

Going in Nature

by James Brown

"Urgh," said Dad, "that's disgusting."

"Yep," I said, backing away.

"That's freedom campers for you."

"It looks like dog poo, Dad. It's right in the middle of the grass."

"It would have to be an enormous dog, Tessa."

"Like Clifford."

Dad laughed. Mrs Dooley, who ran the local store, did have a big red dog called Clifford. I surveyed the reserve and was about to point out the lack of toilet paper when Dad started scrambling about on his hands and knees to photograph the poo.

"Dad!"

"Something needs to be done about this."

"Yes, but not that. Come on, Dad."

That night, Dad went into battle with his laptop. I steered clear, waiting for the inevitable cry for help. "Tessa! The printer's broken again ...," he called finally. "I need to print ten more copies."

I sighed and went over. Dad had written a very clear message. Underneath was his photo. The whole thing was what our teacher would call "a visual cacophony". Dad was delighted with it. "Let me have a play," I said. "Maybe I can improve the, er, layout."

"Glad you're on board. But don't change the words. I could've been a marketing guru."



Dad had once worked for a community newspaper. His "Ding-a-ling Your Cat" campaign, intended to encourage people to put bell collars on their cats to protect native birds, had divided the readership.

"Yes, but sales went *up*," he said when I reminded him of this.

"Sales? Wasn't it free?" I'd been a badly paid delivery girl and was never sure whether I should put his newspaper into letterboxes with No Junk Mail signs or not.

"Readership then. The readership went up."

I changed the fonts on his flyer so it didn't look like it had been designed by a three-year-old.

Our house backed onto the reserve, which we could reach through a gate by the old outhouse. Today, there was only one vehicle – a hand-painted van with a couple of hippy girls lounging outside. They looked like they'd just woken up. Dad went over and handed them his flyer. They examined it curiously.

"Are we not allowed to camp here?" asked one. "Do you want us to go?"

"No, no," said Dad. "It's about keeping the reserve tidy and not using it as a toilet."

"OK, no problem. We love going in nature, too." It wasn't exactly clear what she meant by this. "But," she pointed to the rubbish bin in the car park, "perhaps the rubbish needs collecting more often?"



She was right; the bin was spewing. And I knew campers weren't the only ones who used it because I'd had fish and chips with friends there last week, and we'd had to cram the paper in then.

Dad was embarrassed. Now that he was face to face with real campers, he didn't sound like such a NIMBY.

"Yes, that's bad," he agreed. "I'll phone the council and get them to empty it."

"And where are the facilities?" asked the other. She was running her fingers through her salt-straggled hair, trying to loosen the knots.

"Facilities?" Dad looked confused.

"Where are the public toilets?"

I realised we should have put this information on the flyer. "There are toilets and changing sheds on the beachfront," I said.

Standing here, I could see the problem. If people camping here needed to go, they might not want to walk all the way to the beach. The reserve was on the river, slightly inland – not too far away, but far enough, especially in the middle of the night. In between the reserve and the beach was a proper campground – Jenkins Beach Camp. Old Jenkins complained that freedom campers sometimes snuck in and used his facilities.

"It's not ideal," said Dad. "But that's where the, er, facilities are. If you camped on the beachfront, you'd be closer to them."

"But it says no camping there."

"Does it?" said Dad. "I didn't know that. That's silly."

As we retreated, I glanced to where we'd seen the poo the day before. Mysteriously, it had disappeared.

Dad emailed the council and the local paper. He wanted the rubbish bin emptied more often over summer. He wanted a toilet at the reserve. He wanted freedom campers to be allowed to camp on the beachfront where there were already facilities.

"Ha," he said. "The council won't want to put another loo at the reserve, so they'll take the cheaper option and let freedom campers stay in the beachfront car park. And that will solve the problem in the reserve!" He chuckled to himself as if he'd out-manoeuvred everyone.



"I'm with you," said Mrs Dooley the following day. We were in her store. "The better we make it for freedom campers, the better for everyone."

"Well, I don't like 'em," said Mr Jenkins. "They don't stay at my campground. And now you're asking the council to use our rates to give them services for free."

"There will always be people who travel on the cheap," said Dad. "Or people who don't like campgrounds."

At that moment, the hippy girls came in. Everyone stopped talking.

"Are we interrupting?" one of them asked.

"No, no," Dad reassured them, standing back to let them through.

"Could we have two orange choc-chip ice creams, please?" asked tangle-hair.

"And," she hesitated, "do you sell toilet paper?"

It turned out the toilets on the beachfront had run out. Dad was quick to point out the council's shortcomings again. "We pay our rates," he said, "and what do we get for them?" Everyone nodded. One way to get people to agree, I realised, was to blame the ones who weren't there.



A few days later, Dad and I visited the reserve with a couple of rubbish bags. Dad had phoned the council and been told someone would collect the rubbish next week. "If you want something doing, do it yourself," he humphed. The hippy girls' van had gone, I noticed sadly. The fish and chips I said I ate with my friends? That was actually just Dad and me.

We went to the overflowing bin, and I held open a bag while Dad donned gloves and began scooping rubbish and dropping it in. Clifford bounded up, looking pleased with himself, followed shortly by Mrs Dooley, carrying a heavy looking doggy-doo bag.

"Good on you," she said, possibly to Clifford.

"Could you take a photo of us?" asked Dad. "I want to guilt-trip the council."

I posed holding a rubbish bag and my nose.

