

The Alone Spot Experiment

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On Any Other Planet

It's strange how clearly you can see things from a million miles away.

It was Monday morning and I was sitting at the kitchen table. Well, at least part of me was; the rest was floating somewhere past Mars.

Tamara, who's three, was stuffing honey and toast into her mouth, one piece after another without doing any of the usual chewing and swallowing that's typical of eating. It was pretty obvious that after the fifth piece she'd end up choking – and when Tamara chokes she regurgitates too. But I didn't say anything.

Bryan; he's eight, is making patterns with his Coco Pops on the table top, pouring small piles of white and brown sugar for effect. Bryan is the artistic one, not that Mum's going to appreciate this work of art. But I didn't tell him to stop.

Lachlan and James are twins and at thirteen they're always arguing. Mum keeps telling me that they can't help their hormones. Right now James is telling Mum about some girl called Vanessa who has a crush on him. Only Lachlan has to chirp up and say that she has a crush on him, not James.

I don't bother to tell them that Vanessa obviously can't tell the difference between them, even though it's obvious that James is an inch taller and his ears don't stick out like Lachlan's do.

Miriam and Melanie are the other twins, they're only six, but because they're girls I'm supposed to have a lot more to do with them than the others. For the past ten minutes they've been nagging me to put their hair in plaits. I think my slack-jawed look put them off, cos' now they're hassling Mum.

Normally I'd stand up, take the brush and do it for them. But not today.

Mum is walking around with Tanya, whose face looks like a windsock in a hurricane. It's like babies only have three things they can do, sleep, eat and cry and they take their turn at wearing them all out. Crying is down to threadbare.

At least Mum and Dad are quiet. They're not talking because Dad forgot to bring home the lawn mower for the tenth time. Last week Mum lost Tanya in the front lawn and it took five minutes to track her down.

Tim is my oldest brother, he's sixteen, four years older than me, but you'd think it was ten. Mum and Dad trust him. He gets to work after school at the Convenience store and give Dad a break. He reached past me to grab a carton of milk off the table and started drinking it. Mum slapped his hand and made him spill it.

"Use a glass Tim, How many times?"

Tim used his sleeve to wipe up the milk, he looked straight at me and said,

"Happy Birthday, Krissey."

Mum dropped the baby's bottle. I could've reached out and caught it, only I was still only half way back from Mars, shooting past flaming stars, long-lost space junk and a pale, green planet that might or might not have been discovered yet. It was still close enough to hear Mum say.

"Oh sorry love. I'd forgotten... it's been so busy."

I jerked a little in my seat as I zapped back into full body mode. I flexed my hands before leaning over and fishing out the baby's bottle from under the fridge. I handed it back, looking past her at the fridge magnet that said 'It could be worse, you could have been born with two hands, one head and

a couple of legs.’

“So ‘kay, it’s not like it matters. By the way I think Tamara’s choking.”

She was at the stage just before blue. While everybody watched, Dad reached behind her, squeezed hard, and out popped the toast. Just before she went into the regurgitation phase I slipped out the kitchen door and banged out the front, launched myself into the lawn where I muttered to myself.

“Course it flamin’ does.”

School was a shocker – it’s like I’d spent the whole of last week guessing at what I’d get for my birthday – half the time out loud. Now everybody knew it was my birthday and no one *forgot* to ask what I’d got. So I lied and said anything that popped into my head, even mentioned my strange, green planet. I even called it “Planet Snot” And said that I could see it through my new telescope, it had a FOR SALE sign on it, with SOLD in bright green letters right next to the Bertram family flag.

“One small step for mankind” I said, “At least two thousand and three for your average ant.”

One of the ‘advantages’ of a big family is we all get to go to the same school – by lunchtime everybody knew. At least, everyone that mattered.

I couldn’t wait to leave school – but on the way home, I thought of a thousand better places to be. None of them though, were on this particular planet.

My teacher Mr Teddy Bear

You know how when people make an embarrassing mistake and they try to make up for it, it just gets more and more embarrassing and you just wish they’d stop – that’s what it was like when Dad found me in the grass. It wasn’t even as though he was looking for me either, he almost ran me over with the mower.

He turned it off and stared down at me. I felt embarrassed about looking so miserable, but it wasn’t

anything I could stop.

“What kind of a miserable weed is this?” he asked, “might need the whipper snipper for this one.” He sat down in the grass and waited for me to look at him. I made him wait a long time.

“Your Mum feels terrible” he said, “she had your presents, she, I mean we, just forgot to give them to you.”

“Doesn’t matter” I said.

“Well it might not matter to you, but it really matters to her, so how about you go in and get yourself birthday’d.”

So I went in, and Mum said she was sorry twenty-three times, gave me lots of presents which I opened and said thank you for at least as many, and it all felt pretty much horrible. Even though the presents were what I’d wanted, somehow it just didn’t feel right any more, especially with Mum hanging over me saying every two point three seconds, ‘Did you like it? Is it the right colour, if you don’t like it we can always exchange’.

“It’s OK Mum, really it doesn’t matter.”

It took me at least a week to get over my birthday.

ADVANTAGES OF A BIG FAMILY.

I wrote it in large letters at the top of the page. I considered if for a full minute, I know because I timed myself - I mean, I want to be fair, only I really couldn’t think of anything. So I wrote instead,

DISADVANTAGES OF A BIG FAMILY.

No secrets.

You only ever get to find the empty packets of stuff you want to eat.

Never enough hot water.

Eight times out of nine it’s someone else’s turn.

Someone always ends up using your toothbrush.

Everyone always needs a pee the same time you do.

You get your birthday forgotten if you don't keep reminding them.

If you try and write something you always end up with someone sucking on the end of your pen.

The list would have kept getting longer and longer, but Tanya's drool got into the ink and the pen wouldn't work. I figured I should try again on the advantages and I did come up with one.

You can always blame someone else when you made a smell.

That's what Mum called it anyway.

"Hey" she'd say, "Who made that smell?" as if anyone would own up. "Next time leave the room."

Mum's funny about smells. Dad said Mum could smell a pee under thirteen mattresses. She named our two dogs Skunk and Stink. Both of them were supposed to stay outside because Mum can't stand the smell. They both sit on the doorstep and you have to jump over them. Mum calls them Mongrels, Dad calls them Crossbreeds, though he calls them much worse when they muck around in the garden. Dad had the sprinkler on his veggie garden once and Skunk and Stink were racing around and around trying to bite the spray – by the time Dad found out there was only a row of Brussels sprouts left. If it were me, I would have jumped on those first.

We also have two cats; Vanilla and Chocolate, but not because they smell that way. Vanilla is white and Chocolate, yeah well, you get the picture.

My teacher at school this year is really cool – everyone likes him, even Shane – and Shane hates pretty much anything to do with school. Our teacher's name is Bier as in 'Bear' and we all started calling him Teddy ... not to his face of course. Then we found out his first initial was 'T' and we really wondered. It took Samuel a week of hanging around the staff room until he overheard Mr Bier's first name. He tried to make everyone pay to find out what it was, but Louise paid a dollar and then told everyone so that he couldn't. The thing was that his real name was worse than Teddy it was Terry ... Terry Bier. Shane said his mother must have been Chinese. Wu who is Chinese told him not to be so

racist, but he couldn't help laughing ... it was pretty funny. In lots of ways it was Mr Bier who brought a few things to my attention. The week we held the Alone Spot Experiment pretty much changed my life.

Each week Mr Bier conducts an experiment. Sometimes it was like a real experiment, like... finding out why bubbles are round, and why it is they pop, that kind of thing. Other times its weird, like 'Why is it you feel frightened when you look down from a height?' He made us experiment to find out just when it got too high for us, and we plotted it on a graph and compared heights. He told us that at times it was right to fear things like heights, especially if there was a chance of falling and getting hurt. Like when Samuel refused to find something too high and Mr Bier had to get a ladder and bring him back down from the tallest tree in the school grounds. Then he made us challenge what we thought was too high and told us that when it came to life, most of us were held back by fear and that only by challenging fear could we live the life we were supposed to. I ended up being able to add an extra metre to my height chart. I figured that Mr Bier was smart.

So when he announced that we were to hold a new experiment I was looking forward to it. By the time he had described what we had to do I felt a whole lot different.

I held up my hand, "Mr Bier?"

"Yes Christine?"

"I can't do that."

"Why not? It doesn't seem too hard to me, does it seem too hard to anyone else?"

Everyone else shook their heads. I shut up. After class I told him why it was that the Alone Spot Experiment was impossible.

"I live in a family of *eleven*" I explained.

"When was the last time you remember being alone?" he asked patiently. I shut my eyes, because with them open I couldn't think of anything. With them shut I still couldn't.

"Wow" I said, "I can't remember ever being alone ... half the time Tamara, she's three, has to be in

the loo when I am ... and you only ever get half a minute.”

Mr Bier smiled “Hmmm... he said. “I think you’ll have to tell everyone about your experiment and see if you can get them to cooperate.”

That seemed fair enough. I said that I would try.

At dinnertime I explained what it was I had to do.

“First I have to spend ten minutes on my own, no one else around, no T.V, no radio, no one... I’m not even allowed to talk to myself ... other than in my head of course, Then I have to go for an hour, then three whole, big, fat ones.”

“Impossible” said Mum.

“Hmmm” said Dad, “that’ll be hard to arrange.”

But Tim agreed to take Tanya and Tamara for a walk, James and Lachlan agreed to play outside with Melanie and Miriam for the ten minutes and Mum and Dad said they’d have no problems staying out of my way.

“Ten minutes of silence” said Mum “sounds like heaven.”

Mum has a joke about how ‘hell’s quieter than this house.’ Last year for Christmas I gave her a bottle of ‘quiet’ that I made. Really it was only vanilla essence in water. I made instructions that said ‘when dabbed behind the ears, all sound will cease. Effects wear off within a minute’ I called it ‘Quiet water, for when you want a minute’s silence’. Mum thought it was great and all Christmas day she dabbed it on and pretended she couldn’t hear us. I got a real kick out of seeing her laugh.

When Penguins Have Colds

This is the first year I don’t have a best friend. Marnie was my best friend for the last two years, until she went stupid over ballet. Now it’s all she ever talks about. When we eat lunch she’d stands on her toes and tries to look graceful. She never eats. She thinks that ballet dancers must be abnormally thin. I could strangle her on a cheese sandwich. At first she wanted me to be her ballet buddy. But I

wasn't too keen. I think she noticed. She ended up telling me that the only part I could play in a ballet was that of a hippopotamus. Good one Marnie, just too funny. Now she's a best friend with Sianne, and at lunchtime you can see them out under the trees doing all the moves – they both wear their hair tied back so tight you can see their follicles screaming.

I get around with Leone, Marita and Leela – but we don't usually see each other in the weekends, we just hang out at school. Except this week they decided to have a fashion show on Saturday. They were going to go over to Leela's for the night with all their best clothes and makeup, dress up and parade around. Leone has her Dad's digital camera and they are going to do 'fashion shots' of each other. I'm about as interested in that as I am in playing the part of a hippopotamus in Marnie's ballet. They invited me too, but I said I was busy, I had to shampoo the dog's hair. I probably should have gone but it didn't sound like fun to me. They all had the best clothes, I only had old daggy things, the sort that it didn't matter if you wore them while you washed dogs. Leela, Marita and Leone are OK, just somehow I don't really fit in, and they know it too.

The next day I sat by myself at the back of the class. I swapped seats with Tina who wanted to sit with Leone. I can see that pretty soon it will be Leela, Marita, Leone and Tina getting around together and I'll be sitting out there on my own. There's only one thing worse than getting around with people who aren't really your kind of people, and that's getting around on your own.

Mr Bier had everyone take out their notebooks and write down what it felt like to spend ten minutes alone. I didn't take mine out, instead I stared at the 'Alone Spot Experiment' written on the blackboard and made a joke instead, 'Why do teenagers have so many spots? Cos none of them like being alone'. I tried to share my joke with Leone but she was busy writing down her observation of ten minutes alone. Mr Bier was looking at me, I pretended not to notice.

"How did it go?" he asked coming up behind me and crouching down.

“Didn’t” I said.

“Hmmm, a few interruptions huh.”

“I could write about two minutes alone.”

“What happened after that?”

“The phone rang, it was for Mum. By the time she left everyone else had come home. Tanya’s pooey nappy was more important, and she needed more slop to eat... Lachlan wanted to watch T.V ... no one wanted to start the ten minutes again.”

“Hmmm” said Mr Bier, “Maybe you need to find a place outside of home for your ten minutes.”

So while everyone wrote their observations I wrote a list of places I could be alone in ... the only place at our house I could think of was the roof and that was about ten metres higher than on my fear of heights chart. There were always too many people at the park and at the library. In my experience libraries aren’t quiet places. I ended up with a list of all the planets I knew of, plus a few that I didn’t.

I thought I could sneak ten minutes to walk home alone... I waited till everyone had left and then started out, but Shane caught up with me and started blabbing on about how tonight he was going to spend an hour alone. He had several books about UFO’s, a packet of chips and a bag of liquorice bullets to keep him company. “It’ll be easy!” he raved.

“Yeah right” I said, “I can’t even get to walk home alone.”

But Shane’s a bit thick, he followed me right to our turn off and it only takes another thirty seconds before I walk through the front door.

