ll be great for sitting out at night toasting marshmallows. We’ve built a firepit with logs for seats and

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stuff, but we were waiting on you guys to have a big bonfire,” said Lily. She high-fived Dylan.

“What about the rednecks? Are we going to have any more trouble?” asked Chloe.

“Seems pretty sweet. Them shooting up Klontarie didn’t go down too well with the locals. Sounds like they’ll steer well clear. And the town’s not so bad. People’ve been friendlier ‘cos of Tom,” said Daria.

“You won’t have any trouble. But if you do just let me know. The cops from Bencubbin spoke to those hooligans about the damage to the tanks and the hall. They didn’t admit anything, but the cops have got their number. Charlie Field seems to have left the district and good riddance. The others are minding themselves,” said Tom.

“They’re good folk in the town and the district. It just takes a while to get to know you, is all. You do right by them and they’ll do the same for you,” he added.

## II. A Man and a Dog

They drove into Gabberin on the main road past the shiny corrugated tin grain storage shed on the edge of town. The town seemed different compared to Dylan's impression from his first visit several months before. Under the bright spring sunshine and blue skies, it didn't seem as dismal and forlorn. It was still small. It consisted of a single row of commercial buildings on the main street opposite the rail line, backed by a handful of residential side streets.

Forewarned by Lily's phone call, two teenagers were waiting outside the café when Tom stopped the ute. One was a tall good looking athletic Aboriginal boy in jeans and a sleeveless AFL jersey. The other was a tall slim girl with short blonde hair wearing jeans, T-shirt and boots. Tom remained in the ute with the engine idling while his passengers got out. To the man's eyes the greetings between the two waiting on the kerb and the two picked up in Dalwallinu were friendly but a little awkward, as though none were quite sure how best to show their affection after a time apart.

"How's the foot?" Dylan asked Steven.

"Yeah, it's okay now. But I missed the season," said Steven.

"Bummer. I'm sorry," said Dylan. Steven shrugged.

"Good to see you guys. Lily's been pining for you since we got here. She's been the lone princess and doing it tough," said Martha.

"You have no idea," Lily told Chloe and Dylan, with a theatrical hand to her brow, "Marooned with a tomboy and two boofheads. Not a spec of mascara in sight!"

"Tell her you've brought your dress-ups or she'll die," said Martha to Chloe and Dylan. The latter two grinned and nodded.

"It's not dress-ups," corrected Chloe.

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“I know. I know. It’s the whole *authentic coordinated thing*,” said Martha, rolling her eyes at Daria.

Tom bade his farewell, telling them, “If you get into trouble just call. And if you’re in town, drop in. Laurel’s always got a cake in the tin.”

“Thanks again for all the firewood. Thank Laurel for the eggs too,” farewelled Daria. The others echoed her thanks.

“He seems okay,” Chloe said, as the white ute departed down the road.

“Yeah, he’s cool. Real old school. Doesn’t say much, but he’s as strong as. He can turn his hand to anything and repair everything with fencing wire and spit. He’s repaired the tanks and the hall at Klontarie like new,” said Steven.

“But you gotta come and see what he’s set up for us,” he continued.

Steven and the others refused to tell anymore and insisted on taking Chloe and Dylan across the road to the vacant graveled lot in front of the rail line. They seemed to be heading for the wreck of an old truck. Dylan though the others must have stashed a surprise behind the wreck. Instead they pulled up short and pointed gleefully at the wreck. It was a large truck with dual rear tyres, a high cab that you had to climb up to and an open tray body. The rounded shape of the cab and bonnet looked really old fashioned. The dull metal name plate on the front of the bonnet said Bedford. The paintwork was so faded you could just tell it was originally a mid-blue colour.

“It’s a wreck!” Dylan objected.

“No, it goes. Not fast, but it goes,” said Steven. Dylan and Chloe weren’t sure why Steven seemed so proud.

“It doesn’t have any number plates,” objected Chloe.

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“Duh! It’s not licensed. It’s an old farm truck. Just used around the property to cart feed and stuff. No point in paying for registration,” said Martha, impatiently.

“Who’s is it,” asked Chloe?

“It’s ours,” proclaimed Daria, “Tom arranged it with Georgia. It’s from the farm next to Klontarie. The farmer walked off the property and they sold all the farm machinery they could. They’re still trying to sell the farm, but no one wants the truck so we’ve got the use of it.”

