

Snack

by Matt Potter

They were the weirdest family in the neighbourhood: father tall and rake thin, hardly ever seen except driving to and from his job at the nearby hardware shop (the one with the fundamentalist Christian slogans in the windows); son and eldest daughter of similar builds and clearly two bricks short of a load. And the squat mother was apparently — so we learned later — extremely intelligent, loved classical music and even went to church (Anglican, even more surprising) but to look at her lumping home from the bus stop, breasts bobbing and hips heaving with each step, you'd never have known she was a MENSA candidate. And she gave her looks to their youngest, Kerryn.

Kerryn's name didn't help either, in a suburb filled with Kylies and Kerrys and Karens. She was older than we were (me, my two sisters and three other kids from two other houses in the street) and outclassed us in the puberty stakes, boisterous cleavage unrivalled at the primary school we all attended. She probably should have been in high school, even then.

Kerryn's hands were damp to the touch, and her eyes would dart about her freckled face and the schoolyard and the neighbourhood and she would clutch her swishing skirts in an adult way — half-knowing, half-nervous, all clumsy. Her voice was small, barely audible at times, her hair thin and mousy and often oily, though sometimes fluffy and clean, perhaps just after she'd washed it. She snuffled too and at times smelled of stale urine and perspiration, so playing dress-ups when we were all together was very hit-and-miss. Was it too rude even for kids to suggest dry-cleaning the can-can skirt we all fought over (and wore inside out, blue and green frills showing — I was eldest and bossiest so wore it often) after Kerryn grabbed it, slipped it over her head and it snuggled about her waist? Regardless, we all avoided wearing it the next week.

One day we found an old crust of bread, thick and stale and curled at the edges, too burned for breakfast and probably tossed on a front lawn or footpath for unfussy birds. (Bits of old bread seemed to settle about the street in ways then that are unfamiliar now.)

But on a bright spring day, we smeared greeny-brown dog shit, pungent and crunchy, across its dry surface with a thick twig, fingers crooked to avoid contact. (Dog shit seemed more plentiful then too.)

"Here Kerryn, would you like some bread with peanut butter?" we said. We thought politeness would mask the smell.

But we could barely contain ourselves, smirks bubbling across our faces, the greeny-brown smear offered like a sacrifice.

"It's really delicious," we said. "Mmmm."

(How did we serve it? On a stray paper plate, also leftover from someone's rubbish? A piece of newspaper? An old bit of wood? Actually, I think we braced ourselves and served it *au naturel*. Or rather, I did, the only one brave enough to touch the crust, gingerly cupped in my hand, dog shit almost to the edges.)

Kerryn shocked us by backing away, nose wrinkled in horror. And maybe shocked it was us doing the offering.

"Mum gave us some before," we added. "So we're not hungry now."

The closer the open dog shit sandwich came the further Kerryn pulled away. We tried not to smile, not wanting our snickers to give us away. But she turned on her heels and arms in full sail, bottom bouncing, ran up the street and around the corner and home.

Really, the joke was on us. She was smarter than we'd thought.

Perhaps it was another incident — sitting on the neighbours' table tennis table, Kerryn slid off to leave an expanding pool — that prompted our generosity.

"It's lemonade," Kerryn had said. "I spilt it." And she ran home then at full sail too, wet bottom bouncing up the street and around the corner. She might have been twelve at the time, and me ten.

Kerryn saved us from ourselves really. Would you be reading this had she eaten it?

And thinking back to the table tennis table and what I have come to know now, I wonder if she wasn't abused.