Everybody at home had forgotten about the experiment. Mum was trying to help James invent a new recipe. He ended up with ‘candied Brussels sprouts – the only way they’re edible.’ Dad made him eat an extra three for dinner. I laughed and got an extra two.

Everyone takes ages before they go to bed at our house. So my plan almost came undone, until I remembered that there is such a thing as an alarm clock. At twelve o'clock I had a dream that someone had stuck a jackhammer in my ear and was drilling out the rot caused by reading too much junk. But it was just the alarm clock pressed against my ear.

I snuck out and into the hallway. It's amazing how everything is so quiet. I stopped outside Bryan's, Lachlan and James's room. Bryan was talking to himself, something about how lions are brothers to tigers, but sharks have no one. All artistic people are loopy.

In the lounge room I took invisible notes and pinned them to my forehead ... my impressions of being alone. I watched the alarm clock flick to 12.03pm and sat down in Dad's chair ... dark ... cold.... quiet ... very, very quiet ... a minute later I could add only one more observation ... boring.

Suddenly the room lit up. Dad was standing blearily in the doorway.

"What are you doing up?" he asked.

I pointed at the alarm clock and gave him my most scowliest scowl.

"Oh" he said, "sorry. Ten minutes you say?"

I nodded.

"I'm just up for a drink ... be gone in a minute."

By the time he'd found what he wanted, made it, drank it and shuffled off it was 12.08pm so I started again.

At 12.12pm I heard Bryan, he was mumbling,

"Someone's got to tell them." He stumbled through the door, his eyes were wide and weird.

"Tell them what?" I grizzled. Bryan tends to sleepwalk as well as talk.

“That it’s the starfish.”

“What is it about the starfish?” I stood up and quietly took his hand, just like Mum told us to, and turned him slowly around.

“They’re cousins.”

“What, to sharks?”

“That’s right.”

I pulled him gently towards the stairs, “You’re dreaming.”

“Am I? Hang on, I’m just going to get a warm coat, some of the penguins have colds” he tried to shake my hand off, but I held tight.

I steered him back up the stairs, put him in bed and told him that all the animals were asleep till morning and not to disturb them. Once, when he was five, he sleepwalked into the hall, opened a cupboard and peed in it.

I left the alarm clock downstairs and went to bed too. What’s the point any way? Day or night it’s just the same. I, Krissey Kelly Bertram, am destined to never be alone.

At school while everyone wrote about the hour they’d spent alone I made a list of places I’d like my family to be.

Perched on a high cliff in a hurricane.

Pickled in a bottle of quiet.

Characters in a book that you never read.

Mr Bier smiled but I could tell he wasn’t impressed. He even implied that ten minutes alone wasn’t that big a deal, I probably did it every day, I just didn’t notice. Tim told me once that the best thing you can do when dealing with an adult is agree ... so I did.

Louise was excited because her Mum and Dad were going to the movies and leaving her alone. Shane was going to end up fat from the amount of chocolate bars he intended to consume during his three hours. Everyone talked about what they were going to do and how they were going to do it. George Worthington said it was like an *initiation ceremony*. That's the kind of stupid thing he says though. The Alone Spot Experiment was turning out a disaster.

I like school, I'm even pretty good at it, not brilliant like George, but you'd have to be brilliant with a name like that. George has a theory about outer space that's really spacey too. Something about how as we circle the sun we move into different phases of space, and that sometimes the place the earth is in is linked to other galaxies. UFO's aren't trying to visit earth, they just find themselves here. That aliens think that earth is some weird phenomena too, like we're an unidentified unflying object. Every time a plane goes missing, he tells us how it probably crashed in another galaxy. Lately George and Shane have been making a time chart and have pinpointed the next alien visit. They even made it into a school project. Up on the back wall, they have a poster that says, 'Don't answer your door, On July one four', with a picture of a green blob with teeth knocking on a door. Sometimes even the brilliant can be incredibly stupid.

Though I'm not exactly brilliant I've never failed anything before, and I wasn't keen to start. So I was forced to come up with an idea that would blitz everyone else's experiment. Everyone had the weekend to do their three hours and hand in their final conclusions. I told Mr Bier that I'd be handing mine in too ... he looked dubious (that's the kind of word George uses) but he agreed, after all it was his turn to.

At lunchtime Leone, Marita, Leela and Tina made lists of their clothes and who they would swap with, and how Leela had a curling iron and Tina's Mum had given her a whole lot of lipsticks to use. It was about as interesting as the molecular structure of mud. Instead I made a list of food I'd need,

and the kind of hardware I'd need to pack. I didn't know if I could pull it off. There are so many people hanging around at my house, someone would have to notice and ask too many questions. On the other side of the page I made up a list of lies I could tell.

Over at Leone's we're having a search and rescue for her Barbie doll.

We're going to post food to the starving people in Africa.

We're building a time capsule of our favourite food and burying it under a tree in Marita's backyard.

Black Bottom Creek

Like most Fridays it was a never-go-no-where kind of a day. It made me feel like when you're dying of thirst and there's always someone standing, doing nothing, right where you want to be - in front of the cupboard, in front of the fridge, in front of the tap. I had an idea, and I just couldn't wait to get it all happening. Eventually even the clock couldn't resist the force of time. I charged the door, but Mr Bier held me back and I had to stand and watch everyone go through first.

All Mr Bier wanted to say was not to worry if I couldn't get the experiment done, he wouldn't fail me. I let him think that I would fail. I wasn't about to tell anyone my plan. When I got to my bike it had a flat tyre and I had to spend ages pumping it back up. Nathaniel likes to let the air out of everyone's tyres, and he picks on my bike heaps. I think it's because he likes me.

By the time I got home everyone was already there, which made my plan seem harder, but as it turned out, it didn't make the slightest difference.

Miriam and Melanie were so busy having Brian draw tattoos on their arms that they didn't notice

me swipe enough food to sicken several elephants. While I was jamming three iced buns into a small camping pot, Tamara and Tanya were being tigers, pulling the ends of my shoelaces with their teeth. I guess about now I expected Mum or Dad to walk through the door and ask what exactly it was I was doing with a box of matches, three candles and Dad's solar torch. But nobody noticed me walk past with my sleeping bag on my shoulder, nobody noticed how overloaded my bike was. James waved as I steamed down the drive and on to the road, pedalling down the street with feet full of anger.

"So even though I'm never alone, I might as well be" I grumbled.

The whole thing almost ended there. Not because I gave in, but because Stink made a mad dash in front of my bike, hitting the wheel – I zagged all over before I recovered. Skunk and Stink were bad news when you're biking, they've got no idea.

According to Mum, 'they are as bad as having kids'. What an insult.

I wonder who will find my letter. The one I left in the middle of the bed, saying 'I'm, on a space quest... some of my own.' It's not like I've run away or anything. I just need to get away from everyone for a while, that and my report on the Alone Spot Experiment will be ten times better than anyone else's.

Skunk and Stink followed me. I wasn't sure I should let them, and I wasn't sure if they'd go back even if I told them to. One thing I was sure of though – they'd make good company. I wondered if that made my aloneness not quite alone enough? I figured it was within the rules, and I'd feel safer having them around. Stink took a playful lunge at the front wheel of the bike. I only just managed to get my feet on the ground before the bike hit it. I scraped my ankle bad enough to make me kick invisible dogs for the next half minute – Skunk and Stink don't have a clue – so much for them making me safe!

It was exciting though, a whole night on my own. I was planning on having a fire, I had candles, and a torch – the dark had no chance against me – I knew exactly where I was heading – I'd been there last summer with Bryan, Lachlan and James.

Was I being stupid? Should I really do this? But by now someone had probably already read the letter and I'd look stupid if I turned around and biked home. Besides I'd nicked Mum's mobile, if anything went wrong I could always ring up for help. Plus I was almost there – I'd passed town, and was swooping down the slope to the Memorial Bridge, the one that Tim was famous for jumping off when he was twelve. He had a black bum for a week. I stopped and took a good look over the side. It didn't take a genius to realise why, The Sandy Bottom Creek was a long way down. At home we call it 'Black Bottom Creek'. Imagine being famous for having a bruised bum. I guess we all have our famous stories – James is famous for trying to climb up the inside of the chimney when he was three. Mum always laughs about how she found him – she saw two blue eyes sitting in the fireplace, the rest of him was so black he blended in.

Lachlan's famous for pies. When he was little he ate three frozen pies out of the freezer and wanted more. Every time we get in the van to go to town he pipes up with 'Wanna pie' in the back, which is why he got it as his nickname...'Wannapie' I mean.

Brian is famous for his wall paintings – anything is paint to Brian – jelly, custard, glue and poo. Dad calls him Michelangelo – Mum says it would be funnier if it didn't always seem to be her doing the cleaning up. Mind you that was when he was really young.

The whole family is famous for a cane toad too. James and Lachlan sometimes get called the cane toad twins, and it even ended up as one of our experiments with Mr Bier.

One night Lachlan was out in the rain with Dad's golf club playing golf with a cane toad for a ball. I think it's cruel and inhumane, but Lachlan reckons Cane Toads are cruel and inhuman. Once I rung an animal rights place about Cane Toad golf and the man who answered told me that when he's driving he swerves to run them over. So I figure it must be OK. Though I once read that years ago people thought it OK to rip parts of people's brains out through their eye socket to make them easier to get along with, and it wasn't that many years ago. Even today some countries think it's OK to chop people's hands off if they steal. It makes you wonder if the stuff we think is OK today will end up being not OK years down the track. But I'm so used to thinking that everything we do is OK that I can't think of anything that might not be. Phew! Sometimes I think I think too much. Huh! That's like Mum when she said she'd have to try and control her urge to always be in control. But I'm right off the point.

Lachlan was out there playing cane toad golf in the rain, when he came roaring in yelling about how he found this strange cane toad, and that he wanted to ring the local TV station and let them know he had 'a freak of nature'. We all stood and huddled over this ugly looking cane toad hunched in the middle of a puddle with Dad's torch shining in its eye. Its one, big ugly buggly eye. Right in the middle of its ugly buggly head. Tim mumbled about chemicals and mutants while James found an ice cream container to scoop it up. He figured we could make money out of it. But it only ever ended up in a glass cabinet in the science room at school with Mr Fastenon taking photos of it from every angle.

Mr Bier made it a part of our 'A lot of Rot Spot', which is our discussion group we have once or twice a week. It's called that because one of the parents complained that Mr Bier was filling his son's head with 'a lot of rot'. But actually I like it. We get to talk about the kind of stuff you don't usually talk with adults about. Usually because they are talking it *to* you. The only thing you can do is ask questions like teachers are God's or something and know all the answers and you're too stupid to

know how to tie your own shoelaces.

Mr Bier stuck the toad at the front of the class and invited us to have a good look at him. Andrew kept calling it a 'Complete Freak monster', he even reckoned we should kill it, he even volunteered to do it. But that's Andrew for you, he's a complete freak monster.

Mr Bier asked us if it was a cane toad and we agreed that it was. Then he asked us how different a toad would need to be to not be a cane toad anymore. We had a hard time with that and couldn't decide if it would need to have different skin, or eyes or numbers of legs or organs. The next thing Mr Bier asked was how different a person would have to be before we couldn't think of him as being a person anymore. That was interesting. Andrew reckoned it'd have to look like Ayla. But the rest of us took it seriously. We decided that if a person only had one eye stuck in the middle of their head they'd still be a person as long as they talked like a person, and spoke about thinking and feeling the same way we did about the world. Mr Bier made it harder, "Some people think quite differently from others, if a person thought or felt quite differently from you would that make them less of a person?"

We decided that, no, it would not, there's a whole lot of different ways to talk, and think and feel in this world that were normal for people to think like.

"So people can be very different from each other and still be people and still be normal?"

We agreed that that was true.

"Then why is it that some people hate other people just because they are different from them? Sometimes they will even go so far as to kill them, and burn or destroy their homes."

We couldn't come up with a good reason why.

Strangely enough the cane toad went missing that day, his glass cabinet was found empty. James lost his chance to get rich, Mr Fastenon his opportunity to publish scientific papers on mutations in

cane toads, but I guess the cane toad gained a chance to just keep on being different in his own one-eyed way. I just hope the other cane toads don't pick on him.

What am I famous for? 'Dish-appearing', - Which is what Mum calls it when it's time to do the dishes, she turns around, and suddenly, there's no one there, we've all 'dish-appeared'. I'm famous for getting words back to front, like saying 'Belly jeans' instead of 'jelly beans', and I told someone to stop 'winkling the crapper' instead of 'crinkling the wrapper', I told Tamara to 'nipe her wose', and James to 'Learn off the tight'. Mum that her 'pins skeeling', and Dad that my favourite food is a 'cham and heese sandwich'. He told me that I belong in a 'booney lin'. There are lots of things I'm famous for, but after tonight, I have a feeling, it might just be this.

Skunk and Stink were mad to get moving and the middle of a bridge isn't the best place to stop, so we crossed, and turned down a narrow, dirt track. It'd been a while since anyone had. Half the time I had to duck to miss branches and I got swacked every couple of minutes with one kind of bush or another. Skunk and Stink thought it was great, they galloped on in front, sometimes running back straight at me and I'd have to stop in a hurry.

