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Opening extract from
Everybody Jam

Written by
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EVERYBODY JAM

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ONE

I'd known for *ages* how a baby was made. I'd seen enough animals rooting to work it out. But now my older sister, Sissy, was having one and because of that we didn't look at each other – just at her belly. I'd seen everyone doing it. Dad stared at it bulging under the tablecloth at dinner each night, like it was the news.

Sissy was fourteen – just a year older than me – which everyone said was too young, but no one knew who she'd been rooting with. When she came home from boarding school for the Easter holiday she was throwing up all the time. You couldn't get into the bathroom in the morning to go to the dunny because she'd be in there puking her guts up. I was desperate one morning, so I banged on the door and told her to get a move on, but all I could hear was her heaving and coughing and then something splattering. Eventually, she ran out and went straight to her bedroom and slammed the door – like it was my fault.

At first Mum reckoned Sissy'd picked up a nasty bug at school. She gave her crackers and plain toast to

try and settle it down. But when Sissy'd been home a couple of weeks and she was still hogging the bathroom each morning, I heard Mum tell Auntie Veronica that *the penny dropped – she's up the bloody stick*. I didn't know exactly what that meant, but I guess she'd worked out that Sissy wasn't really crook.

Then one night at dinner, Sissy was sat in her usual place at the table, but her eyes looked redder than normal. She'd been such a dag since she came home – throwing up, staying in her room and crying all the time, I didn't really think too much about it. But as we all got on with our food, I noticed Sissy pushing hers round the plate. It was steak, so I said that if she didn't want it, I'd eat it. When Dad put his knife and fork down and looked at Mum, I dunno why, but it made me feel a bit like when I found out about Jonny's accident. I thought the steak I'd been shoving into my belly might jump back out again. I looked at Jonny's photo on top of the piano and wished I could run and touch it.

Dad sighed and looked round the table, before he took a deep breath and stared at Sissy. As he breathed out he said we might as well all know that Sissy was pregnant. Then he looked back at his plate and ate another mouthful of steak. I nearly choked on my mashed potato, but the farm hands, Lloyd and Elliot, didn't say anything. They just cleared their plates real fast and went outside for a beer. I stared at Sissy, who'd started to cry again.

When Mum asked if anyone wanted more veg, it almost made me jump. No one answered. I guess no one felt hungry any more. That's when Emily, my younger sister, said, 'What's prejang?' She is useless. She is seven and can't do anything properly. All she does is talk about the poddy calves, but she never feeds them – she just wants to pet them, and give them stupid names.

Mum sighed and put her arm on Emily's shoulder as she explained that *pregnant* meant Sissy was going to have a baby. Emily's eyes got real big and this dumb smile filled her cheeks as she said, 'A real one?' Like it was a good thing.

Not long after that we were told to help clear the table and go to our rooms. Then there was a big bluey. I heard it all through the wall between my bedroom and the dining room. It was the first bluey in our house for ages – I reckon it was the first since Jonny's accident. It started with Mum and Dad talking to Sissy in their normal voices, but then they shouted. They wanted to know who she'd been rooting with, but she wouldn't tell them. 'Come on, Sissy – who is it?' Mum pleaded. 'Just tell us, will you, love?'

Then Dad cut in: 'It'll come out in the end – these things always do, so you might as well just save us all the bother and tell us now. Is it one of the boys at school? The little mongrels.'

'Why won't you tell us?' Mum asked. 'Does he know you're pregnant?'

I reckon Dad got tired of waiting for an answer because that's when he said, 'For God's sake, just tell us who it is. WHO IS IT?' I guess he hit the table because there was a loud bang and that's when Sissy started to blub.

Mum said, 'Derek, leave it,' at the same time as a chair scraped on the wooden floor. I heard footsteps and Sissy's bedroom door banged.

Dad said, 'When I find him – God help the little bastard!' Mum said, 'Oh, shut up, Derek!' Then they really started to row. I pulled the doona over my head and imagined Jonny's picture was in my hand.

After that, Sissy seemed to blub even more than before. She hardly ever came out of her room and when she did, there was always a row between her and Mum and Dad. Sissy'd always been OK – she wasn't like the girls you see on the TV; all stupid and into dumb stuff like dolls or make-up. She could ride the motorbike better than me, and she could shoot pretty good too. Not as good as Jonny, of course. I dunno, it was like she'd tell me stuff – about things no one else would. She was the one who told me about when the flying doctor came for Jonny – and all the blood.

