

Australia (from slushpilemag.com)

by Rick Rofihe

Ninalee and her husband Joseph are arguing again. Joseph's sister came to town. Ninalee took her out shopping and bought her a fake designer handbag on a SoHo street corner. But the one the guy let her walk away with for only twenty dollars wasn't quite right—the tiny sewn-on label read **Kate Spad**.

"Kate Spad!" That's what Joseph said later back at their apartment, and he said it while breathing in. Yes, Joseph should hardly be able to control himself, with laughter, Ninalee thinks. But it's rage, and he's only somewhat controlling it. "Sure, sure, it's a big joke to you, here in sophisticated Manhattan," he says. "Take her to the real store! Let her buy the real thing—she can afford it. We can afford it."

"Kate Spad? Who, Mommy?" That's from Janny. She's five.

"Kate Spad is Andy Spad's wife," Ninalee says. "And Andy Spad has his own store, called Jack Spad—no, Ack Spad!" Ninalee really wants to drive Joseph crazy. She crouches down to Janny's level. "Can you say it, Janny?" Ninalee asks. "Can you say Ack Spad?"

"Ack Spad!" says Janny. Janny spins around to her little brother, Benjie. He's two. "Benjamin!" she announces. It sounds to Ninalee almost like Atten-shun! "Benjamin," Janny repeats. "Say it. Say Ack Spad!"

"Azz Pazz," says Benjamin, wide-eyed and serious, but with only a little bit of confidence. If he were older, Ninalee thinks, he'd probably add, "What's going on?"

For a long time now, since Janny was born, Ninalee doesn't shut the door when going to the bathroom. Ninalee doesn't want to miss one little thing—good or bad, frightening or hilarious—that

Janny might make happen or have happen to her. The leaving-the-bathroom-door-open might have stopped by this time, but of course it had to be extended due to Benjamin's arrival.

Now it's a long-term goal for Ninalee: when Benjamin is five, she's going to start closing the bathroom door on him and his sister. Maybe even locking it. Maybe they'll find notes from their mother stuck on the outside where Janny could read them and relay them to Benjamin: "Do not bother Mommy." "Please do not whine." "Do not ask me questions through the door." "Do not begin a fight with each other the minute I go in." "Do not stick your little fingers under the door and wiggle them." "Do not slide me pennies under the door." "Do not write me messages and stuff them in under." Whatever Ninalee's future notes will say, she's conceded to herself they'll have three main ingredients:

"Yes, the door is locked."

"I want you children to be quiet, to stay out of trouble while I'm in there."

"Yes, yes, yes, I still love you."

Because Ninalee never shuts the door, of course Janny doesn't either. There is a logic to this to Ninalee, but she doesn't know if it will be so logical to Janny when she's old enough to think it over. Because her father always closes the bathroom door.

For a while Joseph didn't actually lock it if he was only in there shaving, but now he locks it all the time. And this too is somehow logical to Ninalee: she, Janny and Benjamin on the outside of a door locked by Joseph from the inside.

Ninalee thinks that by the time Janny is eight and Benjamin is five that the change she will make then will make sense to them. What she thinks now that she will tell them then is, "Children, today's the day we—me, you and you—are going to start closing the door when we go to the bathroom." Then she will add, "Like Daddy does."

Does, or did? Used to do? Three years from now, she thinks, he'll still be their father, but where will he be fathering from? A lot could change—she wants a lot to change—in three years.

Joseph and Ninalee haven't had sex, or at least any sex she's cared about, for months and months. She imagines it soon will be years, and not too long after that, forever.

After Benjamin was born, they did end up, by mutual agreement, at a marriage counselor. Ninalee made the mistake of telling the woman that she really didn't care about the lack of sex right then, but that only made the counselor, it seemed to Ninalee, more sympathetic to Joseph.

When Ninalee met with the counselor alone, she was informed by her that if they couldn't fix their sex life, well, what was to stop Joseph from looking for one elsewhere? And she gave Ninalee a newspaper article that said, among other things, that during sex with a long-term partner, the heartbeat rate goes from 70 a minute to 120. But if you're having extramarital sex it can go to 180, and some men have heart attacks. Ninalee, reading that, didn't quite giggle, but she did stop going to counseling.

Ninalee started looking for someone for Joseph. A woman from far away—as far away as you can get and still speak English. Because it's all going to be hard enough for Ninalee to arrange, and Joseph wouldn't want anything too exotic.

Ninalee's looking for someone who Joseph can't resist—and someone who'll take him home to Mother. Her mother in Canberra. Or Melbourne. Or even New Zealand.

She'd seen ads like that, she's sure, "Lonely Australian woman, young and pretty, on work assignment in New York, looking for local man to show her all the city has to offer...." But, Ninalee thinks, it can't be someone who wants to stay here. If he settled down with someone new in the tri-state area there'd be years and years of shuttling Janny and Benjamin around, Australian step-mom or not.

It has to be someone who wants—and soon—to expose him, long-term, to the outback. Ninalee sees certain promising ads now and then, but in the Escort category: “Saucy Aussie. Just Up from Down Under. Discreet and Discriminating. Does anything. Very expensive. 212....” Yes, Ninalee's seen ads like that—when she sees one again, she's promised herself to write down the number, she's going to make a call. After all, if Joseph was properly motivated, and the woman was, too—different motivations, perhaps—but why not? Yes, why not, thinks Ninalee. He can afford it—we can afford it.

Joseph is working from home today, Friday. It really is too much, thinks Ninalee. Wednesday would be better, because three days in a row—Friday, Saturday, Sunday—with him can be a lot.

Later she'll take the kids outside somewhere, it's a nice day. They'll play in a park, she'll be sitting on a bench. Their daddy will be in his home office in front of his computer. He's in there now, computing away. The door is, of course, closed.

Ninalee, meanwhile, is at the kitchen table making lists of things that have to be bought, and of things that have to be done. One thing—Ninalee doesn't write it down—that really has to be done is making sure about Benjamin. Because Janny is already her mother's daughter, but how to make sure that Benjie is not his father's son?

Now Ninalee gets up from the table. She starts to put some snacks in a bag for Janny and Benjie, and some storybooks in there too, to read to them in the park: books about trains, mostly, and there's one with a bus and one with a car.

No books about planes, though. In very small ways that only an attentive mother with time on her hands can do, she's been suggesting to them that flying in planes isn't something that either would like. It won't come up for a while, but she doesn't want them going off to visit Daddy someday—and really, flying's the only time-efficient way of getting to Australia.

And Ninalee hears Janny right then from the bathroom. “Shit,” Janny says. Joseph wouldn't really like hearing that, no swearing in

the house, but Janny isn't actually swearing. She's, well, commanding? Maybe coaching? Ninalee knows.

From the kitchen Ninalee can imagine Janny's face now, eyes focused on Benjie, a very serious look on her face as she says it again. "Shit, Benjamin!"

No, it's not swearing—Janny's helping her mother by toilet-training her little brother. He's up on the potty—he'll get it right soon, thinks Ninalee, suddenly completely happy in her own home, while Janny is saying it, again and again, "Shit, Benjamin, shit!"

