SHIRLEY MARR

USBORNE

COUNTDOWN TO YESTERDAY



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Winner of the WA Premier's Book Awards – Writing for Children

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For William

And for Tiger, who sadly left before

this book was finished

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COUNTDOWN TO YESTERDAY



GO LAUNCH

It seems strange to start a story with a goodbye. But as I sit in the time machine with Tiger on my shoulder, I look over at Yan and for a split second I don't want to go. I want to stay in the present. Because I can see things now, things I couldn't begin to understand two weeks ago. But Yan gives me a thumbs up. She turns the big button on the black box and confirms the coordinates. I go to place my hands over my face because it's overwhelming, but they touch upon the plastic visor of my helmet. I tell myself I'm ready. The lights flicker. There's a low hum in the air. I watch the countdown on all the screens. Time s l o w s and white smoke fills the floor. I squeeze my eyes shut.



2 WEEKS 4 DAYS
22 HOURS 43 MINUTES
UNTIL GO LAUNCH

Mum announces at dinner that she's going to enter the Summerlake Primary School Cake Competition this year.

I'm shocked at this news.

In the *for ever* that the school's been holding the fundraiser, Mum has entered it a total of…

Zero times.

I should be happy about this news.

"Therefore, James, I'll be walking down to the school with you tomorrow morning," she says.

Dad doesn't say anything, he just cuts up his steak. I don't say anything either. I don't like steak. Mum has made me beef rissoles and I cut one in half.

Every year, parents get to select one of the cakes in *The Australian Women's Weekly Children's Birthday Cake Book* to bake. And every year, two weeks before my birthday, I'd look slowly through our copy and make a fantasy Top Ten list in my head. I'd wish so hard that Mum would make me a cake. Any cake. I'd even be happy with the worst one – the Hickory Dickory Watch, which features a mouse made out of a large prune. But she never has.

I *am* happy about this news. My brain starts trying to pick which cake I want. Robert Robot. No, the Swimming Pool filled with green jelly. The Cricket Bat with my name piped in the corner.

But I am suspicious.

Mum is obviously trying to make up for something. *Or*, she's guilty of something. *Or*, she's got bad news.

"I've found a house," she suddenly blurts out.

She bursts into tears.

Oh. I guess it's all three.

Dad puts his knife and fork down and stares at his plate. So do I.

I don't want to move again. We moved just last year, and I still consider this place that we're living in right now "the new house".

We've moved five times in total. Dad says it's actually been seven times, but I was too little to remember the first

two. That's like once every one-and-a-half years since I was born. The houses all seem exactly the same to me – I don't know what my parents are looking for. Each time we move, my trundle bed loses more bits. The bottom bed that used to be able to slide under the top bed no longer does, so the bedroom door bangs against it.

The last moving man stepped on my mattress and left a black boot print. It doesn't matter which sheets Mum uses to cover it up, I know it's there.

But I tuck my hand into the crook of Mum's arm because I know it comforts her. I shovel down a big spoonful of peas and chew them with my mouth closed, without her telling me to.

Mum pats my fingers. As her crying turns to sniffles, she gets her phone out, even though we have a no-phone policy at the dinner table. She flicks through a whole bunch of photos and shows me. . .

A small, empty bedroom with grey carpet. An even smaller bedroom with the same grey carpet. A kitchenette with one wonky cabinet door. A lime-green bathroom with only a shower cubicle, no bathtub. A concrete balcony. Then, strangely, a photo of a room full of washing machines.

I ask her why she's showing me this and she says that's where we'd be doing our laundry from now on. In the shared room at the bottom of the building. Because the apartment is too small to have its own washing machine.

This blows my mind. I remember when we were on a family holiday to Broome once and Mum had to use a coin-operated clothes dryer at the resort. She decided to clean the lint filter because she's fussy like that. I'm not going to mention what she found inside that lint filter. Mum started storing all our dirty clothes for when we got home. Me and Dad had to hear about it non-stop for the rest of the trip.

So, I don't understand why Mum is now looking at me that way, as though she's hoping for my approval on this house.

"Where is all of Dad's stuff going to fit?" I ask.

And by that, I mean his sixteen computers that run his programming experiments all day and all night, testing strange things like what would happen if the moon fell out of orbit or if the sun exploded. Dad is a Geek Twenty-Four-Seven. He goes to work at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and spends his time with computers, and then he comes

home and spends more time with computers just for fun.

There is also his tuba, bassoon and flugelhorn, as complicated and as big as the plumbing under a sink. Although he hasn't played any of them since I was born.

All of it takes up a whole room.

"We don't have to worry about Dad's stuff," says Mum. "Because Dad isn't coming with us."

She bursts into tears again.

I look at Mum with her face in her hands. Sobbing.

I look at Dad, who very calmly says to me, "James, your mother and I have been discussing this for a long time and we've decided on a divorce. We'll be living in different homes and you'll be spending half the week at one and half at the other. It's not an exact science because, as you know, a week has an odd number of days. But that doesn't mean anything has to change."

That's like Dad saying that nothing would change if the earth suddenly rotated in the opposite direction.

It would lead to the end of the world.

I know because Dad showed me on one of his computer simulations. The earth is spinning so fast that, if it suddenly stopped, everything would be hurled hundreds of kilometres forward. People, cars, buildings.

