

## **Rent-A-Child by Julie Chevalier**

GeeMa Johns will be standing at the window waiting for me. The week between my visits goes slowly for her. She'll have changed her dress, done her comb-over thing and put on old lady lippie. I've gotten ready too. Changed from my school uniform into my westie costume. A black tee with a girl holding a rabbit, and short black skirt from Target. Crocs. Bare legs. A messy ponytail and slabs of eyeliner. TripView says the bus will arrive four minutes late.

I was in year nine when the Director of Rent-A-Child explained my job. *Your role is to be Rikki-Tia from Blacktown. GeeMa Johns' granddaughter. Our clients are lonely people who like to talk. Ask her what job she did. Ask her to teach you how to do simple tasks, like something your Mum might ask a cleaner to do. The elderly need to feel useful.*

He doesn't know my mother. Mum's far too busy with work to talk to cleaners! She just leaves cash higgledy-piggledy on the kitchen bench. I push the button for the bus stop and tuck the key on the chain under my shirt. None of GeeMa's business what time Mum gets home. The door to her flat is like a red velvet curtain on the front of a proscenium stage. My acting practice begins the moment the door opens.

*How was school today, dear?*

*Good. Our last day in year eleven.*

Not promising opening lines. Occasionally GeeMa forgets that I go to The Academy of Performing Arts. Sometimes it slips her mind that all Rent-A-Child kids are called Rikki or Ricky, generic names that make it easier for us to stay in role.

Sometimes she asks if I have homework. Once I told her about my photography project. She went into her bedroom knelt down, and dragged old brown suitcases out from under the bed. I sat down on the floor. She handed me hats wrapped in tissue, hats she'd made when she was a milliner. GeeMa put on a ruby-coloured hat with a olive headband and blousy roses, like an oil painting of Margaret Olley. Thank goodness I'd borrowed the art department camera. I snapped a couple of close-ups, getting the texture of her skin. I stood in front of the bedroom mirror, adjusting the angle of a royal blue pillbox with a veil. GeeMa picked up the camera, focused. Snap. She handed it back, worked her knees like scissors

dancing the Charleston in a green suede cloche. Snap, snap, snap. She sat on a kitchen chair and pretended to row in a straw hat with poppies piled on the brim. Snap. I handed the camera to her before I straddled a kitchen chair in a black fedora with a peacock feather curl, a la Christine Keeler, but with clothes on. Snap. In my backpack I had the selfie stick Auntie Jess had sent. Berets at crazy angles, two laughing faces in the mirror. Snap. GeeMa had that same happy look when I told her about my A. GeeMa, Mum and Auntie Jess are getting albums of my photos for Christmas.

*My real name is Harmony. After a check out chick in Bi-Lo. Don't tell the Agency I told you. I double-crossed my fingers behind my back.*

GeeMa had an excuse the time I asked how to polish silver, but here on the green Formica bench is some cutlery and a jar of polish. GeeMa tries to untwist the lid, then hands it to me.

*We rub the polish on with the sponge. Let it dry. Wash it off. Easy. Do you have a silver pattern at home, dear?*

*Stainless. From the two dollar shop in Blacktown. Whose initials are E.E? I'm making up dialogue, not telling lies.*

*My mother's mother, Emily Elizabeth. I was named after her. She looks away.*

*Did she live in the white house with the apple tree? In a real play I'd never say, Did she live in a white house with an apple tree? At NIDA I'll never have to write my own lines. Pinter, Albee, Beckett, Pirandello, Genet, Ibsen and Chekhov will write them. Did she live in a house with a cherry orchard? OMG! Where are the plays by women?*

*If you were my real granddaughter she'd be, let's see, your maternal great-great-grandmother.*

*A Paleolith, cool.*

In the beginning a GeeParent rents a child actor for two hours a week. Later, they can rent their grandchild for full days, overnights and even travel if they can afford it. A rich variety of acting experiences, the Agency says. GeeParents pay the Agency, but we aren't paid. A unique opportunity, the Agency says. Mum wants me kept busy so I don't have time to do drugs or get seduced. Having a cuppa with a pretend granny after school? Perfect.

GeeMa said her mother used the tongs to pick up cubes of sugar. But who could VAW be? Or FVK? No way she could cook for a cast of rels in this kitchenette. Not like my family. We'd all fit. My elbow bumps a glass. I wash the tarnish from the knife, fork and teaspoons in the little sink while GeeMa sits on the other side of the bench, rubbing a cake server. None of the pieces match.

*Tell me again about when you met me. Repetition helps me remember what I've said.*

*I wanted a well-behaved little girl with long hair. That sounds like I wanted you to look good in hats, but I never thought of that until just now, Rikki! Honestly!*

Sometimes I forget Rikki isn't my real name. *I wanted a GeeMa, and you wanted a granddaughter. Remember iced tea and gingernuts on a tray?* Like I was fourteen going on three. Maybe, in some way, I did want a grandmother.

*Just before my seventy-fifth birthday, you might have forgotten that. We worked on a jigsaw puzzle. They gave us each a snapshot - I was re-tying the ribbon in your curls.*

*Remember the Anzac biscuits we made the first time I came here? Your friend in your book club gave you the recipe?*

*Christmas biscuits from the supermarket, this time. In the usual place. Help yourself, dear.*

Mum guessed I'd been hitting the biscuits. She liked slim girls but her models looked like sick giraffes, so she didn't want me sticking my fingers down my throat either. Appearance is important for models and actors, she said, and almost no one gets accepted into NIDA straight from school. I wanted to be the best actor, not the skinniest.