But then, after she got pregnant, that all changed. She didn't talk to me any more – not really. She didn't really talk to anyone, I guess. All she did was cry. She blubbed after I called her a stupid cow for stealing my wickets. I'd spent ages looking for them and then

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found she'd used them to wedge the door of the chook pen shut. Before, if I'd called her a name like that, she'd have given me a dead arm.

Once she was *up the stick* everything changed. I wasn't allowed to hit Sissy – even if she really annoyed me, like when she stole food from my plate. Before I would have whacked her, you know, a dead arm, or something, but because of the baby, I got into trouble just for calling her a name. Dad said I had to be nicer to her because she was going to be a mum. I dunno why the rules suddenly changed just because she was up the stick. I asked Dad about it and he said, 'They just do, OK?' Like I was the one in trouble.

Two

Sometimes, when everyone annoyed me, I'd go to my bedroom and sit on Jonny's bed. He was fifteen when the accident happened. That was when everything kind of stopped. Well, not stopped exactly. It was a bit like when the ute got three flat tyres, or the time when the bank phoned, or something else went wrong. Whenever that happened, we all kept out of the way until Mum and Dad had sorted it out. We kind of made ourselves invisible, so we were no trouble to them. With most stuff, that would last a few hours, or maybe a day if it was something real serious, like when the generator broke. Only with Jonny's accident, I guess they couldn't fix it, so we'd been invisible for a while.

That's why I liked to keep our room exactly as Jonny'd liked it to be – how he'd left it. No one was allowed to touch his stuff. No one. Mum tried once. She came into our bedroom a few weeks before we found out Sissy was pregnant. She came in to see if I had any laundry, and as she picked up a few things off the floor, she said she reckoned it would be a good

idea to start *thinking about sorting Jonny's things out*. I dunno what she meant by that. There wasn't anything to sort out; his stuff stayed where it was, how he liked it. When I explained that to her, she put down the things she'd picked up and said she didn't mean we should throw anything away, but just change the sheets and tidy up a bit. I stood up and shouted, 'No way,' at her. Mum turned to look at me for a moment, then held her hands up and left the room. I guess she knew I was right.

Jonny's accident happened about six months before we found out about Sissy and the baby. Her getting pregnant meant everyone seemed to forget about Jonny, like he'd never been here, or something. Like it gave them an excuse not to think about him any more. So they didn't miss him, I guess. Everything then was about her and that baby. I couldn't stand it. I didn't want Jonny to be invisible. There was a photo of him on top of the piano and I liked to touch it, every day if I could. I think I started doing it to remember what he looked like. I dunno, really, it just made me feel better. Like keeping all his things just how he had them. If I looked at them, I always put them back. I never mixed them up with my stuff. That would have been wrong, like stealing.

A few days after we found out about Sissy, I sneaked into the kitchen, hoping to grab some bickies without Mum catching me. I was stopped in my tracks, though, because she was in there on the

phone. She was busy yabbering on to Auntie Ve in Alice Springs. I knew it was her because she was the only person who ever phoned. I hung around wondering if I might be able to sneak into the pantry without Mum noticing. That's when she told Auntie Veronica that Sissy was *three months gone, so it must have happened some time around Christmas*.

I was getting down on the floor and thinking about crawling into the pantry, so she wouldn't see me. Then Mum said, 'I dunno, love, we can't think it would be either Elliot or Lloyd – I mean really? They're decent fellas – Elliot especially.' I guess Auntie Ve didn't know Elliot and Lloyd very well, cos there's no way they could have been rooting with Sissy. No way. They're loads older than her for a start. Then Mum got mad with Auntie Ve, so I stopped where I was on my belly on the floor and listened. Mum never got mad with Auntie Ve. She said something like, 'Over my dead body – we couldn't, we just couldn't! After everything else we've all been through with Jonny. I can't believe you'd suggest that – and the same goes for having the baby adopted.' I didn't think having the baby adopted was such a bad idea: I mean it was already causing everyone a whole heap of stress, and it hadn't even been born. I reckoned that was the best idea anyone had had for ages, but I guess Auntie Ve must have apologised for whatever she'd said because Mum calmed down then and said she was sorry for losing her rag. Her voice went kind of quiet when she said

she didn't know how we were going to manage after the baby came. She reckoned she was going to see about reducing her hours at work.

