

Jack's Red Hat

By Jennifer Mills (Australia)

Alice doesn't want to be left behind so she follows the boys at a distance. Her legs aren't fit or subtle yet. They soon catch her at it.

'Go home, why're you always follerin us?' Jack spits. The other boys stand back, embarrassed by her strip of grub-white belly as much as anything.

Alice stares at them and Jack wavers. The afternoon is grey and fading. To send her home in the dark would put a red handprint on his arse, maybe worse. He glances at the others, then nods at her. 'But ya gotta wait the rock,' he says.

Alice settles on the slab of concrete at the edge of the gully where they go for tadpoles when it's warmer, if Jack doesn't mind. The mozzies are loud here from the creek. She can hear the voices of the boys getting quieter down the hill, then louder again as they come up the other side. Jack's red hat comes and goes in the distance. One of the boys makes a noise like an Indian.

The dare is the sleepout. If the bum's there you have to go as close as you can. If he's not you have to go right in and bring something back, but no-one's got that far before. Into the sad little camp off the track, a hole-specked tarp, a bit of ply strung from a rock. Jack goes ahead, treading through the scrub like a hunter.

There is a rustle, and Jack starts. Bird or a lizard. The pocketknife he got for being eight is warm against his groin. He takes off the hat and puts it under a tree. Camouflaged, he gets down on his belly and snakes closer. The tarp is partly covered in rotten leaves: decay or a trap. The bum's blankets are rolled up at the bottom and the bedroll is flat. He's not there. Jack hears a close coo-ee. The others are waiting.

Alice hears it too, and is grateful. She stands and squints at the ridge. Can't see the red hat but she can yell alright. She puts her hands up to her mouth but the answer gets there before she does, from further along the ridge. Alice sits down again.

Jack calls 'Coo-ee!' and slides down the rock, wriggles into the bum's crawlspace. It's damp, smells of pee. He looks for a trophy, and decides on a cut bit of blanket. Unrolling it,

there's something else, bright and shocking. Holes through the pages. Jack feels nauseous but he can't put it back. He has to carry it.

On the way back the boys argue over the magazine, hoot and giggle and become serious, agree to share it a week each. The pages are slimed and no-one really wants to hold it, so it ends up back with Jack. His find. He thinks he can get the dirt off it. Stickytape the bits where bugs chewed through. He comes in sight of the concrete block and can't see his sister.

'Alice!'

There's no answer.

'Coo-ee!'

They wait, still as bricks, for a whole minute, then Jack shrugs and walks like a man to the road.

'She musta gone home.'

The magazine in his hand is limp. The light's dropped out of the sky. No-one says maybe the bum took her. No-one says anything for a few blocks, then Jack turns back to face the place. The bush rustles like voices. He rolls the magazine tight in one fist, and his eyes sting.

'Stupid Alice,' he says. 'I left my hat.'