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HAVE YOU SEEN ALLY QUEEN?

DEB FITZPATRICK

FREMANTLE PRESS

SAND DUNES

I HAVE SURVIVED. Today was my first day at this new school. I feel like I've run a cross-country or something; I'm exhausted. I drop my bag outside our house and head down to the beach. I don't feel like answering Mum's questions about how it went – I just want a bit of space.

My feet sink deep into the cool sand and it takes ages to make headway through the dunes between our place and the beach. I stop to rest for a while, and plonk down on a steep section. I make bum-shaped dents in the sand and look out.

New schools aren't such a big deal – some kids move every couple of years, don't they? But I've gone right through to Year 10 at the same school, and now this. It's the first time for Jerry, too. We've changed schools *and* towns. Well, *regions*, actually.

Sometimes I feel like we've changed mums, too. Which is weird, because we haven't. I didn't want all this change, I really didn't. It's messed everything up.

We shifted in to our new place a couple of weeks ago, at the start of the school holidays. Mum and Dad brought us down here for a weekend a few weeks before that, to introduce us to the new house and show us around Melros a bit. That didn't take long. The whole of Melros is about four streets, and one long beach. There are no shops. A fat row of sand dunes separates the houses from the water. Jerry was really amped that first weekend about the fishing potential. I was too, secretly, but I'm not sure anymore if I should keep going out fishing with Dad and Jerry. I mean, it's not very *teenage girl*, is it?

One thing I'm glad of (if you have to choose something): we moved during the holidays. So I started at Peel at the beginning of fourth term, when there were a few other new kids, too, not just me. There'd be nothing worse than walking into a classroom one morning right in the middle of term. *Right, everyone, I'd like you to meet someone new to our school. Alison Queen. I hope you'll make her*

very welcome. And to have to put up with those *queen* jokes, the snickering. Very welcoming.

I looked around the class this morning – without looking like I was looking – for anyone who seemed like my kind of person, for someone to hook up with, but everyone seems all set with their mates and groups. Quite a few of the girls are wearing stacks of make-up. One chick's hair is streaked like a rainbow, with the full range of colours. I guess it's going to be a long term. I s'pose I can just spend lots of time doing homework and stuff till it gets easier.

It's not so bad for Jerry – he's still in primary school, and they're not that into queen jokes in Grade 4. But Peel Senior High. I can't believe I have to do this without my friends. I can't believe I have to do this without Shel.

I shake my head, as if that might help me clear it. It doesn't. It just makes me feel even more frazzled. I look across the ocean as far as I can, and try to blank it all out.

SEAL

MUM TRIED TO talk to me today but I didn't want a bar of it, as she would say. Big Talk. Then she went off looking tragic. I heard her blabbing to Dad about it in the bedroom. She'd been trying to tell me not to worry about make-up, she said, how it clogs up your skin. Filling me in on feminism. What a load of frogshite. Like *she'd* know about make-up and feminism. Look at her, making us come down here, out in the sticks. *That's* feminism, isn't it. Being away from all your friends and cooking country stews every night of the week. We used to have pizzas and stuff, even HJs sometimes! But now she's all gingham shirts and vegie patch. She's even trying to make Dad get us some chooks. Reckons it's good for the garden. Now that's one thing I know for sure: chooks *don't* live near the beach.

I go down to the beach at sunset. The sand flicks back at my calves, stinging and tickling. The dunes go up and down like sandy waves. I climb and sit on the highest one, like yesterday, and the day before that. The coast is the one good thing about this place, I reckon.

Sometimes roos hop through the scrub behind me. I never thought of roos as beach critters before we came here; I thought they lived in the dry bits of Australia, in the red dust. But here the roos come right up to the last row of dunes before the water. They stick their heads up over the scrub for the view, and watch for a bit before turning back.

Sometimes I go all the way down and sit on the cool, wet sand at the edge, soaking a dark patch on the back of my uniform, and wait for the seal to come back. I've only seen it once. I couldn't believe it, it was rolling and clapping and arcing in the water out by the reef. Sleek and beautiful, just playing. No one else saw it, and I didn't tell anyone. Not that I have anyone to tell – small detail. Only Jerry, and everyone knows you don't tell stuff like that to your poxy little brother, who comes into your room at night just to fart, and then slams the door and runs away.

That's Dad and Jerry coming back now from Tims Thicket. Bet they haven't caught anything. They went off carrying on like Rex Hunts, with buckets and blocks of bait and PVC pipes. Jerry spent all last night after dinner making gangs. Like they're gunna catch anything that big.