I inherited my father's cheek bones, year-round tan and curly hair, even if I am a size ten. Mum has a photo of him in a black leotard. Someday we'll go to Jamaica and look him up. Surprise! A good surprise not a bad surprise. Fingers crossed.

GeeMa said don't worry about being size ten when size fourteen is average. Rent-A-Child said, Keep up physical activities! Don't bite your nails or chew your hair! Don't bump into a client at the theatre with mum when you're pretending to be poor.

GeeMa goes on about what is on her shopping list, when her library books are due, places she has been in traffic gridlocks, where she has had trouble finding a place to park.

She asks me to remind her to bring the wash in from the balcony before it rains. When it gets super boring I change the topic. I would like to tell her about the song I'm writing with the sax player in Drama but that would be complicated. GeeMa might ask if the sax player was my boyfriend. At least Mum gets what LGBTQI means.

*If you want to avoid parking problems, you could order groceries online. I could help you set it up.*

*I used to have food delivered. Remember our magpies drank the cream off the top of the bottles the milkman left on the step? The woman who drove the fruit and veg truck? The handsome man who delivered fish? I showed you photos.*

*Is this your handwriting? The round brown handwriting on the creased photo of the iceman and his horse blends with the sepia. One dog photo is annotated on the back in blue cursive, the other in a child's printing. GeeMa writes in blue gel biro.*

*Umm, so long ago. She looks away.*

If only GeeMa kept in touch with these people by email or on Facebook. Who will take care of her if something happens?

*Someone's talking on an old phone in this one. Angular black script. The T crossed with an angry slash. The letters say, Susie T, not Emily Elizabeth!*

*Daddy called me his Susie sometimes. GeeMa is such an ugly sounding name. Can't you call me something nicer?*

*Emily Elizabeth? Or, Susie T?*

*'Nan' sounds sweet, don't you think?*

*Keep the Agency in the loop?*

*I worry they'll take you away if I bother them.*

*You worry too much.*

*Would you stop coming if I couldn't keep up, dear?*

*You know I love visiting you. I pass the tissues.*

*That poor old Tasmanian woman in the news, locked in a pig sty! She blots her wrinkled cheek.*

*I'd never let anything like that happen to you, GeeMa Nan.*

Both of us are snuffling.

*Just Nan.*

*Nan.* I blow my nose. Brushes a hair off my cheek.

I thought I could keep a professional distance, but I have a recurring nightmare. The bus doors fly open as I'm on my way to audition at NIDA. Three times I've been sucked through the front door of the School of Social Work. Social workers in all sizes scurry around, not worrying about their weight. I fill the kettle and get out biscuits, cups and tea. Almost time to go home.

The tea steeps while I dry the silverware. Add extra milk and sugar to GeeMa's cup. Milk's good for old bones.

Things get emotional this close to Christmas. Rent-A-Child used to charge triple for visits during the holidays. The pensioners scrimped all year. Now the Director flicks up an out-of-office message and closes for three weeks while he has quality time with his kids in Ubud.

I can't wait. No school. No acting. No lying about my name. Breakfast and presents on the deck. Auntie Jess is arriving from London, wearing a new bikini under her clothes, all ready for the first swim at Coogee. Jess refuses to go back to the office without a splendid suntan. Two whole weeks of swimming. I'm going to show her how to put music up on YouTube. Mum has booked a table for three at Aria.

I sneak into GeeMa's bathroom to check messages. A text from Rent-A-Child, *A GeePa wants a girl interested in photography. Can you manage another client? Starting 17th January?* The agency requires a Police Check, but there's a big difference between taking photos, helping in a darkroom and being a model. I hit reply. *No nudity. No priests, monks, sports coaches or Scout leaders. In addition to GeeMa Johns, not instead of.* He will only be a hobby photographer. I'm not dumping GeeMa Johns in any case.

If photo shoots go over time, Mum arrives home wired. During Mercedes Fashion Week I'm in charge of ordering a different takeaway every night. Variations of Asian vegetarian. Mum doesn't cook much. People in the eastern suburbs don't need to. Eat on the deck, listen to the sea.

GeeMa's handbag is open on the chair. I can smell silver polish on her hands when she holds a string of pearls around my neck. It tickles and in the mirror I see a twist of white string. A price tag. Maybe in pounds, shillings and pence.

*Pearls glow next to olive skin like yours, my dear.*

Pearls? GeeMa has given me her grandfather's watch with one hand (engraved BEB) and a maroon pen engraved, A McInnes, with a perished ink sac, like it had been through a war. I saw a pen like that in the pawnshop window near the bus stop. Sugar tongs, too. Probably a coincidence.

Only one visit more before Christmas. GeeMa would like me to visit Christmas Day, but I haven't other years. She and her friend from book group have put their names down to serve Christmas dinner to the homeless.

*A privilege, GeeMa says without blinking.*

*You're kind, doing that. Will your knee be okay?*

*I have my elastic bandage. We had fun trimming the tree last year, didn't we?*

*Next week, after we set up your tree, let's go to the library and get you the next Elena Ferrante novel. My Auntie Jess is arriving that day.*

*When my ship comes in, we'll go to the guesthouse in the rainforest for Christmas.*

I haven't heard this before.

*At five-thirty every morning they bring a pot of tea to your room so you don't miss the early bird walk. She puts the pearls back in her handbag.*

I turn on a light and the tellie, company for her.

*Would you phone me Christmas morning, Nan?*