I stopped listening then for a bit – I was still trying to work out how to slip along the floor into the pantry where the bickies were without Mum seeing me. I was thinking about just making a dash for it, when Mum said the worst bit. She said Sissy couldn't have chosen a worse time to have a baby. 'We've got the muster happening the same month it's due,' she said.

The muster is the best part of running a cattle station. It's when we round up all the cattle and decide which will go for slaughter and which will stay on the station for another year. It only happens once a year and this one was going to be my last before I went away to boarding school in Alice. I didn't want Sissy and her baby ruining it. I couldn't help it, I was so mad, I forgot all about the bickies and jumped up and shouted at Mum. I yelled that it wasn't fair – Sissy and that baby were ruining everything. I shouted that I hated Sissy and her dumb baby. Mum shook her head at me, and asked Auntie Ve to hold on a minute. She put her hand over the phone as she told me to stop being such a baby and to go to my room, before turning her back to me and carrying on talking to Auntie Ve. I heard her say, 'Oh nothing – just Danny having a fit about nothing, as usual.' That made me madder than anything. I stormed off to my

room, slammed the door and ripped some pages out of Jonny's cattle book. I dunno why. I was sorry afterwards, so I stuck them back in. No one noticed.

Sissy couldn't go back to boarding school in Alice Springs, so she had to go to the schoolroom on the station with Emily and me instead. That's where we learn maths and writing and stuff. The schoolroom is an old shed Dad tidied up when Jonny and Sissy were little. It's pretty basic – wooden with a metal roof, so if it rains it gets so noisy you can't hear the lesson any more. Not that it had rained for a while – not really. When the rains really came the rivers filled up and kind of flooded a bit – but that hadn't happened for ages. We hadn't had enough rain to wet the ground, really – not for a couple of years. We'd had one little shower, but Dad reckoned he could spit and do a better job.

Anyway, we went to the schoolroom every morning at seven o'clock until around lunchtime when it was too hot to concentrate any more. We only went to the schoolroom until we were thirteen though. That's why after Christmas I was going to go to the boarding school Jonny and Sissy used to go to. I guess that's why Sissy was so unhappy about being in the schoolroom again. She must have felt kind of stupid sitting with us, even though she had her own schoolwork to do. Everyday, when we walked over there from the house, she had a face like someone had

slapped her. I didn't speak to her, but Emily did – always about the baby and what she was going to call it. They were both so dumb.

Bobbie had been our govvie for more than a year. She helped us learn stuff using this radio programme called *School of the Air*. It is for kids like us who live at places, like Timber Creek, too far away from a normal school. Timber Creek Station is two hundred miles west of Alice Springs in the middle of the Tanami Desert in the Northern Territory. The nearest towns are Warlawurru thirty miles south of the station and Marlu Hill, twenty-five miles north. They're towns for Blackfellas though. Mum works in the office at the health clinic at Marlu Hill, so she drives over there each day, and even though there is a school there, it's just for the Blackfellas' kids. Sometimes we call them gins, as in Abori-GIN-al.

Bobbie was twenty-two and came from a farm in Victoria. She lived in one of the old outbuildings on the station. Dad had turned half of it into a bedroom for her and she had her own shower and everything. We weren't allowed in there. It was out of bounds. Bobbie reckoned she needed some *space and privacy*. I dunno what for. In the afternoons all she did in there was read or watch TV. In the mornings she was with us in the schoolroom.

We had a few people working for us at Timber Creek. It was sixteen hundred square miles of desert and we had several thousand cattle, so Dad couldn't

run it all by himself. That's why we had Elliot and Lloyd. Elliot had been with us the longest and he was real nice, kind of quiet, but a real hard worker. He knew what he was doing. I know Dad liked him a lot, reckoned he was *real reliable*. Elliot came from just up the road near Tennant Creek. His folks had a station out that way, but he was the youngest of four brothers, and there wasn't enough work for them all. Their station was a bit smaller than ours and because he was the youngest, and his older brothers were already working there, it was up to him to find a job somewhere else. I once said to him I reckoned that wasn't fair: it wasn't his fault he was the youngest. I said they should have pulled straws or tossed a coin or something. But he just smiled and shrugged. That was Elliot for you – he would never make a fuss.

