

BIRTHRIGHT

By Sue Jackson

‘What can I call him?’ I said to Michelle. ‘I can’t start the letter “Dear Sperm Donor”.’

‘Definitely not. Too informal. “Dear Mr Sperm Donor” would be much better.’

‘You can laugh. But there’s no way I’m signing “Love, Lauren” either. Maybe I could put “From your Donor Offspring”?’

She paused. ‘What about “Yours gratefully”?’ she suggested.

‘Not!’ I snorted.

I’d known about S D forever, of course, but I’d never expected him to make contact. His letter of introduction had come as a complete shock.

‘I made Mum read it out. I wasn’t going to touch it. I knew where his hands had been. Listen to this,’ I went on, holding the letter at arm’s length, “‘We’re very committed to our permaculture garden.” What sort of person is committed to a garden?’

‘Lots of people love their gardens,’ Michelle said.

‘I reckon all you’d have to do is stick an A between S and D and you’ve described him perfectly.’

‘I guess Sad is pretty close to Dad,’ Michelle murmured.

‘And another thing – I can’t figure Mum out. She knows how I feel about Dad; just because he’s passed away makes no difference. Why all this enthusiasm for a stranger?’

Michelle shrugged.

Michelle is my best friend. We tell each other everything, which is pretty amazing really because, usually, the Muslim girls at school stuck together. We got to know each other in Year 11 when we were partners on this Maths project. It was great for me, because

I'm lousy at Maths and she was awesome. She reckoned it's all genetic – that Maths started in her part of the world. And even though her Dad drives taxis now, he'd been some hot shot accountant in Iraq.

Something I admired about Michelle right from the start was that people always seemed to respect her. She didn't use to wear a head scarf back then, but no one ever dared have a go at any of her friends who did. Michelle would be right on to them.

Michelle isn't her real name. It's actually Fatima. But one day, when we first started hanging out, she suggested that when it was just the two of us, maybe I could call her something else. She said Fatima sounded too formal and whenever she heard it, she expected to be told off. And who'd want 'Fat' for a nickname? Certainly not someone who describes herself as a 'failed anorexic'. Though sometimes I wonder just how failed she actually is – it's hard to tell, especially under all the layers she's taken to wearing lately. And she certainly never eats a thing at my place anymore.

Anyhow we spent a whole day on it - there were heaps of evictions, before we finally decided on Michelle. It's sometimes hard to remember to use Fatima in front of other people though.

In the end I didn't get back to Sad for a couple of weeks. And I would have stuck to name, rank and serial number, except that when she saw me writing, Mum insisted on including a pile of photos of me looking cute at various ages.

He must have been waiting at the Post Office with his next letter in his hot little hand – we got it less than a week after we sent ours. When Michelle arrived the next Saturday afternoon, she'd barely got her shoes off before I dragged her upstairs.

'Aunt June phoned this week,' I said. Aunt June is my dad's sister, and since he passed on, she calls me up lots. 'She said she's really worried Sad's going to pressure me to visit him,' I added.

'Would you want to?'

'You're joking!'

'Could be interesting.' Michelle looked thoughtful. 'I've never been to the Northern Territory.'

'Really?' I said. We both knew she'd never been anywhere. Michelle gave me The Look. 'Anyhow,' I went on, 'Aunt June said she knew this woman once who was adopted. She'd been hanging out to meet her birth mother. In the end she traveled all the way to W. A. Her mother turned out to be this junkie, and the sister and brothers were totally feral -'

'Sounds like *Deliverance*,' Michelle interrupted.

Michelle is the Video Queen of Coburg. Mention any film, old time to new release, and she can tell you all about it. She has a film for every occasion. What else are you going to do stuck home night after night?

'Haven't seen it,' I said.

'There were these really weird-looking kids,' she persisted, 'with no teeth and bald heads sitting on verandahs in their singlets, grinning and playing banjos. All totally inbred.'

'Really? Anyway, you haven't heard the worst bit yet.'

'What?'

'Well, her voice sounded just like her mother's... and both of them twirled their hair while they talked!'