“We can’t drive it on the road ‘cos it’s not licenced, but there’s an old reserve that runs from the town out past Klontarie. It was for a spur for the rail line which never got built. Tom got us permission to access the property next to the abandoned farm and we can get to Klontarie without using a public road. Means we can get into town when we need to pick up things like frozen stuff when the eskies are empty,” said Steven, proudly.

News that the truck was their possession and their independence changed everything. It went from being a wreck to a mascot for their common pride. Dylan insisted on climbing into the cab and onto the tray. There was a single hard bench seat covered in old jute wheat-bags. The cab smelled of years and years of old dust. Now that he was part owner, the truck seemed reassuringly big and solid to Dylan.

“We call it Macdonald,” said Martha proudly, “You know, as in Old Macdonald Had a Farm!”

“Lame”, said Dylan, smiling.

Martha boxed him teasingly on the shoulder saying, “Shut up princess.”

“You can drive it?” Chloe asked doubtfully.

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“I’ve been driving farm trucks for years. Steven too. It’s a piece of cake. And Daria’s learning too,” said Martha.

“But you’ve got the satellite phone if anything goes wrong, like we break down half way or something? We’re not gonna get stuck?” said Chloe anxiously.

“Right here. Georgia made me promise to carry it when we used the truck,” said Daria patting her small backpack. “Every time we come into town, I make sure it’s charged up.” Her voice was soothing. Everyone could tell that she wanted Chloe to feel safe. Chloe smiled gratefully.

Martha took her hand, saying, “We’re in good shape with those first aid and survival courses and we’ve got whistles, maps and compasses. And you heard Tom, those rednecks will leave us well alone. This time, it’s just us chilling by ourselves, and we can come into town if we want or if we need stuff.”

“I know, I know. It’s gonna be great. I’m sorry I get freaky,” apologized Chloe. She was embarrassed, but happy at the chorus of reassurance from the others.

All were impatient to make the journey to Klontarie under their own steam – either as a new experience or to proudly demonstrate their newfound independence to the two new arrivals. Daria and Steven hoisted Chloe’s case onto the tray and tied it down. When instructed to go back across the road to the general store to get their final purchases, Chloe objected to leaving her case unattended.

“Don’t worry. Everyone knows us. No one’ll touch anything. They don’t even lock their houses or cars out here,” said Daria. Dylan and Chloe looked happily surprised.

“So we’re locals now?” Chloe asked.

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Martha laughed saying, “To be a local, you need to have relatives buried in the cemetery. We’re blow-ins, but we’re not strangers.”

They trooped back across the road. Steven went to the service station to get a jerry can of petrol for the truck and the others went to the general store. In the store, Dylan and Chloe found that the others knew the manager, Norma by name, and seemed on good terms with her. When they came out carrying boxes of their purchases, Steven was coming back to the service station. He stopped on the far side of the road, waiting on a big semi-trailer sheep transport that was barrelling through the town.

From the vacant lot next to the service station, a cat raced across the road with a speed that suggested it had been spooked. It looked like it would make it across before the semi-trailer with room to spare. But moments later, a dog with what looked like a plastic bucket on its head raced after the cat. It evidently hadn’t seen the semi-trailer. The semi’s deep horn sounded in a long continuous blast. The dog stopped, confused, in the middle of the road as it swung its head with the ungainly attachment. Down the street, the five teenagers outside the store gasped in growing horror. There was no sound of brakes or braking from the semi. It wasn’t going to slow or stop.

Steven dropped the jerry can and launched himself across the road towards the dog.

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Daria. She shoved her box at Lily and sprinted down the footpath towards Steven. Martha was hard on her heels.

With the truck growing larger and larger as it bore down on him, Steven grabbed the dog without breaking stride. The semi’s horn stopped sounding, but there was still no sound of braking. It was too late anyway.

