

Marcie Gill and the Caravan Park Cat

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Chapter 1

The year Marcie Gill turned ten, three mysterious things happened:

1. Her dad moved out of the family home into a caravan.
2. Her gran gave her a very unusual, early Christmas present.
3. The third mysterious thing is a secret for now. But to give you a hint, it involves a cat called George.

Marcie's family ran a (small) caravan park in the (little) seaside town of Snorkel Bay in (big) South Australia. It was on a (curving) bay, just a short walk through sand dunes to the white beach and glistening sea. The Snorkel Bay Caravan Park was known for its (beautiful) gardens too: tall, shady trees, lush green shrubs and brightly coloured rose bushes, all planted years ago by Marcie's grandfather.

Marcie was the middle child of the Gill family. She was short and sturdy, with sticky-out black hair. In her most recent school report, her teacher had described her in one sentence: *Marcie is extremely interested in everything.*

It was true. Aside from her family (her mum, dad, fourteen-year-old sister Jemima, seven-year-old brother Fred, Gran and Gran's cat George) Marcie's favourite thing in the world was asking questions.

It was a joke in the Gill family just how much Marcie loved questions. She called it her hobby. They called it her obsession. (Obsessions ran in the Gill family. Jemima was obsessed with tennis. Fred was obsessed with fish.)

This story begins on a hot December morning in Snorkel Bay, two weeks before Christmas. School was finished for the year.

In the room she shared with Jemima, Marcie woke up earlier than usual. As she lay in bed, she could hear seagulls squawking outside and surfers shouting to each other down on the sandy shore. She could also hear her sister sleep-commentating what sounded like an exciting tennis tournament. Jemima played as many tennis games in her dreams as she did in real life.

Marcie yawned, stretched, then let her mind fill up with the first of that day's questions:

1. *Should she have cereal and fruit or Vegemite on toast for breakfast today?* (Perhaps she'd have both. Breakfast was Marcie's favourite meal of the day.)
2. *Would she get to have a long swim down at the beach today, after she'd helped her dad clean the caravans?* (She'd need to find someone to go swimming with her. It was a Strict Rule in the Gill family that the Gill kids didn't go to the beach alone.)

Her third question was the most important one of all. She asked it every single morning.

3. *Would Gran come home today?*

Seven weeks earlier, Marcie's gran had tripped during her morning walk along the jetty and broken her hip. Two people fishing had raised the alarm. Gran was taken away in an ambulance. After her operation, she stayed in the little Snorkel Bay hospital for nearly a month. There were 'complications' in her recovery. Marcie visited her every day after school and each weekend. When her ward had to close for urgent renovations, Gran was moved to another hospital in the bigger town of Sunset Vale, half an hour's drive from Snorkel Bay. She'd been there for three weeks so far.

'It's just until she is one hundred per cent again,' Marcie's mum said.

'Just until she's back on her feet again,' Marcie's dad said.

'Just until I can look after myself and George again,' Gran said.

One of the first things Gran asked after her accident was who would take care of George. Marcie volunteered straightaway. Every morning over the past seven weeks, she'd gone up to Gran's caravan, unlocked the door using the key she kept on a ribbon around her neck, and made sure George's bowls of food and water were full. She plumped the red cushion in his old blue basket under the little table in the living room area, as she'd seen Gran do. She also made sure the cat flap in the caravan door was working properly. George liked to come and go.

George was a fine-looking cat, with long black fur and very green eyes. He was ten years old. Gran had told Marcie that, for a cat, it equalled fifty-five in *human* years. He was named after Gran's late and much-loved husband, Marcie's grandfather. George the cat mostly liked to sleep, or to sit in patches of sunlight. If Marcie scratched the top of his head, right between his ears, he would make a deep purring sound that sounded as if he was saying four words: *PurrPurrPurrPurr*.

After Gran's accident, Marcie had overheard a lot of discussion between her mum and dad about George. Whether he should sleep in the caravan if Gran wasn't there, or if that was against his animal rights. Marcie's parents worried a lot about all sorts of rights. (Marcie had once heard the Snorkel Bay butcher call her family 'those hippies and their hippy kids'.)

But then, during one of their hospital visits, Gran stepped in. 'I hope there hasn't been any nonsense about George not sleeping in the caravan while I'm away. It's his home as much as mine.

And please make sure you keep him updated about me. He'll worry otherwise.'

So, as well as feeding him and looking after 'matters regarding his litter tray', as Gran put it, Marcie talked to George as much as she could. She sometimes felt a bit silly doing it – it wasn't as if George could talk back, after all – but she knew it was what Gran would want her to do.

