

1 Me

...where I tell you about me.

If there's one thing I don't mind doing, it's agreeing with myself. And if there's one thing I really agree with myself about nearly all the time it's that it's tough *always* being a girl.

For boys it's different. For them life is one great pram ride. For them it's like living in an armchair, all soft and warm, with big, comfortable arms to rest on. As long as their mothers keep up the supply of food they couldn't care less about anything. Especially girls.

It's not like that with me. I really like boys, or *some* boys, anyway. Jingo's my favourite boy at school, in fact *he's* my favourite boy *anywhere* because all the boys in Niamong go to my school. Imagine nearly thirty boys all together in one place at the same time! It'd be like going into Mrs Macleod's lolly shop on the main street and being able to choose the best ones from all those big glass jars on the shelves. You go in the door and the bell rings over your head and Mrs Macleod waddles out from the back where she's been socking into cream and raspberry jam sponge (you can

tell, because most of it's still hanging from her chin) and you stand there, choosing.

I never choose quickly because that'd mean paying the money too soon and having to leave before I'd let my eyes have a proper feast. I'd walk slowly along the counter, checking out each jar, with Mrs Macleod shuffling on the other side to make sure that I didn't snaffle any lollies while she wasn't looking. I never bought the same lollies I'd had the week before and one day I'm going to try to have a different one every week for a year.

School isn't quite as good as the lolly shop, though. In the first place you *have* to go to school, at least until you're old enough to leave. In the second place, which is just about in the same place as the first place, most of the boys are too young for me, and in any case they're not sweet.

What's the good of having nearly thirty boys to choose from if most of them are still wearing nappies? Well, that's not *exactly* true, even though I've seen a few boys around with their shorts looking a little damp in front. Especially when Mr Braden's in one of his tempers.

Still, with Jingo being there I'm pretty happy generally, except that it's hard trying to get him to talk to me when anyone else is around. I don't think that Jingo is his real name – that's just what everybody calls him. I think that maybe his real name is one that he doesn't like very much, or maybe he's just forgotten what it is. Whatever it is, I can't forget him.

The best time I've had with him was when we were all coming back from rabbiting, on the back of Old Mary, the biggest horse in Australia. We were all tired out and I leaned my head on Jingo's shoulder and went to

sleep. The horse lumbered along, and even walked through a dam, and Jingo didn't push my head off or say anything.

It was lucky that he didn't realise that I was just pretending. Pretending to be asleep, that is. Not pretending about the snuggle.

I don't know why boys don't like talking to girls when other people are around. After all, we come from the same place, almost. And all we want to do is give them a cuddle or, perhaps, a little kiss or two. Or three or four in Jingo's case.

Last year we went down to Melbourne for the Christmas holidays and I didn't see Jingo for six whole weeks. I nearly died. I couldn't ring him up, because I didn't know his phone number. And, anyway, I don't think he had a phone. That was one of the troubles with living in Niamong instead of America. We had one, but who could I ring up there? Not Jingo or Jemmy or Scratcher. One or two girls had one, but who'd want to ring *them*?

Why don't boys just come out into the open and say they like us? It would make things so much easier for us and I'm sure that they'd be much happier. After all, girls are quite special. We're intelligent and beautiful, and can say lots of interesting things when we get going, and now how to read and write and do terrific borders around our pages at school, and we can cook and sew and ride bikes and horses, and even tractors, and play rounders and netball – all these are things boys should appreciate.

Instead, whenever you start talking about them they start sniggering. Jingo doesn't really do that, though, except when other boys are around, and even then I think he has his fingers crossed behind his back or in his

pocket. Maybe one day when I'm really old and the boys are even older they won't need to snigger, but I doubt it. Boys can be so dumb.

I was glad that for at least some of my life we didn't have a boy in our family, if you didn't count Dad. Having someone around to boss about is all right but young brothers are really not worth the trouble. Still, I suppose having an older brother would be even worse. He'd be strutting around the house making out he was great and better at everything than Dad (which wouldn't be all that hard sometimes, but you know what I mean), and spending all the time in front of the bathroom mirror on Saturday nights brushing his eyebrows and putting Mum's perfume under his arms before the dance down at the Returned Services League hall – the RSL. That'd really make me sick.