Mum runs out to them. Feminist.

They come in, all fishy smelling and roughed up by the wind.

'Cool hair, McJerry,' I say, smirking.

Dad looks at me. 'We got a salmon.'

'Huh?'

I get the same smirk back from Jerry. 'Salmon!' he shouts, hopping all over the kitchen like the little kid that he is. 'We caught a salmon!'

Dad ruffles his hair. What is this, an ad for Country Road or something?

'This is gunna be good, living here,' Dad says. 'First pick of the salmon every run.' He's grinning and brown and salty, and his lumberjack shirt's got blood on it.

Mum looks at me. Suddenly everyone's looking at me, slightly crazily. Grinning, smelling, and with big hair.

'What?' I say. Why am I copping all the attention?

'Come on, Allycat,' Dad says. 'Have a laugh.'

'Don't call me that!' I say, and I know I'm going to cry. I can't believe it. I run out again, even though I only just got back, leaving them standing there in the kitchen with their stinky salmon.

I catch the bus to school here. As if living in the sticks isn't bad enough! Having to be a *bus kid* in the sticks – it's hideous. There's only a handful of other kids still on it when I get off. Poor buggers. How much further away could you live? In Perth, I used to ride my bike but Peel Senior High is fifteen ks away. On the way to school, Shel and Zoe and I would swing by the deli and get a whole heap of snacks, which we'd ration out for the rest of the day. Caramel buds, green snakes and my favourite, Killer Pythons. Bet they wouldn't even know what a Killer Python is here.

At least we're not stuck inland. Have to thank Dad for that; he still thinks he's a surf rat. It's ridiculous, seeing him wax up the malibu on a Saturday morning. Obviously, I don't go and watch him, in case anyone sees *me*.

I email Shel; it's the first proper one since we came here. Texts just don't cut it at the moment – I

need more than 160 characters for some of this stuff. I sit down at the computer (which Mum and Dad have set up in the living area so that they can *keep an eye* on what we're *up* to).

Dear Shel,

This really is frogshite. The Killer Pythons at the deli here are STALE and HAVE NO FLAVOUR. To get to the deli from our house, you either have to trek (taking spare water with you) or catch a light plane. Can you urgently send me down some KPs? How are you and Zo? How's Max?! Has the bubble on Mr Dawe's head grown any more? Peel SHS is absolutely tragic. The boys are either bogans or surfies and the girls are pretty unfriendly. They have 80s hair and worse make-up. No one really wants to know me, and I'm not sure that I mind, to be honest. They don't have cheesies at the canteen, and the women who work there are hideous. Mum's been on my back about make-up and shaving my legs and stuff. Can you believe it?! She reckons there's some

> kind of conspiracy theory against women, reckons magazines and consumerism are to blame for the world's problems. I'm seriously concerned about her, I mean, what's going on with her, making us move down here and growing vegies and hair, and Dad and Jerry going fishing all the time – they've all completely lost it! I'm on my own here, Shel, please come down and save me! You can sleep in my room ...

I nearly say that I'll take her to my secret seal spot, but I delete that thought before I type it. Love Ally, I key in.

I go downstairs and sneak out the door next to my bedroom; I've already made it my emergency exit. The only problem is when Jerry's in the shed fiddling with his chemistry set. I tell you, the boy's sad. He makes Dick Smith radios and intercoms in his spare time. If it weren't for Dad taking him fishing, he'd never leave the house.

The moon's out; it's spilling over the water, slightly blue like Hi-Lo milk. I can't be bothered scaling the Mt Everest dune, so I sit on a rock with my back to the house. Seals aren't nocturnal, I

reckon. I'm not expecting to see it again, just like to look out at the spot where it rolled and slid through the water, almost oily. Free.

DEB FITZPATRICK

DEB FITZPATRICK is the author of more than a dozen books for readers of all ages, such as *Tawny Trouble* and *Kelpie Chaos,* the *Spencer Gray* books and her YA classic *90 Packets of Instant Noodles*. Deb loves bushwalking with her kelpie and, when she can, she sneaks away to a shack in the karri forest to be among wildlife and write adventure-in-nature stories. Deb has a Master of Arts in creative writing from UWA. She lived for several years in the cloudforest of Costa Rica, where she did a lot of hiking while toucans, three-toed sloths and spider monkeys crossed through the forest canopy above her.

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