

How I'll Know Her

2787 words

Door to second bedroom is shut firm; Tommy's gone to Workshop; flat's been cleaned from tip to toe. Nothing Mumma rules *unnecessary* has been left about to spoil things. 'Cos Mumma's coming, and Mumma likes things orderly.

Mumma doesn't like Tommy, but that doesn't stop from Tommy trying. Before he left, he laid out two packets of lamingtons, like wheel spokes, on our best plate. Cling-wrapped them, too. Mumma likes things fresh.

Of course, I could arrange those lamingtons myself. But wheel pattern? That'd be tougher. Running my fingers along to ensure wheel pattern spokes are straight isn't nice – even with clean hands. Mumma likes things hygienic.

Car door bangs; gate to our block squeals; one set of feet scampers, another set shuffles, closer.

Mumma's here. Mumma's here.

But her footsteps, heavy as bricks scraping concrete, shuffle my heart. Back in the day, she used to moan, "I got legs like stumps of houses. Glad you kids don't take after me." But wow! Could her legs cover the ground! At those stumps pound-pounding the hallway, us kids'd stop our fooling and big brother'd stub and stash his smokes and fling the windows open. When Mumma stormed in, we'd be stacking books into bags and someone'd be straightening my pony-tail before she could grumble, "You can't go like that, Donna. If you could just see yourself."

But I couldn't see myself, so a crooked pony-tail didn't bother me.

Mumma doesn't pound the floorboards any more. She just lumbers along, like life's dealt her too many blows.

One of those blows is with her today. I can hear him chattering.

By the time I swing open the screen door, Mumma's found her bossy voice and she's lecturing Jeremiah, "Now no rushing, and knocking Auntie Donna down. Go easy or I'll give you what for."

Mumma's kiss is warm, Mumma's hug is a teddy bear's. Not like when we were little. What you got then was likely a slap and a hair-pull and a "Pull yourself together, Donna. Stop that sniffling. You gotta play the cards you've been dealt."

My brothers reckon Mumma's mellowed. I'm not so sure.

"Ouch!" I pull my hand back from petting Jeremiah's head. "Your hair has transformed into spikes." He giggles and puts his hand in mine. And I'm thinking, "It's gonna be a good day. 'Cos not only has Mumma come, but this darling kid has come, too."

"Under the couch, Jeremiah, there's toys Tommy got at the op shop." His little feet's scurry, the scuff of the toy box over the tiles, his *whoop* – they set me smiling big time.

"Mumma, would you like to sit on the comfy couch," I suggest.

Mumma ignores me.

Oh, what a sad wheeze as she plods across the room; what a heavy sigh as she lowers herself onto the velvet chair Tommy christened Donna2, '*cos its b-b-bones are f-f-fine and its cover is as g-g-gold as your hair.*' But Donna2 knows nothing about decorum. Nothing about suffering silently for good causes. Her springs squeak louder than Jeremiah's rubber duck.

There's no nice way to say, "You sure that chair can hold you?"

"You comfortable there, Mumma?" seems safe.

"As comfortable as I'm ever gonna be, what with the Ar-thur-it-is and the Bur-sit-is."

A clatter shudders my bones and I leap forward. But at the click-clack-skidding of tin trucks across tiles, my bones settle and I laugh, "You just tip all the toys out, Jeremiah?"

"He can jolly well tidy them up again." Mumma sniffs her angry sniff.

"Nanna doesn't wanna go tip-truck sliding."

"I'm all right. It's you I'm worried about, Donna."

As he hurtles blocks back into the box, Jeremiah declares, "Tommy got great toys.

Tommy's not a dropkick at all, Nanna."

"Shut it, Jeremiah," she barks.

"You said - "

Whistle of Mumma's hand slices the air. Whack on Jeremiah's bum slices my heart.

Until his howls have dampened down into blubbers and snuffles, we don't try to talk.

Then I say, "Cuppa, Mumma?"

"I need more'n a cuppa. A stiff whisky might hit the spot. Taking on these kids after seven of my own, I must be crazy."

"How about I put the kettle on, Mumma." My heart is pounding like Mumma's feet used to.

In the kitchen, my fingers trace to where two mugs already stand assembled, dangling their tea-bags, and the kettle is waiting for me to flick its switch.

To calm myself, I chant, *Mumma's here, Mumma's here*, over and over. I feel the revs of my heart slow until I can't hear it pulsing at all.

Hissing becomes my guide. Starts small like a conch shell which you have to strain to hear; but when the kettle's boiled, it bubbles and sloshes, thrashing its way out of prison. Pouring is my challenge. But I've practised it so often, lining up cups, guiding kettle's lip, angling right, I don't spill a drop. Add milk-shake, grater and chocolate to tray; check cups are straight; double-check lamingtons.

One shoulder against the wall, holding the tray steady, I count nine steps back to our living room.

