

## Young Writers Award - 2006 runner up

### Simon Says by Benjamin Law

**This story may contain inappropriate terminology or offensive language which, though unintentional, may cause distress to some people.**

As far as I'm aware, it's not in any medical brochures or textbooks. But Simon says he reckons that when someone starts shitting with the door open, they're officially depressed. He says it's a symptom probably just as telling as "ceasing to care about physical appearance" or "loss of appetite". Of course, Mum resents this and says it's a totally unfair, misrepresentative assessment of her, claiming that:

- (1) Since Dad's left, this is her house now, and she can now do what she wants;
- (2) In normal families, there aren't supposed to be secrets and closed doors;
- (3) Simon's on Dad's side, like he always is; and
- (4) Simon's an arsehole.

So by Mum's logic, it's her marriage that's prevented her from exercising this basic human right to leave the toilet door open. Leaving the toilet door open is, for her, apparently the act of a strong-willed, independent woman, finally free from the oppressive confines of a bad marriage.

Simon and I are supposed to take that seriously.

But as Simon says, when your mother starts sitting on the toilet, with her imitation *Hello Kitty!* pyjamas bunched by her ankles, pissing loudly and staring off vacantly into space like she's had a lobotomy—well, she kind of loses her authority a little bit.

Dad left home with his clothes in black, industrial-strength garbage bags. Because he never traveled anywhere, he didn't have any suitcases of his own.

Mum and Dad haven't 'seen their lawyers' yet (I wasn't even aware they had lawyers), so Simon says they're not even technically divorced at the moment. In the meantime, they've come up with this schedule where Dad spends the whole weekend with us, while Mum gets Mondays through to Fridays.

Today's Saturday.

I hate picking up the phone, but after it keeps ringing and ringing—and after yelling out and getting no response from Simon or Mum—I finally answer it.

"Hello, Tommy speaking," I say.

It's Dad on the other line.

"Tommy-ah," he says in Chinese. He sounds exhausted. "So I was thinking, you guys should get ready now, and I'll come in half an hour to pick you and your brother up. Wait in front of the house, okay?"

Dad knows better than to come into the house now.

On the phonenumber, I hear a soft *click* noise, and I know Mum's doing it again. But I can't do anything about it, or mention it on the phone.

"Okay Dad," I say. "I'll tell Simon. See you soon."

After I hang up, I go into the living room, where Mum's doing the ironing, and watching a repeat of a quiz show called *Australia's Smartest Kids*. Simon's lying on the sofa, reading *Rolling Stone*.

"Complete this common phrase," the host says on the TV. "For all the ---- in China."

"Come on," Simon says, not looking up. "It's 'tea'. *Tea*, you fucking idiots."

"Simon, they're only kids," Mum says.

"Rice?" the kid asks.

"The answer we were looking for is 'tea'," the host says. "Sorry!"

Mum sighs and unplugs the iron. "I'm Chinese, and I've never heard of that expression." She starts folding the laundry. "Was that your father?" (When parents split up, they only refer to each other as "your father" or "your mother", as if they never actually had a relationship with *each other*.)

"Why are you even asking when you were listening in, anyway?" I ask.

Simon hears this and groans.

"Jesus, Mum."

"What?" she says.

"They're *private* conversations," Simon says. "Dad wouldn't do that to you."

"Well, you don't know your own father very well then," she says in Chinese. "So it's obvious you've taken his side, then."

"Oh, *that's* fair," Simon says.

I don't want to be the one who's started this.

"Hey, Simon—"

Simon groans. "Mum, I'm not on anyone's side. There *are* no sides. That's just something you're making up. It's just: you get *irate* if we open mail with your name on it. So why shouldn't we get pissed off when you're listening in on our phone conversations? And then you deny it? It's *pathetic*."

He shouldn't have called her 'pathetic'.

"See, Tommy? See how your brother hates me?" she says in Chinese.

"You're both my parents," Simon says, "so don't make me take sides."

"Ah!" she says. "You said there *were* no sides! Now you're being *controversial*!" she says triumphantly. "Say one thing, but mean another!"

Simon rolls his eyes, avoids saying the obvious.

"Do you mean *contradictory*?" I tentatively ask. "Because *controversial* is a different word. 'Contradictory' means..."