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Steven reached the other side of the road, just as the semi swept past with only feet to spare. When Daria and Martha reached him, he was still clutching the struggling dog. He swore and knelt down setting the dog on the ground. His face was pale. A solidly built man in jeans and a denim jacket rushed to them from the door of the service station office. He fell to his knees and lovingly hugged the dog. It was a medium sized well-proportioned animal with a bristly brindle coat. There was a patch of black fur on its face that made it look like a pirate with a patch over one eye. It had what looked like an open-faced bucket around his head, attached to its collar. The dog greeted the man enthusiastically with licks and throaty murmurings. The semi was now well up the road. With a final set of protesting blasts on its horn, it continued on without slowing. Chloe, Lily and Dylan joined the group, having left their burdens back outside the store. The others clapped Steven on the back extolling his bravery and speed.

“Damn, you scared the shit outa me!” exclaimed Martha. Her face was as pale as Steven’s.

“Good pick up eh? I may’ve missed the season, but I’ve still got it,” he said with a weak grin.

The dog’s master stood up. Up close, he was an imposing figure. He wasn’t much over average height, but he was powerfully built with massive shoulders. His head was shaved and there were big tattoos on his neck and hands. He would have been intimidating, but for the fact that he was wiping tears from his eyes.

“Thanks mate,” he said, offering his hand to Steven.

The stranger’s hand was massive, like a farmers’, with a tattoo of a snarling tiger’s head on the back. Again, it would have been intimidating, but for the huskiness in the man’s voice as if he was still mastering distress. Steven shook his hand. The man held Steven’s grasp firmly, but not tightly. He didn’t let go. He looked

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Steven in the eye, meaning to drill his thankfulness into the teenager.

“That was bloody brave. And quick. You must be a demon footy player. Thank God you were there. Dunno what I’d do if I lost Harley,” the man continued. His voice choked.

“Cool name,” said Steven.

He knelt down to pat the dog, to give the man a chance to compose himself. The animal’s tail wagged enthusiastically and he pushed up against Steven’s hand. The dog had a friendly laughing face with bright alert eyes and a lolling pink tongue. He went from one of the teenagers to the other seeking and gleefully responding to their pats before returning for more attention from Steven and then his master. There was a shaved square of bare pink skin on his flank with a row of dark stitches.

“He likes you,” said the man warmly.

“Always loved dogs,” replied Steven, rubbing Harley’s ears to the dog’s delight.

“Why’s he got the bucket on his head?” asked Martha.

“He’s had that wound in his side patched up. But he keeps licking at it, so it won’t heal. The vet gave me that to fit to his collar. He’s a handful to manage on the bike,” said the man.

At the stranger’s gesture, they looked to see a big motorbike with a bed roll tied on the back. It was the only vehicle in the service station.

“He rides on the bike with you? queried Lily. The stranger turned to answer her question. Lily suddenly felt his appraising gaze. She knew he recognized she was transgender. He was the last person she thought would know.

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The boofheads almost never tumble to the truth about me. But when they do, it usually doesn't go well.

Lily blanched. Daria saw and guessed at the reason for her friend's discomfort. The man smiled at Lily. Not the leering, sneering smile she feared, but a kindly one that said, *'It's okay, I'm cool with it'*.

"Yep. Sits in front of me. Has done since he was a pup, haven't you fella," the man replied, fondling the dog's ears. The dog stretched his head back in pleasure.

"I could do with a drink. No pub, so I guess it'll be a coffee. How about I shout you lunch before me and Harley hit the road again? The name's Rosco," the man said.

They readily agreed and introduced themselves. Rosco brought whatever they wanted at the café and paid with a hundred-dollar bill. They took their lunch across the road to the concrete benches and table at the tourist pullover near the public toilets. As they ate and chatted in the sunshine, Harley wandered in and out of the group. Rosco proudly demonstrated how well Harley responded to his commands. It was obvious that man and dog shared a deep bond. Harley also clearly relished the attention of each of the teenagers.

They talked amiably as they ate. Dogs and bikes featured strongly, the latter especially after Rosco discovered Steven and Martha's love of trail bikes. Rosco showed an interest in them as individuals, but stopped short of prying. They told him of their plans to spend the school holidays at the campsite at Klontarie out of town. Daria and Lily were less forthcoming, but neither felt their 'creep alarm' trigger either. Still, Daria noticed that Rosco was good at turning any conversation away from himself, so that he revealed nothing more than his love of dogs and bikes. After those first moments after Harley's rescue, Rosco showed no more sign of his

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emotions. She also noticed that he unobtrusively kept an alert eye on any traffic or pedestrians.

