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The New Boy in Town

Life had been fun when they were growing up. Like many other creatures in the area, the goannas lived near a billabong (that's like a pond) in a place they knew as Soapstone Gully. For the boy goannas it was a great time with nothing much to do apart from playing and messing around, as young boys do. The girl goannas liked playing too; but they also tended to be fairly silly and giggly. When they weren't chatting about girlie things they would often talk amongst themselves about the boys. "Have you noticed they all look the same," observed Minnie, "A sort-of dark grey colour. I wonder why that is? I mean, the boy birds are really bright, pretty colours. Our boy goannas are rather dull-looking. Still," she mused, "That Cory's rather cute."

"But he does some pretty stupid things," observed Chaz, "Why would anyone want to fall off a log and laugh about it?"

"Well," Minnie came back, "That's the sort of things boys do. I still think he's cute."

These good times might have gone on forever with boys being boys and girls being girls, but children eventually grow up and when they do, their likes and dislikes change. The girls still eyed up the boys; in a different way, though. Before this growing-up period, boys and girls rarely mixed; now, however, for some reason the girls felt it might be good to have boyfriends. The boys were also taking more interest in the girls; and the kind of fun they had always had was becoming pretty boring. The problem was that none of them really knew how to approach girls with a view to starting up a friendship. They talked about it amongst themselves, trying to come up with things to say that might impress the girls. "Hey, chick, wanna go walkabout?" was Stumble's suggestion.

"I can't imagine any girl taking you up on that," said Cory with a chuckle, "Not with you tripping over your own feet half the time."

"I reckon something to do with food," suggested Bot, "Like: that's a nice juicy leaf you're eating, sugar. Mind if I have a bite?"

Dweeb thought his idea better: "Girls seem to like flowers. What if we gave them some...?"

The boy goannas talked round and round in circles for a while and weren't getting anywhere; then Cory said: "I reckon we need motivation and an incentive."

Stumble frowned as best as a goanna could. "What are *they*?" he asked.

Cory pondered for a moment before answering: "Not sure. They're words I heard my Dad say – something about having a reason for doing stuff, I think. That's what we need, a push to get girlfriends. How about we have a competition? Er... last one to get a girlfriend's a drongo."

Days passed, with the boys trying to do or say something that would make a girl want to hang out with them. The competition idea certainly made them think harder because none of them wanted to be called a drongo. After numerous failed attempts, one ploy at least worked; well, almost. "Dweeb came up to me today and asked if he could be my boyfriend," said Fleur, "And he gave me flowers."

"Ooh, that was nice," commented Nell.

"It would have been," explained Fleur, "Except he'd already eaten half of them. Even so, I told him I'd think about it."

Instead of plunging in headfirst, Cory had been biding his time, watching what the other boys did and said as they attempted to win over girlfriends. Most of the time their efforts weren't good enough; either that or the girls were being very picky. So Cory decided to try something different. "Seeing as it's such a beautiful day, Minnie," he started, "I wonder if you wouldn't very much mind me taking you to lunch...?"

Minnie remained silent for a bit, then she smiled and said: "That sounds quite romantic, Cory. Did you have anything particular in mind?"

Cory came in with what he hoped would be a winning strategy: "I found a new bed of wild strawberries the other day. I'd like to take you there."

"Thanks for the offer, Cory," said Minnie with a sigh. "But I have to say no – strawberries make me itchy."

So much for that! The friendship-thing wasn't going well for the boys and one day something happened to make matters worse. A new boy arrived in Soapstone Gully. Although he was a similar creature, he was different to the goannas – a bit slimmer and longer and was certainly a brighter colour. The moment the girl goannas spotted him they rushed over to meet him. The new boy was delighted as they milled around him. "Well, hello there, ladies," he sang in a chirpy tone. "My you do look pretty, all of you. Spangle's the name, sparkly by nature. Which lucky girl would like to show me round town?"

The girls moved away and huddled together to begin what should have been a friendly discussion, but it turned into a heated debate. All of them wanted to escort Spangle around town and no-one wished to miss out. "Why don't we decide on colour?" suggested Nell. "He's kind-of yellow and you know that's my favourite colour, so it should be me..."

No wonder Nell's bid to befriend Spangle had fizzled because he was changing colour even as they watched. "He's not yellow at all," said Fleur, "He's more green."