'Genes,' Michelle whispered. 'Come to think of it,' she added, staring off into the middle distance, 'that could explain a lot...Maybe your mum thinks, as it's just the two of you, that it would be good for you to have some more family.'

I flared up: 'You would think that. You can't turn round without falling over a relative.'

She looked at me. 'Yeah. Right,' she said.

Sometimes I wish I'd keep my big mouth shut. Because of course there are relatives she'd love to be falling over, but can't - her favourite aunty, Jemilla, has been stuck for ages in this refugee camp in Pakistan. Her dad spends his days off at the post office trying to send her stuff .

'Sorry, Michelle,' I muttered.

She took a deep breath and after a minute smiled at me.

Climbing off the couch a while later, she said, 'I'd better be getting home.' She hesitated, flipping the cover of her mobile up and down. 'Lauren, I -'

My mobile rang. 'Hang on, Hannah.' I covered the phone. 'Yeah?', I said.

'Nothing,' she replied, shaking her head, 'Catch you later.'

Eventually, to keep Mum happy, I answered Sad's letter. But I kept it brief - after all, Aunt June is nobody's fool.

It was a full six weeks till I heard from him again. After I'd read his letter a few times, I put it straight into my backpack to take the next day to show Michelle. As soon as my last lecture was over, I caught the tram up Sydney road to Tigris Fabrics, where Michelle and her mother work in her uncle's shop.

Michelle's mother's face is always one big smile when she sees me. And her first question is always the same: 'Your dear mother, Lauren, how is she?'

I find it amazing - Michelle's mum and mine have never actually met. Yet you'd never believe it to hear how her mum asks after mine. Especially since Dad died, every time she asks she looks as if she's about to start crying.

I squeezed between stands of dark-coloured polyester and crepe for outdoor wear and the *High Fashion Ramadam Specials* - vibrant voiles, georgettes and chiffons - to the back of the shop where Michelle was labeling remnants.

'Guess what I've got?' I said, rummaging round in my backpack before waving the letter in her face. She made a few half-hearted grabs as I held it just out of reach.

'Okay, you win,' she said after a moment, 'so what does he say?'

'He's got a wife and little boy and they live in this place called Burrundie, on a bush block, with lots of animals. They make their own soap and clothes and stuff.'

'A real old hippy,' Michelle said.

'Also he's a mad abseiler –'

'Does he know you're terrified of heights?' she asked.

'Who says?'

She looked at me with her eyebrows raised.

'He's also sent some photos.'

'Let me see,' she said. 'What is this place?' she asked as I handed her yet another photo of a huge lake with dark blue water, surrounded by gums.

'It's called Howard Springs - '

'Never heard of it,' she said. She seemed distracted.

'It's where they all go to swim – apparently it's just down the road from his place.'

'Are they **all** just pictures of water?' she asked.

'Not quite,' I said, passing her the final one of a really old guy swimming, wearing a woolen beanie. 'It's not him, thank god!' Michelle laughed. 'Look at the back,' I added.

Turning it over she read out, "'Fred's swum at Howard Springs every day for fifty years. Care to join him?" Inter-esting,' she said.

'He didn't mention why he took so long to answer.'

'It's obvious. He's being cool, trying to win you over. It's exactly like *The Horse Whisperer* – he squats in a field in the middle of nowhere for ages just waiting for this scared horse to come closer—'

I sighed. 'Haven't seen it.'

'Robert Redford's awesome. He's really hot –' she enthused.

'Too old!'

She just smiled. I guess I should have seen it coming then.

The last Tuesday in May, I arrived home from Uni to find a large envelope in the letterbox. Michelle and I had been messaging each other, but hadn't actually met up for ages. So the next day, as soon as my Salvador Dali lecture finished, I hurried to the tram stop.

When I arrived at the shop, I stood outside under the awning for a bit, looking in through the front window. For once, Michelle was on her own – no mother and no customers. She was sitting behind a card table covered with an embroidered velvet table cloth. Every so often she took a sip from her glass of tea. She seemed intent on the red ledger in front of her. Looked like a real business woman.