It'd been a long time since I'd been there, I couldn't remember exactly where it was. I might already have passed it. And my legs hurt, and if another tree got in my way. I came around a corner and whack! I rode right into an overhanging branch, my bum hit the ground, my bike hit the tree, and my bag, which had been full to bursting, burst. I spent a minute kicking invisible trees and even a couple of real ones. When I calmed down enough I discovered Skunk had found my iced buns and gobbled them. One of the problems with blaming anyone or anything is that you can always think of a good reason why they did it. Poor old Skunk couldn't help being a dog, or a pig. I stuffed most of my stuff back into the ripped bag. Leaving the cans on a rock.

"Try eating those" I pointed a finger at Skunk who looked guilty, but probably didn't even know why.

I found my Alone Spot not much further on. It was just as I remembered it, three huge rocks in a perfect circle. By huge I mean much taller than me, which according to Dad isn't particularly tall at all; but it's big for a rock. It's a strange place, the rocks are all about the same size, and there's one small opening. Last year I could just fit through - this year, no chance. I had to throw my bag over the top and scramble up the side. Inside, when you look up all you see is rock, sky and trees. Stink pushed his way through, Skunk, who's bigger, could only just fit, and he didn't look too pleased about the idea, they both sniffed around for a minute, and then left in search of better game.

I hauled myself up on top of one of rocks and sat there for a while. It was warm and it felt good to be sitting quietly, peacefully, the sound of the river not far off, the cicadas in the trees, Skunk and Stink exploring close by. I sat there for ages, just breathing. When I looked at my watch I realised it had to have been over ten minutes – I'd been alone the whole way here, that was at least an hour. I had the whole night to experience three hours. I could almost see their faces when I told them. This was better than chocolate bars and raiding the fridge. This was better than sneaking through Mum and Dad's things while they were out.

I slid off the rock and ran back for the remaining cans, then off to gather firewood. It was the end of summer and not likely to be cold enough to need a fire, but the idea was too fantastic, plus I had things to cook. Popcorn on an open fire – sounded real good and I wouldn't have to divide it into eleven shares. Melanie always gets out the kitchen scales, even for chips. I looked at my watch, right about now everyone would be in the kitchen, saying they're starving and making Vegemite sandwiches, arguing over what TV Program to watch and if I was there I'd be asked to change someone's poeey nappy. Nope, I wasn't missing out on anything. Instead, I was checking out the creek, which is a sluggish green thing only about as wide as a bed is long, and you can't see the bottom. The boys go eeling sometimes. Tim caught one once that had horns. I wasn't going

swimming. Being alone was being brave enough for me.

The Popcorn Panic

By the time I had enough wood the sun was dropping behind the ridge. Mum and Dad probably knew by now. I hoped they weren't too spun about the whole thing. Parents think you're always ten times more useless than you are. Every time you stuff up they like to remind you for the next ten years, but it's OK for them. Like the time Mum turned left into oncoming traffic on a one-way street in the city. It cost heaps of money, but nobody ever mentions it.

The funniest thing I ever saw my Mum do was when we went shopping at a mall Supermarket. By the time you shop for eleven people it's a mega trolley. We were all half way up a walkway elevator when Mum complained that Dad wasn't really holding his share of the load, so he let go. It knocked her over before he could stop it. Everyone behind managed to jump out of the way, but the trolley ended up crashing through a jewellery store window. It took ages to pick up all the potatoes and diamond rings out of the broken glass. The Police took photos and the shopkeeper cried. The Police asked Mum for a statement. She tried to tell them what happened but started laughing instead, and once she started she couldn't stop. A policewoman said it was because she was in shock. But Mum shook her head, "No, I'm not, let's face it, it's funny." The Policewoman frowned and asked her to begin again. I bet she wouldn't have laughed if it had been one of us. I bet she wouldn't laugh if we forgot her birthday. Forgetting about things is so much harder than forgiving.

About then I realised there were two types of paper I'd forgotten to bring, one kind to light the fire, and the other to... toilet paper. There was a news story on the radio once about a group of people on an expedition into the desert on camels only they forgot to take toilet paper and radioed the rescue crews to fly some out. I'd have to manage with small twigs and dry grass, one to light the fire and the other ... you know what I mean.

I gathered enough of both and shoved the twigs through the gap in the rocks, and climbed over again. I didn't want my fire to be too big, it would get too hot. Usually I'd have Lachlan and James telling me I was doing it all wrong and Tanya undoing everything I did. Tonight I could watch the sun go down, I could light my fire, eat my food and be alone.

As darkness came I started to get a funny kind of 'can't go back now even if you want to' pain in my belly. I struck the first match and held it under the pile of grass. I had two voices in my head, the scared side said, 'you'll burn yourself to death', my brave side sighed and imagined the flickering flames and shadows dancing over the rocks.

The fire started easily I watched it as it spread across the pile,

"Brave little flames" I whispered, "Brave little me."

"I'm alone" my words bent the flames closest to me, and they crackled back, gleeful too.

When it was well alight I grabbed for the tin opener and a can of beans. I dumped them in the pot and realised my next problem – How was I going to hang my pot over the fire? Climbing over the rocks was wearing a bit thin. But up, over, and the last of the light in the sky just enough for me to find my sleeping bag and stuff it through the gap and to scout around for the right kind of sticks I wanted, they had to be green with forky ends. I'd even bought a pocket knife; but as usual, the only ones they give to kids are too blunt to be useful. I had to savage several small branches till I had what I needed. I shoved them through the gap, jumped over the rocks and rescued the fire, which was just a few embers away from dying.

While it recovered I twisted the ends of my forked sticks into the dirt on either side of the fire, pushing rocks around the base. They felt pretty solid, and the forks were about even. I put my pot handle over a straight stick and settled it over the fire. I giggled like a goblin. I thought myself incredibly clever – I heated up my beans and chipped small cubes of cheese in with my pocket knife.

It all looked pretty good bubbling away there. I almost wished my family could see me.

They'd have to know by now I was gone. For a minute I let myself think they didn't and when I rode home tomorrow they'd just think I'd arranged to stay over somewhere for the night or even worse; they'd not even noticed. But of course they would, they might not remember my birthday, but they'd notice if I wasn't there. Wouldn't they?

It was as I took the pot off the fire that I realised the next problem. I had nothing to eat with. I could try to whittle a spoon, but it'd take too long. I couldn't think of a single thing to use as a substitute. I ended up using my fingers and they tasted great, the beans that is. Much better than on a stove, or in a microwave. Plus, as it got darker the light from the fire did make lovely shadows, and had a nice spit and spark conversation.

When I finished the beans it was time to solve another problem. How to clean my hands. This was easier than the rest. I wasn't brave enough for a torch lit trip to the river, so I cleaned them on my jeans. Even so they were still a bit sticky. More of a problem was the dirty pot, I needed it clean so I could make popcorn. I didn't even look sideways I just passed the pot to my left and pretended I didn't hear Skunk licking the sauce. Mum would go bananas if she ever found out I did that. With the dog-spit cleaned pot, I dumped a big cube of stolen butter and hung it back over the fire to heat. I fed the fire more sticks while I waited for it to sizzle. Grabbing the popcorn I poured in a generous amount and waited. After all my problems I didn't foresee this one, it wasn't till the first one popped right out of the pot and into the fire that I realised I had a predicament, no pot lid. Then it all started. Frantically I looked around but I didn't have anything to put on top of the pot that wouldn't burn. I had popcorn in my hair, and one hit me right in the face. I was ready for the next one, I opened my mouth and in it shot. I tried to catch more, but I was laughing too hard and had to sit and watch it fly everywhere. Skunk and Stink watched too, looking very puzzled.

While they snuffled around and ate the rest. I took out my notebook and headed it up.

July 14 – Black Bottom Creek – 7.15pm

Observations of Being Alone

Even though I have a huge family and I can't even pee on my own I still feel lonely.

Even though I have three people I call friends, when I'm with them I still feel lonely.

Right now I'm actually on my own (except for Skunk and Stink) and I don't feel too lonely.

Sometimes I wish I could have my own space to be alone.

Sometimes I wish that I could share that space with someone so I'm not alone.

Why is it that I don't have a best friend.... Sometimes I think there must be something wrong with me.

I crossed out the last line. It didn't have anything to do with the Alone Spot Experiment and if I read that out I'd sound like a loser. Maybe I was.

I wrote a new list of non-loser observations.

I like not having everyone bugging me all the time

I wish I could live on my own in a little hut on top of a mountain and only ever talk to sheep.

Being alone is the coolest thing.

And I'm a big fat liar.

I decided to break my vow of aloneness and ring home on the mobile. Just to check in, just in case they were worried. I spent ten minutes pulling apart my bag to find it squashed between a couple of banana's. I went to dial and realized something was wrong right from the start... where was the screen? Five, then ten seconds of delayed brain reaction and then I threw it down in disgust. I'd brought the remote control for the TV. My aloneness needle swung ten degrees closer to 'extreme'.

Unidentified Unflying Objects

Skunk's ears pricked up. As I watched, Stink's did too. They both raised their heads and swivelled them to one side. Stink growled, so did Skunk. Slowly, I put down my pen, and just as slowly I put down my notepad. I edged toward my bag and fumbled for my torch. I switched it on, and then on again, then I added another twenty cents to Dad's swearing box. I hadn't checked to see if it was charged. It had a dynamo for emergencies, so I flicked it open and spun it around a few times. It went another twenty cents. It made a strange whirring noise. Mind you, whoever or whatever it was would have seen the light from my fire by now, or seen the sparks drifting up. Skunk and Stink rose quietly, and crept through the gap, though with Skunk it was more of a shoved himself through the gap.

I could hear voices. Please don't be my family, please don't be the Police, I begged. Skunk and Stink went mad. I hoisted myself up the rock so I could see. Lying low so whoever it was, whatever it was, wouldn't see me. A short distance away I could see two torches flickering down by the creek.

"Wolves!" I heard someone scream.

"Run!" came another.

I kept whirring away on the torch like I was trying to pull in the world's biggest fish, then shoved it back in, switched it on. A dim beam hit the ground, enough for me to see where to jump. The dogs were going mad. I stumbled over the ground toward the sound of their barking. Skunk and Stink would protect me.

Skunk and Stink were running around under a tree, I could see a leg dangling out, Skunk made a leap for it and it withdrew in a hurry.

"Who's there!" I tried on my big voice, but it didn't fit, and sounded floppy instead.

"Who's that?" the voice up the tree asked. It didn't sound much bigger than mine.

"This is Krissey Kelly Bertram and her wolves. Don't come out of the tree or I'll order them to

attack.”

“Krissey! It’s us, George and Shane. You never told us you have wolves.”

My sigh was bigger than my shout, “I don’t, you idiots, they’re just dogs. Skunk, Stink, come here.”

Normally they never listen to me, but they both came and stood anxiously beside me.

“It’s O.K, the wolves have been called off.”

Shane’s fat legs appeared, and he jumped, landing awkwardly on his bum. George; always the smarter one, waited to see if the dogs would attack Shane before jumping down too.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I’m *trying* to be alone.”

“Oh, sorry, we’ll leave now if you like” said Shane.

“What are *you* doing here?”

“It’s July the 14th said Shane.

“Oh I get it, you’re hiding out in case we’re invaded by the little green men with teeth ... no doors out here huh.”

“Actually” said George stiffly, “We’re trying to *find* them, not hide from them.”

“At Black Bottom Creek?”

“Black Bottom Creek?”

“I mean Sandy Bottom Creek.”

George and Shane looked at each other as though I was the mad one.

“So should we be expecting them soon?” I looked up at the sky with a smirk.

George looked at Shane,

“Com’on Shane, no point hanging around here.”

“Thanks from saving us from the wolves” grinned Shane. They started to walk away.

“Want to make some popcorn?” I asked, which was the only thing I could think of. Shane looked instantly interested. George looked pensively at the sky.

“Sounds good, what do you think George?”

He shrugged. "Why not, I don't expect we'll see anything for at least another hour."

I dropped my torch, it rolled away and died. So I was lucky they agreed to, otherwise I could have been blundering around till dawn.

I showed them how to climb over the rocks, and they sat down impressed with my camping spot, while I rescued the fire from death again.

"I - um, I don't have - I forgot to bring my pot lid -so..."

George looked around for a moment and scabbled in the dirt, prising up a thin piece of slate about the size of a pot lid, which he dusted off and handed to me. I took it.

"That was brilliant George" said Shane.

"Yeah, thanks George." I mumbled. Embarrassed that he could solve my problem so easily. I dumped another load of butter into the pot and strung it up over the fire.

"So what should I be looking out for?" I pointed at the sky.

George shrugged. "I reckon you'd know if you saw something. Might not see anything."

I grinned wickedly.

The butter was sizzingly nicely and I dumped a load of popcorn in, swirling it so it was covered in hot yummy butter. I stuck the slate over the pot and we waited. While we did I told them about the first batch. Aware that both of them kept looking nervously at the sky.

"Can't see much of the sky from here", I pointed out as the popcorn started doing its thing.

We sat around eating, I wondered why I'd jumped at the chance to have them stay longer. I'd been doing alright, I hadn't been scared, but it was good to have them sitting there, even if it meant sharing out the popcorn. At least it wasn't divided by eleven.

"Your Mum and Dad are cool to let you go camping on your own", said Shane.

