

Opening extract from

Two Weeks with the Queen

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Chapter One

The Queen looked out across the Mudfords' living room and wished everyone a happy Christmas.

Colin scowled.

Easy for you, he thought. Bet you got what you wanted. Bet if you wanted a microscope you got a microscope. Bet your tree was covered with microscopes. Bet nobody gave you daggy school shoes for Christmas.

Colin looked away from the Queen's flickering face on the TV screen and down at the shiny black shoes peeping up at him from their box on the threadbare carpet.

Yuk.

The Queen obviously couldn't see them because she continued her Christmas Message without once chucking up.

'. . . ridding our world of suffering and pain is not an easy goal,' she was saying, 'but we will achieve that goal if it is our sincere wish.'

Colin's sincere wish was that the shoes would burst into flames and explode into pieces. But they didn't,

even though they were being shot at by a low-flying MiG fighter plane.

Colin stared out the window at the dusty paddocks. The shimmering glare was painful to look at, but not as painful as the sight of Luke playing happily with his model plane. Why should that little whinger get exactly what he wanted, right down to the colour of the pilot's helmet and the number of napalm canisters under the wings?

It wasn't fair.

'. . . fair share of the world's resources for all her people,' the Queen was saying.

Colin looked at his parents. He hoped the Queen was making them feel guilty.

It didn't look as though she was. People who are riddled with guilt don't usually cuddle up on the settee and fan each other with bits torn off a beer carton.

Colin stared at them for a while but that didn't plunge them into guilt either, so he went back to watching the Queen.

He wondered what it would be like to be that important. So important that it didn't even matter if you spoke like a total prawn, millions of people all over the world would still sit down on Christmas afternoon and say shhhh and listen to you.

In his head, Colin started composing a letter. 'Dear Your Majesty The Queen, I would be very grateful if you could send some tips on how to grab people's attention and make them listen to you, understand what you want for Christmas etc. Even though I'm

twelve I might as well be a lump of wood for all the attention I get around this place. Also some tips on how to stop younger brothers getting everything. I understand that chopping their heads off has been used a bit in your family. This is frowned on in Australia so something legal please . . . '

Several loud explosions echoed around the shoe box as Luke roared in for another attack on the aircraft carrier HMS Yukky School Shoes.

'Luke,' said Mum, 'we're trying to listen to the Queen.'

'I don't feel well,' said Luke.

Serves you right, thought Colin, for having three lots of ice-cream with your Chrissie pud.

'Serves you right,' said Mum, 'for having four lots of ice-cream with your Chrissie pud.'

Four? Colin couldn't believe his ears. When he was eight he'd only been allowed two. Young kids today didn't know how well off they were.

'I feel sick,' said Luke.

'Try keeping the racket down a bit,' said Dad, 'and you'll feel better.'

'Probably a strain of heat-resistant bacteria in the Chrissie pud,' said Colin. 'Pity we haven't got a microscope in the family, I could have run some tests and spotted it.'

Colin saw Mum and Dad swap a little glance that he wasn't meant to see.

They knew. They actually knew what he was busting for and they'd still given him shoes. Boy,

wait till he had time to write that anonymous letter to the child welfare department.

Luke came over and held out the MiG in a skinny hand.

'Wanna go?'

Colin shook his head. That's all he needed, charity from an eight year old.

Luke's pale brow furrowed for a second, then he was away, inflicting serious artillery damage to an already battered cane chair.

A gust of scorching wind swept in from the Western Plains and made the plastic branches of the Christmas tree flap wildly. Something in the kitchen started to bang.

'Col, shut that screen door, old mate,' said Dad.

Colin dragged himself to his feet.

'Luke'd get there quicker,' he muttered, 'he's got turbo thrusters and I've only got lace-ups.'

But Mum and Dad's eyes were already glued back on the TV screen.

'. . . in these difficult times,' the Queen was saying, 'we have to work and struggle for privilege and good fortune.'

'Bull,' said Colin loudly as he slouched out to the kitchen, 'some people are born with it.'

Mum and Dad stared at the Queen.

Colin stared at Luke.

As Colin wedged a chicken bone under the screen door to stop it flapping open again, he heard the music playing at the end of the Queen's Christmas

Message. Then he heard footsteps behind him. He straightened up. It was Mum and Dad.

Mum gave a little cough to clear her throat.

'Love,' she said, 'about the microscope . . .'

'Next time, eh?' said Dad.

They looked at Colin.

Colin looked at them.

He could hear Luke in the lounge, shooting enemy planes out of the sky with a faint roar.

'We just couldn't stretch to one this time,' said Mum, 'not with you needing a new pair of good shoes and all. But don't forget, it's your birthday in less than five months.'

And it's Luke's birthday in less than two months, thought Colin bitterly. Wonder what he'll get? A working model of the Jervis Bay Naval Depot with matching aircraft carriers? A trip round the world? A car?

'They're pretty snazzy shoes,' Dad was saying. 'Bloke could end up Prime Minister in shoes like those.'