But Mum gives me this look, so I just sort of trail off. Then she uses the trump card employed to end all arguments—"Well, sorry my English is not as good as yours!"—and leaves the room with the ironing in her arms.

She slams the laundry door behind her.

Simon sits on the sofa, looking dark. He notices I'm staring at him.

"What?" he spits.

I'm suddenly aware of my arms, and don't know where to put them. So I pretend I'm scratching my hand.

"Um, Dad said he'd be here in half an hour. We have to wait outside."

"I'm already dressed," he says, and goes to his bedroom.

He slams the door, as well.

I knock on Simon's door, but he doesn't respond. So I go in anyway.

Simon's bedroom has posters all over it—a pop-art poster of a movie called *A Clockwork Orange* I'm not allowed to see, and this singer called Beck who Simon says is *god*, even though he's a Scientologist.

Simon doesn't acknowledge me, so I sit on the floor while he lies down in bed, throwing an old tennis ball against the ceiling, listening to his discman. He does this when he gets moody. When Mum's pissed off, she makes sure you *know* it. As Simon puts it, the woman likes to make some fucking *noise*—screaming, throwing pots and pans, banging the walls, talking to herself. (Probably another sign of depression). In contrast, Simon's like Dad. He just broods silently.

But a part of me thinks of Simon: *What's he got to be angry about?* He's just graduated from highschool. And although I've just graduated from primary school, graduating from Year 7 doesn't mean anything, except that you're just spat out at the bottom of the school pecking order again, and you've now got several teachers who despise you, rather than just the one. But leaving Year 12 means you get to leave behind your school, your town, your family. You get to become a new person, reinvent yourself. You get to escape.

"What?" Simon asks. "Is Dad here?"

I shake my head. "Fifteen minutes."

The day Dad left home—garbage bags stuffed into the boot of his Honda (others must have thought he was homeless or crazy)—I watched his car drive away until it was a dot, and even after it had disappeared, I willed myself to believe I could still see the car. Then I was struck with the thought: *He's not going to live here ever again. Not like before.* Afterwards, I had trouble breathing, and had to lie down for the rest of the night because I had a stomach ache that wouldn't go away. The next morning, I had bad diarrhoea, and Mum said I was just making myself sick.

Simon's final marks come in the mail tomorrow.

Outside, a car horn beeps. Dad's early. But we should have been waiting outside already.

If you drive about 30 minutes away from my place, you reach a town where there are six or seven small, crappy little theme parks within walking distance of each other. I remember when I was little, I thought these places were fantastic. We used to have birthday parties and school excursions there. But now, only a few years later, they just seem really sad and deserted. I nearly want to cry when we drive past their signs, and their brightly-coloured cartoon fonts saying *Dig up your own THUNDER-EGGS here!*, or *Slide down Australia's BIGGEST beer bottle!!! Kids under 8 are FREE!* (Fact: the giant beer bottle slide smells badly of piss. Do not go there.)

It just seems unbearably sad that these awful places were built for the sole purpose of making people happy.

At one of these tourist attractions, you were able to taste honey from 50 different types of bees for free. *Dead*. Another place had a train where all of the individual carriages were built to resemble giant macadamia nuts. *Dead*. In Year 4, we went to an adventure park where a massive waterslide zig-zagged through the side of a massive green hill. But then I think someone got Legionnaire's Disease there, or something, and died. It was in the news and everything.

There's also a wildlife sanctuary.

Dad pulls up the Honda outside, and we're the only car in the carpark. Simon chose the wildlife sanctuary, because it was his turn. (Last week, I chose a charity bookfair that was on, but Simon and Dad both came out saying it was the most boring piece of shit they'd ever been to. Neither of them read much.) I don't really understand Simon's approach to picking Dad's weekend activities. He gets a kick out of choosing the most crap places for us to go. He says he chooses places out of a "detached sense of irony", which basically means we visit somewhere lame, and Simon says because they're so bad, they're actually good. I have no idea what he means.

We get out of the car. Next to the ticket booth, there's a small pen of baby deer you can pet while you purchase your tickets for the "Great Australian Safari". Dad buys the tickets (they're expensive, I feel bad) and three packs of wildlife feed, while Simon pets a baby deer on the head.