"Yeah aren't they" I grinned, "yours aren't afraid aliens will boil you up for boy butter?"

"They don't know" said Shane looking worried.

I grinned, "Neither do mine. I don't think they'll even notice I'm not there."

"I'm an only child" said George, "that makes it much worse."

"Oh yeah. How's that?" I asked.

"You can't get away with anything, they never let you take any risks, always watching you and telling you to be careful. My Mum has three bath mats in the shower so I won't slip and crack my head."

"Yeah" said Shane, "I'm the lonely only too. You're lucky."

"Get real!" I said, "Lucky!. You know my parents forgot my birthday this year. Bet yours never would."

"I'd rather they forgot my birthday because I had so many other brothers and sisters. I reckon that'd be cool."

"You've got no idea Shane, none. Living in a family as big as mine, sucks, sucks big time."

"Oh come on. What's your best memory of being a kid?" George asked.

I wondered for a minute or two.

"I reckon it would have to be the time we made the human pyramid and stood on each other's shoulders. Would have worked too if Dad hadn't tripped on Miriam's bike."

George and Shane looked enviously at me.

"Yeah, try that with three."

"You try getting five minutes alone, you try changing pooey nappies and getting asked to clean strawberry jam out of a two year olds ears , you try ... you try having someone wake you up at three in the morning cos they're scared and want you to tell them a story, you try..." I mumbled to a stop.

"Sounds cool to me, except the bit about pooey nappies."

"I know it's not much fun being the centre of attention all the time." Said George.

"Yeah, well your parents will be going stark raving mad when they find out where you are" I said.

"Nope, they don't even know we've gone, they won't know either. We'll get back before they do" said George confidently, "What about you?"

"They'll get over it" I said less confidently, "If you want you can call them on my mobile phone."

“You have your own phone?” Shane asked.

I reached into my bag and handed over the remote. I was pleased to see it took him as long as it took me to work out what it was and what it was not.

“I reckon they’re having a hard time dialling up the ABC right now” I giggled. Shane held the phone to his ear,

“Oh yeah, Hi Scotty. Beam me up would ya?”

George said very seriously, “You know remote control use means an extra 200,000 tons of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere each year, just cos we’re too lazy to get off our bums and turn it off.”

“Hmm” I said, “that’s nice.”

He gave me a dirty look. I grinned.

“Do you want to get back to being alone then?” George flicked a finger at my notebook. Before they came I’d been enjoying being alone, but the idea of them walking away and leaving me alone now seemed daunting. I shrugged.

“Nope, it’s OK, you can stay if you like, I’ve done my three hours.”

“Good, can we have some of your chocolate then?” Asked Shane, who could see the corner of the block sitting in the side pocket of my backpack.

“Sure” and tossed it over.

“It’s all melted from the heat of the fire” said Shane, poking some of the gooey mass into his mouth and passing it on.

“So when are you doing your three hours?” I asked.

“Tomorrow night” said Shane,

“Tomorrow.” said George, “I’m going to spend a few hours in the shed out the back of the house. It’s no big deal, I spend hours alone in there anyway. I can spend the time drawing up conclusions to the Alone Spot Experiment, and this one, the July 14 Predictory.”

I smiled to myself.

“You don’t think this is for real, do you Krissey?”

“No, I think you’re both mad as meat pies.”

“As mad as meat axes, you mean” George corrected me.

Shane started on about UFO’s and all the stories he’d ever heard about them. I made up a few too, and made out like they were true,

“Like the time my Uncle Bevan went up the coast of his motorbike, they abducted him, motorbike and all. When he woke up, he was on the side of the road ... alone. They didn’t give back the bike. I reckon there’s some thieving alien riding it somewhere on the other side of the galaxy right now.”

Shane was impressed, but George said,

“You know there’s been research done on people who lie Krissey.”

“Yeah, and what does it say?”

“That they always end up with chocolate on their face.”

“Ha ha” I swiped at my face and started to laugh, “have I got it?”

“Yeah, half way over your eye and on your chin” Shane giggled.

Things got a lot easier then, I guess I gave in. George’s a lot smarter than I am, and I don’t really like having someone a lot smarter than me around. But in the end I figure he’s an OK kind of guy, and I stopped acting like a pinhead. Shane talked about how if you said ‘it’s not’ real fast it sounded like you were saying something else, George said that saying ‘catch it’ was the same. I told them how if you said your own name enough times it sounded weird, like not a word at all. Least not one that you knew. So we sat around the fire chanting our own names. George reckoned that it was almost like an initiation ceremony. We didn’t know it then, but it was the start of something. Something much bigger than we could ever have imagined.

The Big Waxy Blob

George and Shane decided to go back to their 'station' as George calls it and bring back their gear. They ended up deciding to sleep on top of my rocks so they'd have a good view of the sky. I was happy with that. Shane pulled out his chocolate supply and we ate enough for ten people. We talked about stuff, nothing amazing, but it felt good. If you ignored George's big words and technical talk he was just the same as everyone else, and Shane's OK too.

It was late when I pulled out my sleeping bag, crawled in and said goodnight. George and Shane were arguing about shifts. Shane wanted to sleep first. George; who thought that the early morning hours were a likelier time for spacecraft, wanted that shift. Shane yawned widely and decided the point. Either George took the first shift or they both slept. I thought about offering to take a shift too, but what they were doing was too stupid to waste sleep on, besides I needed to sleep off all the chocolate. I was feeling sick.

I went to sleep straight off, and didn't wake till much later. I'd dreamed that I did the old one, two, three, leapt into the air, flapped my wings a few times and started flying. It was good to start with, looking down and seeing my house and everyone looking up at me, powerful, special me. Then I started getting faster and faster. I couldn't slow down. There were powerlines in the way. I dodged, dodged again, dodged hundreds of times, only just managing to get clear before more came at me. It was only a matter of time, all that speed was making me feel.... I opened my eyes, jumped out of my bag, scrambled over the rocks, nearly knocking George off on my way past, and was embarrassingly sick in the dark, in the trees and anyone who wanted to listen... nobody ever wants to listen. I mean, anyone close by was *forced* to listen to me spewing up popcorn and chocolate. Shane and his flamin' chocolate bars.

George didn't say anything till I climbed back over.

"That was lucky" he said, "I was almost asleep then."

I grumbled something about the incidence of people dying of embarrassment. George just laughed. I found myself kind of liking him. At school you don't really get to know people, it's not till you see them outside of school that they start making sense.

"Any aliens yet?"

"Just a few."

I closed my eyes and pretty much fell straight to sleep. That was, until the first rock stuck between my fifth and fourth rib, and something crawled over my face and tried to get up my nose. I'd smashed my watch a while back and now the light doesn't work so I had no idea of the time and my fire was dead. I could see George was asleep and that Shane had taken the on duty spot... and was asleep. I needed a pee. I'd wake him on my way back. I jumped over and scrambled round till I found a good spot. It was very dark, and the stars looked awesome when they haven't got the town lights to compete with. It's like they had all turned their dimmer switches onto high.

There's no easy way to explain what happened next. I almost feel like an idiot saying the words, but as I sat there peeing, trying not to wet my own foot, I saw one of the stars move. Yeah, yeah, a shooting star, so what. But it was more than that, it was a shooting star that was coming right at us. Yeah, yeah, a comet, but it wasn't that either. It was like nothing I've ever seen, or will ever get to see again. The dogs started to whine, probably sensing that barking at it was just a bit stupid, like trying to rugby tackle an elephant.

It was huge. It was oval, but changing. Circular sometimes, oval at others, it didn't revolve or have strange blue lights, it sort of glowed, the way the light inside a lit candle looks, and inside, you could see things moving. Strange things.

I didn't need to look down to know that I'd peed on my foot. The thing was getting closer, closer and it looked like it meant to come closer yet. Over where George and Shane were, things were even

weirder. The rocks were glowing like candles too, like three, big, fat birthday candles without wicks. I'd like to say I ran over and did something brave, but I didn't, it took me the whole time to think of pulling my knickers back up.

I watched as George and Shane woke up. Shane fell off the rocks and I saw by their glow that he ran away. But George, brilliant, but stupid George just sat there, waiting. The alien ship came to a slow stop directly above the rocks. George sat there, gawking up at it. I tried to yell out, but found I had no voice, just a silly little gaspy thing. A strange noise came from the ship, a noise, but not a noise, more like a pressure on your ears that made you think of being sucked under a wave at the beach. The rocks glowed even more, and George slipped off the side and backed away. Not fast like you'd expect, but kind of walking backwards step by slow step. The ship just hung there. No beam came down, nothing opened, but you knew something was happening, because time became intense. And then I saw Skunk, big fat Skunk who'd eaten the last of everything till he couldn't fit back through the gap in the rocks. I could see flashes of him running around the inside the rocks. Then a bigger glow vibrated the ground. A big round ball of orange, waxy glow emerged from the rocks, moving slowly toward the waiting alien ship. Just beneath it was Skunk, who was being dragged along. He yelped, he whined, he barked and struggled. The orange glow wobbled as it merged with the ship, kind of like a blob of wax in a lava lamp merging into a ball, and Skunk, poor old Skunk, disappeared with it too ... and was gone.

Moments later, so was the alien ship. It just disappeared, a faint glow that faded within moments was all that remained. The rocks dimmed down and were just rocks again.

Skunks Abduction

"George?" I could hear Shane's wobbly voice.

"Krissey?" he wobbled again.

"I'm here." I gasped and tried again, louder this time, "I'm here." I felt something wet on my fingers and realised it was Stink, licking them, he whined. I felt like whining too.

I could hear someone blundering. Shane almost fell on me.

"Krissey" he sighed in relief. When strange things happen, people do strange things, so it seemed OK to give Shane a big hug. I needed one too.

"Where's George?"

"George?" we both called at the same time, listening in the dark for him. But there was nothing.

"They've got him too" Shane wobbled some more.

"Didn't see him go, did you?" I gasped.

"No."

"Well he's got to be here somewhere then."

"Maybe it killed him."

I didn't say anything. We walked to where we'd last seen him, treading very carefully in case we tripped over his dead body in the dark.

We found him lying on the ground, staring up at the sky, his mouth open. Shane screamed, high, like a little girl.

"Wasn't that just too unreal" George said in an awed whisper.

Shane kicked him, "Why didn't you call out when we did George? We thought you were dead."

"I think the orange ball, I think it has to be an energy source. They must plant them around the planet, so if they're low they can pick one up and keep travelling."

"And Skunk, he's an energy source too?" I asked.

"Skunk, no, he's a mistake. He just happened to be there."

"What about my sleeping bag, my other stuff, why didn't it get sucked up?"

"Its inanimate, no living energy" he replied.

"What will they do with him?"

"Don't know, maybe spit him back out."

I caught the sob in my throat and wrestled with it, "So they'll drop him from miles up?"

"Maybe" said George,

"Maybe" said Shane, grabbing hold of my hand, "maybe they'll keep him as a pet."

"Maybe they'll put him in an intergalactic zoo, or maybe they'll use him for an energy source and eat him." I shuddered.

George sat up and began striding toward the rocks.

"Where are you going?" yelled Shane, "I wouldn't go back in there!"

George didn't even bother answering,

"Let him go" I mumbled, looking back up at the sky, for a not flying, but falling dog. The sky just kept on doing its starry thing as though nothing had happened. The sun was rising, enough light appeared to watch George jump over the rocks and into the circle. We waited nervously, Shane muttering about how it would be the last time we saw George, that the radiation had him, and we, at a distance would die a lingering death instead.

Eventually George scrambled back over with an armload of something. It turned out to be my sleeping bag full of my gear. He dumped it cheerfully at my feet.

"Here you go. Shane and I better get out of here. It will be light soon."

Shane was happy enough, he jumped to his feet and started walking.

I looked at the rocks, back at them, grabbed my sleeping bag, found my bike, wrestled the stupid big bundle of stuff on the back, whistled to Stink who had kept two centimetres from my feet the whole time anyway, and started out of there. I had to race to catch up with George and Shane.

Neither of them said anything when I caught up. No one said anything till we reached the bridge. It was light enough by then to see George's face, which had a huge grin on it. His eyes were wild.

Shane asked him,

"What was inside the rocks George?"

“Just a hole where the orb came out” he said, “you guys realise what this means don’t you?”

We both shook our heads.

“We’re not alone.” He stared into our scared faces and repeated it, “We are not alone.”

“Yeah, well, you try writing that for your Alone Spot Experiment results” I said, still thinking of Skunk somewhere alone in a strange place or, worse, dead.

“Are you going to tell people?” Shane asked.

“I’m not, they’ll throw me in the loony bin with you two” I said.

“It’s our duty to tell the world” said George.

I snorted.

“How you going to tell your parents what you saw if you weren’t supposed to be there in the first place?”

“I might have to come clean about that.”

“Then they’ll just think you made up a stupid story to get yourself out of trouble.”

“Yes, but I’ve got this” George struggled in his pocket with something and then took out a camera.

“Wow” said Shane, “we’re going to be famous.”

“That’s if they turn out.” I said.

“They will” George said, “they will.”

“I’m going that way” he pointed in the opposite direction to the way I was going. Shane nodded.

“Well see ya” I said lamely.

“Sorry about Skunk” said Shane.

“I’m sure he died quick” said George. Shane gave George a frown,

“I just realised something George.”

“What’s that?”