If you take my advice, then, don't have any brothers in your family. Unless you're Jingo's sister, of course. I'd love to be Jingo's sister, and then I'd see him every day and night, especially in the holidays. On the other hand, if I was Jingo's sister there's just a chance, even with him, that he might be like all the rest and I'd hate him. No, I don't think I could ever hate Jingo; he's so nice, with his hair tossed over his left eye because of the strong wind. He's so manly, but not like most of the men I know, who don't seem to know how to talk to girls unless they're handing over glasses of beer in the Lalor's Arms. Not that I go in there, but I bet that's what it's like.

Most of the boys in our school aren't too bad, except for the McPhees. The worst thing that can happen at school is for Mr Braden to put you in a group with the McPhees to do a project. They live with pigs and ferrets.

Pigs aren't too bad – they just grunt and roll in the mud and put their noses and feet in their dinner. The McPhees do all of those things, but they also smell like their ferrets, and if you've ever smelled a ferret, let alone a dozen, you'll know that there are easier ways of winning a war than dropping bombs. You'd just send out the McPhees, making sure the wind's blowing towards the enemy. It's not that they never have a bath – they haven't *got* a bath, and the copper in their laundry is only used for making stuff their father drinks when he isn't out working in the paddocks, which is most of the time.

Boys have all the fun, too. They're allowed to go off blackberrying in the bush whenever they want to, even when there aren't any blackberries. They just go off for hours on end and no one at home seems to give them a thought. I suppose it's because parents know that their sons'll always be home for tea, even if they've got two broken legs and a squashed nose. 'What've you been up to, son?' they'd say. 'Oh, just blackberrying,' would be the reply as the cripple tucked into roast lamb and potatoes. It makes me sick.

Why don't boys have the same rules as girls?

Whenever I want to do something that all the boys in Niamong do without asking anyone I have to yell and stamp my feet and sometimes roll on the floor in a pink rage until I almost believe it myself....or else I just go off and do it and hope my parents worry themselves sick about me; except that I don't often give them much thought when I don't have to worry about them.

Parents seem to have another set of rules altogether, and I can't quite work out what they are. They're so selfish. 'Rules are made to help us,' says Dad, and then he makes *me* go to bed at 8:30. *He* doesn't go to bed at 8:30, nor does Mum; they both stay up to all hours, talking in the lounge, having cups of tea or port, and sometimes, I bet, a bit of a cuddle.

I don't really think that parents should cuddle each other; it's not right and I get terribly embarrassed if they do it when I'm around. I just have to look somewhere else until they've finished and my cheeks can cool down. Sometimes they do it for so long in the kitchen that the peas get burnt and I have to go outside and play with my lamb or chickens.

There should be a rule that they only do it at night, or when I'm away on holidays somewhere. They're too old for it, anyway, and they should grow up and act responsibly.

Jingo says his parents are the same, and so does Jemmy out at Quimbilong. Scratcher doesn't know anything about what his mum and dad do, except that one of them feeds him and the other one whacks him. He's one of the funniest kids around but he's always getting into some sort of trouble. Quite often he finds it hard to sit down and keep still in class.

Why should you have to sit still in class, anyway?

Mr Braden doesn't. In fact he hardly ever sits down. He's always on the prowl somewhere, looking for trouble, and at *our* school he usually finds it. At least *he* calls it trouble – *we* call it fun and try to get into it as often as we can without getting caught.

About the only time Mr Braden sits down is when he's doing the school bank on Wednesday mornings and he has to make sure he doesn't make a

mistake in adding up. I think he's scared stiff of the bank manager coming up to school and telling him in front of the whole class that he can't do his sums.

It almost happened once.

Mr Braden had just finished writing in all the bank books, he'd stacked the coins in little piles on his table, and he'd written the total in the special bank book for the school when Scratcher suddenly yelled, 'I've got a blood doze!!'

Mr Braden and the rest of us looked up and saw World War 2 at the back of the room. Blood was everywhere. On the desk, on Scratcher's books and clothes, even, I think, in the ink well.

'All right! Who's bashed Macneill?'

Macneill was Scratcher's proper name, the one he was called by Mr Braden and Miss Hendley and his parents, and one or two other people in Niamong.

