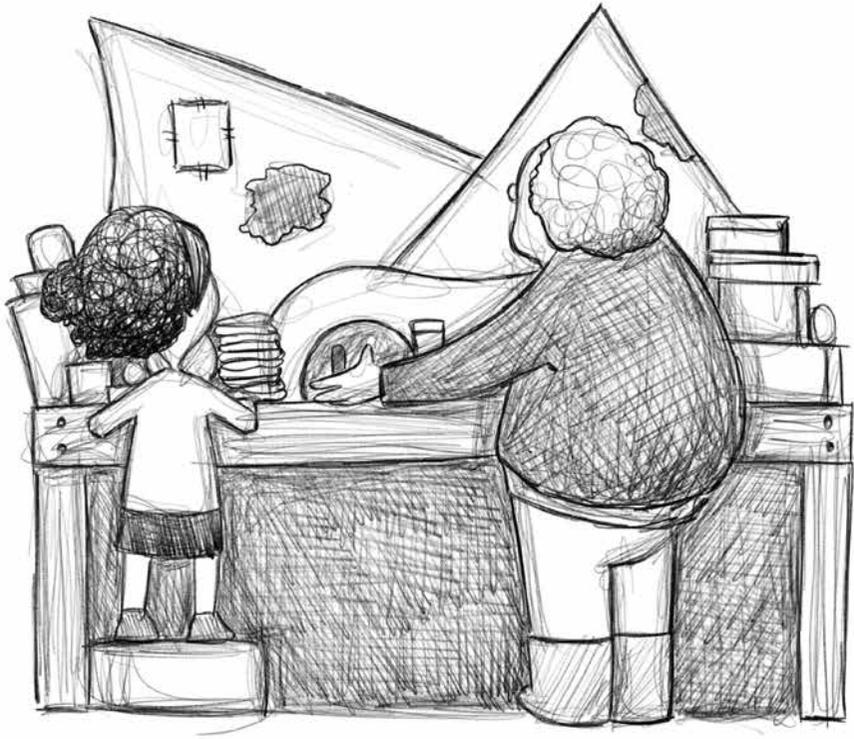


One



‘What do you think?’ Grandad looked up with a twinkle in his eye. ‘Any ideas?’

Bella stared at Grandad’s workbench. As usual, it was covered in springs and screws and something-or-others of all shapes and sizes.

Last week, there had been metal pipes and an old lawnmower engine.

This week, there were leather belts, and what looked like the remains of a colourful kite. Maybe two kites.

As usual, Grandad was working on one of his special and somewhat strange but sure-to-be spectacular inventions.

And as-even-more-usual, Bella had absolutely no idea what it was.

She picked up a belt buckle and turned it over, as if searching for a clue. Then she shook her head. ‘You know I can never guess.’

She knew Grandad loved this – the mystery of it, the surprise on her face when a tangle of pipes turned into a periscope or a pile of plant pots into a water wheel.

Or even – best of all – when the wood from an old boat turned into a very special bedroom.

‘Ah well. I guess you’ll just have to wait and see.’ Grandad tousled her hair. ‘How about we have our snack, then?’

Bella nodded, and they made their way over to the table near the back door. She set her school bag down and settled into a chair while Grandad went inside.

A few moments later he came out with a glass of milk in one hand and a familiar paper bag dangling from the other. ‘Vanilla slice or

doughnut?’ he said. ‘You choose.’

Bella reached for the doughnut. She knew Grandad wanted the vanilla slice. He always did and she always let him have it, pretending that whatever else he’d bought was what she wanted most in the world.

She took a quick bite then passed the bag back to Grandad. His eyes lit up when he saw the vanilla slice but then he frowned. ‘Oops! Mustn’t forget the fruit. You know what your mum’s like.’

‘I’ll get it.’ Bella went to stand up but Grandad waved a hand.

‘No, no. You sit.’

She heard the fridge door open and close and then he was back, peeling the cover off a small dish of sliced apple and watermelon. ‘All done, see.’ He smiled. ‘You are a guest in my house. When *I* am a guest in *your* house, then you can serve me.’

Bella smiled back. ‘All right, I will.’

