

Better Homes and Gardens

By Catherine Moffat

Dad doesn't hang about the school gate like the other parents. He parks around the corner just up from the lollipop lady. I hold tight to Grace's hand as Mrs Vargas hurries us across the road. It's my job to see she's safe.

5 When we get to the other side of the road Grace drops her school bag on the ground, pulls away from me and takes off running. Dad's always there, leaning against the car. He picks Grace up and throws her into the air. When I jog up behind carrying both bags he runs his hand through my hair. 'Giddy mate,' he says.

Every day after school Dad takes us straight to the beach. We change into our swimmers in the car and Dad shakes the creases out of our school uniforms and hangs them up next to his shirts on the coat-hangers suspended above the back seat window.

10 If it's warm, we play on the beach building sand-castles and stuff with Grace. But the days are getting shorter now and sometimes the wind whips up the sand and it stings our calves. If it's windy Dad makes us run up and down the beach 'getting the wiggles out', and when we're warm enough we dive in.

15 After a swim, we do some more beach runs and then into the showers. Only one of the showers works properly so we have to take turns. We push the button and jump under the water and try to wash before the hot water runs out. Dad showed us how to rub sand on our body instead of soap to get the dirt off. 'Lots of women pay big money at the day spa for a salt scrub,' he says. 'Here we can get it for free.'

20 I sit under the light on the bench in the change room and start my homework while Dad and Grace shower. Grace is getting too old for the Men's but Dad doesn't like her going into the Women's toilet by herself. While Grace is drying off Dad goes through times tables and spelling with her. We get into our tracksuits and dry our hair under the hand blowers and then Dad asks us where we want to go for dinner. The only rule is we never go to the same place two nights in a row. My favourite is pizza because when we have the deal with the large Supreme and the garlic bread even Dad reckons his stomach aches because it's so full, but Grace says McDonald's every time because of the Happy Meals. Dad likes fish and chips or KFC. Sometimes he makes us have pasta and salad and some nights we cook sausages on the electric barbeque in the park. Grace plays on the monkey bars while I help Dad. I watch the moths flit around the electric lights above us and when the sausages are cooked we have to eat them really fast before the fat and tomato sauce drips through the white bread onto our fingers.

30 After dinner Dad makes us go to the toilet and clean our teeth in the park toilets and then we drive around for a bit. We stop the car and Dad puts Grace to sleep in the back seat and then we sit and listen to the radio for a while and then it's my turn to go to bed. Before I do, I have to get the bucket out of the boot. I hate the bucket. It doesn't matter how much you wash it out it still stinks. Dad says we have to have it just in case.

'Nobody likes you pissing in their front garden, mate. If you do, it's sure to get noticed.'

Getting noticed is something we try to avoid.

35 I sleep head to tail with Grace in the back seat. She reckons my feet smell.

'Not as much as yours,' I tell her. I tickle the soles of her feet and she giggles. I wrap the blanket around my feet but it's hard to keep them covered all night, and in the morning they're usually sticking out.

40 Dad sleeps in the front seat sitting up, wrapped in a sleeping bag. He got laid off from work because he had a bad back and some mornings he can hardly straighten up for about twenty minutes. He walks around with his hands down near his knees and groans and tries to stretch.

Dad always waits until it's late at night to take us to where we'll stay. Just like with the food, we never park in the same place twice and Dad always makes sure he wakes up and drives us somewhere else before it's light.

45 'If the cops ever come,' he tells us, 'we're on our way to visit your grandparents in Queensland and I pulled over for a sleep when I got tired.'

After dinner on Friday, Dad asks, 'Who wants to watch some television?' and then we head off to the Mr Clean laundromat on Wattle Street to wash our clothes.

50 Most Fridays *Better Homes and Gardens* is on the telly. We've each got a favourite. Mine is Fast Eddie. I want to be a chef when I grow up. Dad likes Johanna Griggs. He reckons she's a big sassy blonde like our Mum was.

'Go for the big girls, mate, especially if you're chasing a blonde,' he says. 'Skinny girls are always watching their weight and it makes them as crazy as a sack full of shaved monkeys.'

