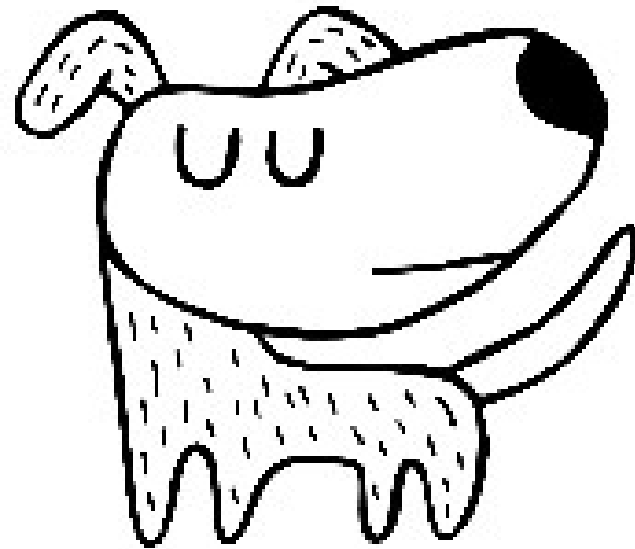
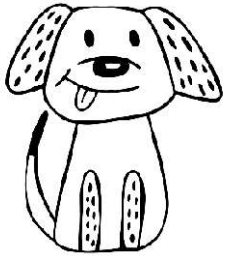


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One Impulsive Decision and other stories

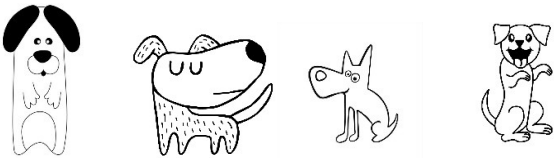


One Impulsive decision



We all have moments when we make an impulsive decision, that on reflection, we realise was made in too much haste. The day we decided to get a dog was one such decision. We had never had a dog. Over the years, the pleading of my children

and I to have one had largely been ignored until finally my husband said 'I won't have anything to do with it'. As far as my children and I were concerned, this was a resounding 'yes', so two weeks later, we found ourselves at the dogs' home for abandoned and stray animals.



The dog's home is for abandoned and stray animals and where dogs wait for their new forever home. Each animal is kept in a small concrete cell with a bowl of water and something to lie on. Prospective owners parade up and

down the cells, checking out each dog one by one. On the day of our visit, there was a large, intimidating dog that had a reputation for jumping high fences. There were elderly dogs that could no longer be



river. A few of us desperately tried to lift the boulder, but after multiple attempts, we gave up. The boulder wasn't budging. The enormity of the situation was just dawning on me. With the narrow spaces that we were still to pass through, there was no hope of us being able to get her out or even being rescued if her foot was broken.

We were panicking, how could we help her? Then I heard someone shout, "What if we attach a rope to a harness and try getting the harness around the boulder? We can hopefully pull the boulder off her foot." To enter the cave, we had to climb down ropes and each of us had a harness around our waist to help us safely descend into the cave. It seemed like our only viable option.

Quickly, we formed a human chain along the length of the rope and placed the harness around the boulder. We tightened our grip on the rope and pulled. The boulder moved slightly, but Claire's foot was still firmly wedged underneath. We pulled again. This time I felt the jolt from the boulder shifting.

In the dim light of my head torch, I could see relief spread across Claire's face. She wobbled to her feet and gingerly put weight on her foot. She winced, but she was OK. Yet, in the excitement, I realised how different that day could have been if Claire's foot had been broken.

We turned our torches off and there were audible gasps from my friends. It was as if there were thousands of tiny twinkling lights set into the roof of the underground castle. These tiny lights were glowworms, the larvae of an unremarkable insect, the flying gnat, which is only found in Australia and New Zealand. The larvae build a sticky web to catch other insects. Attracted to the light the glow worms give off, insects of all sorts become trapped in the sticky web becoming food for the larvae.

We began wading through the stream, the water lapping against the tops of our legs. Pressing our hands against the roof of the cave to help balance ourselves against the rushing water, we slowly made our way through the rushing water. At times, the roof of the cave was so low that we had to crouch down, lowering our bodies further into the water. We snaked along the underground river.

