

## THE MORNING NEWS

I hear them coming along the path and go out onto the cabin's verandah to greet them.

Daniel, aged seven, is in front of Ben, who is four. Or four and a half, as he corrected me recently.

They are carrying bowls of Weetbix and milk, holding them at chest height and trying hard not to spill. Both boys are barefooted, wearing tee shirts and shorts. It is very warm.

Daniel says 'good morning Grandpa' without looking up. Ben does look up at me and says good morning too but some milk spills. He says "ooh" and stops to stabilize his load before coming on. The cicadas choose this moment to begin singing. .

I sit on the top step of the verandah, in the middle, and the boys sit where they always do, Daniel to my right, at the end of the bottom step, and Ben on the other end of the same step. We all face forward, looking at the bush, forming a perfect isosceles triangle; where will Basil sit today? He sidles past to my right and goes one step down, to sit between me and Daniel.

I have thought before that it is as if these morning tableaux were being marshalled by some unseen family portrait photographer.

Both boys settle to the task of eating, but I look forward to their news. After perhaps two minutes I see that the four and a half year old has stopped chewing and is staring ahead. He turns his face up to me.

“I heerd a crow.”

“Heard” says Daniel.

“I did. When I was in bed.” He takes another spoonful. “Crows are bad.”

Daniel, without looking up from his bowl, nods gravely and then says “don’t speak with your mouth full, Ben.”

I say nothing; there will be more on crows.

“They peck sheeps’ eyes out.” says Daniel.

Young Ben swivels around to see how I react to this horror. I shake my head; this is indeed an abomination. Ben continues to stare at me but when he realizes he has seen the limits of my reaction he turns back to his food.

“Do you know that crows are considered to be the smartest of all birds?”

Now both boys look at me and I tell them that farmers say that a crow can tell if it's a rifle pointing at him or just a stick. "And I knew a woman who had a pet crow, and one day...."

"A *pet crow*.....?" Daniel is incredulous. Ben looks from me to Daniel and back again; *could* such a thing exist?

"Yes. She mended its broken leg when it was young and it just stayed around her farm. It was always in the back yard. Anyhow, one day she came back in her car and went into the house and left her car keys on a table just outside the back door. When she came out just a few minutes later they were gone."

"The crow took them!" says Daniel.

"That's what *she* thought, so you know what she did?" I am looking at Ben and he shakes his head vigorously.

"She gets her spare set of keys and shakes them in front of the crow and says 'where have you put my keys? I want them back'-----and you'd never guess but the crow flew away down the valley to a big gum tree. She watched him, and he landed in a fork in the tree and then flew back-----with her keys!"

Daniel and Ben do not take their eyes off me. Ben's mouth is open.

“And then he flew back to the tree and returned with a plastic clothes peg. And he kept on flying backwards and forwards for a whole hour bringing something each time.’

“What things?

“ Tap handles----golf balls---coins ----all sorts of things....”

Daniel resumes eating, thoughtfully. Ben is too full of this to eat-----he stares off into the bush, keeping very still. Something will come.

“He could have diamonds!”

“Diamonds,” mutters Daniel. .

“Or--or---spanners” says Ben, on perhaps safer ground.

Hunger re-asserts itself; I sip my tea. Just below me Basil makes a slight noise and does a little kneading action with his front feet which means he wants some attention. I let my right hand move out and down, to rest on his neck; I gently scratch it.

Ben turns towards me; I think perhaps it is to be something more on crows, but his eyes shoot from my face to my hand on Basil and back to my face.

“Do you *like* cats Grandpa?”

“I like cats that like *me*.”

“Basil doesn’t like *me*.”

Ah, but you are so rough with him. I continue to stroke Basil; Ben returns to his Weetbix.

The cicadas seem even louder. After a few seconds Daniel says “I saw a rhinoceros.”

“At the zoo?”

“Yes, and some---” there is a long pause, “----African Hunting Dogs.” I am impressed.

Ben is staring ahead, then turns. “I saw a tiger.”

We both look at Ben and he realizes he must give us more. His eyes take on an unseeing look, and then, when he is ready, they come alive again.

“Its tail was very long....” and he spreads his arms out to their fullest.

“And his tail was hanging through the fence” adds Daniel.

“Yes, and some boys wanted to pull it but it was too far away.”

“You wouldn’t pull his tail would you?”

“No!”, and his eyes widen at the thought. “It would *kill* you”

I wonder how long it will be before Basil ‘kills’ *him*.

The cicadas stop suddenly, as they do, and the hush is palpable. It seems to be hotter.

Both boys finish off their Weetbix and put their bowls on the ground. Daniel stretches his legs out and I notice how brown they are. Ben folds his arms and leans forward onto his knees. He seems to have found something interesting on the ground. A companionable silence falls over us.

“Ben fell down some steps.”

“Where?”

“In a shop.”

Ben stares at his legs. Then he stands and climbs up to me, steadies himself with a hand on my shoulder and lifts a knee. On it is a tiny red mark. I give it serious consideration.

“Did it hurt?”

“He cried.”

Ben looks quickly across at his brother and I think he is about to deny this accusation but he lets it stand; perhaps it confirms the scale of the incident. He goes back to his place, now limping noticeably.

Another silence falls, and this one continues for some time; Basil becomes bored with it and goes down to sit beside Ben. The boy looks up at me and I lift my arm and make a little scratching movement with my hand and he puts his own hand on the cat’s neck and copies me. I hear Basil purring. Ben looks up at me again and I receive one of his best smiles.

I say “tigers are cats.”

His eyes widen. “Are they?”

“Yes. The biggest cats there are.”

Ben looks across at Daniel but this is obviously old news to him.

We hear a call from my daughter----“Bo-o-oys”---- and the two get to their feet and pick up their bowls.

“See you later Grandpa” says Daniel, and strides off up the path.

“See you Grandpa” says Ben and follows. Basil decides that he too is on the move and trails after Ben.

After a few metres the boy turns. “Hurry up Basil”, but Basil hurries for no-one.