The following morning, I decided to have a swim in the reserve. Oddly, the back lawn was strewn with the garden tools and junk Dad normally kept in the old outhouse, and from which I could hear grunting and sloshing. I peered cautiously in. Dad, shirtless, was kneeling with his head against the smeary seat, one arm contorted far into the bowl. "There's a lot going on here," he began as I hurriedly withdrew.

I kept walking, out the back gate and across the reserve to the river. To my surprise, the two hippy girls were bobbing languidly in my favourite swimming hole.

"Hi there," called tangle-hair. "Come on in. It's delicious."

"I thought you'd left," I said, smiling.

"No. Mr Jenkins offered us a free site at the campground in return for cleaning work. It looks like we're here for the summer. We have toilets and everything!"

My mood lifted. "Nice," I said and jumped in, letting the fresh river water wash over me.

The three of us ran into Dad and Mr Jenkins at the store. Dad was explaining how he'd unblocked our old sewer pipe and was planning on making our outhouse available to campers until the council built a toilet or allowed them to stay at the beachfront.



"That's so kind," said tangle-hair.

"You'll still have to clean it," said Mr Jenkins. "I've had to get in help," he added, indicating the hippy girls.

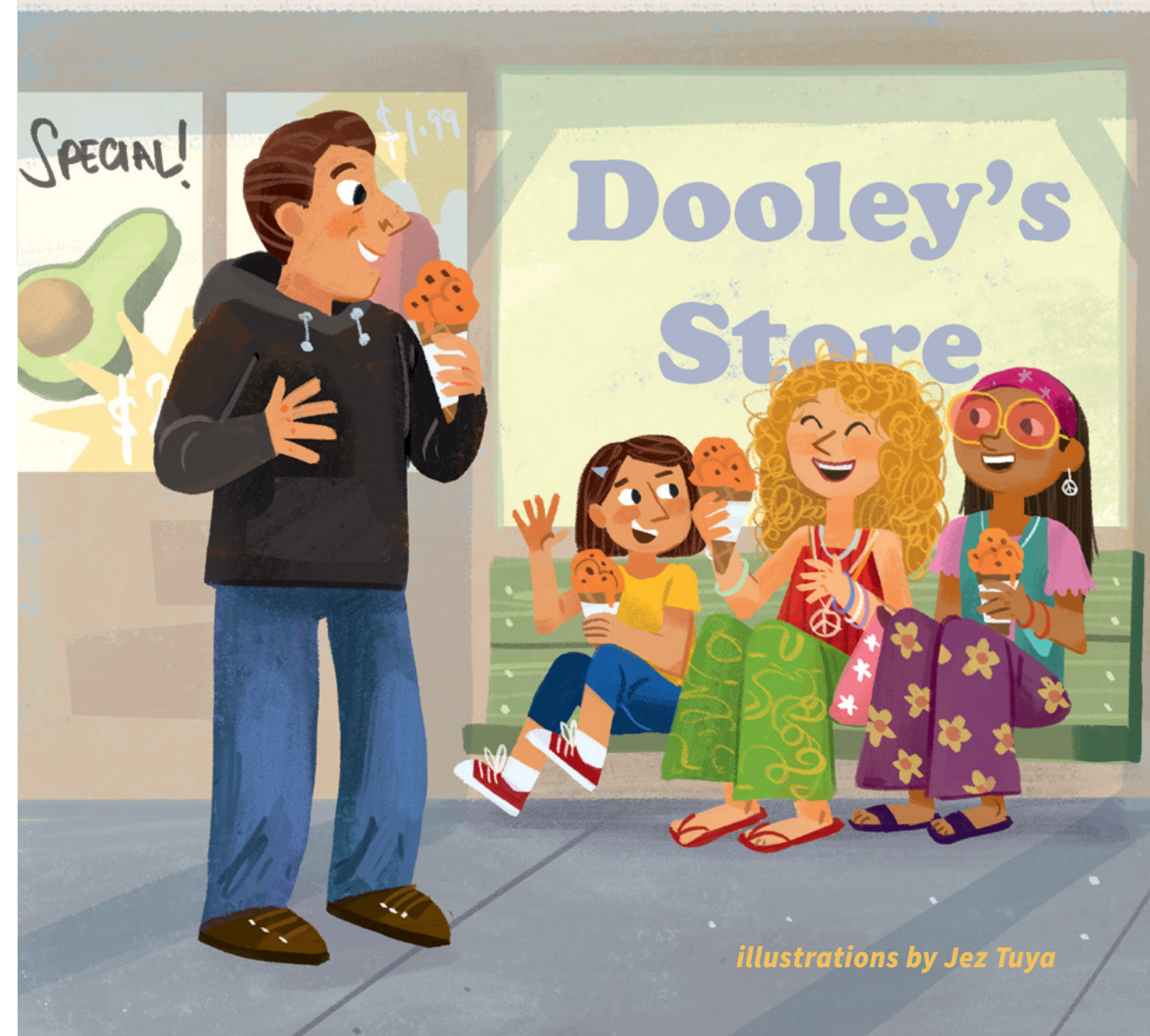
"I could do it," I said.

"I'll pay you," beamed Dad. "Orange choc-chip all round," he said to Mrs Dooley.

"Where are you both from?" he asked the hippy girls. "Wait, let me guess ... the Netherlands!"

"Auckland," they chorused.

"As I thought," he nodded, "somewhere overseas."



illustrations by Jez Tuya

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