Suddenly, there was a splash, followed by urgent shouting. My companion, Claire, had used a stalactite to support herself, but then it broke off in her hand. She shrieked as she tumbled backwards and was swept downstream, her arms desperately trying to grab onto something, the blackness of the cave seemingly swallowing her up. Frantically we quickened our pace, following her shouts of help.

We charged towards her. She was struggling in the water and her head was just bobbing above the surface of the water. "I can't move," she shouted. It soon became clear that Claire's foot had become wedged under a boulder in the

cared for by their owners and there were small dogs that were yappy and annoying. We paused at a cell where there was a shaggy ball of white wiry hair racing back and forth in his cell. We knew the minute we saw him that he was ours. He was a mongrel - neglected and scrawny with a squashed face.



Nigel, as he had been named by the workers at the dog's home, had been found wandering the streets.

He had been bred to herd cattle and sheep, but we were assured he would make a great addition to our family. Our experience with pets was rather limited, but how hard could it be? We had pet chickens that we had reared inside our house. We kept them in a cardboard box to protect them from the harsh Tasmanian winter, letting them wander around our living room when we were home. But now, fully grown and just starting to lay eggs, they lived in a chicken coop constructed from odd bits of wood and chicken wire.

We arrived home with our new family member, Nigel, taking him inside. However, it wasn't long before chaos descended on our house. Free from the confines of his cell, Nigel pelted around our home, darting into different rooms and sniffing every nook and cranny. It wasn't long before he turned his attention to our furniture and before we had a chance to stop him, our couch was peppered with tooth marks!

Nigel was banished outside to the yard where he continued to sprint at lightning speed, forcing his way through shrubs and charging through garden beds. We left our mini tornado to explore the rest of the garden, enabling us to enjoy a few quiet moments inside, without having to worry about our furniture being chewed to pieces. An hour later, I checked on our new family member. Our chicken coop was mangled and our yard was littered with feathers and blood. Tears welled up in my children's eyes. Then the full-blown screaming began. They were hysterical. I tried to bury the dead birds, but our dog kept digging them up. I tried consoling my children, but failed miserably. I tried to help the one remaining traumatised chicken, but it hid deep in a bush where it resided for an entire week.

After the day's shenanigans, we were all looking forward to a calmer evening. However, it then became apparent that there were some serious gaps in the training (if any) Nigel had received in his past life. As I was serving dinner, Nigel leaped onto the table and greedily helped himself to the fresh pat of butter, and before I could retrieve it, he had feasted on my son's dinner.

Nigel was exiled to the laundry that night. We figured this was the best place for him. He couldn't be trusted with our furniture and I wasn't sure what mischief he would get up to outside. By midnight, I gave into his incessant whimpering and scratching at the door. Not trusting that he would behave if left unsupervised while we were sleeping. I tied

100 m below

We surveyed our surroundings and what we saw took our breath away. There were knobbly columns of white stalactites that hung from the cave ceiling, like oversized chandeliers that glittered like jewels in the light from our head torches. Some of these were like giant icicles, others were thin straws, and others looked like rippled blankets of stone. Of equal beauty were the stalagmites that rose from the ground. It was as if we were in a secret underground palace.

I realised that it was such a rare privilege to see such wonders. We were about 100m below the surface in one of the most beautiful limestone caves in the world. I could faintly hear the dripping of the water in the cave that would have formed these stalactites and stalagmites over hundreds, if not thousands of years. As acidic water slowly seeped through the rocks above, it formed the mineral calcite, as it reached the open air of the cave, gradually forming the stalactites that were in every direction. As the water dripped onto the cave floor, the majestic stalagmites gradually grew up from the cave floor towards the stalactites.

To our left was an underground waterfall, with water cascading over rocks into a narrow stream below. The stream was surrounded on either side by high rock walls.

Then, in a barely detectable voice, my friend Rose asked, 'Can we order some olive oil ice cream, please?'

Her eyes were like slits as she hovered over Rose, who was now shrinking away.

