



TV at Dinner

“SO HOW’S DAD COPING?” said Mum. She glanced into the lounge where Grandpa was watching TV with my sister Sarah.

Grandma sighed. “Oh, OK, I suppose,” she said. “I don’t know that retiring was really the best thing for him. He just doesn’t seem to have enough to do.”

“There is the garden?” said Mum. “And he still goes fishing?”

“Yes,” said Grandma. “But you can’t garden all day. Or fish either. He does seem to have a lot of time on his hands.” She stirred the gravy briskly. “Never mind. I’m sure it’ll all work out. Are the potatoes ready, Tom?”

I opened the oven. “Another five minutes.”

Grandma and Grandpa come over for dinner nearly every Sunday. I usually help with the cooking. I like cooking. Some day, I’m going to be a famous chef and have my own TV show. I don’t tell the kids at school that—I tell them I want to play soccer for Australia—but that’s my plan.

Mum and Grandma kept talking quietly about Grandpa. He’d retired from his job on the railways

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a couple of months ago, and like Grandma said, he didn't seem to have enough to do.

"Well, I think everything's ready," said Mum. "Tom, can you put the potatoes around the roast and take it in to the table, please?"

"Sure," I said. I took the roasting pan out of the oven.

"Tom, they look delicious," said Grandma. "What did you do to them?"

I was pretty pleased myself with the way the potatoes had turned out. I'd peeled them, cut them across and across, sprinkled them with sesame seeds and then roasted them. Even if I said so myself, they looked good.

I carried the dish in to the table, at the other end of the lounge room. "Dinner's ready!" I said to Sarah and Grandpa.

"Mmm, smells great!" said Grandpa. He and Sarah came over to the table. They didn't turn the TV off. No-one else bothered to turn it off, either.

So, really, that was how everything started.

We were halfway through dinner when a new program came on. There was a blast of music, and I glanced up just in time to see the titles. The documentary was called "Gone West". I watched a few title scenes of a man and woman driving a car and caravan across a wide, red dirt plain. Red dust billowed up behind their car, against a brilliant

blue sky. An emu stalked along beside the road. The people in the car weren't young. They both had grey hair, and more than one or two wrinkles on their faces. And they were smiling, looking as if they were having a great time. The car passed a road sign to Birdsville. Then I lost interest and went back to my plate again. I'd been right—the potatoes were excellent.

But Grandpa kept watching the TV. I could see Grandma giving him a look—she doesn't approve of watching TV at the table—but she didn't say anything. And after a moment, I looked back at the TV, too, because the documentary was really interesting.

It was about a man and a woman who'd bought a car and a caravan after they retired and travelled off around Australia. They went everywhere, but mainly through the outback. They saw some amazing things. And after they'd finished their trip, driven all around Australia, they thought about it—and decided to do it all over again. When the interviewer asked why, they weren't sure. Then they said it was the space, the vastness, the mystery of the country. "You feel there could be anything out there," the woman said. "Anything—and no-one might ever know about it. This country is so big, so old. You have to respect that."

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The remains of the roast got cold on the table, but no-one got up to clear it away and get dessert. We all watched the program until it finished. The last shot showed the car and caravan driving off into an orange and purple and grey sunset, and the words "Gone West" came up on the screen again.

"Wasn't *that* interesting!" said Grandma.

"Yes," said Grandpa slowly. He hadn't taken his eyes off the screen. "Yes, it certainly was."

Mum looked at him. She opened her mouth to say something, but before she could speak, there was a knock at the door.

"That'll be for me!" said Sarah.

I could see Mum's face change. She thought she knew who was at the door. She was right. It was Sharon and Kelly, two of Sarah's friends.

Sarah hadn't been friends with Sharon and Kelly long. I could tell Mum didn't like them much, though she was always polite to them.

Sarah started to take Sharon and Kelly to her room.

"Sarah," said Mum quietly, "would you like to introduce your friends to your grandparents?"

"Oh," said Sarah. She turned back. "Kelly, Sharon, these are my grandparents, Lorna and Bill Tait."

"Hello girls," said Grandma and Grandpa.

“Actually,” said Sharon, turning to Sarah, “we thought we might go out for a bit. Gazza’s got his car outside. Down to Macca’s, maybe. Want to come?”

“Sure!” said Sarah. She turned to the door.

“Be home by nine, Sarah,” said Mum. “School tomorrow, remember.” I could see Sharon flash an amused grin at Kelly. Sarah saw her, too.

“Yes all *right*, Mum,” said Sarah. Grandma looked up quickly. She’d never heard Sarah use that tone of voice to Mum before.

Sarah, Sharon and Kelly went out. Sarah closed the front door just a little too hard. Grandma raised her eyebrows.