‘Actually ...’ Grandad waggled his eyebrows.

‘I think you will be serving me cake.’

‘Cake?’ Bella was puzzled for a moment, but then remembered. Grandad’s birthday! She hadn’t really forgotten, of course. How could she, when Grandad was just about her favourite person in the world and was coming next week for his special birthday sleepover? And also when, even though she’d been racking her brains for ages, she still had no idea what to get him for a present?

‘Maybe even two slices!’ Grandad went on.

‘Two?’ Bella pretended to be shocked. ‘Do you think you’ll be allowed? You know what Mum’s like.’

‘It could be carrot cake.’ Grandad winked. ‘That’s practically a vegetable.’

He reached for the vanilla slice and as he did, something went *click* in Bella’s brain. *Hmm*, she thought. Maybe that was a birthday idea. Maybe she could buy him a whole tray of vanilla slice.

Only ... that wouldn’t be very special,

would it? The shop that made the flakiest and squishiest and absolute best vanilla slice in the world – at least according to Grandad – was right around the corner from his house. Even though Grandad said he only had it when Bella came over after school on Tuesdays, she suspected that might not be quite true.

Bella shook her head and sighed.

‘Oh, would you rather have this?’ Grandad had noticed her staring at the vanilla slice, which was at this very moment halfway to his whiskery mouth.

‘Oh, no,’ Bella took another quick bite of doughnut. ‘I was just thinking.’

‘Thinking, eh? That sounds promising.’ Grandad raised his eyebrows. ‘Anything I can help with?’

‘No,’ Bella replied. ‘It’s nothing. Just ... stuff.’

‘Ah. Well, you know how fond I am of stuff.’ Grandad waved a hand behind him and Bella smiled in spite of herself. Grandad’s whole backyard was crammed with stuff – odds and

ends collected from junk shops and rubbish collections, bits of wood and metal and spare parts saved from things he had taken apart. You never know, he always said, when something might turn out to be the absolute exact thing you needed at some particular moment.

Like a pipe you could mould into the perfect statue for the front of your boat.

Like a garden stake you could shape into a frame for a photo of your boat and its perfectly perched statue, to put on the wall of your very special bedroom.

Like a periscope you could unfold out the window of your very special bedroom when your house started moving in the middle of the night – an unusually extra-long periscope that unfolded out and down and past the floor so that even from upstairs, Bella could see all the way down to a pair of spindly pink legs underneath.

Like those things, and so many more.

Grandad had a knack for that – of always having just the right thing at just the right time. He was the same with birthday presents, always giving Bella strange and unexpected things that turned out one day to be unexpectedly and completely perfect.

Just for once, she wanted to do the same for him.

She took another bite of doughnut and chewed slowly. Then she looked up and met his eyes. ‘Grandad, what would you say was your absolute best birthday ever?’

‘Well, let’s see ...’ Grandad stroked his moustache. ‘Was it last year you gave me your biggest, brightest smile? Or was that the year before?’

‘Grandad!’ Bella grinned. But then she saw his gaze shift. Not a lot, but a little. Almost so little you might not notice it unless you were a girl who knew her grandfather better than anyone in the world.

He was looking past her and inside to

where a picture hung on the lounge-room wall. And Bella didn't need to look to know what it was because she had the same one on the wall in her bedroom. It was a photo of his old boat with the three of them on board – Bella and Grandad, and Grandma, too.

At once, the feeling of that day washed over her. The waves were gentle, the water clear as glass. The sun was warm and a cool breeze tickled around them. They dropped anchor off a quiet beach on a little island and a friendly seal swam right up to the boat. They sang 'Happy Birthday' and ate cake, even though they were going to do it again that night with Mum and Dad.

It was the last time they had gone out on the boat together, before Grandma got sick and it was just too hard. And eventually Grandad moved here, to the little house with the tiny backyard and no room at all for a boat.

'Ah well.' Grandad said softly, and Bella wasn't sure if he was talking to her or to



himself. 'What's gone is gone.'

He leaned over and took his hand in hers, squeezing it gently.

And Bella squeezed back. But her thoughts were swirling wildly. Because maybe – just maybe – she had a completely and unexpectedly brilliant idea.