"He might have been, but he's changing again to orange..." started Chaz, "No, red. How is that possible – first one colour, then another?"

The girlie chatter had become louder and Spangle heard the last bit. He wandered over to them and beamed proudly. "That's because I'm what's known as a chameleon. I can change my colour to whatever I fancy. You want green, I can give you green; or greeny-blue; or tangerine, maybe..." He watched the amazed looks on the faces of the girl goannas and knew he was on a winner in this new town. "Well, why don't *all* of you show me round?" he suggested, "And we can sort out the boyfriend girlfriend issue later. What do you reckon?"

The boy goannas had been watching this from a distance and were not happy. "Who does that show-off think he is?" grumbled Bot. "Coming here without so much as a by-your-leave and taking our girls."

"He hasn't exactly taken them," said Dweeb. "It's more like they're taking him."

"I don't get why they want to be with him at all," put in Stumble. "I mean, what's he got that we haven't?"

"He's very bright," offered Cory.

"Too flash if you ask me," Bot sneered.

"That too," Cory continued, "And he can change his colour. I think that's what attracts the girls. The point is: what are we going to do about it? If he stays in Soapstone Gully we have no chance of getting a girlfriend, none of us."

The boys thought about their problem for a while. There were some suggestions for making themselves more attractive to the girls, but having to compete with the new boy seemed impossible. Eventually, Stumble declared: "What we need to do is get rid of him - run him out of town." The other boys weren't too keen on the idea at first because the new boy was bigger than them. "But there are four of us and there's only one of him," said Stumble. "Let's go and find him and do the deed."

What the boy goannas hadn't realised was that Spangles had overheard their plan, and he knew what he had to do to ensure he wasn't run out of town. When the boys came looking they couldn't spot him anywhere. "Maybe he's gone," said Bot. It seemed doubtful considering the attention he had been getting from the girls, so they carried on searching. But they had no luck; and as with the arrival of Spangles there was more trouble coming, or so it seemed...

He wasn't as flashy as the chameleon; in fact he was a pretty light colour all over, almost white. He was also different: nothing like a chameleon or a goanna, and he was covered in fur. Perhaps what was of most concern was the way he moved along - slowly and suspiciously making him appear kind-of shifty. The other strange thing was that he wore a pair of spectacles with really thick glass, and he was carrying a peculiar object in his paw that he waved around and looked through occasionally. "Who do you think he is?" queried Dweeb, "And what's that thing in his paw."

"More to the point," added Cory, "What's he doing here? I think we'd better go and ask."

The boys walked briskly over to the new arrival; well three of them did, followed hesitatingly by Stumble who kept tripping over his own feet as usual. He caught up in time to catch Cory's question: "What are you? You're not a goanna, and you've got hair like a rabbit, but you're not one of them either."

"I am a ferret," answered the stranger as he handed something to Cory. "My card," he said by way of an explanation, "Name of Conan Pratt, occupation Detective." He waved the thing in his paw around, "Which you can probably guess from my magnifying glass. As for why I'm here, I am on a case - that's like a job that we Detectives do. Well," he said after pausing to think, "You couldn't really call it a case because that's what I do for other people; like finding lost things and tracking down crime stuff."

"So, if you aren't Detectiving a case," queried Stumble, "What *are* you doing?"

"Actually something for myself," explained Conan. "I am seeking a particular individual who I believe might want to come and work for me. He's not unlike all of you, but is bigger, much brighter and more colourful."

"Oh, we know who you mean," said Bot. "The flashy dude. Well, good luck with finding him. We've tried but can't see hide nor hair of him."

Conan frowned as he peered through his glasses at the surrounding area. He stopped and said: "You can't have been looking very hard." He pointed with his magnifying glass at a clump of weeds. "He's over there, see?"

The boy goannas looked to where the Detective was pointing, but none of them could see Spangles; not until he moved. "He made himself the same colour as the weeds," concluded Dweeb. "So's we couldn't see him. That was sneaky." He turned to face Conan. "How come you could see him and we couldn't?"

The ferret took off his spectacles and showed them to the boys. "Special glasses just for this job. When I'm wearing them I can't see colours, only shapes. I knew this Spangles character would keep changing colour so that I couldn't find him; but with these glasses it doesn't matter. I can spot him anywhere. Now that I've found him I might go and have a word."