Mumma's doing something she shouldn't be. Here's how I know: she gulps her guilt, plonks something down and slumps onto Donna2. All that effort has upped her wheeze several decibels, too.

She's been snooping in our accounts box.

Well, what she'll have found is this: we've never been late once with our bills. Every payment we make, I spell out PAID for Tommy to write on the bill along with the receipt number and the date.

I'm not saying I left that box there deliberately. Let's just say I didn't move it from where Mumma would find not looking harder than a kid left alone with his presents on Christmas Eve would.

Jeremiah skips, Mumma labours, but they both make it to the table. Grating chocolate for Jeremiah rasps my fingers raw. But his *ooh, yum* is worth it. It's even worth Mumma's, "Oh, Donna. Why d'you always have to get ahead of yourself?"

Jeremiah's reaching for a third lamington when Mumma slaps his hand.

"Tommy's fixed up a sandpit for you," I put in quickly, although my heart has started such a jig it could be a cork bobbing across a flooding river.

With the little lad gone out to the yard, Mumma exhales what might be an all-in-one sigh and groan. "I don't mean to be tough on him. Just that life shoulda got easier ... and now this."

Mumma's arm, when I pat it, is dry and crepey, as if weariness has wrung out all its softness. "Me and Tommy could help out sometimes," I say.

"You do keep your place nice," she concedes.

The thrumming stops instantly and my heart soars into singing *told you so*. Not wanting to gloat, I make my old joke, "Didn't bother cleaning the windows, though. Couldn't see much point." When Mumma manages a chuckle, I try again. "We could give you a break with the kids, Mumma."

"You're a kind girl. But ... well ... you know you can't. Not really." Her voice, laced with pity, sets my teeth clenching.

For minutes we sit still, neither of us able to bridge the chasm that has re-opened between us.

At last, to cut our stalemate, Mumma asks, "Heard from your sister?" When she mumbles, "You were the one I feared for," I know she's thinking about how clever Louise was. Wondering how it came to this.

At her voice drooping, my teeth unclench. "I get phone calls," I tell her, "but police say *don't let her know where you are*. So if she starts abusing, we hang up."

"You're smart," Mumma says. Then catches her breath. Bet she wishes she hadn't said that. But she did say it. I could punch air. *Say it again, please Mumma*, I'm praying. Once is enough, though. I store it away in my heart like a precious gem in a bank vault. When Tommy returns, I'll take it out, and we'll examine it together in all its brilliance. I can already hear Tommy crowing, "Of c-c-course you're sm-sm-smart. You're the br-br-brains of our outfit. Just t-t-took that M-M-Mumma of yours th-th-thirty years to wake up to wh-wh-what I knew day we met at W-W-Workshop."

Mumma has settled into chin-wag stuff, rehashing the bad times. There'll be no steering her away from them now. How I wish I had a heart eraser to rub them out. To let her be happy. She starts with Dad's boozing and punching-on, wondering if Louise might have been different if he'd been better.

I tell her what a good Mumma she was. How we know it was her that kept us going.

But Mumma's aching too bad to hear.

She moves to something worse. I can tell it's worse when I reach for my second lamington, and there's none. A twelve-lamington-day is a bad day, even for Mumma.

She's reliving when Jeremiah was a little-bitty baby and Toby just a year old, and she went with Louise up, up in a lift to do a drug deal. How she thought she'd be sick. But

she had to make sure Lou's babies weren't found in a park beside their mother who'd passed out there with a needle in her arm, just weeks before.

"You reckon God'll forgive me?" she cries.

"Oh, Mumma, if God is really God, he'll say *Nothin' to forgive*. I don't want nothing to do with a God who'd hold it against my mumma that she loved her kids so much she'd even go on a drug deal for them."

"It's not for you to understand God's ways, Donna."

Oh, I so wish she'd let me lift some burdens off her sagging shoulders.

When she says she'll nip to the loo, her bladder not being what it was, I go check on Jeremiah.

"My castle's bigger'n the world, Auntie," he calls.

A screech freezes his excited claps.

Oh, don't have fallen over, please, Mumma.

What to do? What to do?

Stay calm and think.

Self-talk, they tell you at Groups. *Positive self-talk: you can solve this, Donna. You are capable. You can...*

Go, help Mumma up.

"Donna's comin', Mumma," I call.

Feel along walls to where Mumma's screaming has dropped an octave into angry bull's groaning. The groaning is from up high though—tall as me, so she's still standing on those stumps of hers.

But the stumps are on the move. Not a-drifting. But a-stomping. Towards ME, crying out, "Coming, Mumma."

"You stupid girl, Donna." The sting across my cheek nearly flattens me.

By the breeze kissing my burning face, I know. She's opened our spare-room door; she's poked her nose into our sacred place.