'We only have one serve left,' she quipped, 'and it comes with cake.' Her beady eyes had seemingly now disappeared in the folds of her skin, but for a small glint.

After a small pause, Rosie responded that she would like to order the last serve of ice cream with cake, and that they would share it.

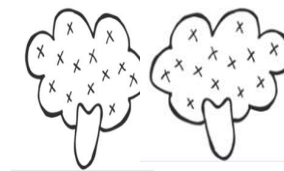
The apron-wearing lady now appeared and snapped, 'You will only get about a teaspoon of ice cream each.' The friends sat at the table, rather confused as to what was happening. A few minutes later, dessert appeared. There on the plate was a warm piece of orange cake with lashings of cream, and a small dollop of ice cream was perched on top of the cake. The apron-wearing lady was right. There was only a teaspoon of ice cream each. Perhaps that was the reason for her annoyance. The lady had gifts, meals, drinks, and a range of different olive oils for sale, but all the friends wanted was to share some ice cream that was smaller than the palm of a hand.

And what of the ice cream? It tasted like you would expect - slightly oily vanilla ice cream.

Nigel to the dining room table using his new leash. Quiet returned to our house and I managed a few hours' sleep, until I was woken by havoc in our loungeroom. Nigel had eaten through his leash. Chaos had returned.



A week later, our home was returning to some normalcy, until frantic squawking roused our attention and I raced outside. The last remaining pet chicken that had spent the last week perched in a bush, had summoned up the courage to come out - perhaps in search of food. Our dog, who had been waiting for this moment, now had a mouthful of chicken. I raced outside, chasing the dog around the yard with no plan of how I would get him to release the petrified bird from his grip. Unfortunately, this debacle didn't have a happy ending for the chicken. Our dog seemed to be completely oblivious to the fact that he was in disgrace.



While our home is in the suburbs, beyond our back fence is a bush reserve. People frequently walk through the reserve, enjoying the serenity away from the hustle and bustle of the city. This reserve is also home to a large number of wallabies. During the day, they sleep among the safety of the trees. At night, they hop down a laneway next to our house to feast on people's lawns.

It was about this time that we discovered that Nigel loved to chase anything that moved. As far as Nigel was concerned, the wallabies were moving targets. As they undertook their evening migration past our house, He would charge full speed up and down our yard, yapping at the wallabies who were safe on the other side of the fence and didn't care about the frenzy occurring in our yard.

It was during this nightly routine that Nigel perfected the art of parkour. In his excitement at seeing wallabies that were just out of his reach, he would sprint towards our back fence, gaining sufficient momentum to run along its back corner, almost reaching the top of the fence in the process. Late one night, alerted to sounds of commotion outside, we discovered that Nigel's parkour practice had paid off. He had succeeded in launching himself over the fence. His timing was impeccable and as he catapulted over the fence, he brought down a poor, unsuspecting wallaby in the process. Already in my pyjamas, I raced outside to find what looked like a dead wallaby on the other side of the fence and Nigel was nowhere to be seen. I grabbed a torch and raced around the bush, desperate to find our dog, who was very likely causing mayhem with the multitude of moving targets. Eventually, I located him. He was panting and exhausted and looking rather pleased with himself. As we approached the spot where Nigel had made his escape, it seemed a miraculous resurrection of a wallaby had occurred. There was no trace of the animal that had been lying limp among the grass less than an hour ago. It seems that our dog must

Olive Oil Ice Cream

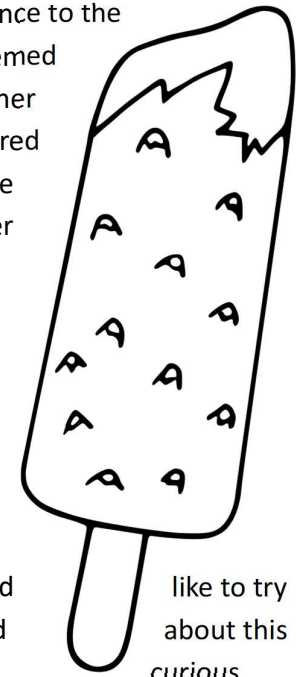
We were greeted at the entrance to the restaurant by a lady whose apron seemed to be two sizes too small. She wiped her hands on her apron, which was smeared with oil and splattered with dried cake batter. She ran her fingers through her wiry hair as if she was trying to unsuccessfully tame it.