“Even you can be incredibly thick.”

George didn’t look too worried. He turned around and started walking and after a moment so did Shane. Then I was alone. Except for Stink that was, and he looked like he was feeling pretty alone

too. Stink and Skunk did everything together.

Pancakes for Punishment.

I had to push my bike up the hill. I'd now seen something amazing, something so special it was way over the top of just amazing, I'd seen something that only a few people ever would. Instead of feeling great, I felt bad. Really bad. What was I going to tell Mum and Dad and the others? If I told them that Skunk got pulled into an alien ship they'd think I was acting like normal. Lying. Even if George's photos did turn out it would only look like he'd taken photos of blobs of wax in a lava lamp. Everyone knew what alien ships look like, and it was nothing like what we saw.

The ride home was sad, Stink stayed right beside me and didn't once run in front. He looked up at me with big, worried eyes. I tried to talk to him and to tell him something that made sense to him, but nothing makes sense to a dog except food, and I couldn't explain Skunk's disappearance using food unless I said Skunk had become it.

I was pleased to see there weren't any police cars parked outside our house. When I walked quietly through the back door I found Mum and Dad sitting at the kitchen table, Mum had Tanya in her arms and she'd been crying. She gave me a smile that was more sad than happy.

"Glad to see you home. Tell your father where you've been. I'm going to bed."

She gave me a hug and went upstairs. I wasn't feeling very brave, so I didn't look at Dad.

'Skunk's gone' I said instead.

"Lost him?"

"Yeah."

"He'll turn up when he's hungry."

I nodded, unconvinced.

"You realise what you did was dum, really dum."

I nodded again. Too flat to do anything but agree.

“Where did you go?”

“Black Bottom.”

“On your own?”

Did I dob Shane and George in?

“Yes. I had to finish my experiment for school.”

“Your teacher said it was OK?”

“Didn’t tell him.”

The interrogation probably would have gone on much longer except every minute or so Dad would yawn again. When Miriam and Melanie walked in, Dad stood up.

“You can cook everyone breakfast, clean up the mess, and make sure your mother and I don’t get disturbed for at least three hours. After that I’ll think up more ways to make you think twice in the future.” He gave me a big hard hug, big enough for me to know that he loved me and was glad I was home. Then he followed Mum up the stairs, yawning the whole way.

It wasn’t such a bad punishment. I made our favourite breakfast, which is pancakes with swirls of food colouring in the middle. Everyone asked what I got up to last night, and I told them the safe stuff. I choked on everything else. They laughed when I told them about the popcorn, but when I told them about Skunk disappearing everyone went quiet. Tim promised to go out looking for him later. I could hardly tell him not to.

So Saturday was a strange day. I spent time writing up my Alone Spot Experiment. I didn’t mention the alien spaceship and I didn’t mention George, Shane, or Skunk. All the time I was writing I was thinking of George’s words over and over ‘We are not alone’. Now I know it’s true. George’s July 14 Predictory was true too, I’d never laugh at it again. I’d thought I’d be coming home feeling like some

kind of runaway hero, brave, able to withstand long periods of time alone. Instead I just felt like crying.

I gave Stink an extra bone, the one that was supposed to be Skunk's. I patted him for a whole hour and threw a stick for another half.

So I guess you're thinking that this is how the Alone Spot Experiment changed my life. Well it's not. So far I'd learnt that it wasn't so bad to be alone, that I could handle it. There was probably more, but it's hard to know when you're learning, it kind of just happens anyway. But there's other stuff that made even the alien space ship seem small.

In the afternoon, Dad came home with two tiny, yellow chickens, we called one Angel and one Mouse. Which ended up being quite funny, because Angel only lasted two days and became one. I think Miriam fed it too much cheese, and Tim said he might have squashed it a bit when he stood on it coming down the stairs. We had a funeral for it, stuck it in a chocolate box and sticky taped the sides. Bryan made a little wooden cross with 'Angel, died too soon', on it. We dragged Mum and Dad along, and we made a procession to the hole that James had made. Lachlan lowered it in, and we all dropped a bit of dirt on the lid, Dad said a few nice words, something like 'Dearly beloved we are gathered here to today to honour the life of a chicken called Angel, may the chicken called Angel rest in one piece' which is why we buried Angel so deep, so Stink couldn't dig her back up.

Mouse didn't die, Mouse just got around the house following everyone, we all danced around her, trying not to squash her, or stand in her little poops. We all had to clean up any poops we saw lying around. Mum said if she saw more than one lying around she'd send Mouse outside. It was kind of nice having her around, she liked to sit under your neck to keep warm when you watched TV, and if you wanted her to come you just tapped your foot on the ground and she's run like fury to get to you. James and Lachlan almost exhausted her to death by having her run between them. James

would tap, she'd run over, Lachlan would tap, and off she'd run again. The only thing that really drove you crazy was she cheeped and cheeped, it's a wonder she didn't have a sore throat. It was nice having Mouse around. I think Dad got the chickens to try and cheer us all up. But really a chicken called Mouse does not make up for not having a dog called Skunk.

The next day Tim brought home a mouse and we called it Chicken, which must really confuse Tanya and Tamara. We kept it in a cardboard box till it started eating its way out, which wasn't that stupid of it, because the smell of its own poo and wee was enough to make most of us hold our breaths, he must have been suffocating. So Mum, who wasn't that happy about having another poo producing thing in the house, told us to make it a permanent home. So Tim, James and Lachlan made it a red roofed, one bedroom house out of Lego and stuck it in Vanilla and Chocolate's cat cage. Mum asked them to design nappies for Chicken and Mouse too. Miriam took it too seriously and hacked up two hankies and we caught her tying one of her nappies around Chicken. Now we had another pet, and while that was OK, and while I know everyone was trying to make up for Skunk, it didn't make the Skunk ache in me go away. Especially when Bryan made up posters to put around town.

MISSING, a yellow breedless dog that smells, needed back for his yearly wash,

if you find him please return him to 20 Burton Street. Or call 41276549

He had a picture he had photocopied of Skunk lifting his leg on Mum's pot of gerbera's. Not surprisingly, despite fifty copies stuck to poles and noticeboards with three rolls of sticky tape, no one rung up to say they had found him. Three people rang up and asked if we'd like to have their dog though.

I fed Mouse and Chicken my piece of pizza that night. It took them an hour to eat even the smallest piece. If Skunk was around Pizza, it lasted point two of a second, and his eyes always said the biggest thank you.

On Monday I handed in my Alone Spot Experiment report. Everyone was talking about their three hours alone. Everyone, that is, but George, Shane and I. I pretended to smile and asked them about their three hours.

“Pretty boring really” said Shane. George just nodded.

“Told anyone yet?” asked Shane.

I shook my head. “Nope, and I’m not going to. They’ll all think I’m bonkers. Did you get home OK?”

“Yeah” said George, “Mum and Dad had no idea I was ever gone. I can’t decide whether that’s good or not.” He still was pretty darn happy about the whole thing. I bet he’d forgotten about Skunk already.

“You guys told anyone yet?” I asked.

“George said not to till we get the photo’s back”, said Shane.

“No one’s going to believe that a space ship looks like a blob of wax” I said and was surprised when George nodded and said,

“I know.”

“He’s going to write to the government, send them a photo and tell them what happened.”

“It’s my duty” said George very seriously.

I felt like blowing a raspberry at him.

“Well, when you get them back, can I have a copy?”

George thought about it for a while and said “Sure.”

Everyone rattled on about their Alone Spot Experiment with Mr Bier and when it came to my turn I told them how I went and camped alone, how I made popcorn. I mean, the popcorn story was pretty good. Looking sideways at George, I told them how I used a piece of slate as a pot lid. I told them I’d lost Skunk too. Mr Bier was very nice and asked how I might have lost him. I looked across the room at George and Shane and said,

“I reckon he got abducted by aliens.”

They both had their heads down. I could see Shane trying not to laugh, but George wasn't smiling.

Mr Bier asked whether I had my parent's permission to go camping alone. My turn to put my head down.

We ended up with a list of things we thought we had learnt from the Alone Spot Experiment.

1. *That being alone is relaxing*
2. *That being alone is not always easy.*
3. *That getting the space to be alone isn't always easy either. (that's mine)*
4. *That being alone is OK*
5. *Being alone can be boring (that's Andrew's)*
6. *Being alone doesn't have to mean being lonely*
7. *Being alone is a skill and some people have to learn it.*
8. *The best time for thinking is when you are alone.*

At lunchtime I had to look at all the print outs of Marita, Leone, Tina and Leela's fashion show. I tried to make out like I was interested, but personally I think they look more like losers than I am. They told me it took them two hours just to get their hair straight. I told them about losing Skunk. Tina said,

"Who'd want a dog that smells anyway?"

"At least I'd rather have a dog than look like one." I snarled and walked away. I'd just taken one more step up to the top of my mountain, soon I'd be talking to sheep.

Shane Leaks & George gets Alien Goobers

Things leak. I guess they always do, but a rumour started up around the school that George and Shane reckoned they'd seen an alien space ship, but it soon got called the alien space blob. I figured that Shane had to have said something to someone, but George thought it was me and anytime I saw him he ignored me or glared. There wasn't much I could do about it, so I tried my best not to

look like I cared too much.

I asked Shane whether the photos had come back and he said they had but they were;

“Inconclusive” a sure sign he’d been hanging around George too long. I asked him if I could see them but he said George wasn’t too keen on showing them around.

“Because I’m the one who blabbed, right?” I gave Shane a hard look and he went a bit pink around the edges. It’s hard to be mean to Shane though.

I don’t know if George sent his report to the government or not. But I noticed that their poster on the July 14th Predictory came down off the wall.

About three days after it all happened I heard George being teased by the lockers, well actually the lockers weren’t teasing him, just the people hanging around them.

“Worthington, got any alien goobers in your locker?”

“No.”

“Hey Worthington, got any alien goobers in your brain?”

George didn’t answer, he just kept pulling things out of his locker and stuffing them in his bag.

Everyone else was giggling.

“Hey Worthington -”

“Give it a rest” I said, bored, “you guys get so boring when you go on and on.”

Of course it didn’t stop there, they kept on and on. George just quietly insisted when asked that yes, it did happen, and no, he wasn’t full of brown squishy stuff. It was kind of unbearable to listen to, because he was right, it had happened. But I wasn’t about to say anything about being there. I felt bad about that, but I had said I would say nothing, I had said nothing, even if George thought I had.

Confused?

Well not as confused as I felt when George calmly mentioned that if they wanted more proof, they’d have to talk to Krissey Bertram. His face was as calm as his words, but his eyes were angry.

I stood staring at him, while everyone turned to look at me.

“That true? Did you see the goobers too?” Andrew, the meanest of them, sneered at me.

I was caught, and I know now that I did the wrong thing, if I could do it all again I’d do it differently. I didn’t look at George. I laughed instead and said,

“Course not. Geez George, you’re dum.”

That made everyone laugh, because George, of all people, isn’t dum. Andrew laughed the loudest because he IS dum. I turned and walked off to class, but not before catching George’s miserable face. I felt bad, I still feel bad when I think about it. I should have stuck up for him, but I didn’t.

When we were back in class and Mr Bier was talking about our new experiment I hardly even listened. I could feel George at the back of the class glaring at me.

It turned out we were having a week of the Personal Space Experiment, it was about how we all have an area around us that we don’t like other people in because it makes us feel awkward. Mr Bier had Wu and Melissa standing five feet away from each other and Wu walked slowly up to her and stopped about a metre away. So what. Mr Bier chose Emma next, Melissa’s best friend, she had to walk up to Melissa too, she stopped about thirty centimetres away from Melissa. Then everyone got a turn to see where their personal space began and ended, and how it changed for different people. Of course, it had to happen. George and I both got called to the front of the room and we demonstrated how great a distance can be. Three metres was all I could handle and I was pleased when he stopped moving in at two point five.

Mr Bier gave us both a very hard look and told us to sit back down. Then George did something stupid,

“Mr Teddy B...?” he began and stopped.

Mr Bier had his back to the class when he said it and we all saw him go very still. He turned slowly on one foot and looked straight at George with his eyebrow raised.

“Mr Bier” George said hastily, “when are we doing a *real* experiment.” And he got a very hard look just of his own.

“This is a real experiment George, but if it makes you happy we’ll be dissecting some poor unsuspecting member of the insect species next week.”

He turned away again and we thought he was just going to ignore the Mr Teddy Bear thing. He began handing out multi-choice test papers and as he did he said very casually.

“I haven’t been called Teddy Bear since I was a boy... but I guess if you’re all calling me that behind my back I’d rather you called it to my face.”

Shane, grinning, asked,

So, Mr Teddy Bear, what’s the test on?.”

Everyone laughed and so did Mr Bier. Everybody was keen to answer questions in his class all day, just so they could start with “Mr Teddy Bear...”

What a cool teacher.

A Part of Skunk

When we left class Mr Bier asked if I’d stay behind to answer a few questions about the Alone Spot Experiment. Here goes, I thought, another lecture about not going off on my own without permission. But he didn’t.

“So what’s going on with you and George?”

“Nothing Mr ... Bier. He’s got nothing to do with the Alone Spot Experiment.”

“I know that, I want to know why you two dislike each other so much. Its obviously bothering you both.”

“Perhaps you should talk to George then, he’s the one with the problem.”

