

## **Chelsea's Man (1996)**

Chelsea woke to the sound of little birds tweeting and cars swooshing by in the distance up at the main road, and the sun's rays peeking round the edges of the vertical blinds into her room. She stretched and rolled onto her side rubbing her eyes before opening them toward the very first thing she would focus upon this day.

"Hello B1, hello B2," she said as she discovered her two buddies had woken before her but were still in their pyjamas waiting for her to start the day with them. She bounded out of bed and over to the book case on which they sat. Taking this jovial pair and a colouring book and pencils she went back and sat on her bed, waiting and listening a moment to the house to make certain this was the day she thought it was.

To Chelsea's way of thinking there were three types of days. There were good days and ordinary days, and just sometimes there were special days.

Most days were ordinary. On these days mum would be up before her getting ready for work and Chelsea would get up and get ready for Child Care. Jenny would pick her up in the afternoons and she'd stay with the Hannahs until mum came home around dark. The good days were when mum didn't go to work and Chelsea didn't go to Child Care. The special days were when they'd visit Nan and Pop or take Boogie to the park or the beach.

Chelsea was at an age where it hadn't quite yet occurred to her that the object was to fill the spaces between the lines with colour, though she could recognise the pictures outlined in black. And though her mother had demonstrated and told her to colour the pictures it was what her mother did and not what she said that had the greatest influence on her. So her idea was that page and pencil meant writing, for that was what she'd seen her mother do. Just turned three she hadn't quite got the knack of writing yet so mimicking it seemed good enough.

She sat a while scribbling away from page to page from one colour to the next. Then the phone rang. Knowing mum would take a while to wake and stumble out to it Chelsea jumped at the opportunity. Pencil and paper were left to Bs 1 and 2 as she leapt from the bed and

sprinted down the hallway past her mother's bedroom door toward the phone.

Chelsea loved to answer the phone so it was a great satisfaction when she reached it within four rings, even before she'd heard her mother stir.

"Heyo," she said.

"Hello," the reply came back in a friendly but somehow startling voice. Ooh?! She thought - a man's voice. Don't hear them very often around here. She'd hear other children's fathers at child care sometimes, or when she was shopping with mum, and there was Mr Hannah next door. But other than grandpa she couldn't recall ever hearing a man on the phone. "What's your name?" the voice asked.

"I'm Chelsea," she said. "Mum's asleeping," she added, though she knew her mother was stirring.

"Oh," he said, a little disappointed. "Aah...how old are you?" he asked, intrigued at the discovery of the child.

"She's tired. She worked very late last night."

"I know," the voice laughed. "Um, could you tell her Jim called, please." Her mother was now coming down the hallway.

"Yes," she said, knowing the phone would be snatched from her at any moment. "Jim called," she yelled, as much into Jim's ear as to her mother right beside her.

"Oh, thank you," her mother said, taking the phone.

Chelsea lingered a while, gradually straying back to her bedroom, very interested in the telephone conversation. She had never seen such body language from her mother.

She took the pencils and started scribbling again, becoming bored very quickly. Come on mum it must be time for breakfast, she thought, poking her head out the doorway to check on things. Turning away she started scribbling again. Mum was soon off the phone so Chelsea dropped her things and made her way out for breakfast - corn flakes and milk with banana slices. Boogie scratched at the back door and barked a few times for mum to let him in.

"Hello Boogie," she said as the little dog came over to say good morning. He licked her foot and ran around in a couple circles, tail wagging all the while.

"My friend's coming to visit today," said mum. "His name's Jim."

A man? Coming here? Chelsea thought. But, why do we want one here? "Is he your friend?"

"Yes, he's a friend I met at work."

"Is he your boss?" Chelsea inquired.

"No," said mum. "He doesn't work at my work. But I helped him so he wants to be my friend."

"Oh," said Chelsea, thinking she had the picture now. Mum put the kettle on and floated away to some other part of the house. Boogie sat beside Chelsea looking up at her in anticipation. Chelsea reached into her breakfast bowl and grabbed a piece of banana. She held it out as Boogie stood tail-wagging and gave it a sniff. Chelsea let go of it, assuming the dog would take it. But Boogie rejected it and it fell to the floor.

"Chelseeee," her mother screamed, giving her a start. "You naughty giiirl." Mum suddenly appeared beside her waving a few pencils in the air. "You scribbled on the wall. I told you not to do that."

Uh oh, this was going to be one of those days she'd forgotten about - one of those bad days.

Chelsea thought a moment. Should she deny it? Blame it on Stacey Hannah? She looked up and her mother's angry face pierced straight through her. No, there was no use denying it. She started to cry. Her mum turned away in a huff.

"Don't cry you naughty girl, I don't want to hear you."

With this the cry became a great holler as her mum stomped away to a far corner of the house again, satisfied that Chelsea's present discomfort was a worthy beginning to her penance.

There was a chilliness in the air between them when later Chelsea stood by in silence watching her mother scrub the wall. Things didn't start to warm again until her mother bathed and dressed her. This ritual complete, she then sat alongside and watched her mother groom herself. The morning sun shone through the window and onto her mother's face as she ran the brush through her long golden hair.