'Are you here for lunch?' she croaked, making her multiple chins wobble as she spoke. She waved a menu in front of them, which had a long list of delicious things to eat.

The friends replied, 'No, but we would like to try the olive oil ice cream.' They had read about this very unusual ice cream and were curious enough to find the restaurant to try it. Any remnant of a smile evaporated from the apron-wearing lady's face as she waddled back inside without making a comment.

'Would you like to sample some olive oil?' she asked, pointing with her knobbly, outstretched finger at the range of olive oils they sold.

We politely replied, 'No, thank you,' as she turned to disappear into the kitchen.



like to try
about this
curious

able to keep up, let alone keep in time with my sister's fingers that were also sliding across the keys.

In no time at all, we found ourselves at the front of the stage, bowing and then walking off stage. What was a result of months of practice and many lessons, was now over in under a minute. The audience was applauding. Despite the frantic pace at which I had set for us, we had played our piece flawlessly. My moment of fame was over in seconds and was never repeated, yet it created a memory that lasted a lifetime.



have only knocked the poor animal unconscious as he hurtled over the fence

For a while, life with our dog was uneventful. He stopped escaping from our yard. There had been no mishaps involving wallabies and he learnt that our dining room table was out of bounds. There were no problems until one day our neighbours got chickens.

I think our next pet will be a guinea pig

How to use a fire extinguisher (a cautionary tale)

The annual arrival of the dentist van to Mark's school was not something that was particularly memorable. Except for that one visit when Mark was nine years old. The dental surgery was a transportable building towed by a truck, which then spent the next week or so parked in the school's carpark. While it looked rather plain and ordinary on the outside, inside it was a fully kitted-out dentist surgery. There was a small reception area where children would wait their turn. The dental nurse bustled in and out of the surgery, helping the dentist but also welcoming the new children as they arrived. The dental surgery was complete with a dentist chair that the dentist adjusted before he or she decided that the position was just right, before shining a bright light on your mouth and asking you to say 'ahhh' so you could have your teeth inspected. There was a small white sink next to the chair and, after everything was done, you would be able to rinse your mouth and wipe away any drool using the paper bib tied around your neck. Often, you would be given a sticker or sometimes, if you were really lucky, you would be given a new toothbrush! Everyone knew about the school dentist. There wouldn't be a child living at that time who didn't visit the school dentist.

On this occasion, the dental van was visiting a small outback town where Mark lived. Mark was a 9-year-old boy with mousy brown hair and freckles, and like most boys his age,

the judges. We had won our event which is how we now found ourselves on the edge of the stage again. Winners from all the different sections had been invited to perform in the final concert of the Eisteddfod. It was an incredible honour to be one of the chosen few to perform at the grand finale. It was something that had never happened to my sister and I before.

The bell chimed and we walked out on the stage, our polished shoes tapping across the wooden stage. The bright lights shining on us meant it was impossible to see the audience, but this was probably just as well. We stood at the front of the stage and bowed in unison and then turned to sit on the piano stool. The piano was a shiny black grand piano. It was an honour to play such an instrument and to be part of such an auspicious occasion. On our teacher's instructions, we made sure the piano stool was positioned correctly for us. We placed our fingers on the sleek white keys. Despite not having the sheet music with us, somehow my fingers knew where they needed to be. When playing a duet, one person always has the responsibility of counting us in to set the speed and also ensure that both start in unison. Counting was my job. My heart was pounding, '1..2..3...4'. We both started playing. However, I instantly realised that there was a problem. With the adrenaline pumping through my veins, I had counted too fast and what was already a short, upbeat piece of music was now an utter musical frenzy. Our fingers raced across the pianos at a frightening pace that was so fast I wasn't sure that my fingers would be

greeted us with a warm smile, but we both knew she had high expectations of her students and that there would be trouble if we didn't put in sufficient practice. We spent most of the year either preparing for piano exams or for the Eisteddfod, an annual competition for performing arts - from reciting poetry, singing, dancing or playing an instrument.