“I hear talk about Alien Space craft ... anything to do with that?”

I looked at him real steady and did what I do at home. I tell the truth, but like its something I’m making up. Like the time I went skinny dipping with a couple of friends and inhaled on a cigarette, I

told Mum with a big grin on my face like it was a joke, so even though I told the truth she didn't think it was.

"Well... I went camping on my own, my dogs tried to eat George and Shane, an alien space ship which was like a big blob of wax, came down, gobbled more wax and abducted Skunk, whose really a dog that smells a bit. George thinks I told everyone, but I didn't, Shane did." I shrugged as though I'd just told him that my bike had a flat tyre (which it did, but I didn't know that yet).

Mr Bier stared at me for a long time without saying anything, long enough to make me feel very uncomfortable. In fact I noticed my personal space increased and I took a big step back from him.

"Well" he said very slowly, "you obviously don't want me to believe you. So why would you say it?"

What a hard question. I didn't hurry the answer.

"Well, I don't think you will believe me anyway." I stood on one foot and pretended to tap dance with the other.

"Try me" he said.

So I told him everything that happened, right down to peeing on my own foot.

"Believe me?" I asked.

"Well I probably wouldn't but the part about George finding the slate to put on the pot, and how you never really did it at all, that bit kind of convinced me that the rest must at least be part way true."

"Whole way true" I said almost angry, "I better go now, Mum and Dad are a bit funny about me being late at the moment."

"Can I look at the photos?" he asked.

"For that" I said, "you will have to ask George."

While I was pumping up my tyre in the bike shed I thought about what I'd just done. I'd told someone, an adult, the most unbelievable story, and he seemed to almost believe me. Which is amazing because grown-ups have such a hang up about being conned by a kid into believing

something that's not really true.

When I got home Tim told me how he'd been out looking for Skunk but hadn't found him, he told me that perhaps I should get used to just having Stink around, Skunk was probably gone for good. Like I didn't know that already. The whole afternoon I had Mouse follow me around pecking at my toes and cheeping till I could almost scream. So I took her outside and sat in the grass while she ran around fertilising it and chased flies. I thought about Angel and how she got to have a proper burial and how Skunk never would. I just hoped he was somewhere on earth and not stuck on a table getting anal probes. I remembered how his favourite thing to do is chase magpies and steal the neighbours cat food, and how good it is to stick your face into his fur and have him lick you, even if his breath smells like road kill. The whole thing was my fault, or his fault for eating all those iced buns, maybe it was the fault of the tree that made me fall off my bike and drop them, or me, for packing my bag too full, or Mum for having brought the iced buns, or for Mr Bier for starting off an experiment I could never really do without biking off into a place where aliens roam.

It was Saturday, a week since I'd got back from the Alone Spot Experiment. Mum and Dad had forgiven me, and I wasn't famous for it like I thought I would be. No one mentioned it because my Alone Spot was still a sore spot. It was a hot day, the sort that makes your brain cells sticky. I'd had all sorts of plans, but I ended up sitting in the hammock reading a book about snakes, I'd just got up to the part where it said a snake can open its mouth wide enough to swallow something three times the size of its own head, I figured that it would be the same as if we opened our mouth and swallowed a toilet seat. I looked up to see Shane biking up the street with a strange look stuck to his face, like he didn't know whether to be excited or scared. When he turned up our driveway I could see he was sweating. If you knew Shane like I know Shane, you'd know he never does anything harder than it needs to be done. If there's any sitting down to do, Shane will be the one doing it. So it wasn't ESP, I knew something pretty serious was up. He saw me, dropped the bike, staggered over

and stood there heaving like an asthmatic whale. He tried to speak but it came out a breathless splutter.

“Hi” I said very calmly, I didn’t even sit up. I had the feeling of really wanting to know something, but at the same time not really wanting to know at all.

Shane dropped into the shade of the tree and spluttered a bit more. I think one of the words was ‘wait’.

“Wanna drink?” I asked. He nodded and I went into the house for a glass of water. I even put in some ice. When I got back he was still red and sweaty, but the whale out of water was almost gone.

He slurped up the drink and said the one word guaranteed to get me going,

“Skunk.”

“You found him?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“What, only parts of him?”

“Kind of that too.”

“They chopped him up?” my voice started to go into a wail.

“Nah, nah, nah” he shook his head.

“He’s like the full thing, but ... well it’s a bit hard to explain. George reckons...” he stopped for a bit of a puff, “that you’d be better off just coming and seeing.”

“George reckons diddly-squat” I spat, “Is Skunk OK?”

“Yeah” he said, “He’s OK” but he sounded doubtful, and he added, “he’s changed.”

“He’s purple, he’s green?”

“No, nothing like that, you’ll see. Ya comin?”

I jumped on my bike, Stink must have known what was going on, he was milling around excited.

“Better that Stink stays here” Shane said.

“What are you on about? Stink and Skunk are ... Stink and Skunk.”

Shane shook his head, “Just trust me on this one.”

“I can’t stop him, if he comes, he comes.” And I shot off down the road. I could hear Shane grunting his way down the road behind me. It wasn’t until I was about three blocks away that I thought about how I hadn’t let Mum and Dad know where I was going. Well they’d just have to wait until I got back before they could kill me.

So Skunk was still in one piece, but changed. How could he change so much that having Stink around would be a problem? The more I thought about it the faster I biked, till I got so far ahead that I couldn’t see Shane anymore. I whizzed over the Memorial Bridge so fast I even left Stink behind. I felt a bit mean when I waited up for Stink, but not for Shane.

I know where George’s house is. It’s the colossal thing with the red roof. They even have a duck pond with a bridge over it. But instead of ducks they have swans, I suppose that makes it a swan pond... or a swan lake. A pond can’t become a lake just because it has swans in it, can it?

George must have seen me, because he came out from the side of his house, shushed me before I could speak and snuck me around the back and up to his shed, which is what he calls it. But it’s bigger and better than some people’s houses.

“You’ll have to tie up Stink.”

“I will not.”

“Oh come on Krissey, it’s only for a little while.”

I gave him one of my ‘not very impressed’ looks and we found a rope and I tied Stink to a tree. He was happy enough to collapse in a heap and fall asleep. I made George wait until I found some water for him to drink before I let him take me to where Skunk was.

“Don’t rush him OK, just wait for me to introduce you”, he whispered.

“What the ...” I hissed back at him. But he gave me a fierce look and turned to the door, which he knocked on politely before letting himself in. I followed wondering... Oh boy, wasn’t I wondering.

Humya

The shed was set up like a bedroom. There are microscopes and telescopes, posters of planets and even a computer sitting in the corner. There is a red couch on one side of the room and Skunk was sitting in it. He looked, ... just like Skunk, just like normal, not green, not blue, smaller than usual, but not shrunken down to the size of a coke can or anything. Just like he'd been a week without food.

"Where did you find him?"

George was strangely embarrassed.

"By the three rocks..."

"Skunk you must be starving." I started to walk toward him but George grabbed hold of me and held me back.

"You don't understand everything yet."

I looked back at Skunk and realised that while he'd seen me, and was watching, he wasn't wagging his tail and jumping all over me.

"Is he paralysed?"

"No... he..."

"Has he lost his memory?"

"No ... he..."

I evaded George's hand and walked over and put my hand on Skunk's head, soon as I did, I knew Skunk wasn't just Skunk any more.

I heard a voice in my ears, which is the usual way you get to hear things I suppose, but this wasn't like normal, it was like it started in my ears instead of ending there. It said,

"Quiet for a moment, noisy one."

I pulled my hand away from Skunk and walked slowly back to the door. George gave me one of his hard looks. He walked up to Skunk and held out his hand and gently laid it on Skunk's head.

"He said he's sorry about Skunk, and that you're not to worry, he's back at the ship...."

"But... what?" I said angrily.

"Skunk has been... temporarily removed from his body..." George began.

"He'll be going mad!" I said, feeling pretty mad myself.

"No," said George, "He's asleep, he won't know anything's happened."

"Good" I said, but I still wasn't sure, it felt very weird to be talking to an unSkunk Skunk.

"So... umm ... He looks like Skunk, smells like Skunk, but he's not Skunk, he's an alien right?"

"Yes" said George taking his hand off Skunk's head, well I presume it was Skunk's head, just not his insides or something.

"I'll tell you what I know."

He opened the door, turning back to Skunk to say respectfully,

"Sorry, I should have explained things to her *before* I let her in."

Skunk dipped his head regally. His big brown eyes were different too, they had no smile in them.

It made me goosebumpy just looking at him.

"Is he dangerous?" was the first thing I said. George gave me a scornful look.

"No, he's just a very intelligent life form."

"Who just happens to have invaded the body of my dog ... I don't believe any of this. When is a cane toad not a cane toad? When is my dog Skunk, not my dog Skunk.... when he's got an alien in him." I almost started to cry.

George grabbed me and sat me down under a Jacaranda tree behind the shed,

"I'll tell you everything, just sit down and shut up ... where's Shane?" He suddenly realised that his best friend hadn't turned up.

"He died of exhaustion somewhere along the way." I mumbled, squashing ants on my foot with my thumb and looking nervously at the shed, wondering just what it was George had in there.

Something horrible occurred to me and I turned slowly around to look deep into George's eyes.

"What?"

“They haven’t got you too have they?”

George rolled his eyes.

“Shut up.” And then he told me how it was he had Skunk the Alien dog in his shed.

George had convinced Shane to take another trip down to the three rocks to take soil samples from where the strange blob had emerged. But when they got there, they found Skunk lying in the stones, too exhausted to move. George had touched him and heard the strange voice in his ears. It had asked for water and something to eat. At first George thought that being in the alien space ship had given Skunk the ability to talk. But it was much more than that. They helped Skunk to drink some water and fed him two of Shane’s muesli bars. Skunk explained that where he was from there was no need for food or water and that he had ignored the dog’s hunger and thirst until Skunk’s body gave in.

“You reckon he’s an intelligent life form, huh!”

George shushed me and got back into his story. He was even more excited than when he saw the space ship. Even though he was trying to be really cool and scientific the kick out of having an alien in his shed couldn’t help but sneak around all his corners. I think he totally missed out on how pissed off I was about an alien having the cheek to take over my dogs body without at least asking first.

“Humya ... which is what he calls himself in his language, only it sounds lots different, but it’s the closest I can get to ...”

“Yeah, yeah come on, what’s he doing here?”

“Krissey, do you ever just shut up and listen?” but he didn’t wait for an answer, “Humya comes to earth because he has an interest in primitive worlds, he likes to study...”

“What? We’re primitive or the world is primitive?”

“Both, he doesn’t seem to think a lot of humans, he says humans are only interesting to other humans and that actually we’re rather simple life forms, that take ourselves very seriously.”

“Huh ... and you like this ... alien?”

“It’s got nothing to do with like or dislike.... Krissey, I don’t know why I waste my time with you. This is one of the most important things that has ever happened, not just to you and me but to the *world!*.”

He was probably right, so I sat back and listened.

It kind of went like this. This incredibly intelligent animal had got itself in trouble and needed a couple of young primitives from planet earth to look after it till it recovered. They’d brought him back here, not without a lot of effort, and had been spending several hours feeding him and taking care of him. According to the alien, in his world they don’t have bodies or brains which they have to feed and care for, they are like an energy that feeds off an energy source which radiates energy all the time. They kind of photosynthesis like plants do, but not from a sun. George got very technical here, like you expect him to, but this is what I figured he meant. That we, humans, are primitive life forms because we rely on brains and bodies and we spend most of our lives just eating, sleeping and cleaning ourselves. He made us sound like a bunch of sheep.

“But what is he doing here?”

“Well, you know how we have anthropologists, and geologists and palaeontologists?”

“I trust ya” I said nodding,

“Well he’s an alien that likes to visit other worlds and collect data on energy forms.”

“Like humans?”

“He isn’t very interested in humans. He said they were all the rave once upon a time, but they’re kind of passe’ now.”

“Passe’”

“You know, boring.”

“You believe him? You don’t reckon that this is some kind of ‘find out about us and then take over the planet thing’?”

“I don’t think so. All he’s interested in is staying alive long enough to get back to his space ship and go back to his planet.”

“Where’s that?”

George shook his head, “Don’t know.”

“You know if I hadn’t seen the alien space ship with my own eyes I’d say you’d rigged this all up to make me look like an idiot.”

“Why would I want you to look like an idiot?” he asked. I had a flash of the locker room scene where I made George look like an idiot by saying I hadn’t seen the space ship. I grimaced.

“I kind of deserve to after what I did to you...”

George interrupted, with ,“What telling everyone about ...”

“No,” I interrupted his interrupt, “About lying and saying I didn’t see the blob when I did.”

George said quietly, “I deserved it. I deliberately put you in a difficult situation and I’m sorry.” He stood up and I stood up. I gave him a big smile,

“Glad that one’s sorted out.”

“Yeah, and about being the one to blab.” added George.

“Yeah?” I said, starting to feel prickly all over again.

“Shane told me he was the one who did the blabbing.”

That made me grin even harder. Thank you Shane!

But George didn’t seem very interested any more he was looking back at the shed.

“The reason I brought you here, was I figured Skunk was your dog and well, you know, you were there too. I’m going to spend as much time as I can talking to him and finding out what I can. You can stay but you gotta promise to be quiet.”