“You Department kids?” Rosco asked.

“What’s it to you?” returned Daria.

“Maybe I was one myself?” he replied, evenly.

“Most of us are,” Steven answered. Rosco nodded thoughtfully.

“What would you say to looking after Harley for me? I’ve gotta meet a mate and I’ll be on the road for a few days yet. Harley really needs to rest up and I’m worried the wound’s gonna open up if I keep him on the bike with me. Hadn’t any choice ‘til now. I wouldn’t leave him with just anybody, but after what you did and the way he likes you all, I figure it’d be okay,” said Rosco addressing Steven, but including them all.

Steven looked eagerly at the others.

Seeing what he hoped, he replied, “Yeah, of course!”

When Rosco thanked them warmly, they could see the mist in his eyes and hear him striving to keep the choke out of his voice. He told them what they needed to know to keep Harley happy and well.

“If there’s any problem with the wound, just call the vet at Bencubbin. He’ll do whatever Harley needs done. Nothing’s too much. My credit’s good with him. Dunno when I’ll be back exactly, but it’ll be before the end of the fortnight. Don’t give Harley to anyone but me, and if anyone asks, best tell ‘em he’s yours,” Rosco told them.

He took a roll of notes out of his pocket and peeled off two one hundred-dollar notes which he gave to Daria.

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“That’s for his food. Should cover it. He pretty much eats whatever you’re eating, except chocolate and nuts of course,” Rosco said to her, adding, “I figure you’re the treasurer. Women always mind the money better than blokes.” She nodded with a wide grin.

He farewelled them all and shook Steven’s hand again saying, “I’ll never forget what you did for Harley. Never!”

Then he knelt down, patting and saying farewell to the dog with fond tenderness. Something in the farewell suggested it was covering all contingencies, including a final parting.

“Are you sure you’re coming back for him?” asked Chloe, doubtfully.

“If I have to come through hell itself,” Rosco replied, in a tone altogether different from what they had heard before. It was a tone that would cut steel. It was a tone that restored the menace to his powerful figure – a menace previously exiled by their friendly talk of dogs and trail bikes.

With that, he gave Harley’s lead to Steven, bid the dog stay, turned his back and walked across the road to his bike at the service station. With a throaty roar, he sped off up the main road. He never looked back at them.

### III. Klontarie Again

Impatience to get to the camp at Klontarie postponed their avid discussions about Steven's bravery and Rosco.

Steven took the driver's seat in the truck. Daria rode with him to pick up tips on driving, with Harley perched between them. The others climbed up on the tray and held onto the bars behind the cab. There was a shoulder high frame which spanned the width of the tray, giving them a good view forward over and around the cab. The reserve where they could drive the unlicensed truck was about twenty metres wide and ran in a straight line out of town between paddocks either side. There was a dirt track running through the middle of the open scrub.

The truck swayed and lurched over the uneven ground. At their slow speed, the movement was lively rather than dangerous. It felt a bit like being on a boat. Dylan was exhilarated. The tray was high off the ground and gave him a commanding view up the track and beyond over the paddocks. There was nothing between him and the surrounding bush, but the open air. He could see and follow every tree and every rut. He could smell the gum trees and the damp leaf litter, dodge overhanging leaves and feel the wind. Compared to the boredom of being in the sterile backseat of a fast-moving air-conditioned car, *this* was travelling. This was living!

"How good is this!" he exclaimed to his three companions on the tray.

Martha beamed back at him, saying, "Reminds me of home... the good bits."

Even Chloe smiled and nodded at Dylan's infectious enthusiasm. They could see she shared their enjoyment.

"You might even like being a country girl," Dylan teased her.

"A country princess maybe," said Lily. They laughed.

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“Do they have country princesses?” Dylan asked Martha.

“Not so much,” said Martha dryly. Chloe gave a self-mocking pout.

Steven concentrated on driving, sparing a glance and a pat every now and then for Harley. The old truck wouldn't do more than forty kilometres an hour at its best, but mostly he was going a lot slower to negotiate the narrow uneven track. The dog was subdued and soon laid down on the seat, rather than sitting up. He still gladly licked their hands when they patted him or fondled his ears.