Grace's favourite is Doctor Harry. Every week she asks Dad if she can have whatever animal Harry has been visiting. One time it's a duck, the next a dog or a miniature pig.

55 'Sure you can, Princess,' Dad says. 'Just as soon as we get our own home.'

Grace likes the woman who does the room renovations, too, but Dad isn't so sure. 'She's always messing about covering things with sequins and ribbons and stuff.'

60 Saturdays if the weather's no good, we go to the library. You can't borrow books unless you can prove where you live, but they don't mind you sitting and reading. One of the librarians lets me use the computer even though I don't have a library card. Dad reads the papers while Gracie sits and looks at the picture books and plays with the toys.

65 Dad likes to pick up a book from their throw-out box when we leave. He reads it during the week and then gives it to Uncle when we visit on Sunday. Uncle's not really our uncle. Dad met him when we were parked down near the railway bridge. Uncle doesn't have another name either. He's not Uncle Steve or Uncle Mick. Everyone just calls him Uncle.

Uncle lives in a house with a whole lot of other men. They 're not allowed to be inside during the day so when we arrive in the morning there's always nine or ten of them standing in the front yard or out on the footpath. They stand by themselves, clutching cigarettes or with their hands dangling, like they don't know what to do or where to go.

70 Dad brings Uncle a pack of cigarettes as well as the book. Uncle puts the book in the inside pocket of his jacket, cracks the cigarette pack open, takes out a cigarette, looks at it, twirls it between his fingers and then tucks it behind his ear. Only when he's done that does he nod a greeting to Grace and me.

75 Grace loves Uncle. He has this trick where he makes a bunny rabbit out of his hanky and waggles it at her in a game. It's not the handkerchief he uses to blow his nose. It's a special one he keeps in his top pocket. It's thin, and a bit raggedy at the edge, and in one corner the initials R. W. are embroidered in blue writing.

When they've finished the game Uncle smooths the handkerchief out, folds it carefully into four and puts it away again.

80 Uncle wears a suit with old trainers and no socks. He's a bit smelly too. All the men have something that looks slightly wrong about them. Their hair is too long, or they haven't shaved properly, their clothes don't quite fit, or even when everything else is right, it's something about the way they walk, or the fact they can't make eye contact.

85 Grace hasn't noticed yet, but she will, and then one day she won't want to play with Uncle anymore. Grace is too little to understand how important it is to appear normal, but Dad and I do. The kids at school are starting to notice something about me. Just like with Uncle, they can sense there's something different. It's getting hard to keep pretending I know about the latest games or what's on YouTube and I've grown so much my school shirt is too tight under the arms.

So when Grace comes running out of school with an invitation to Samantha Ling's birthday party, Dad and I aren't exactly thrilled. Grace is burbling with excitement. 'It's a fairy party with dressing up and a cake.'

90 Dad says, 'That's great, Princess.' But he doesn't sound like he thinks it's great. He sounds like it's a problem, and it is.

A party means taking a present and everyone will be dressing up, so we have to turn Grace into some kind of fairy, with wings. Friday after school instead of going to the beach we trawl the two dollar shops down at the mall. There's plenty of vampires and skeletons and Spidermen but they're sold out of fairies. And nothing in the two dollar shop is ever really two dollars.

95 It's when we're watching Better Homes that night that I get my idea. The woman who does the room renovations is stretching material over wire and sprinkling it with sequins to make butterflies to hang on the wall and I remember that Rebecca Blake has a big pack of glitter pens. Rebecca has so many pencils and textas and things that she'd never notice if I borrowed them for the night.

100 On Monday we have maths and reading and writing all day so Rebecca doesn't get her giant panda-shaped pencil case out at all, but Tuesday afternoon is art and when everyone is packing up I manage to pinch three of the glitter pens and hide them under my jumper.

'Come on,' I say to Grace. She's always sooo slow. She likes to dawdle across the road, smiling at Mrs Vargas and waving to all her friends. I feel like there's a big red sign above my head saying 'thief, thief, thief', and I want to get to the car as quickly as possible. But when we round the corner the car isn't there.