“I’ll try...” though I didn’t think it was a polite way of getting to know a planet, taking over someone’s dog.

We saw Shane come around the corner, he was holding up his bike, or maybe his bike was holding up him, and he was staggering.

“We’re going inside to talk to Humya. When you’re up to it you can come in too.”

And we left Shane lying on his back in the grass panting. There’s something about Shane that always

makes me feel like I'm being just a little bit mean.

Mrs Worthington Proves Worthless

Going back into the shed felt weird. While George might be convinced that Humya wasn't about to try and make us all aliens, I wasn't. I sat down near the door and crossed my arms and legs, then uncrossed them, so that if I had to make a quick move I wouldn't have to untwist them all first.

"To talk to Humya you have to touch him" said George, moving carefully over to him, crouching down respectfully and placing a hand on his paw.

"I think I might just sit here and watch" I said. I still felt angry about some full-of-himself alien filling up my dog Skunk too.

George shrugged,

"Humya says it doesn't matter, he understands that you're frightened."

Humya wasn't looking at me, you could tell he didn't really care. He was the one who had said humans were boring. Which really got up this particular life form's nose. So I stalked over and sat beside Skunk, not down on the floor like George. I went to plonk my hand on his back, but ended up hesitating and giving myself away. But I forced my hand down till it rested there. I looked at my hand like it was going to go green or something. I was feeling green.

Nothing happened. I turned to George, waiting for him to laugh at me. Tell me it was a joke.

"So noisy one" the voice said, "you have decided to risk."

I gulped, nodded,

"So why are you sitting in the skin of my dog?" I asked him testily.

"I choose a body of an animal to inhabit during my stay on earth. I would look too conspicuous in my own."

"Conspicuous?" I tapped George on his knee,

"Obvious" he interpreted.

"Did it hurt Skunk?" I asked.

“He felt nothing, nor does he now.”

“Why did you choose *my* dog?”

“He was available. Usually I take dangerous or abhorrent animals, so that humans will not be tempted to interfere with them or touch them. Contact with humans is to be avoided.”

I was trying to get the words out and ask what would happen to Skunk, but George, who was looking anxious, cut in with,

“Tell us more about your world.”

Humya settled my dogs head on his paws, “Once, our world was not so different from your own, and we had forms not unlike your own. But we evolved.”

“Will we evolve too?” George asked.

“Possibly. Sometimes evolution comes too late. I have studied twelve other worlds like yours. There are only nine now.”

“What happened to the others.”

“They destroyed themselves.”

“Is that what will happen here?”

The alien was quiet too long.

“I know many things, but no one, no where, knows what has not yet happened.”

“Would your race help us?” George asked.

“It has been tried before” said Humya, “But one cannot help those who will not be helped. Now, we help no one.”

“What if we asked for help?”

“If we asked for help it would be after it’s too late anyway, right?” I said.

“The noisy one is right.” Said Humya.

“Noisy?” I blustered.

“I see things differently from yourself. While humans identify themselves by facial features or physical manifestation of the body I hear you more than I see you.”

“And I sound noisy?”

“You are many sounds, the sound of a mouth opening, a rude thought forming, the sound of a head on a pillow, the inhale between giggles.” I nodded, it sounded like me.

“And George?”

“He’s the sound of a page turning.”

“Shane? ... No don’t tell me, the sound bum muscles make just before they push out a fa...”

“Krissey!” George warned.

Humya continued, ignoring my latest rude thought noise. “Shane sounds like a lizard sunning itself on a warm rock.”

Just then Shane knocked on the door and came in as quietly as his lungs would let him. He knocked against a pile of books and they banged into the floor. He ignored it.

“Your Mum wants to know if you’d like her to bring out some food and stuff.”

“Tell her no.” George said.

Shane was disappointed, but he disappeared again.

When he came back he looked embarrassed instead,

“She said she will anyway, cos it’s been three hours since you last ate anything.”

“Oh geez, we’ll have to go in then, so she doesn’t come out.”

“Too late. She’s coming across the lawn now.” Shane said, watching through the window.

“Just act normal“, said George, looking hardest at me of course and grabbing a magazine on astronomy and pretended to be engrossed.

Mrs Worthington knocked on the door and Shane opened it, grinning too hard, so hard that she must have known something was up. Mrs Worthington is one of those ladies who looks like one of those people who don’t ever drop crumbs, or farts and she’s never not-got-to-the-tissue-in-time and sneezed on her elbow instead. She didn’t expect me to be there, because when she saw me sitting beside Skunk she kind of made a noise like “owww”, and her eyebrows jumped an inch. Then she

saw Skunk and her eyebrows came right back down.

“George, you know what I think of dogs.”

“Yes Mum. But this one is Krissey’s and...”

“Well, hello Krissey, but I’m sorry, definitely no dogs allowed.”

Then she did something that made us all make ‘owww’ noises of our own, she grabbed Skunk by the collar and dragged him out the door. He kind of clumped down the couple of stairs and lay there a moment before dragging himself up and giving Mrs Worthington a look that made me take a step or two back. I waited for her to burst into flames. But she didn’t, she walked back into the shed, handed a stunned George a glass of juice, smiled at Shane and backed out. Humya was still sitting watching her as she walked down the steps.

“I’ll come check on you later. You might need something else to drink by then.” She smiled and we all tried to smile back but we were all watching Humya to see what he would do. He did nothing.

George walked down the steps and sat on the bottom one.

“I’m very sorry about that” he said, touching Skunk’s ear. Humya must have said something because George laughed.

Shane and I came out too, feeling braver.

“What did he say?”

“Mum is the noise of water being poured into hot oil, the sound of a match striking in the middle of the Antarctic.”

We sat on the grass and pretended to pat Skunk, but he didn’t say much more. Humya said he was feeling very strange, and he thought perhaps Skunk’s body was tired. It wasn’t something he was used to, and he didn’t much like it. He called it ‘a diminishing of available energy.’ We told him he needed to sleep.

“I guess we better help you take care of Skunk’s body” I said kindly, ‘Seeing you’re too stupid to do it yourself” I grinned less kindly.

Humya curled up in the sun and slept. George asked us to keep an eye on Humya while he made an 'extensive review of Humya's conversation', and created a suitable list of questions to ask him when he woke.

Shane and I were OK with that. We talked about how weird it all was. I was worried that I might never get Skunk back, Shane was worried that the alien might decide to take us with him. I bet Shane was wondering if they have chocolate in space. I thought about thanking him for having the guts to blab about being the blabber, but decided not to. It didn't seem to matter anymore now that George knew.

Stink and Skunk reunite

We sat in the shade for a while, not speaking, but thinking. I couldn't seem to get over that the alien had sucked Skunk out of his own body, and didn't even seem to think it the least bit rude. I wonder what the rest of the world would think if we told them we had Humya. Unless Humya spoke to them they wouldn't believe us. I wonder if they x-rayed Skunk if they could see an alien stuck in there. I thought about James and how he thought he could make money out of a one-eyed cane toad, what could I make out of Skunk the alien dog? Lots of dollar signs and rows of zeros I reckon. Movie rights, books, TV interviews, famous, famous, famous. Of course so would Shane and George, but that was OK. Everyone at school would be soooooo jealous. All we had to do was...

"Shane?"

"Yep"

"What would happen if we told someone?"

"Like who?"

"Like one of George's government officials."

Shane was very quiet, he looked at me sideways.

"Well, I don't think they'd believe us."

“What say we managed to make them believe us?”

“Then they’d take Humya *and* Skunk and we wouldn’t see them again.”

“Oh” I hadn’t thought of that. “What say they managed to get Humya out of Skunk and I don’t know, stick him in a special jar.”

“Why would you want that to happen?”

“You never know, there might be some special reward for catching an alien.”

“Well if it’s anything like on TV we’d probably disappear too. You know, make sure to keep the whole thing quiet while they performed hideous experiments on Humya. He’d never get home.”

“He’s not like ET you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well he’s not exactly cute is he.”

“And are cute things the only things worth saving?” Shane kicked his heel into the dirt and gave me a dirty look.

“We could make a lot of money out of it.”

His look got dirtier and I guessed it was time to shut up. Even so I still added,

“Everyone at school will think you are so cool.”

“Never really wanted to be cool anyway.” Shane muttered and got up and walked away. I gave up on the idea of making money out of Humya. But only because I’d lose any chance of getting Skunk back.

I decided to go see how Stink was getting on. I’d forgotten about dogs and their noses and how they can smell a sparrow’s fart at a thousand paces. Poor old Stink was whining away and sitting at the very end of his rope, as close as he could to the shed. Obviously Skunk still smelt just like Skunk. I tried to tell him to forget about Skunk until we’d managed to remove an alien out of him. But he didn’t really get it.

When Humya woke we were sitting there looking at him. George was first to touch him, I was second and caught the part about getting back to the three rocks. Shane probably only got to hear 'three rocks', but he knew what it meant.

"Oh no" he said. We have to go back now?"

"My ship will be back tonight. I must be there."

"Will Skunk be able to come back?" I asked.

"He will."

"It might seem like a stupid question to ask..." I began but George cut me off,

"Well don't ask it then."

"It is fine, noisy one, you can ask me whether I intend to let you live or not, and whether I will make ... boy butter ... of you all."

"Of them" I pointed at Shane and George.

"We do not need food. Humans would be of no use to us. If you help me to the ship I will reward you each with a gift."

It sounded suspicious to me, like baiting a hook for a few dumb fish.

But George was nodding, and when Shane went to ask what kind of gift, George elbowed him.

The three rocks wasn't that far away. But even a shrunk Skunk was a heavy weight. While Humya sat in the sun George had us making a stretcher. We ended up modifying an old tent till we could sit Humya on it. It had to be narrow enough for the path to the three rocks. Shane didn't look too impressed. He asked me if I thought we should ask for our gift now. But I told him I didn't think it was such a good idea.

We had to muck around pretending to not be doing what we were so that Mrs Worthington wouldn't make a fuss. Meeting Mrs Worthington made me realise how brave George had been in going down to Black Bottom Creek in the first place.

George was telling me what a bad job I was doing of tying knots in our makeshift stretcher when I saw a pale streak zip past. My knot tying really is bad, even I have to admit that, especially seeing as Stink is jumping all over Skunk the Alien dog, because, as usual my knots on his rope have loosened and come undone. It happened so fast that there wasn't much anyone could do. Stink was slobbering over Skunk and making weird happy noises at the back of his throat. We stood there, like the dumb sheep that Humya thought we all were. Skunk looked like he was a clean freak, like Mrs Worthington, and Stink was a two week old snotty hanky. Stink bumped against him almost knocking him over.

"Stink!" I yelled. But he was just too overcome with joy at finding his lost buddy that he didn't notice.

Then he did. Stink suddenly dropped to the ground looking frightened and puzzled, next he lifted up the slobbery sides of his jaw into a snarl, and leapt away into the trees and was gone. Just my luck, I've almost got one dog back, now I go lose another. Poor old Stink. I glared at Humya and turned back to my hopelessly tangled knots.

"Come on, let's get this superior being back to his superior mates so he can RACK off."

George shoved me out of the way and started working on my latest bungle of rope. He didn't even look at me, he was as angry as I was, just for different reasons.

The Triacular Pull

Mrs Worthington came back not long after with a silver tray of biscuits and a thermos of tea.

"Don't give any to that dog" she said, "He's your dog is he Krissey?"

"Yes, he is, sort of, or most of him anyway." I agreed, looking at the dainty teacups she had brought out for us to drink from and wondering what planet she came from too.

"Well he sort of smells, well most of him anyway" she laughed at her own joke. Which isn't to say I don't laugh at mine either, but I usually wait for everyone else to start before me.

“What are you making?” she asked us all.

“It’s for a school project” said Shane.

Quick thinking I thought.

“What’s the project?” she asked.

“Uhh” said Shane not quite so quickly.

“We’re experimenting with the negative triacular pull of a vermifuge chain reaction exerted on a static object,” said George.

“Oh” she said, “It’s not dangerous then?”

“Oh no, of course not. Not using any explosives or anything, just observing natural phenomena in controlled conditions.”

“Oh good.” She smiled at us all and backed away, calling over her shoulder, “you really must wash that dog Krissey. I can smell him inside.”

Ten minutes later just as we were about to leave it turned out the reason she could smell dog inside was because Stink was in there hiding under a bed. Mrs Worthington made me go in and drag him out. She was vacuuming the spot where he had been and squirting pleasantly fragranced poison in a can even before we were out of the room.

George insisted on being the one to tie him up this time. I shrugged my shoulders. I didn’t care,

“So what’s a triacular pull anyway?”

George shrugged, “no such word.”

“Verma....whatever?”

“Oh, vermifuge, it’s a substance that expels intestinal worms. Sounded good though huh.”

I grinned. It must be good knowing big words, or being able to make them up on the spot. I practised making a few of my own.

“Serinthenia, melandoxy, momoxatism, genophism”

Even George grinned, “Sound good. Pity they don’t mean anything.”

George sat Humya in front of his computer and brought up his astrology program and a map of the universe as we knew it. George wanted to find out where Humya came from. Humya made a funny hissy noise, later on we figured that was him laughing. He said, we would need at least five more computer screens to get even close. His planets name was 'Tiramoose', or that's what it sounded like in Humya's sound language. He told us that it was very strange to him to have to relate to a computer with your fingers, that you didn't just plug it into your mind. We thought that idea was really cool and asked him heaps of questions, but he didn't seem very interested in answering them. Instead he was keen to get moving down to Black Bottom Creek.