Steven was glad to focus on driving. He could see Daria's bright happiness at the whole group being reunited for the holidays. He knew she was happy doing her 'Mama bear' thing, though she'd probably get shitty if he named it so. He didn't really envy her being the leader of the mob, though she could be a pain in the arse when she got bossy. He'd always liked being named best player, better than captain or vice-captain. He was happy too, but there was a niggling voice in his head.

Are these misfits really my new mob? Instead of the footy team, or any footy team?

He felt shitty and disloyal, but it felt like a come down. If he'd saved the dog in front of his footy mates, he'd be a legend.

The misfits stuck by me and each other against the rednecks those months ago. It's possible they are better with me being gay than I am myself. I couldn't ask for more. So why am I so confused? I like each of them - a lot. But there isn't a bloke amongst them. Daria is as good as any of my footy mates in a tight corner. Better really, but she's dyke, not a bloke. Dylan's brave and a good shot with a rifle, but like dressing up as baby girl for goodness sake! Martha's a country kid like me and she likes trail bikes but she's a

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girl too. Chloe and Lily are such girly girls, and I even forget Lily is really a boy.

Steven felt like a fraud, accepting their friendship, and their enthusiastic praise for saving Harley, when part of him looked down on their company. He felt shitty three ways to Sunday.

It was near fifty kilometres from town to Klontarie. In the second part of the journey, the reserve followed wide curves in between the long straights. It sometimes ran past bush blocks on one side or the other. In places, the track served as a fire break and had been cleared in recent memory. Elsewhere, it hadn't seen a vehicle in years and brush and fallen branches narrowed the way. From time to time, in the distance across the paddocks, they spied farm-steads and a truck or tractor, but for the most part, the paddocks were left to the quiet of their green crops and the occasional grazing flock of sheep. The further out they went, the more common it was to see derelict farm houses and buildings, some looking like they had been derelict for decades.

The last part of the way to Klontarie, they left the reserve and went through two farms. The first was a working farm in crop. The other one, where the owner had walked off his land, was immediately adjacent to the campsite. On the latter property, they passed the empty farm-stead, and close to Klontarie, the long derelict original farmhouse. Steven stopped the truck, while Martha or Daria dismounted to open each gate and close it after he had driven through. Martha impressed on Chloe, Lily and Dylan that it was an article of faith in the country to leave a gate open or closed as you found it.

They approached Klontarie around a bare untilled paddock, instead of the normal access track from the public road. It was the same paddock where the rednecks had been spotlighting in the winter. Looking beyond the last fence, up the gentle slope through

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the scattered trees the white painted tin roofed hall was a  
handsome and welcoming sight.

“Feels good to be back, doesn’t it?” said Martha to the other three.

“The best,” agreed Dylan, smiling broadly.

“I’d hate it if I was on my own,” said Chloe. “But with you guys, it’s wonderful. Having the sat-phone makes me feel safer, just in case.” Lily nodded her agreement.

Tom had put a makeshift wire and star picket gate in the paddock fence below the hall. Martha recruited Dylan to help her unhitch and open the unwieldy portal. Steven drove the truck up to the graveled area in front of the hall. The building’s white weatherboards were surmounted by a corrugated tin roof. It was the centre of a small collection of structures in the midst of open graveled ground; the shiny new tin toilet block, a big open fronted weatherboard garage, the woodshed, two big ground level water tanks and the smaller tank on the steel trestle adjoining the hall. Beyond the graveled space, they were surrounded by the open trees of the bush block.

“We’re home,” Lily announced, happily. The others’ smiles and sighs affirmed her sentiment.

Dylan was waiting when Steven climbed down from the cab.

“That ride was great, the best!” exclaimed Dylan.

Looking at his friend’s face, Steven thought *‘this kid is so not cool’*.

He wasn’t even trying to disguise his eager happiness and admiration, so unlike Steven’s footy mates. It was the same look when Dylan and Chloe had rescued him in the bush last time and had reminded Steven of a cocker spaniel. Steven knew he need never fear ridicule from such friends, if he failed some canon of

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bravado or coolness. It was okay to share his own happiness at the admiration and thanks of a friend. Steven's open smile matched Dylan's and together, they unloaded the truck.

