

## **“My Mum the Bushranger,” by Kathleen King**

She spends hours in our garden, hours and hours. It's so big that when we need her to help us with our homework, we can end up lost in there the whole afternoon looking for her. I don't know what she finds so interesting out there. Maybe it's just that working in the heat, in the dirt, with only the bushes and the bugs for comfort, is more bearable than cooking dinner in the kitchen.

When I go home after school, no one greets me or Chloe. It's just us living in the house. And mum's out there, in the garden. Me and Chloe traipse in, silent, and I take out the piece of bread I snuck into my pocket from the tray at lunch and I cut it in half. We won't see mum for hours yet.

When I was nine, one of our topics at school was Australian history. Mrs Emerson told us about how in the old days, prisoners were sent here from Britain. I wasn't really interested. I didn't like having to imagine people coming here. Far as I can tell, my family's had our house for years and years, and we'll have it forever. One day I'll be the mum of this house and I'll meet my kid after school everyday with snacks and questions. My friend Lucy's mum does that. But anyway, I wasn't at all interested in the early settlers or any of that. They didn't even have cars back then. It's too hard to imagine. But when Mrs Emerson started rabbiting on about bushrangers, my ears pricked up. She said bushrangers were originally escaped prisoners who hid from the police by staying in the bushes for ages. I think my mum's a bushranger. She's always hiding from us. Does that make me and Chloe the police? Cool. I could have a car with flashing lights and loud sirens one day. I'd run over all the stupid bushes and pick mum up and make her come back home and cook us dinner.

It's been two years since I was in Mrs Emerson's class. I don't have a car yet. And mum still spends all her time in the garden. I can feel my tummy gnawing away, like it thinks the bread I gave it was bigger than it was and now it's looking for more. I know Chloe feels the same way, 'cos she's given up on her books and is rummaging in the kitchen. All that's there is the green stuff mum brings in from the garden. There's only so many greens two girls can take. “Wanna go to the shops?” I ask Chloe. She perks up at this.

“Chicken?” She asks.

I smile.

We walk out the back door and down the gravel path alongside the road towards the shops. Chloe's trailing. She's a slow walker. I've learned to just get on with it. The walk to town never gets shorter, but our feet are hardened to the little bits of stone, so at least that no longer bothers us. Cars zip by us like big versions of the ants I sometimes watch as they scuttle along the kitchen floor, all following each other in a tidy little line. I've gotten good at telling which type of people are driving the cars. The ones that are smart enough to weave around us, drifting closer towards the center line and further away from the roadside, from us, are people from round here. They know the trail along the side of the road is a footpath for people like us. They don't want to hit us. The cars that speed right past are the people passing through, on their way to somewhere better. Not sticking around for longer than they can help it. They don't know us or even see us, blinkered to the wider roadside by their GPS things. Lucy's mum has one of those.

I tell Chloe to take the chicken breasts to the counter and pay. I'm crouched at the bottom shelf of the bakery aisle. It's low enough to the ground most people forget to look there. They reach for the fresher goods displayed in pride of place on the higher shelves. It's easier for them to do that. Not just 'cos they don't need to worry about discounts, but also 'cos they can reach that high. There are shoes all around me, but no one notices me down beside yesterday's mock-cream filled donuts. They're all a bit squished. Leave them trapped in the plastic too long and they start sweating.

I hear Chloe reach the counter. Eloise, the checkout girl, loves Chloe.

"How's your day going sweetpea? I see it's yummy chicken for dinner tonight. Lovely weather we've been having, isn't it? Been to the beach lately?"

Chloe never responds to Eloise's incessant questions, just smiles shyly at her as she hands over the crumpled ten dollars and takes the chicken. Eloise smiles back. I watch this last exchange and rejoin Chloe as she leaves the shop. The cool breeze from the air conditioning above the door waves us goodbye.

Once we've crossed the carpark and are back on the trail towards home, I grab Chloe's hand and smile at her, opening my jacket to reveal the crumpled plastic box. If mum's a bushranger that means she's committed a crime. If I'm going to be the mum of the house one day, I'll have to become a bushranger too. Commit my own crimes.