The ocean would slosh like a bowl of water being tossed out. Mountains would break and go shooting off like giant arrowheads.

The only way to avoid this would be if the earth came to a gradual halt first.

But my parents haven't eased me into this news, they've dumped it on me.

Bam! Just like that.

My heart and stomach are now down the street somewhere.

Where was I when they had these "discussions"?

Mum is still crying, and I think about putting my hand back in the crook of her arm, but instead I get out of my chair and I run to my room. I want to slam my door, but I can't because the bottom bed of my broken trundle is in the way. So, disappointingly, I have to push the door closed. It does so with a bang and a scrape. I crawl into the top bed and put the duvet over my head.

I hear my parents talking in the dining room. The sounds of the table being cleared and the kitchen tap running. They must be doing their normal routine – Dad washing and Mum drying. Why are they still pretending everything is the same when it isn't any more?

My bedroom door opens. There's a bang and a scrape when it hits the trundle bed.

Dad comes in and sits on my bed. "Can we talk?" he asks.

I don't reply.

Dad clears his throat. But nothing else comes out because he's only really good at technical speak, not emotional stuff.

After a while he gets up, says, "Hang in there, mate," and closes the door after him.

Mum comes in next and again there's the bang of the door against the trundle bed. "We really need to get that fixed," she says, obviously hoping it's a conversation starter.

It's not.

"I'm going to make the Rocket cake for the competition," says Mum.

That's the most popular cake. Every year all the parents fight over that cake. I don't blame them. It's the tallest cake out of all of them and it's awesome.

"I'll make sure I'm the first parent through that gate tomorrow morning." Her voice quivers.

Tears are rolling down my face, but I keep the duvet over my head so she can't see.

I don't know whether I'm crying because I'm still upset about before or whether it's now replaced by the fact that Mum is going to make the Rocket cake.

"We'll talk about it in the morning. Who knows? In the morning, everything might be wonderful," she suggests.

It won't.

Maybe it'll be wonderful for them because it's what they want. Even though they come into my room individually, it's like they're ganging up on me.

Mum leaves and it's all quiet.

I flick on my night-light, which is a globe. My anger has lost its sharp edges and I wish I didn't feel so alone. I look at the bright outlines of all the countries and continents of planet earth and pretend I'm an astronaut floating out in space.

My duvet rustles softly and I feel Tiger coming to sit on top of my legs. She's not actually a real tiger, but don't upset her by telling her that. She can always tell when anyone in the family is unwell or sad. Dad says her purr is the same frequency as the one scientists use in vibration therapies to heal tissue and bone.

I know I don't have anything broken in me, but it is still a comfort.

THINGS THAT WILL NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN NOW THAT MY PARENTS ARE NOT TOGETHER #1

Stuck on the back of my bedroom door is a large poster of David Bowie. I was seven years old when I heard a song of his on the radio. I remember because I was obsessed with everything space at the time. It started off about an astronaut called Major Tom who is so famous, everyone wants to know everything about him, including what brand of shirt he wears.

Then, one day in space, he loses contact with Ground Control.

I wish I wasn't listening so closely then.

I don't normally get scared. I mean, as a seven-year-old I could watch the scary bits in cartoons that other kids couldn't take and laugh about it. But this song really messed me up. Major Tom floats out into space all alone

after becoming untethered from his spaceship. I couldn't think of a worse way to go.

But Mum and Dad sat down with me because they could see I was upset, and they tried to comfort me in their own way.

Dad, always scientific, said that space was cold and that, eventually, when Major Tom ran out of oxygen, it would be like drifting off to sleep. He probably wouldn't even feel it. He'd be snap frozen, like a bag of peas. Maybe some alien spacecraft would spot him, with his bright orange hair, and pick him up. Who knew what technology the aliens had? Dad believes in aliens. Four of his sixteen computers scan the skies endlessly, looking for intelligent communication.

Mum, on the other hand, always takes a more creative view of things. She printed out the song lyrics at work and we looked through them together when she got home. She said that Major Tom *wanted* to cut himself off from planet earth. That he was sick of humans and their tiresome ways and wanted to be left alone. She thinks he's happy now, doing his own thing.

Sometimes when I can't sleep, I look at David Bowie with his glittery silver space top and his mismatched eyes



and I don't feel like I'm always the odd one out.

I don't even think about what happened to Major Tom any more, instead I think of how Dad and Mum teamed up and stopped me from being scared. Like having a warm sticky date pudding in my belly and the whole world being okay.

Now that they're splitting up, I'll never have that again. That's what scares me.



2 WEEKS 4 DAYS 10 HOURS 30 MINUTES UNTIL GO LAUNCH

Mum was serious after all. She wakes me up early the next day so she can be the first through the school gates when they open. So she can be the first parent to put her name down for the Summerlake Primary School Cake Competition.

"How are you feeling, James?" she asks.

"Fine," I grumble and try to go back under the covers because I hate mornings. But she threatens to brush my teeth and change my clothes for me, and I'm reminded that everything Mum says, she follows through with, so I get a move on.

That's how I end up seeing the girl with the X-ray eyes.

Now, I'm not saying she has electrons for eyes, I'm