

JOY COWLEY



DUNGER



dunger: an old car; anything out of date and useless

GECKO PRESS

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**D U
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info@geckopress.com

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For Vita and Tom, and their Mum and Mumma.
Thank you for the love you share with the world.
– *Joy*

1

WILLIAM

The world is full of calamity: famines and wars, birds choking to death on oil spills, earthquakes, tsunamis, and Melissa – my disaster of a sister. Reading this, you’ll probably say, what’s wrong with this kid? Is he a bit paranoid? My response is that all tragedies are relative to their context and as far as domestic upheavals go, this one is about eight on the Richter scale.

Melissa might be fourteen – but fourteen what? The I.Q. of someone who thinks manga is some kind of tropical fruit? The number of times an hour she consults a mirror when she should be looking at www.hireabrain.com? Trust me, fourteen years is not an indication of her emotional or intellectual age.

The disaster all began with Melissa’s baby-sitting job. She took the job not because she likes kids, but because she wanted money to buy clothes. So it was some karmic principle, like reap what you sow, that had her walking over the Wilsons’ bouncy castle in shoes with heels like sharpened pencils.

Of course I call her an idiot. Who wouldn’t?

“He’s just jealous because I had a real job!” Melissa

shouts across the breakfast table, and she reminds our parents of an incident a whole year before, when I broke Dad's laptop (pure accident – I tripped over the cord).

I smile and exhale slowly, directing my breath over her yoghurt and muesli, which notches up her screeching by a decibel or two.

“You evil little monster!” Her hands cover the bowl. “Mum? Make him behave!”

Mum, or Mother-of-the-hundred-eyes as I like to call her, nudges me with her elbow. “Stop it, you two! I'm sick of you fighting like a couple of cats.”

“Our insurance doesn't cover damage to other people's property,” Dad says.

“The Wilsons must be insured,” I remind him.

“Not for third-party damage.” He has that weary old-man voice. “We'll find the money. Somehow.”

At this point, you should know there is a fundamental flaw in my father. I'm not complaining, merely observing that while he may be a very good radiologist, a personality x-ray would show him completely lacking in survival instinct. He takes on all the family problems, regardless of whose they are, but does he try to solve them? No. He simply rolls over like a big dog, waves his paws in the air, and lets the world take advantage of him. Mum actually admires him for it. I don't. As far as I'm concerned, if my sister is old enough to wear stupid spiky shoes, she can accept responsibility for any damage they cause. I confess, however, to disappointment that I didn't witness the

bouncy castle deflating on that little kid's birthday party. It must have been quite memorable.

Dad runs his forefinger slowly around the rim of his coffee cup; not a good sign. I have the feeling he is going to disregard all the practical advice I've offered, and I'm right. He breathes deeply and Mum reaches across the table to put her hand over his in a way that suggests she knows what he is going to say.

"We've decided," says Dad, "to work over the summer."

"Apart from the holiday in Queenstown," Melissa says quickly.

Mum looks at Dad and says, "We have to cancel the Queenstown trip."

My sister's spoon skids across the table and clatters on the floor. "No!"

"I'm afraid it's true." Dad is still trying to hypnotise his cup.

"But we have to go to Queenstown!" Melissa's eyes are as round as plums. "It's all been arranged! I told Herewini and Jacquie. They're going. And the McKenzies – the whole family! You can't do this!"

Dad doesn't answer. It's Mum who says, "We already have."

"What?" I'm appalled at the injustice. Last year Melissa went to Queenstown with a netball team. I've never been there. The week in January – luge, gondola, jet boating – was destined to be a major part of my education. Now I am the innocent victim of my sister's extraordinary stupidity.

I point this out to my father, who doesn't respond but instead – predictably – leaves my mother to do the talking.

She says, "I'm sorry, Will. We have to be practical."

I try to sound reasonable, logical even. "There is a point of family law here. You told us 'never break a promise', and if I remember correctly, the trip to Queenstown was actually a promise."

Melissa dives in. "Yes! You can't go back on a promise!"

"The promise still stands," says our mother, "it's just postponed for a year. Not this summer. I'm sure you'll both find plenty to do around here."

"Both?" I am determined to keep my voice level. "Please, Mother, do not include me in this fiasco. You may feel obliged to accept some parental responsibility since you allowed Melissa to buy shoes that turned out to be weapons of mass destruction. I, on the other hand, am blameless. I rest my case."

"Don't talk such rot, Will." She gets up and starts clearing the table. "This is not just about the bouncy castle. It's the recession. A lot of families have to cut back and frankly, for a number of reasons, we can't afford an expensive holiday. I know you and Melissa are disappointed, but by next year we'll have enough saved."

"You could get a bank loan!" Melissa cries. "Like you got to build the garage."

"That's different. A garage is an investment. Which one of you is going to empty the dishwasher?"

Our mother always does this; when argument fails

she pushes the escape button into domestic trivia, so of course Lissy and I know better than to respond.

I ask, “What precisely is the ‘plenty’ you expect us to do here when we should be in Queenstown?”

She turns the toaster upside down and shakes crumbs into the sink. “You could spend some time helping out at the shop.”

Oh yes, indeed. A fine substitute for a helicopter flight to the top of the Tasman Glacier: Mum’s book and stationery store, where it’s my job to carry heavy boxes, sort magazines and newspapers, and clean up after kids who run riot because their mothers are talking to mine, while Melissa – oh yes, my sister. Where’s she in this scenario? Out back in the toilet, reading romantic slush about vampires. No, thank you.

Dad sits back in his chair and folds his arms. “The rest of the time, you’ll have a holiday with your grandparents. They want you to stay at the bach.”

“You have got to be joking!” says Melissa.

My father never jokes about his parents, which probably explains a lot. I suppose the only way he survived growing up with those crazy people was to learn the fine art of submission. What I can’t understand is why he would want to inflict them on us. An afternoon visit, two or three times a year, is surely more than enough.

“They want to go back to their old bach in the Sounds,” Dad says. “They’re too old to look after it on their own. You can be sure they’ll give you a good time.”

Oh, absolutely, sure. Like the day we spent at their

house in Timaru: a hilarious time playing cards and listening to them fight about who had forgotten to flush the toilet.

I shake my head slowly at my father, expressing disbelief that he could even suggest such a thing as a holiday with his parents.

Melissa gets up and bangs her chair against the table. “I’d rather die first!” she says, sweeping out of the room.

For the first time in my life, I find myself agreeing with my sister. Compared to a summer vacation with Grandma and Grandpa, death by slow torture would be a pleasure.

2

MELISSA

There's something a bit weird about my eleven-year-old brother. When he was nine he started talking like a dictionary, and for no reason. It was more or less an overnight change from normal kid-language to using words as missiles. He has to be right about everything. Maybe it's some kind of inferiority complex. My friends think he's a nutcase.

This holiday cancellation can't just be about the holes in the bouncy castle. That's just an excuse. Bet you anything, Mum and Dad decided to scrub Queenstown long before it happened. And anyway, I only did what anyone would do, running in to rescue a kid that was bawling its lungs out. How did I know the vinyl was so flimsy? When I try explaining this to Mum, she asks, "Why didn't you take off your shoes first?"

"Mum! If I was drowning, would you kick off your shoes before you dived in to get me?"

She thinks about it. "No."

"Mother means no, she wouldn't rescue you," says Will.

I give him a bored look. "Don't bite your tongue, little brother. You'll poison yourself."

William and Melissa have been roped into helping their old hippie grandparents fix up their holiday home in the middle of the Sounds.

They'll have no electricity, no cellphone reception, and only each other for company.

As far as they are concerned, this is **NOT a holiday.**

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