When Humya walked, his rear end (or Skunk's) kept drooping sideways and dropping the rest of him to the ground. He said he was having mind/body control problems. I said it was because Skunk's body had 'a mind of its own'. Which I thought was very funny, but after how Mrs Worthington sounded laughing at her own funny I thought I'd shut up about mine.

We slogged for that Alien. I mean we really sweated. By the time we hauled Skunk's meaty bum back down there Shane was complaining that he didn't have spit left. If Humya was taking notes to add to the observations on humans I bet I brought the human race down a few pegs. I argued, I swore, I spat, I acted primitive. While George, who was trying to make the human race look good, was having a hard time explaining things. Humya was never really interested though. We didn't communicate most of the way because it's hard to haul on the end of a pole or two and talk. But I was thinking enough for ten conversations. I had that evil kind of feeling that something was about to go very wrong, that soon George, Shane and I would be taking an unscheduled trip to outer space. I thought about leaving scraps of cloth hanging from bushes so they could trace us, but there wouldn't be much tracing to do once we left the sublunary sphere (that's George talk for planet earth).

We passed the place where Skunk had eaten my iced buns and I managed to tell them that it wasn't much further now. It was even starting to get dark, which was about when I realised that before Mum and Dad killed me, they'd probably torture me for hours. Torture sounded like it was on the menu. Remembering that aliens have a peculiar tendency to use anal probes. We might not make good boy butter, but we had to be good for something, space slaves, or flattened and rolled out very thin for extra-soft alien toilet tissue. ET might have been the ugliest lump of latex ever seen, but at least he was a friendly one. Humya, well with Humya it was like walking into a really flash shoe shop with bare feet and asking the woman behind the counter if she sells thongs. He just gives you that same kind of, not-good-enough-feeling. As it was Humya was standing in someone else's shoes anyway.

I wondered if they would give Skunk back the same way he came? Maybe Humya was lying and they wouldn't give him back at all. The idea that we would get a gift, sounded like it might be another alien stuck inside our bodies, and we would be trapped in there with them while they used us. Or worse, they'd extract us from our own bodies and drape our souls over a clothes hanger and store us in a cupboard for years.

I was getting pretty fired up about the whole thing, and there was George like a bloody explorer in a lion infested jungle, a big grin on his face and a water pistol in his hand.

At school I was one of the fastest runners. I wondered if I was fast enough to out run a bunch of aliens and their space ship. Then I got to wondering if I should try and warn George and Shane, if we should have a plan should things go wrong. Humya was staring at me. The look in his, or should I say Skunk's eyes gave me the shudders.

The Three Rocks

Humya told us we should wait till the space ship arrived so we could collect Skunk. George said he wouldn't miss it for the world, I was busy looking around for big rocks or hunks of wood to use to beat off the aliens. It made me think about how primitive I would look trying to concuss an alien with a rock while he killed me off with his laser beam. Really when you think about it we are primitive. If everyone disappeared tomorrow and there was only me, no houses, no turning on a tap to get water, no rows of shopping aisles filled with food, where would I be? Sitting in a cave rubbing two sticks together with incredibly greasy hair. Even though we've come so far it's all down to sticks and stones. When someone shoots a kangaroo it's still with a stick, just the long range kind.

Shane and George were settling down beside the stretcher and rubbing the blood back into their hands.

"While we wait I have a few more questions to ask. May I?" George asked.

"You may have three."

I wondered why it is that things always go in three's, how there are always three magic wishes, three lots of bad luck, three evil step sisters. I almost asked Humya if three was such an awesome number in his planet. I looked up at the sky trying to catch the first glow of a waxy alien ship. Maybe then would be the best time to run.

George took out his sheet of prepared questions, he skimmed through them and seemed confused about which to ask. I snatched the paper from him and read them too, while I did George asked,

"Are there any other life forms out there that mean our planet harm?"

"None that we know of. In some ways that's because of what you have done with it."

George nodded as though satisfied, but it made me find two hundred more. What did he mean, 'because of what we have done to it? Planet Earth is just fine.

"Do you come here, to the three rocks often? Will you come again?" Shane was asking.

“That is two questions but I’ll treat it as one. We have been here many times, but no, this will be the last time we come here. I expect you will talk to others of this matter. No one will believe you. But, to be careful, we will not come again.”

George opened his mouth to speak, but I plonked my hand over it and read out one of the questions on the paper.

“In your world, because there is no need for food and physical necessities” I stumbled over the necessities part, “because things are so very different in your world, is there peace?”

Humya was very quiet. We settled our hands deep into Skunks fur. His eyes were closed.

“The ship is coming,” Humya said, “I can feel it.”

When he opened his eyes he looked at the three of us and said something in a strange language, but it was more of a strange noise than a language, kind of like water running over rocks but with small bells in it, maybe a whisper of grass in the wind.

“Yes,” he said, “we do have peace. But perhaps more important than having peace, is always trying to get to that place.”

We sat there very quietly, even I felt the quiet and listened to it. If they had peace in their planet, then they probably didn’t want to make war on other planets. But then I thought that maybe because they had peace on their planet it was because they had their wars elsewhere, like on other planets, even old, worn out, no-good-to-anybody, broken- strapped shoe planets like ours.

“Perhaps you would like your gift now?” he asked.

I looked back at the trail and wondered if I should start running now.

Shane nodded, “Oh yes please.”

Humya stood and walked toward Shane. I figured I should wait around just long enough to see if he was converted into butter or not. I watched with my heart, stomach, liver and lungs in my throat. I know it makes no sense but I saw a strange humming and heard a yellow noise and Shane was a

little astonished. But he said nothing, and he didn't seem to be in pain. When he looked around he seemed pretty much Shane-like, he didn't look scared and he didn't look like he had an alien stuck in him or an anal probe. Then Humya walked to George and I could see a strange chiming and I heard a blue noise. George, too, seemed surprised, and then Humya was coming toward me. Somehow I'd stood still too long, and it was too late.

Humya stopped for a moment, he looked at me almost sadly, he nudged my hand and I heard him say,

"Being scared makes a lot of noise. What I'm giving you, you don't need to be afraid of", and I saw the sound of waves dragging stones from a rocky beach and heard a deep rose colour and I felt, I felt something settle in me, something small, something unreachable, something new. Then it ended and Humya was stepping past us all, heading for the three rocks. I thought he wouldn't look back, but he stopped, turned ever so briefly to one side and said loud in our ears,

"When the time comes, your gifts will reveal themselves."

Past him we could see the strange moving colour that was his ship in a sky not yet completely dark. Coming fast, coming close. We stepped back into the trees and watched. Just as before the waxy blob hovered over the three glowing rocks. We could see Humya standing in the middle. Waiting. Just like before the rocks glowed brighter and brighter, that strange pressure on our ears, and Humya was gently lifted up till he merged with the ship. He didn't look back down at us, he didn't hear Shane calling goodbye. I watched where Humya had gone in and waited. It was the kind of waiting that is measured in milliseconds, the ones where every millisecond fats itself up and bulges. Nothing happened in any of them, the ship just hovered there and millisecond after millisecond passed. Was Skunk ever coming out? I could see those strange moving shapes inside the ship, nothing that looked human, and nothing that looked dog. It was a whole mega-minute before a squirming Skunk began his descent. He yelped and barked and whined just like I would expect him

too. I couldn't help but grin. He disappeared into the rocks, and, thinner now, he was able to take a lunge for the gap and slip through. The ground rumbled, the rocks shook and came loose from the ground. It shook me like a rag doll and I fell to the ground, I tasted grass in my mouth and dirt on my tongue. The rocks began to spin and as they spun they grew smaller and as they spun they moved faster and faster, then they dropped to the ground. By that time the ship was gone.

George, Shane and I stood and stared at the space where it had been.

"I forgot to ask if we have the same energy here as they do in their world" said George.

"It doesn't matter" I said, dropping to my knees to give Skunk a big, fat, doggy kiss and to get lots of doggy kisses back. I was so pleased to see him that I almost missed the look on George's face. It was over, the aliens wouldn't be back.

"Well, like you said George, now we know we are not alone" Shane gave him a comforting grin.

"What does your gift feel like?" I asked.

"Like it's stuck somewhere..." George's hand fluttered past his head, over his heart, over his left arm..."here." Still not settling anywhere in particular.

"Feels the same way to me."

"Wonder what it means, and what it is."

"I reckon sometime soon we'll find out", said Shane,

I didn't feel like whatever it was was a bad thing. I didn't think that tomorrow morning I would wake up with horns or anything. I felt just like me, and that whatever it was that was in me was a good thing. A waiting thing, something to look forward to, something that would be mine and not like a germ that wanted to infect the world or anything. All my horrible fears were gone, maybe it had something to do with having Skunk back, Skunk the doggy dog.

"Anyone bring a torch?" Shane asked.

We shook our heads and saw how fast the dark was in getting here. None of us felt like blundering around in it.

We all agreed to dump the tent-stretcher and to make a run for it. George took the three stones and shoved them in his pocket. We ran till we got to the bridge and stopped under a street light. Because Skunk was tired and I had further to go than they did, I suggested they take Skunk with them, Stink was still back at George's anyway. I'd come back for them and my bike in the morning. I didn't really like doing it but I couldn't see myself carrying Skunk home.

That was fine by them. George looked at me very seriously.

"Are you going to say anything about what happened?"

"Not unless you say I can."

"You can if you want."

"Thanks. You going to write your report to the government?"

"It's my duty" George said, and this time I didn't laugh.

"Yeah, well if you need any help..." I trailed off.

"I'll ask" George said.

The three of us stood there looking at each other. We each knew more than anyone on earth about life beyond it. We even had the gift of Humya in us, even if we didn't know exactly what that was. It was the kind of thing that makes friends of people, not just at-school friends, but friends forever kind of friends. It felt good, standing there under the bridge light, puffing and looking at the two of them, standing there, puffing too.

"Thank you" I said.

They didn't ask what I meant, they nodded at me, I knew that they understood. They said thank you too, and walked off. I yelled out after them,

"You'll let me know if you get your gift won't you?"

"Course we will, you'll tell us too won't you?" Shane yelled back.

"Sure thing. You'll be the first to know... oh and Shane?"

"Yeah?"

"I wouldn't have sold Humya off. I was just kidding you."

"Oh good. I didn't think you'd be that much of a nong head."

It felt good to know that Shane didn't think I'd be a nong head. It felt good to be walking away from them, knowing that next time I saw them that I'd just walk right up and fit right in. That next time I went to school I was just going to sit down beside them, and not wonder if it was OK to. It just would be. I ran the rest of the way home. I didn't stop till I saw our house and I slowed down as soon as I saw James sitting on the front verandah.

"You're dead."

He said not even looking up from his book.

Broken Spaghetti

I didn't get to go and pick up Stink and Skunk in the morning, Dad did. I was too busy cleaning the fridge for Mum and scrubbing the bath out to make up for disappearing without letting them know where I was disappearing to. But that was OK. I don't think Mum could understand why I kept smiling at her, and asking how else I help.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Oh nothing, I just realised that it's the making of peace that is as important as the peace itself."

That kind of stumped her,

"Learn that at school did you?"

"Kind of."

I gave her a big hard hug and promised I'd change poeey nappies forever for her. It's the only thing I could think of she would really appreciate.

"If I had ten cents for every nappy I've changed..." she said.

"You'd be a rich woman" I laughed.

I played with Tanya and Tamara. I showed them how if you stuck a piece of uncooked spaghetti

down a macaroni elbow and pushed it hard how it fired little bits of broken spaghetti out the other end. Bryan said I shouldn't teach them how to make guns. I reminded him that he had shot James with a book when he was little and that guns could be made out of anything. Tamara kept eating all the broken bits. Which wouldn't have been so bad except she kept trying to peck with her mouth like Mouse does with her beak and she ended smacking her head so hard into the floor she made her nose bleed. So I cleaned her and the spaghetti up and read them a story instead.

Twice I had to rescue Chicken because Vanilla had him cornered under the couch. I could hear Dad yelling outside because Skunk had found a bucket and chewed a hole in the bottom. Lachlan was arguing upstairs about how James had knicked his packet of Lifesavers. I didn't bother telling them that it was me who ate them, and if he intended to leave lollies lying around in a house full of people then he'd just have to wear losing them, same as I'd had to wear a whole box of chocolates once. I'm not trying to say that I actually wore a disappearing box of chocolates either.

That night I sat in my bed and wrote under my heading

ADVANTAGES OF A BIG FAMILY,

More of them to love.

I guess that means things have changed and I've learnt something, still don't know how to put what I've learnt into words, I guess being that bit changed is enough. If it wasn't for the Alone Spot Experiment, it's stuff I might never have figured out. I know that I have two new friends and a great family and that while being alone is OK, I never have to be if I don't want to.

When I got back to school the only person I told about Humya was Mr Bier. It got kind of confusing trying to explain so much, so he suggested I write it down, and that's what I've done. He said that if someone takes it seriously enough they might even publish it. I guess if you're sitting here and

reading it, then I guess somebody has.