105 Dad's never been late before. I tell Grace that we just have to wait and he'll be along soon. It's not like I've got a mobile phone he could ring us on to tell us he'd be late. We wait and we wait and we wait until it starts to get dark. Gracie won't stop whingeing. First she kicks some stones around in the gutter until I tell her to stop, then she goes and sits under a tree. Then she starts to swing on the gate of a nearby house. I tell her to stop doing that too and a dog begins to bark at us. Then she says she needs to go to the toilet. I
110 don't want to take her to the toilet in case Dad comes while we're not there.

So then she starts crying and says she has to go. 'Go behind that tree over there,' I tell her. 'No one will see.' But then she starts crying louder so I give in and we walk the six blocks to the park.

At the park she's so quick in the toilet it's like she wouldn't have time to go at all, but she comes out smiling. 'Let's go and see if Uncle's down by the river,' says Grace.

115 I'm about to say no because I'm still worried that Dad will come back and we won't be there but then I think that maybe Uncle will be able to ring Dad. I've got Dad's mobile number written on a piece of paper in my wallet. I've never seen Uncle with a phone, but maybe one of the other men will be able to do it.

Uncle's sitting at a wooden picnic table with two other men playing cards. There's a couple of bottles wrapped in brown paper sitting between them. Uncle sees Grace and starts to sing 'G.R.A.C.I.E - Gracie-ah.'

120 'It's Gloria, ya plonk,' says one of the other men. 'Nah, ya name's Gracie, isn't it love?' says Uncle. 'The song,' says the other man. 'G.L.O.R.I.A – Glor-ia.' He begins to sing, and Uncle sings the Gracie version, both of them trying to drown the other one out. I wait a while for them to stop, but they just keep getting louder and louder. I touch Uncle on the arm, and he flinches.

'What do you want?' he asks.

125 'Dad didn't come to pick us up. Can you call him for us?'

Uncle looks at me for a long moment. His eyes are bloody and seem almost sightless. 'Your Dad's missing? You better run. The welfare will be coming for you. The cops will come. You better hide. Run now.'

When he says run, he flaps his hands at us. He looks scary. 'Run!' he says again. And we do. I grab Grace's hand and we race back through the park with our school bags bumping up and down on our backs. I'm not
130 sure where we 're going, but we run anyway.

It's getting darker. The trees reach out to us with long black fingers. I'm scared, but I have to be strong for Grace. Her hand is hot and sweaty in mine.

When we finally stop, I'm doubled over, winded and panting. Grace is panting too. 'I'm tired,' she says. 'When's Dad going to come?'

135 I don't know the answer to that. I hope it's soon. It's really dark now. We walk back up the street towards the school, but Dad's not there and there's no lights on and it's scary. We need to wait somewhere Dad might come and find us so I decide to head down to the main street. We walk past the library, but the doors are shut and only the security lights are showing so it must be after six now. I don't know where to go until I remember the laundromat. It's warm and light and open until ten o'clock. Dad will come and look for
140 us there for sure.

We sit on top of the washing machines and watch the television until the news comes on and Grace gets bored. Then I remember the glitter pens. We've both got white T-shirts on under our school shirts. I take mine off and make Grace take hers off too. There are two wire coat hangers in a corner of the laundry. I stretch my T-shirt around one and Grace's T-shirt around the other. Then I twist the handles of the coat
145 hangers together and they're a pair of wings - just like the butterfly wings the woman made on *Better Homes and Gardens*.

I give Grace the glitter pens and watch as she settles down happily drawing coloured spots on the shirts. Everything is going to be okay. Dad will find us soon I know; and tomorrow, tomorrow Grace will have wings.

150 **About the author**

Catherine Moffat lives on the New South Wales Central Coast and works as a librarian at the University of Newcastle. She has had short stories published in literary magazines including *Australian Book Review* and *Australian Short Stories*, and on *Radio National* as well as in a number of anthologies including *The Mer-Creature* and other stories, *Things that are Found in Trees*, *Novascapes*, *The Lost Boy*, and *Shibboleth*.
155 During 2011 and 2012 she was a regular blogger for *Meanjin* and *Overland* as part of their *Meanland* project on the future of the book. [...]

Catherine writes in a range of genres including crime and speculative fiction. Many of her stories have strong social justice themes and deal with the lives of people on the margins - at the edge of themselves and the edge of society. [...]