"Before you do, Mister Detective," said Cory, "Why would you want someone like Spangles to work for you? Apart from being flashy and changing colour, what good would he be?"

Conan looked at Cory at first in puzzlement because the goanna clearly had no idea what he thought should have been obvious; then he realised that Cory and his friends probably knew nothing about Detecting. "Here's the thing," he said, "Sometimes I have to do a bit of spying on people without them knowing; and even though I could dress up, in disguise so to speak, they would still be able to see me. But with a chameleon as my assistant, he could do the spying and change his colour so that he couldn't be seen."

As Conan began walking towards him, Spangles moved out clear of the weeds and changed his colour to a kind-of pink. The moment he did, the girl goannas spotted him and came running over. Like the boy goannas, they had been searching for the chameleon and

were so excited that they could now see him. “Will you look at that,” groaned Bot. “We are totally outclassed by that show-pony.”

“Maybe not forever,” said Cory encouragingly. “If Detective Pratt gets his way and hires him as an assistant, when *he* goes, so will our problem.”

It was a thought, a good one; but would Spangles want to leave? Although they couldn’t hear much of what was said because they were too far away, the boys began doubting Cory’s assurance. Presumably the Detective had made Spangles some kind of offer which he might well have been thinking seriously of taking; but the girls were milling around trying to convince him to stay. The waiting was almost unbearable. Spangles was looking from the girls to the Detective and back again, pondering his decision. Then Stumble declared: “I think we’re in luck. The girls have gone all glum and Nell’s starting to cry. Now Spangles and the Detective are coming back side by side.

“Well boys,” said Conan as he approached them. Taking off his spectacles, he slid them into a pocket. “Seems I won’t be needing these, at least not for now.” He stepped aside and beamed. “Say hello to my new assistant. Finding him should have been cause for a celebration, but we have to go – an important case awaits. Nice to meet you all. I do hope the loss of your friend here won’t be too upsetting for you.”

The boys were speechless; but only until the Detective and his assistant had walked out of earshot. “I had to stop myself,” muttered Dweeb in a low voice. “I almost said: ‘You’re welcome to him and good riddance.’”

The others agreed and were glad Spangles was at last out of their hair; not that goannas had any. “What we have to do now,” said Cory, “Is make the most of the moment. The girls are all sad and need cheering up. I reckon it’s our job to do that.”

“If they even want to know us,” moaned Bot. “Apart from the flashy dude going, nothing else has changed. To the girls we’ll still be dull and colourless.”

“Maybe not for long,” said Stumble. “Hang about a minute.” And he stumbled off. As it happened he was gone for more than a minute; when he returned, however, he looked totally different. Instead of being his usual dark grey he was now a bright rusty red.

The others were amazed. “How did you do that?” asked Cory.

“Well,” Stumble explained. “A couple of days ago I tripped into this puddle of red mud.”

“Okay,” pondered Cory, “But unless we can find puddles of different colours we’d all be red and I don’t think that would help us impress the girls.”

“Maybe not,” said Dweeb. Going over to a clump of flowers he chewed off some of the petals, tossed them on the ground and kicked them around with a foot. “Your red mud’s still wet, right Stumble? Come here and roll in these.” Stumble did just that, and when he stood upright the coloured flower petals had stuck to the mud on his back. “Perfect,” declared Dweeb. “Now all we have to do is have a dunk in the red mud and each find different coloured flowers to stick on it.”

It did seem like a plan, so the boys gave it a go. Soon they looked very different to the way they were to start with. The next thing was to try approaching the girls who were suspicious at first, then quite impressed. “You did this especially for us?” said Fleur, a delighted sparkle in her eyes. “That’s very thoughtful. Um, Dweeb, I don’t suppose you’d fancy walking out with me...?”

It wasn’t long before all of the boys had paired off with the girls; and even though Stumble was the last to get a girlfriend, seeing as he was the one who came up with the red mud idea, no-one dared to call him a drongo. So, life in Soapstone Gully carried on in a very colourful way; and the girls were so taken with the idea of putting on makeup the way the boys had that they decided to try it. And, needless to say, they made a far better job of it; but the boys didn’t mind that a bit.