As we got older, more and more practice was expected of us during the week. So to ensure we could get sufficient practice in our day, we would get up early and practice before school and then practice again in the afternoon. Our teacher expected perfection and would stop us at every error, pointing out the slightest of errors. noting whether we were playing too slowly or not loudly enough. As the exams or Eisteddfod approached, those students who didn't know their music sufficiently well, were asked to come back for an additional lesson. This was shameful as nothing less than perfection was expected. Mrs Herbert was a piano teacher whose students always performed well in competitions. She was a stern teacher with a reputation for being strict. There was unspoken rivalry between Mrs Parson's students and Mrs Herbert's, each wanting to outperform the other.

Two more students had now completed their performance and there was yet another round of applause as we shuffled closer to the very edge of the stage. The bright lights made it difficult to see the audience clearly, but perhaps that was just as well. We had performed our duet about a week ago, to a mostly empty concert hall, except for a few parents and

he loved sport. In the winter he played Aussie Rules Football, and in the summer he played cricket. On the weekends, like his other friends, he would attend church. Mark was like all of the other boys his age, except for one thing. He was obsessed with reading. Like all children, his bedtime routine would usually involve being read a chapter or two from a library book by one of his parents. This quickly progressed to him reading his own books. He read everything. He was one of those rare individuals who read every sign in a museum. He would read at any opportunity. He would be so absorbed in his book that he would forget to get ready for school. He read books about geography and knew all of the Prime Ministers of Australia. He devoured books about sport and futuristic stories. However, this superpower caused him some trouble the day that it was his turn to visit the dentist.

Mark was sitting quietly in the dentist surgery, waiting his turn. Wanting to amuse himself, he looked around the waiting room, searching for something to read. There was children's artwork depicting the usual things like people, houses, and gardens pinned neatly to the wall behind the receptionist's desk. However, apart from the artwork, the room was bare. The only thing to read was the label attached to the fire extinguisher, so that is what Mark focused on. Except there was a problem. The label detailed the instructions for how to use the fire extinguisher. However, without really thinking through the implications,

Mark not only read the instructions, but began following them.

1. Pull the pin to break the seal.
2. Aim the nozzle or hose at the base of the fire.
3. Squeeze the handle.
4. Aim the nozzle at the base of the fire

Suddenly, water shot from the fire extinguisher across the room, hitting the children's artwork so that the pictures were now just streaks of paint dripping down the wall.

Mark, with his mouth hanging open, stared at the soggy paper and dripping paint as the dental nurse ushered him into the dental surgery. He was sure that any minute now he would be interrogated about the mess. However, no one mentioned it, and he left the dental van and returned to class, slightly shaken, trying to pretend that everything was completely normal. He settled back to work, staring at his text book intently. He had convinced himself that the dentist would appear in his classroom demanding to know what had happened. However, that wasn't to be. In fact, no one ever questioned him. Did they not notice the dripping paint down their walls? Did they think that surely a polite little boy with mousy brown hair would never tamper with fire equipment? One will never know.

MY 30 SECONDS OF FAME



I wiped my sweaty palms on my dress. My pulse was racing. It was almost our turn. I tried to transport my mind to a place where I was practising the music my sister and I had spent months playing, but it wasn't working. I couldn't

even remember what note our piece of music started on.

We were standing on the side of the stage waiting our turn to perform. I tried to hide behind the thick velvet curtains while peeking at the audience. From what I could see, the concert hall was full. The piano playing stopped and there was an enthusiastic applause as the competitors stood, moved to the front of the stage, bowed and then filed off stage. The line of competitors was now getting shorter and we were edging closer and closer to the stage. Some of the competitors had brought their music with them, but our teacher was keen for us to memorise the music. My throat was dry and I glanced at my sister, hoping she would help ease my nerves, but her wide eyes were staring at the next competitors who had begun to play their piece of music.

Each week, my sister went to our piano teacher's home for a piano lesson. Her piano was in her living room. We had been learning from Mrs Parsons for quite a few years. She always