

*Dear reader*

*I sometimes wonder how my heroes and heroines have turned into the sort of person who steps out on to my pages.*

*This time I've indulged my curiosity and explored Meriel's and Ben's childhoods. Then I've watched them as adults pursuing their dreams.*

*I hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it.*

*Anna*

# ***1***

## ***Meriel the Child***

Nine-year-old Meriel Ingram walked home from school, shoulders hunched against the rain, backpack bobbing against her shoulders. She slowed down as she got towards the house. Once she went inside, she'd be trapped indoors because her mother never let her play out in the rain. It wasn't fair.

The Ingrams had one of the two best houses in the long terrace, with three bedrooms instead of two. The smaller bedrooms were built over the arched passageway which led through the middle of the row to the narrow lane between the back yards at the rear. It was wide enough for a horse and cart to pass through and Grandpop said in the old days coal had been delivered that way.

With a sigh she opened the front door calling, 'I'm back, Mum!' and went through to the kitchen at the rear.

Her mother greeted her with, 'Just look at you! Covered in mud again. Where do you find it? Get those socks off this minute and I'll put them to soak.'

Meriel removed the socks and trailed up to her bedroom, lingering by the window to stare down at the row of small oblong yards to the rear. Theirs was completely covered in black tarmac, which she hated. The next door neighbours had made a little garden with all sorts of flowers, but her mother said a garden would make the yard untidy and get in the way of her washing.

But the flowers were so much prettier!

When her father got back, her mother had the food on the table within minutes. As they began to eat, she announced, 'Mrs Perley next door's got herself a job. It's not right, mothers working. I'd never let my children come home to an empty house.'

Dad murmured something and concentrated on his food.

Meriel looked at him. Grey. He was nearly all grey: hair, pullover, trousers. Today the teacher had been talking about what jobs their fathers did. Boring jobs, all of them. Hers worked at the Town Hall as a clerk. She was going to do something more interesting than that when she grew up: become an artist, or an astronaut, or a pop singer. Not work in an office, whatever her mother said.

The thing she kept coming back to was being an artist and painting pretty pictures for people to put on their walls. Her favourite Christmas present had been a big box of paints. She loved mixing new colours and trying to make her pictures look real. Art lessons were the highlight of the school week, as far as she was concerned.

After tea she dried the dishes then got out her paints.

'That's the only thing you're tidy about,' her mother grumbled. 'Did you put your clean clothes away? Are you *blind*? They were sitting on the bed. You couldn't miss them.'

'Sorry, Mum.'

'You're not fiddling with those paints till you've gone upstairs and put your clothes away. You'd live in a pigsty if I let you!'

With a sigh Meriel did as she was told.

When she went downstairs again, her father was sitting reading his newspaper, which he did every evening unless it was fine enough to go out for a walk. Her mother was knitting and watching a favourite TV programme. Her sister was doing homework,

sneaking glances at the television.

Meriel had no homework tonight, so for an hour or so she was free to let her imagination roam. Bliss.

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When Meriel was twelve her father suggested getting a computer. 'It's about time our girls learned to use one.'

Denise pulled a sour face. 'They're expensive.'

'They're the coming thing. We want to give our girls a good start, don't we?'

'Where are you going to put it?'

'We hardly ever use the front room, so a computer wouldn't be in the way there. I thought we could put it in the back corner.'

Meriel held her breath. She was learning how to use computers at school, but you didn't get a turn very often and she desperately wanted one at home.

Denise got up and walked into the front room. 'It'd mean getting rid of Auntie Janie's table.'

'Well, we only use that for standing ornaments on.'

'Those are my great-grandma's ornaments. I care a lot about them. No. There just isn't room.'

'Then we could put it in a corner of the bedroom,' her father suggested.

'What, and spoil the look of my new bedroom suite!'

For once Frank tried hard to get his way and quarrels raged through the house, but Denise won, as she always did.

Wanting to help, Meriel suggested they put the computer in her bedroom. 'I wouldn't mind, Mum, and—'

'Don't you start. I'm not having one of those horrible things in the house and that's

that.'

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That same year Meriel's Grandpop retired and bought a little house in the next street with the money from his endowment policy, which had matured after forty years of payments.

His move across town meant he could see more of his only daughter and her family, but Meriel knew she was his favourite. Well, he was her favourite person, too.

From then onwards she was able to escape from her mother more easily. Grandpop had a workshop in the cellar and he let her help him with his woodwork. She loved making things.

Her grandmother was a quiet woman, very house proud like her daughter, except for Grandpop's cellar workshop, where no one was allowed without his permission. Not that it was messy. He wouldn't have stood for that. A place for everything and everything in its place, he always said.

Mum went out shopping with Grandma sometimes, or they sat gossiping together, drinking tea and eating biscuits.

Dad took up walking to get fit and spent even less time at home.

No one seemed to mind what Meriel did as long as she was safe with Grandpop.

And *he* was thinking of getting a computer.

'I'd have to go to classes first and learn how to use one, mind. I'm not having anything in this house that I don't understand.'

'I know how to use one. We have them at school.'

He smiled down at her. 'Then you'll be able to help me. Once I've got the house shipshape I'll look into it.'

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The town's campaign of beautification of the older suburbs spread to Meriel's area. Cul-de-sacs were created in some streets, with strips of garden at the blocked-off ends, though the trees and bushes planted there by the council always seemed to be struggling to survive.

Meriel was in the thick of this mania for revitalisation because Grandpop had got a grant to modernise his home, which had a narrow downstairs bathroom, very old-fashioned, in a lean-to.

A builder created a tiny new bathroom over the stairwell, then a plumber installed the bathroom fittings, but after that Grandpop turned to Meriel. 'How about you help me tile the walls and paint the woodwork?'