The silence filled Dylan's ears once the truck's engine was switched off. Beyond the chatter of his friends there was only the gentle rustle of the leaves in the wind. Nothing else. The wonderful silence drew his eyes to scan the longest sight line down the slope and across the deserted paddocks below. There was nobody in sight. It was exhilaratingly peaceful and a little bit disturbing at the same time.

The others had left Dylan the same bedroom he'd had before. It was just two double bunks with a sleeping bag laid out on the bare foam mattress on one of the lower beds. It was roomy with no other furniture on the bare oiled floorboards. Dylan slung his bag on the other lower bed and looked out the sash window at the bush. This was home for the holidays, his own to share with his friends and make up their own ways and rules. Magpies to wake him up and a campfire to fall asleep to. The end of the two weeks seemed so far away it was almost possible to feel it could last forever.

Chloe wheeled her case into the bedroom she shared with Lily. There was a chair between the two single beds. On it was a jam jar vase of freshly picked wildflowers and room for her battery-operated night-light.

"Oh Lil, you darling," Chloe exclaimed, as she hugged her friend. Lily's slight figure was enveloped in the other girl's robust embrace. Lily felt the happiness well up within. Nothing told her more she was the girl she wanted to be, than the unreserved acceptance in Chloe's embrace. They were girlfriends, 'besties'.

Steven, Daria and Martha brought Harley inside and put down a bowl of water and a bowl of dog biscuits. The dog ate and drank enthusiastically. He explored and sniffed every room. At the

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start, he sometimes bumped into the unfamiliar furniture with the ungainly plastic collar, but was soon moving about freely. They agreed they'd keep the dog inside or on a lead until he was settled and they knew he would obey their commands to return.

The front half of the hall was a single cavernous space under a tall peaked roof with open timber beams. One side was a lounge with mismatched couches around a worn rug and pot belly stove, the other was a dining space with several long chunky timber tables with benches and chairs. They gathered with their chosen beverage and snack and flopped on the worn comfort of the lounge couches. Harley happily joined them on the cushions.

"It is a dump. Ours, but still a dump," said Chloe waving airily at their surroundings.

She proceeded to happily regale the others with how she would redecorate if she could. Her vision grew progressively more extravagant. It grew to encompass a dressing room and a pink tiled ensuite for herself and Lily with paired vanities with brightly lit makeup mirrors. The others decided to join in on the fantasy.

Lily wanted the girliest of bedrooms with Laura Ashley everywhere, plush carpet *'so thick you had to wade through it'* and a four-poster bed. Steven added a giant screen for watching footy and a full-size set of AFL goal posts down in the paddock. Martha wanted a lap pool and jumps for trail bikes. Dylan nominated a nursery with a cot for his baby girl alter, Deanne. He also wanted a shooting range with moving targets to use with the rifles they'd found during their last visit. Daria wanted a flash gym and a bigger flash kitchen with a family range and an island bench.

The conversation soon turned to Rosco.

"I think he's on the run from the cops," said Daria.

"Yeah, right," objected Steven sarcastically.

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“Look he was friendly and all, and talked a lot, but he was pretty cagey. Apart from the fact he loves dogs and bikes what else do we know about him? And he kept an eye on anybody else in the street, without making a show of it,” said Daria.

“A bikie drug dealer, you mean?” added Dylan.

“Did’ya see that roll of cash he had when he gave us money for Harley’s food? It was huge an it looked like it was all hundreds,” said Daria.

“Perhaps he murdered someone?” offered Martha.

“Maybe, but he didn’t seem like a drug dealer or a murderer,” said Lily. “He had me sussed out pretty quick and he was cool about it, not creepy. Nor with Daria or Steven.”

Daria agreed.

“Whad’ya mean *with me*?” said Steven. Lily met his gaze.

“I’m wearing a stupid sign, am I?” he objected. They all knew Steven had been outed as gay, not come out of his own volition, and that he’d been ostracized by his mother and his peers as a result.

“You’re hanging with a dyke and a kid he’s sussed as transgender, along with some western suburbs white-bread kids. We’re not exactly the Moora footy team, are we?” said Daria.

Steven looked disconcerted.

“What’s it matter?” he retorted. “He really loves Harley and he didn’t talk to us like we were little kids. I said I’d look after Harley for him and that’s all there is to it.”

“And he was a Department kid like us. That counts,” said Lily. Steven nodded emphatically.