'Who's bashed Macneill up in class, I said!'

No-one said anything, because that would've meant trouble without the fun first.

Mr Braden stalked down to Scratcher, each of us moving in towards the middle of our desks as he went past.

'Who bashed you, Macneill, and why were you counting when I was counting the money?!'

'Dobody ad I wased whed you were,' gulped Scratcher, swallowing something which I'd rather not say here.

‘You’re lying again, Macneill!! I’ve had to speak to you before about that! I think you’d better come to my office and meet my little friend!’

Mr Braden didn’t have any friends, so you can imagine what he was talking about.

‘Excuse me, Mr Braden,’ I said.

For some reason the classroom went even quieter than it was before

‘She interrupted Mr Braden!’ I heard Jemmy whisper behind me.

‘She has no fear,’ said Jingo in a low voice.

My face went red with joy.

‘Yes, Lissie?’ Mr Braden barked.

Jingo'd said I was brave, when all I'd done was to speak to Mr Braden.

‘*Miss* Pendle! What do you want?!’

Mr Braden was yelling my name! Why? What did he want? Everyone was looking at me, the only sound in the room a plop or two as the blood dripped out of Scratcher's nose and fell onto a bit of paper.

‘It was about Scratcher,’ said Jingo in my ear.

Oh yes! That was it. I’d very bravely interrupted Mr Braden because of Scratcher.

‘Please, Mr Braden. No-one bashed him. It’s just that it’s a hot day.’ And it was. We all had on our lightest clothes, even though that makes no difference in a Niamong summer.

‘Oh,’ said Mr Braden, ‘are you sure?’

‘Yes, Mr Braden. It’s happened to him before. I’ll take him out to the sick bay if you like.’

Mr Braden looked at all the blood. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘and you'd better clean him up a bit, too.’

Scratcher and I walked out of the classroom and down the corridor towards the sick bay, Scratcher stopping outside Miss Hendley's room for a rest on the way.

‘OK, Scratcher, let’s have a look at the blood nose.’

‘What blood nose?’ he asked.

I noticed that he didn’t say doze that time. It must’ve stopped bleeding. Still, when a blood nose stops bleeding it's usually still clogged up with a great big long red.....you know, and you still have to say 'doze'. Something smelt fishy.

‘It's tomato sauce.’

Uh oh, another Scratcher piece of mischief. But what a piece! Jingo’d called me brave, when all I’d done was interrupt Mr Braden! Scratcher'd set up the trick, and on Mr Braden of all people! He was the brave one!

‘It’s tomato sauce! We're going to trick Braden into making a mistake with his bank!’

‘How's that going to happen?! He’ll never make a mistake!’

‘He won’t, but Jingo will!’

My funny bone crashed into the doorknob, electrifying my fingers. It was all right having Scratcher getting into trouble again, but not Jingo, too!

‘When Braden goes down to clean up all the mess on my desk Jingo’s going to race out the front and put another penny on someone’s pile! Braden’ll never notice, and then the bank manager’ll come up and roar the tripe out of him for not adding up the money properly!’

‘What if Jingo gets caught?!’

‘He won’t – he’s too quick. I can’t wait to see old Braden face when the bank manager comes in! Boy, it’ll go puce and pink and he might even wet . . . his’

Scratcher’s voice trailed off and I looked at him to see why, and there was Mr Braden in the door, behind me, blood on his hands and cuffs. I knew that it wasn’t real blood, and I also knew that it would be real blood pretty soon.

‘It’s just that it’s a hot day is it?! It’s happened to him before has it?! I suppose that when he’s got a bad cold he blows out tomato sauce, does he?!’

He knew about the tomato sauce!

‘And I found this sneaking out towards my desk!!’ he shouted as he dragged an ear out from behind him, an ear attached to my poor Jingo!

‘She didn’towknowouchanyoothingaboutuhitit, Mr Bradeneek!’

‘Don’t lie to me! All of you down to the office!!’

I won’t tell you any more about that time because it was too painful. And then we had to go back and clean up the classroom.

That was one of the few when I wished that girls had different rules from boys.

Still, I *did* spend the afternoon with Jingo!