After a while I went inside. When she finally glanced up, she slammed the ledger shut and rushed over to hug me.

'I got another letter,' I said, passing it to her.

'You haven't opened it?'

'Thought I'd wait for you. There's something cardboard inside,' I added.

Turning it over in her hands, she said: 'I think I feel a ticket!'

'Will I open it?' It felt like waiting for exam results.

'Go for it,' she said.

I grabbed it back and ripped open the envelope. Inside was another photo, mounted on a cardboard frame. 'Oh, well,' I said, letting out my breath.

I laid the photo on the table. It was of a little boy, with green eyes, dark hair and a toothy grin, holding a rabbit in a stranglehold. On the back was written in large irregular

letters, “Bugs”.

‘So cute,’ she said. But she only glanced at the photo.

She followed me as I wandered over to the head scarves (\$15, \$10, \$8 – please fold and return). I ran my hand along the top of the rack and finally stopped at a rich turquoise one, exactly the sort I would have once tried on with Michelle’s help. But today somehow that didn’t feel right. I stroked it and moved on.

‘Lauren...I’ve been meaning to say’, Michelle said, looking down, ‘it’s fine if you call me Fatima’

‘Sure,’ I said, trying to catch her eye, ‘Fatima it is.’

‘Maybe in the July break I should take a few days and visit Burrundie,’ I said, as we sat down at her table. ‘Those springs look awesome.’

‘You’d be back by August though?’ she asked anxiously.

‘Sure,’ I replied. ‘What’s the problem?’

Looking everywhere but at me, she said in a rush, ‘Because I need you at my wedding.’

His name is Salam. He is the son of her uncle’s business partner’s best friend (I think that’s right). He’s thirty-two and an accountant. She said the more she got to know him, the nicer he seemed. And he’s quite good-looking ‘in a shy sort of way’. She’d got started now. There was no stopping her.

‘What do you think?’ she said, as she extracted a tiny satin conch-shaped bag from the drawer behind her and handed it to me.

‘What is it?’ I asked, bewildered.

‘It’s a sample of the wedding favours bag,’ she replied, airily.

‘Right,’ I said.

‘It’s been so hard to choose,’ she frowned, ‘but I think I’ll go for these. Have them

filled with chocolate almonds, wrapped in gold foil.’ She glanced at me, ‘What do you reckon?’

My mouth opened and closed. Suddenly she’d become an expert on wedding favours, and I’m sure she hadn’t even heard of them before. I know I hadn’t.

Next she was on to the dress. ‘You can see the lace isn’t exactly white, more of a cream really,’ she said, showing me a picture. ‘Think it’ll suit me better?’ she queried, uncertainly. I nodded slowly. My throat felt like it was full of wool.

‘And you can see the rhinestones on the dress are exactly the same as on the purse.’

‘Yeah,’ I agreed, faintly.

Finally, she dragged out an invitation card from the over-flowing red ledger. Looking down, I grimaced as I glimpsed my fingernails – black-chipped polish, tips gnawed and ragged with an angry-looking hangnail on my right thumb. I glanced over at Michelle’s. Hers were perfectly rounded, the cuticles pushed back evenly, their surfaces shining. They never used to look like that.

‘Michelle, I’m really sorry,’ I said, standing up, ‘but I have to get back to Uni.’ One of the stands teetered as I knocked it in my dash to the door.

‘Phone me tonight,’ she called. ‘We have to figure out what you’re going to wear.’

I had to stop in the street for a minute to get my bearings. When my eyes eventually cleared, I realized I was staring at the window display in the travel agent’s just down the road from Tigris Fabrics. I had to read the advertisement quite a few times before the big red letters finally made sense to me. “Perfect Time to Explore the Territory” they said.

No point hanging round here outside. I’ve got my travel fund. I can pay my own way. I pushed the door open and went in.

After I get my ticket, I’m going to call him up and tell him to expect me. Why wait till July? If I go now, I’ll be able to meet them all and swim in the springs and still have

plenty of time to get back for Fatima's wedding. And I've got to stop calling him Sad. It's a stupid nickname. Mark, that's his name. Mark.