“Okay. Okay. Keep your shirt on! No one’s snitching. We all said we’d look after Harley,” said Daria. The others agreed. Steven looked satisfied.

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“Maybe Rosco is mates with those two men at Dalwallinu?” Chloe suggested to Dylan. They explained their encounter with the two motor bike riders at the coach stop.

“They looked like they expected to meet someone from the coach who didn’t show,” said Chloe.

“Can’t see that it would’ve been Rosco. Can’t see that he’d travel by coach when he loves bikes. And he couldn’t have gotten Harley on the coach. The two you saw probably have nothing to do with Rosco,” said Steven.

Daria made a Goan curry for dinner. Daria being Daria, she recruited the others for the preparation so that the galley kitchen at the back of the hall was full of purposeful bodies. They demanded all the trimmings – the cool riata, hot and tasty chutneys and Daria’s own innovation to Goan cuisine – char-grilled flat bread. Despite Daria’s efforts, it was a leisurely and ambling preparation with lots of nibbling and tasting of the ingredients and dishes along the way. Harley was an enthusiastic participant, waiting sharp eyed for any tidbits to fall on the floorboards. It was after dark before the meal hit the table, but it tasted so much the better for its lengthy communal preparation. The uneven results of Chloe and Lily’s chargrilling of the flat bread occasioned much teasing discussion and swapping of the blackened - or under cooked - breads.

“Right! I’m going to learn to cook these holidays. You guys’ll teach me, won’t you?” Lily declared and asked Daria and Martha. They both nodded.

“I always wanted to learn, but at home that was girl’s work. Well I’m a girl! And I’m not going to get stuck with the washing up every time,” Lily continued asking Chloe, “You’ll be in it, won’t you?”

Chloe looked doubtful, drawing laughter from the others. There was an enthusiastic debate about whether, as it was their first night all together, they could forego Daria’s insistence they

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wash up all the dinner things and instead leave them for the morning. Faced with a five to one revolt, Daria relented with a great show of reluctance, but promising it was a once-only relaxation.

After dinner, they went out into the brisk clear night and toasted marshmallows sitting around a bonfire. They sat on sawed logs of firewood turned on end. Harley was an enthusiastic recipient of any fragments he was offered. The fire crackled and hissed enticingly and the rising sparks glowed brightly against the black night. They each realized anew that there's nothing like talking with friends over a fire out in the bush. The worries and struggles which sometimes loomed so large, seemed to shrink to a manageable size. The holidays together stretched ahead of them, so that they had no need to contemplate an ending. Gradually, happy tiredness lengthened the intervals between conversation as they stared into the fire and the encircling night, but it was too nice to leave the fire and circle of friends. Dylan and Chloe, with their excited early morning start to make the coach, soon had their heads bobbing on their chests.

“Come on princesses, it's time for bed,” Lily roused them.

“Come on baby Deanne. Daria will tuck you in,” Lily joked, with a mischievous grin at Daria. Daria rolled her eyes.

Steven, Martha and Daria stayed by the fire after the other three took themselves inside. In answer to Lily and Chloe's calls, Daria went inside to reinstate her habit from their last time at Klontarie of checking that each had a working torch and saying goodnight. Chloe's Disney Princesses night-light was glowing from the chair between her bed and Lily's. Her soft toy was on her pillow.

“Night, Daria,” said Lily.

“Night, Lily.”

“Night, Daphne.” Chloe, of course, referring to the name Daria had grown up with before changing it when she came out.

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“Night, princess.”

Daria looked in on Dylan or rather Deanne dressed in her pink baby girl pajamas with her comfort blanket and rag doll in her arms and dummy on the pillow. Daria went over and theatrically pulled the sleeping bag up to Deanne’s chin.

“Night, Deanne.”

“Night, Daria.”

Outside by the fire, Steven felt relaxed and alive at the same time. This was country! Friends, food and a fire outside. The longing for the old times with the footy team felt a long way away. He could be all of himself with his companions. They celebrated his bravery and his blokey-ness on the one hand, and his corny sometimes sentimental side on the other. Out here by themselves, he could let each of his companions be all of themselves, without worrying about what anyone else thought. Even Lily and Dylan.

Lily was always meant to be a girl, it would feel wrong if she wasn’t. Dylan’s baby thing is harmless enough, I guess. Why couldn’t it be like this all the time?