"You're beautiful mummy," said Chelsea. Her mother turned to her and smiled. With this Chelsea's sorrow was immediately cast away.

"And so are you, Chelsea."

Mum was very busy with the housework this morning so Chelsea occupied herself in front of the TV cartoons with a couple of dolls and Boogie. Once the housework was done mum set herself to work in the

kitchen. Boogie didn't appreciate the noise so he went out to the backyard to bark at a few neighbours through the fence and anyone who might come walking down the street. Chelsea played on in front of the TV, chatting with mum from time to time.

She was getting bored when Boogie started barking frantically and scratching at the glass sliding door to come in. With all her might Chelsea could just slide the door open for him. He dashed straight past her, across the living room to the open front door. Bounding against the screen door Boogie discovered it had not been latched fully closed. Boogie made no hesitation in seizing the opportunity, knowing full well somebody would be on his tail, but determined to make it at least as far as the mailbox to give it a squirt and run a quick survey of the street.

Chelsea swung through the screen door in hot pursuit of the dog, ducking her head but unable to pull up in time before slamming straight into a giant pair of trousers, each leg inside them as round as her whole body and solid as the playground monkey-bars. Stepping back she gasped in fright. Turning her head upward to identify this intruder her eye followed the line of the trousers which seemed to stretch forever upward. Kahki, a colour so foreign to this household suddenly seemed to engulf it. Looking a moment at a chrome buckle and strap of leather that made even mummy's belt look small she took another step backward and stretched her neck even further skyward until her eye finally landed upon a hard and square but strangely attractive face. How can somebody frown and smile at the same time, she thought?

Jim stood looking down into a face which at that moment he felt with all certainty was the most amusing and beautiful thing he had ever seen. The smile he beamed down at her was not as deliberate as the one he conferred upon clients to win their confidence. It was a reflex action at such a wondrous sight, his heart and not his business head now oddly making it happen. It went some way toward winning her confidence.

"Hello," said mum who was right behind her now. Chelsea turned and wrapped herself around her mother's leg. She watched as Jim's grin stretched wider when he looked at her mum.

"Hi," he said. "I think I scared her."

"Oh," said mum, placing her hand on Chelsea's back to comfort her. "Chelsea, this is my friend Jim who I told you about."

"Hello Chelsea," he said. "Are you shy?" he asked with the same frown. Chelsea buried her face in her mother's thigh and the two adults chuckled.

"You wait till she gets to know you," said mum. "You won't be able to shut her up."

"She's gorgeous," he said.

"Sometimes," said mum. "Come in. I'll just go and get the dog." Boogie, who had all but been forgotten was now two houses down the street weeing on Mrs Halliday's freshly planted bulbs.

"Oh, sorry," he said. "I'll get him." With this the man turned and whistled. Oh gosh, thought Chelsea, I've never heard anything so loud. She saw Boogie's ears prick as he stood to attention immediately, looking up at them. Boogie came running home as the man started to walk toward him and mum called out. Boogie greeted the man on the front lawn by sniffing at his shoes. Jim reached down and gave the dog a pat, which earned him an enthusiastic tail-wag. "Is he your doggie?" Jim asked, turning his head toward Chelsea.

"Yes," she nodded. "He name's Boogie."

"Ha ha ha," Jim laughed. "That's a funny name. He's a cute dog." Chelsea giggled.

It felt strange having a man at the table at lunch time, strange for Chelsea and her mother too. Chelsea warmed to him, showing-off a little now and then. She liked the attention he gave her but wasn't so sure about the attention her mother gave to him. As the afternoon wore on Chelsea was reluctant to go to sleep. She finally drifted off on the sofa with half a chocolate biscuit in her hand while the two adults chatted over a pot of tea.

When she woke her mother was showing Jim to the door. She rose and toddled over to them.

"Oh, she's awake," said Jim

"Jim's going home now Chelsea. Say goodbye," her mother urged. Chelsea buried her face in her mother's thigh again, saying nothing. The adults laughed but there was an uneasiness in Jim's voice. "Go on Chelsea, say goodbye," her mother urged, eager to allay Jim's fears. He smiled at her, though this time it was forced because now on the inside he was having some serious doubts.

Then something very strange happened. Jim suddenly stepped closer to her mother. Chelsea held her mother's leg tight as she felt her

move toward the man. The two embraced and once again Chelsea's world seemed surrounded by a sea of kahki. She watched her mother kiss the man with more tenderness than she had ever received in a kiss. That's a very long kiss, thought Chelsea. There's something about men - they do everything to excess.

"Well Chelsea, um..." said Jim stepping back uncomfortably. "Ah, I'm going now. Do you think I could come back and visit you and mummy again some time?" he asked with a very serious look on his face. He seemed to do a lot of frowning this fellow. Maybe it's a men's thing?

She looked up at her mother, who, looking straight back down at her said nothing. Everything was still a moment until Chelsea realised they were waiting for her response. Then, loosening her grasp on her mother's leg a little she smiled shyly at the man and said "Yes, come back Jim."

Maybe this was a special day after all.