Marcie was very lonely without her gran. She went with her family in their old kombi van every Sunday to visit her, but it wasn't the same. Gran often seemed tired. Also, the rest of her family was there. Marcie loved them, but it meant she and Gran couldn't have

their own private chats any more. Marcie missed those chats up in Gran's caravan. Gran was always so patient with her. She never minded answering Marcie's questions. George often seemed to listen carefully too.

For the past three weeks, Marcie had been saving up her most important questions for Gran, writing them in a notebook she'd found in the caravan park office. She reached under her mattress for it now. (She'd hidden it from her brother Fred. She often had to hide things from Fred.)

Her list of questions was long and getting longer every day.

1. *Gran, are you feeling even a bit better yet?* (Even a tiny bit better would be good.)
2. *Does the food there taste nicer than it looks?* (Marcie hoped so. It looked disgusting.)
3. *Does my hair really look like a toilet brush?* (Fred had told her it did.)
4. *When I get older, will Jemima talk to me more or will she always like tennis more than me?* (Marcie often felt as if Jemima didn't even notice her.)
5. *Would you like me to smuggle George in to visit you one day?*

She knew it would be difficult to do any George-smuggling. Her mum was more relaxed than her school-friends' mums, but she still had laser eyes and bat ears. She'd know immediately if Marcie had George hidden under her T-shirt or in a box behind her back.

As the next best thing, Marcie had asked her mum to take photos of George for Gran. They soon discovered that George was camera-shy. He hid under Gran's bed and glared when Marcie's mum took out her old-fashioned Polaroid camera. (She had a basic mobile phone, but the camera didn't work any more.) After thirty minutes and four handfuls of cat treats, all they managed to get was three photos of his tail.

Instead, Marcie did the best painting of George she could. Unfortunately, her only green paint didn't match the special glittery-green of George's eyes. Marcie took it into the office to show her mum, but she was busy at the computer, surrounded by papers covered in numbers. (That was the only computer the Gills owned. Apart from an old TV and DVD player, their house was what Marcie's parents liked to call 'a technology-free zone'.) Marcie decided not to interrupt her. She'd like to have shown her dad, but he was in his caravan on the other side of the park. He didn't even have meals with them any more.

Marcie wanted to talk about that with her gran too.

6. *Why did Mum and Dad start fighting and why is he now living in one of the rental caravans and not in our house with us?*

He'd moved out a month after Gran had had her accident. There'd been lots of quiet but cross-voiced fights in their bedroom beforehand. Marcie overheard

them while she was in her room trying to get to sleep. She seemed to have inherited her mother's bad hearing. And perhaps her laser eyes as well.

Because she'd noticed her mum giving her dad lots of cross and sad looks. They'd stopped doing their yoga stretches together in the morning. Her mum was also spending more hours than usual in the office, sighing and pressing keys on a calculator. In one of the late-night fights, just before her dad moved out, Marcie had even heard her mum shout. That had shocked Marcie. Her mum was usually gentle. Marcie had only heard parts of the fight, but she remembered the words. '... all our savings, gone! ... our plans, ruined! ... I need some space, can't you see that?'

Those memories prompted more questions for Gran now.

7. *What could her father have done to make all their savings disappear?* (He definitely hadn't spent it on clothes or shoes. He was still wearing his old jeans and tie-dyed T-shirts and still mostly went barefoot.)

8. *How much more space did her mum need?* (The caravan park was full of space. Other parks crammed caravans close together. Not the Snorkel Bay Caravan Park. There were patches of green grass and colourful rose bushes between every van. The beach had plenty of space too, even on the hottest summer day.)

Marcie was also worried about what would happen at Christmas. It was just a fortnight away.

9. *Will Dad have Christmas lunch with us even if he doesn't live with us?*

She was thinking about someone else too.

10. *Gran, will YOU be able to have Christmas lunch with us?*

Recently, Marcie had summoned up the courage to ask her mum that same question. Mum had put on a big smile that Marcie didn't quite believe.

'Of course, Marcie!' she'd said. 'Even if it's only for a few hours. Christmas wouldn't feel like Christmas without Gran!'

No, it most definitely wouldn't, Marcie had agreed.

It was now 7 am. Time she got up. While she was hiding her notebook under the mattress again, another question kept flitting around her mind. One she didn't want to write down or ask out loud.

It was the biggest question of all.

11. *Would Gran ever come home for good again?*