"Hey little guy," he says.

"You're going to get germs," Dad tells Simon (in Chinese so the ticket operator can't understand). "Make sure you clean your hands before you put those fingers back into your mouth. You'll probably get worms."

The baby deer looks sad. Or depressed. It's the only one wanting to get pet by us—the others sleep in the shade at the back and look sickly.

After we get back in the car, ready to drive into the park, Simon says it's probably only a few more years before all the deer are sent off to be slaughtered to become venison and dog food.

For the most part, the wildlife sanctuary is depressing. There are kangaroos, but none of us go near roos anymore, ever since one kicked Simon in the balls so bad a few years back that he got actual *bruises*. And there are a lot less deer than any of us remembered. ("What did I tell you?" Simon says. "*Venison*.")

The deer come up to the car in packs, and we feed them through the windows. Dad doesn't say much during the trip, and he lets me finish off his bag of feed after I run out. Weirdly, there's this one random, single emu in the whole place, amongst the deer and kangaroos. The poor bird—he must feel like he's the last of his species; the last emu on the goddamned planet. I look in the brochure, and finds his name: Clyde.

Clyde comes strolling up towards the Honda, and I wind my window down a bit further to accommodate its hairy neck.

"Are you even supposed to feed the emus here?" Simon asks. "Isn't that stuff for deer?"

"Maybe it's developed a taste for it," Dad says.

Clyde comes up alongside the car, and I lay my hand flat with feed. It starts pecking at the food, but I forget—birds have beaks.

"Oww, *fuck*."

Clyde eats all the feed from my hand, but then spots the paper bag next to me and makes this honking, screeching noise of excitement. His neck comes the whole way into the Honda, and continues its ungodly screaming as lunges towards the bag of feed.

"Oh my fucking *god*!" Simon says laughing.

I don't actually scream, because I can't breathe.

"Wind up the window!" Dad says.

But what Dad doesn't understand is that Clyde's head is mostly in the car already, and winding up the window would make the situation worse. But stupidly, in my stammering panic, I reach out awkwardly, grab the window winder and start winding.

This freaks Clyde out, and he screeches more.

The whole time, Dad actually drives the Honda forward a little, but Clyde keeps up, walking alongside the car, screeching and honking and screeching. I keep winding the window up, which makes Clyde panic, and he starts hitting his head against the car's ceiling in wild, spastic fits.

Simon's laughing so hard now he can't breathe, either.

"Stop the car, stop the car!"

I think we're going to rip Clyde's head off soon.

Clyde gives the car's ceiling one last bang with his head, before he sort of shakes his head out of the window, and stumbles away from the car in a drunken daze. Poor Clyde.

Afterwards, we're all laughing so hard, but I wish Mum were here with us. It seems like something she would have appreciated.

By the end of the day, we're still the only car to have driven through the "Great Australian Safari" the whole time.

When we get back home, Mum's already asleep on the couch, even though it's the afternoon. She does this a lot lately.

Simon crouches by Mum, and nudges her shoulder.

"Mum," he says. "Mum? You're asleep."

Mum, in her sleep, registers his presence and nods. She smacks her lips.

"Mum, did you take out your contact lenses out?"

She nods.

"Did you wash your face?"

Nods.

"Did you brush your teeth?"

In her sleep, she nods.

"Open your mouth then," Simon says.

Still unconscious, Mum opens her mouth. Simon sniffs, and screws up his face a little.

"I'm not convinced you've brushed your teeth, Mum," he says.

In her sleep, Mum looks annoyed and rolls over in the sofa away from him. Simon laughs quietly, and so do I.

But all I can think about right now is how soon it'll just be Mum and I, and I'm not ready to be that person who makes sure Mum's contact lenses are out and that she's brushed her teeth. Parents are supposed to take care of kids, I thought, but sometimes it feels as though Simon's the parent around here. If Simon gets the marks he wants and goes to uni, he'll be gone in exactly 74 days. And then it's just down to two.

I watch Mum sleeping. She doesn't look depressed to me. Just really tired. I tell Simon this later, but all he says is that he was joking about Mum being depressed, and did I really think he was serious, and didn't I know that he was just kidding?