Lloyd was different, he was real big and strong, which made him handy, but Dad reckoned you had to watch him because he wasn't too bright and he had a quick temper. He was newer to Timber Creek. He arrived not long before Jonny's accident and was a Top Ender – that meant his parents lived somewhere up near Darwin. Our neighbours, the Crofts, who have a station fifty miles east of ours, had heard from a friend of a friend that Lloyd was looking for work and suggested Dad took him on. At the time Dad wasn't sure about it. He didn't like old Dick Croft *sticking his beak into our affairs*. Dad reckoned we were doing OK, but Mum said she reckoned Dad was

working too hard and it would be good for Elliot to have a mate on the station. She reckoned it was lonely for Elliot. Dad agreed and said he didn't want to lose Elliot, he reckoned he was *worth his weight in gold*. So, Dad thought about it a bit, and after he met Lloyd, I guess he reckoned he'd be handy to have around. And then after Jonny's accident, we were kind of a man down, so I reckon Dad was real glad he'd taken Lloyd on.

The Crofts had been my family's friends and neighbours for years and years. They ran a cattle station called Gold River, which was on the eastern side of our land. Emily once asked Dick why his granddad had called it that. He hesitated for a while and said, 'Well, I guess my granddad was an optimist.' Later Emily said, 'Danny, what does an optimist do?'

All the rivers near us had been dry for so long because of the drought, they were all a kind of gold colour like the rest of the desert. Maybe there'd been a drought back then too.

My great-granddad bought Timber Creek Station after the last owner, Arthur Simpson, died in 1930. Ever since then, Dad said, there'd been Dawsons and Crofts working side by side to make a living off the desert. Before my granddad, Alex Dawson, died, he'd been good mates with Dick Croft. Dick was real nice, but he'd got lanky now, like someone had dressed a dead tree. He rattled, as though a pea had got stuck

in his breath, and when he talked, he wheezed like I did if I ran around the yards chasing a steer – only Dick didn't have an inhaler to make it stop. I once asked Dick's son Greg what was up with his dad; he just said: 'Too many smokes.'

Greg smoked. He was a real hoot. Once he told us this joke: *What's the difference between a gin and a dog shit? One eventually turns white and loses its smell.* We all died. After Jonny's funeral, Greg gave me a hat. It was real smart: leather. He said it was time I started dressing like a *proper* stockman. He'd picked it up in Alice when he'd met up with his mates. They'd had a wild time. There'd been a fight and one of his mates had been banged up.

Aunty Veronica, my mum's sister, once said it was time Greg found himself *a good woman*. I dunno what for. Greg ran Gold River cattle station with his sister Mary's husband Ron. Dick was too old and crook to work much. He had a girlfriend called Penny who looked after him. He met her in a roadhouse. She was younger than Dick and had real yellow hair. Mum said it *came out of a bottle*. I dunno where Dick's old wife Mavis was. No one really talked about her. Mum said Mavis ran off with some fella from Katherine when Greg and Mary were kids. That meant Dick had to run the station and look after them all by himself. Gold River was bigger than Timber Creek too. I guess Dick was real glad when he met Penny – it meant he didn't have to do everything

himself any more. When I said that to Dad, he nodded and said he reckoned Penny would *put the smile back on any fella's face*.

Greg's sister, Mary, didn't say much, but Mum reckoned she was real nice. And everyone liked her husband Ron. When they got married, the Crofts had a big barbecue. There was loads of food and a band. We all stayed up real late. Even Emily.

The Crofts had been great after what happened with Jonny and everything, but they had their own cattle station to run and we couldn't rely on them to help us all the time. I heard Mum saying to Dad how she was worried about how we were going to cope. She was talking about the future and how things were going to be different with the baby coming and no Jonny. I guess everyone had been waiting for Jonny to finish school and start work on the station. He was going to be Dad's *right hand man*. I felt sore about that – I knew I was younger and with me going to school in Alice, it meant I wouldn't be around as much, but I still knew a lot about running the station. Part of me wanted to scream at them so they remembered I was there, and the other part of me wanted to never speak to them ever again. But then Mum said something that made me feel even worse. She said she needed an extra pair of hands to look after the house and the *young ones*. She never called Jonny or Sissy *young* when they were thirteen. She told Dad she needed a housegirl and he said OK.