He looked up from the fire and his thoughts to see Martha sitting regarding him pensively. She was like a sister to him now, in a good way. The quiet look on her face suggested disconcertingly, that she knew what he was thinking. When Steven went to bed, Harley followed him and jumped up and lay with his head by Steven’s side.

IV. Not Again! [Day 2]

Dylan awoke.

It was light.

For a moment, he didn't know where he was. Then he was conscious of the dummy in his mouth, the nappy enveloping his midriff and the rag doll in his arms.

Klontarie!

Where else could he wake as Deanne? He lay there enjoying the delicious feelings of safety and freedom. He couldn't hear the magpies' morning chorus, so he guessed it was late and the others would already be up. He wasn't sure he had the confidence to pick up where he had left off at the last visit a few months ago and come out to breakfast dressed as Deanne. The fears of rejection and shame had renewed themselves in the interval.

There was a knock on the door. Lily came in smiling. he was wearing a very feminine silk nightdress and matching pink silk looking slippers. She saw the approving look on Dylan's face, twirled and asked, "Do you like it?" She frowned and wound her fingers in her long tresses at the delay in Dylan's response.

He beamed, saying with transparent sincerity, "Its lovely Lil, it suits you. It's new?" Lily clapped her hands with happiness and nodded.

Dylan sat on the side of the bed. Lily's happiness was wonderful to see. Deanne was Dylan's alternative personality. She lived alongside his boy self. She was a handful; she demanded his attention each day, sometimes she wanted to take over, she had tantrums if she was ignored, but she wasn't the whole of him. It was the same with Chloe's princess alter. With Lily, it was different. She wasn't Liam anymore. She was Lily, all day every day. Acceptance for Deanne was the difference for Dylan between happiness and misery. He sensed that for Lily, it was the difference between

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something more. Seeing her happy, made him feel good about the world.

Lily guessed at his hesitation and held out her hand.

“C’mon, we can’t lose your first day. Chloe’s just got up. When you two have had breakfast I promised we’d help her go ‘princess’. She’s gonna show us her new dress,” Lily told him.

He took her hand and she led him out of the bedroom, down the passageway into the big space housing the lounge and dining space at the front of the hall. Lily could feel she was leading not Dylan, but a shy Deanne.

The others were all seated around a dining table with their favourite morning beverage and breakfast before them.

“Hello princess,” Daria greeted Deanne.

Daria’s smile was welcoming. It told Dylan she was picking up where Deanne had left off from their last time at Klontarie. Martha got up, came over and gave Deanne a warm hug. The baby girl alter beamed with unqualified happiness. It was an unhurried breakfast for the late comers, with a leisurely day for all to come. They had nothing planned, other than to do as each pleased.

Lily and Deanne spent a fine ‘princess’ morning with Chloe while she got made and dressed up. Lily took ages carefully applying Chloe’s make up. Chloe was delighted with her fellow princesses’ delight at her gorgeous new dress. Chloe had coordinated the whole ensemble with painstaking care. It had all the trimmings – hair bow, tiny shoulder bag, white gloves and buckle-up white leather shoes. The three princesses presided over lunch, drawing Martha and Daria into their enthusiastic discussion of makeup and clothes while Steven looked on rolling his eyes.

“If you want, I’ll teach you how girls play with dolls,” Chloe offered Deanne.

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Deanne nodded eagerly. Lily was soon leaning on the jamb of the bedroom door watching Chloe show Deanne.

“I always wanted dolls when I was younger,” said Lily, longingly.

“C’mon princess,” Chloe coaxed. The laughter and happy squeals soon had Martha and Daria watching in the doorway. There was some happy contention as to which play was better – ‘tea party’, ‘house’ or ‘mummy and baby’.

“I wasn’t much into dolls once I got to primary school,” said Martha. “But I loved to see my younger sisters play together with them. Bit like now really.”

Daria laughed saying, “Me too. My baby sister used to love it when I played with her. She had this big fancy dolls’ house. It was fun.”

Daria looked back at the play in the bedroom. The anxiety that sometimes beset the princesses, seemed banished and gone.

*Where’s the harm in what they’re doing?*

If you want to read the rest of this story go to:

<https://abdiscovery.com.au/six-misfits-a-man-and-his-dog/>