When Tommy told them at Workshop we were making a nursery, adding one nice item each week, the funniest comments came back. "Oh," says Tommy's mate, "so you're making a place to grow things." That set them off. More Know-it -alls at Workshop than at a meeting of professors. Someone said, "Duh. Donna and Tommy are making a baby. A nursery is a kid's bedroom." Those that titter about anything with a link to sex, tittered. But then Tommy's supervisor said, "You're both right – about what a nursery is. And I want to add another meaning. A nursery can also be a place where abilities are encouraged to flourish."

They pestered Tommy, "Which sort of nursery are you and Donna making?"

You know what Tommy told them? "Our nursery's g-g-gonna be all those things."

Mumma's grunting tells me she doesn't think our nursery will be any of those things. "God, Donna, are you mad? What is this? A pram? A cot?"

My breaths are coming out like gasps but I manage to pant, "For the babies me and Tommy are having."

When I hear Mumma's slump, I worry she'll fall down. But her voice is strong. Strong and bossy.

"You are not having a baby, Donna. You can never have a baby." Bigger Know-it-all than all the Workshop Know-it-alls rolled into one.

Remembering what I've learnt about dealing with people who tell you you're not capable, I shrug and mumble, "So you say, Mumma."

Mumma's breath explodes, like a Puffing Billy steam train that's made station after a tough climb up a high mountain. "So get rid of all this, Donna. All these baby clothes you'll never need. I'll take some in the car today."

A bit of Mumma's bolshiness might have rubbed off on me. Or maybe I'm just weary of all the *You can'ts* strewn across every path I try to walk.

What comes out of my mouth surprises even me. "Don't you touch anything, Mumma. That's mine and Tommy's stuff. You have no right."

One defiance sparks another, until it comes to that question I dread asking, in case her answer shrivels me up. "Why can't we have a baby? We minded Lou's kids when you were in hospital. You even said we did a good job. So why can't we?"

Mumma's answer freezes my heart into an ice-block that might never thaw. "Because you've had an operation."

"I only ever had one operation – for my appendix."

"No, that was so you could never have babies. That part has been cut out."

Lurching between rage and apology, she spits and splutters about how, at twelve, I'd said yes when she and our doctor said it would be just *like* having my appendix out. "Remember," she defends, "you were terrified of everything. You couldn't manage. I did it to protect you, Donna. To make your life easier. I did it for you."

I think it is me who curls into a blubbery heap. I think it is me who starts wailing. It might be Mumma, too. My wailing drowns hers, though. I know it is me who beats my fists on the floor and yells, "I hate you, Mumma. Don't ever come here again."

Another wailing, pitched so much higher than ours, halts mine.

Little Jeremiah, you shouldn't be hearing something bad like this, what with so much other stuff your Mumma has put you through.

Inhaling breaths deep into my lungs, I steady myself enough to order, "Go, Mumma."

I hear the door slam an angry slam. But the footsteps I hear are more like a sad drag fading to nothing at all.

How long am I down on that floor? I'll never know. But when shivering sets in, I scramble up, and stagger out to the table, where I make myself sit. But my heart is pumping so fast it's getting in a quarrel with my cramped legs.

Up and down the lounge— five steps wide, six steps long, I pace and pace. When my steps get long and furious, I bang into the table, but I don't care about the bruises that will blacken my thighs. I can't see them, can I?

Our group co-ordinator's words: *There's none so blind as those who will not see* play a funeral chorus to which I march.

Paced out, I slump onto Donna2 to rehearse ways to break it to Tommy, when all I want is to lean my head on his shoulder and not wake up till time has blunted this stabbing pain into a dull ache.

"Tommy," I'll say, "sit down, 'cos what I'm tellin' you might drop you anyway." Then I'll explain slowly, Tommy not being a fast thinker. I'll put my arm around him, inhale that loving smell of aftershave gone stale because of hard work, and I'll whisper, "I'm sorry Tommy, but you're never gonna hear your little one calling: *Dadda's coming*. And I'll never hear a little voice piping those words I thought were most precious: *Mumma's coming*.

And there's nothing we can do about it, neither."

I think of how it might take a long time before I jab Mumma's number into my phone and listen to her voice, harshened by yelling order into so many kids and grandkids and a husband who liked a drink – or ten, but who was "gentle as a lamb in his last days, Donna."

Of course. Of course. Mumma managed to forgive. Though it was easier, with Dad gone, to forgive him. After he died, my brothers said, "Mumma's like a dog that's been chained so long she doesn't know what to do with herself now she's been let off the leash." And just as she was getting used to freedom, a new chain came a-rattling.

Poor Mumma.

Still, I don't think I'll be opening my door when Mumma knocks. Not for a long time, anyways. And I'll know it's Mumma coming by her footsteps – a rasp of graters jagging across a weeping wound.