'I've got shoes.' Colin pointed down to his brown elastic-sided boots. OK, they were a bit scuffed from when he'd borrowed Doug Beale's trail-bike and the brakes had failed and he'd had to use his feet to stop, but they'd rub up with a bit of spit and chicken fat.

Dad sighed.

'Wish we could all wear boots,' he said, 'but if you want people to take notice of you in this world, you've got to dress proper and wear decent shoes. Look at me with the Wheat Board. Luke was born

on the Sunday, I got the shoes on the Monday, landed the job on the Tuesday arvo.'

Dad grinned and gave Colin a pretend punch in the guts. Colin tried to smile but his face felt like uncooked Chrissie pud.

Mum looked at him closely, concerned.

'Love, is there anything else?'

Colin was still trying to work out how to explain without sounding like the one thing Dad hated (a whinger) when they heard the thump from the lounge.

They hurried in.

Luke lay on the floor, eyes closed, very pale, very still.

Chapter Two

The ambulance men grunted as they lifted the stretcher into the ambulance.

'Weighs a bit for a young'un,' one of them muttered.

Mum and Dad, watching anxiously, didn't say anything so Colin decided he'd better explain.

'It's all the food in his digestive tract. Nine turkey nuggets and four lots of Christmas pudding. His large intestine's probably blocking the flow of blood to his brain.'

The ambulance men, who'd been half-way through a fourth helping of Christmas pudding themselves at the station and were keen to get back to it, ignored him.

'You can faint from overeating,' said Colin. 'It's a medical fact. I've done it with jelly snakes.'

One of the ambulance men helped Colin's mother into the ambulance while the other helped a nurse tuck a blanket round Luke's legs.

'Don't worry yourself, Mrs Mudford,' said the nurse. She checked Luke's pulse. 'He'll be right. Probably just the excitement of the season.'

'We've warned him about going on bombing raids straight after meals,' said Colin, climbing into the ambulance.

The nurse blocked his way.

'Sorry, young man, full up.'

Colin glared at her. What a nerve. Specially as she worked part-time in the cake shop on Saturday mornings and probably sold Mum the Chrissie pud in the first place.

'You go with your Dad,' said one of the ambulance men, lifting Colin down like a sack of old bandages. He shut the rear doors and trotted round to the cab.

'Come on, fair go,' Colin called after him. 'I've never been in an ambulance. Where's your Christmas spirit?'

It was obviously back at the station with the Christmas pudding because the ambulance sped away down the street leaving Colin with a mouthful of dust.

Behind him, Dad blew the horn and signalled tensely for him to get into the car.

Colin sighed.

Next Christmas he was going to stuff himself stupid.

Colin peered down the rubber tube. At the other end the whole world was a tiny circle. In the centre of that circle was Luke, surrounded by most of the nurses and doctors in western New South Wales.

Well, one doctor and three nurses. And a couple of pieces of important-looking medical equipment that

Luke, twisting round in bed, was gazing at with fascination.

Colin watched as the nurses and the important-looking medical equipment all hummed and winked and made a fuss of Luke.

Then everything went black.

At last, thought Colin, my turn.

He waited for more symptoms to appear and for the nurses to rush over and start making a fuss of him.

But it wasn't Peruvian measles or Upper Congo Swine Fever, it was only the doctor stepping in front of the rubber tube.

'Hey, come on, that's not a toy.'

The doctor grabbed the rubber tube and steered Colin out of the ward.

'Any idea what it is yet?' asked Colin. 'I reckon it's gastric. If it'll help you put your finger on it I can tell you what he's eaten today. One bowl of Coco-Pops, three jelly snakes, some licorice allsorts, packet of Minties, six gherkins, half a bowl of Twisties and a chocolate Santa. That was before lunch. Would you like me to write this all down?'

The doctor didn't answer. Colin wondered if many doctors went deaf from sticking their stethoscopes too far into their ears.

Mum and Dad were sitting in the waiting area anxiously chewing their bottom lips.

'How is he, doctor?' asked Mum.

The doctor seemed to hear that OK.

'The young lad's looking much brighter now, Mr

and Mrs Mudford,' he said. 'We've sent a blood sample down to pathology in Sydney so we'll know the full story in a couple of days. I don't think it's anything to worry about. Happy Christmas.'

With a jingle of car keys and a glance at his watch he was gone.

Dad squeezed Mum's hand.

'See, nothing to worry about,' he said.

'I know,' she replied.

'That's a relief,' he said.

'Yes,' she said.

Neither of them looked relieved to Colin. He watched them still chewing their bottom lips. It's not fair, he thought, making people wait for tests to come all the way back from Sydney. Specially just for gastric. I mean I know this is only a small country hospital, but Mum and Dad are parents and parents can't help worrying. It's a fact of nature, like monkeys eating their own poos.

Colin had a sudden vision of how grateful Mum and Dad would be if someone could check out Luke's blood now, this afternoon.