He had to coax Denise to allow her daughter to participate in such mucky activities, and buy his granddaughter some special overalls to protect her clothes, but Grandpop was one of the few people who could make her mother change her mind.

By the time the work was finished, Meriel could use all the tools that had been too big for her before. Afterwards she made her first solo piece, a bookshelf to stand on the chest of drawers in her bedroom.

Her mother pulled a face. 'It's crooked and I don't know why you didn't paint it white instead of polishing up the bare wood like that.'

'It's not crooked. The grain tricks your eye. See how the lines flow and curls.' She traced them with a fingertip.

'It's old-fashioned, plain wood is, but it's too late to change it now you've put the varnish on. Still, it'll keep your books tidy, at least.'

Her dad said, 'It's lovely. You're a clever lass. I like the wood better, too.'

But he said that quietly, after a glance over his shoulder. Her Dad spent a lot of time avoiding his wife these days, which was beginning to worry Meriel. A classmate's

parents had just split up and were getting a divorce. He had to spend alternate weeks with each of them, which he hated.

Surely her parents wouldn't divorce? She lay awake worrying about that sometimes, wishing her mother would be kinder to her father, and go out and have fun like other mothers did, instead of fussing about the house all the time. Her mother was stuck in an old-fashioned rut. Even Grandpop was more with it than his daughter.

Meriel wasn't going to be like her when she grew up.

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'It's unnatural for a teenage girl to hang around with an old man like that,' her mother grumbled as she grew older. 'Why don't you go out to the cinema with your friends, our Meriel?'

'I don't want to.' She didn't want to spend the money, either, because she needed all her spending money for extra art materials.

'Well, what about joining a youth club, then?'

'Youth clubs are for people who have nothing better to do,' Meriel explained—reasonably, she thought. 'I've got plenty to do.'

'You should have grown out of all that painting and drawing rubbish by now. It's for little children not teenagers. A girl as pretty as you should have a boyfriend, but you don't make the most of yourself. Lovely blond hair like that and you scrag it back with a rubber band.'

But Meriel paid less and less attention to her mother because the art teacher was giving her extra lessons after school and talking about the possibility of her studying art at college.

She hadn't told her mother about that yet, though. Her mother had a way of destroying dreams, smashing the glowing rainbow hopes into dull shards of

disappointment.

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When Ben Elless was seven his father died suddenly of a heart attack and his mother moved from Perth to the country. York was very small, like most country towns in Western Australia, dusty in summer, greener in winter, surrounded by low hills. His uncle Johnny lived there and had invited them to go and live with him, which his mother said would be cheaper till they'd sorted themselves out. Johnny said he could get her a job because he knew everyone in town.

'I miss my father,' Ben confided in his uncle one day.

'We all do, lad. But there's no way of bringing him back so we have to carry on without him.'

'Mum cries at night when she thinks I can't hear. I don't like her crying.'

'She'll get over that gradually. She's a strong woman. Now, no use moping. How about I take you out walking on my block and show you the little flowers that hide away, and the little animals too? I've left the bush untouched so they can still have a home.'

'I'd like that.'

'You need to wear shoes, not sandals, and sturdy jeans. I don't want you getting bitten by a snake, or spider, or picking up a tick.'

Once he'd got to know the block of land, Ben was allowed to roam through the bush on his own. He was so interested in the plants, he got books out of the library, thick ones which listed every single plant, with photos or drawings of each stage of their development.

His uncle bought him a big botany book for Christmas and his other presents lay ignored as he sat on the veranda studying the pictures.

After the meal was over, his mother came and sat with him. 'You seem to love plants, Ben.'

'Yes, I do. Look how beautiful that flower is.'

'Perhaps you'd like to help me start a garden here, once the hot weather is over? We could grow vegetables and herbs. I'm missing my garden.'

They worked together on that and he learned more about the tamer plants, proving that he'd inherited his mother's green fingers.

But it was the wild plants he loved most, especially the tiny orchids, so many types that he lost count. The bright yellow Hibbertia was so cheerful he always lingered to smile at it and there was something about the intense blue of the leschenaultia that made his breath catch in his throat.

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When he was eleven, his mother met a new guy. Ben was cool with that because Tom was fun to be with and made his mother happy. His uncle had explained this was likely to happen when a woman was as pretty as Louise. It didn't mean she'd forgotten his father, only that she enjoyed being married.

One day his mother came out to join him in the garden. 'Tom's asked me to marry him.'

'Me and Uncle Johnny thought he would.'

'The trouble is, Tom's been transferred to Queensland so we'll all have to move over there.'

'Uncle Johnny too?'

'No. Your uncle likes it here. He'll never leave York. But we can come back and visit him.'

'But Uncle Johnny will be on his own.'

'You can visit him in the summer holidays.'

'I suppose.'

'And you'll be able to learn about a whole new set of plants and animals.'

It was no consolation as Ben had begun to share his uncle's love of the area round York. It took him a while to settle down again because they lived in the suburbs of Brisbane and he missed the country. He spent a lot of time outside in the garden and in the end he took over because Tom wasn't interested in gardening, even if he'd had time for it. His Mum said Tom was a workaholic and sighed.

With her encouragement, Ben remodelled the garden completely, making some quite big changes to the layout. It looked far better when he'd finished.

As he said to his uncle on one of his visits to York, there was usually something interesting to do in a garden.

Johnny grinned at him. 'I think you were born with a happy soul, Ben Elless.'

'What does that mean?'

'You're always cheerful. That's good. I'm a bit that way myself. I think you take after the Elless side of the family physically too. You're going to be tall like me and your father.'

Ben grimaced and looked down. 'With big feet.'

'All the better to stand on.'