The matron called Mum and Dad into her office to take care of the paperwork.

Colin decided that while they were doing that he'd take care of other things.

'No,' said Luke, pulling the covers over his head.

'I don't need a bottleful or anything, just a tiny bit,' whispered Colin.

He looked around to make sure none of the nurses were watching.

'Come on, it won't hurt.'

'It will,' said Luke's muffled voice.

Colin took a deep breath. How could a kid who was always falling out of trees and dripping blood all over the house be so sooky about handing over a bit now?

He put his mouth to where he thought Luke's ear was.

'It's for Mum and Dad.'

Luke's voice sounded faint under the covers. 'I gave them placemats.'

There was a pause, then an arm slowly slid out from under the sheet.

Colin grabbed it, pushed up the pyjama sleeve and hunted for a not-too-old scab.

It was a top microscope, but Colin didn't have time to admire it. The little room it was sitting in was on the main corridor of the hospital and someone could walk in at any time.

He pulled out his hanky, found Luke's blood-spot, and slid it under the lens. He peered into the microscope and focused it.

Wriggly things, that's what he was looking for. Like when they'd looked at the frog under the microscope in science and there'd been a million little wriggly things which Mr Blair reckoned were germs on account of the frog having been dead for two

weeks because Arnie Strachan had put it in his lunchbox and lost the lunchbox.

Colin couldn't see any wriggly things in Luke's blood.

Just blobs.

He figured gastric germs would probably be wriggly rather than blobby.

He peered at Luke's blood again. Not a wriggle.

What I need, he thought, is some healthy blood to compare it to.

Without hesitating (if he was sprung, that matron looked like she could remove an appendix with her teeth) Colin grabbed a pin and jabbed it into his finger. He put a spot of his own blood onto his hanky, slid it under the lens and peered at it.

Wriggle.

Wriggle wriggle.

His blood was full of wriggly things.

Colin felt the rest of his blood pounding in his head. He had a vision of Mum and Dad kneeling by his bed holding his hands and weeping while several hundred doctors and nurses wheeled huge and very important-looking pieces of medical equipment into position.

Then he had a very different vision. Of him telling Mum and Dad and them not believing him.

What I need, he decided, is a second opinion.

By the time he got to the doctor's house he was in a fair bit of pain.

It was his new shoes, rubbing the backs of his

ankles. He'd had to wear them because that was his excuse for going for a walk, to try them out.

Another bit of him was hurting as well, the bit inside that always ached when Mum and Dad did something that made him think they preferred Luke. It had started this time as soon as Mum had said, 'Good idea, love, you take yourself off for an hour, give me and Dad a chance to get some of Luke's things together and take them to the hospital.'

They'd be sorry when they found out it was him who was really sick.

He checked a brass number on a smart polished-wood mailbox and turned into the doctor's driveway.

The doctor lived on the side of town where people had brick houses with front lawns and sprinklers and two toilets. Dad reckoned this was a criminal waste of water. Colin reckoned that if people were clever and successful and important it was OK. As long as they didn't show off about it, like inviting two people in to go to the toilet at once.

He knocked on the doctor's big, stained-glass front door. The doctor opened it. He was wearing a party hat and a red plastic nose and holding a turkey leg.

From inside Colin could hear Christmas music and lots of adults and children talking and laughing.

He held out his hanky with the blood spots on it.

'Sorry to bother you,' he said, 'but I think I've got gastric.'

The doctor stared. Then he took off his red plastic nose.

* * *

Later, when the doctor drove Colin home in his silver Jag, Colin had got over not having gastric.

At first it had been a bitter blow, but interesting as well, the doctor getting out his microscope and showing Colin the wriggly things that covered not only the blood spot but that entire corner of the hanky.

The doctor had asked Colin if his hanky had come into contact with a dead animal and Colin had said, yes, sort of, Arnie Strachan had used it to wipe out his lunchbox.

Then the doctor had explained that the wriggly things had only got onto Colin's blood spot because they were on the hanky in the first place.

Colin had asked why the wriggly things hadn't got onto Luke's blood spot and the doctor had said because by some miracle Luke's corner of the hanky had stayed clean.

Well, cleanish.

As they turned into Colin's street, Colin glanced across at the doctor. They knew their stuff, these medical blokes. The doctor saw him looking. He gave Colin a grin.

'Bit of a pain, eh, having your kid brother in hospital. Bloke gets a bit ignored when his kid brother's in hospital.'

Colin didn't say anything. He wondered if the doctor would agree to swap brains with Dad. The first double brain transplant in Australia. Probably not.

'Don't worry about your brother,' said the doctor. 'He'll be out of hospital in a couple of days.'

Colin hoped the doctor was right.

He looked around the car as they purred along. The leather seats, the real wood dashboard, the aerial that went up without you having to stop the car and get out and pull at it and swear like with Dad's.

Of course he's right, thought Colin. You don't get a car like this by being wrong.