

Young Writers Award 2010:

Maureen Donahoe Encouragement Award winner

Hobbes' Samoyed Acquisition

by Helen Brake

Samoyeds were used by the nomadic Kamasin people of Siberia to herd reindeer. At night they would lie by their owners, and the herdsman would stay warm with one of the double-coated dogs under each arm. Samoyeds were vital to Kamasin life. The dogs' stamina and loyal nature ensured the men returned safely to their families back at their home camps.

Clacey had it all planned. The dog would be allowed inside in the air-conditioning during the day, and would be exercised after dinner when it was cooler. She knew of at least two Brisbane-based breeders, so it wasn't as though it was unheard of. Plus, her family lived right on Moreton Bay; it was always a couple of degrees cooler than the central or western suburbs. And she would care for the Samoyed so well it would never feel wronged or unhappy. When it arrived, it would understand how much her family needed it; the Samoyed is one of the world's oldest dog breeds so they have been protecting families for thousands of years. Clacey wouldn't include that part, the one about needing the dog, in the proposal because it wasn't something you could find evidence for. Nevertheless it was what drove her to make the submission perfect. She mustn't leave anything to chance.

Stink! Clacey half rose from her seat and winced as the back of her thigh broke contact with the seat. So humid already. She bumped the chair backwards and resettled herself, now there was enough space between the chair and round table for her to work comfortably. She put the Reflex box filled with stationary she had gathered from the home office to her left, and began stacking her collection of pictures into piles: those she might use, and those to be discarded. If her Dad was going to approve the proposal—Operation Hobbes Family Samoyed—at the next family conference it must be as professional as the handbooks he gives his students when they are taking one of his courses. She wouldn't have a monogrammed pen to clip inside the proposal-folders, obviously, but she was confident she could supply everything else.

It wasn't very often she was alone downstairs, so she spread her things out right across the dining table. Last night she and her big sister had gotten into a fight because they were both using the table and Jen thought Clacey was taking more than her fair share of room. Jen had stormed off to bed in a huff, after getting in trouble by Mum for taunting Clacey about having bigger calf muscles than breasts. It was a common dig, but always evoked a reaction because it was true. Clacey had inherited her Dad's well-muscled legs but nothing of her Mum's chest. Jen, on the other hand, had already filled out a B-cup by the time *she* was fourteen.

But Clacey was alone now and worked uninterrupted. She settled on a profile shot of an immaculately groomed, medium-sized dog from *50 Best Breeds* as the cover art for the document, and carefully cut the photo from the magazine. Clacey slid the front page into a

laminated slip and the proposal was complete. She sat for a moment enjoying the smell of the drying glue and the sense of fulfilment she always experienced when she had completed a project. Outside, cyclists sweated and parents called for their kids or dogs. The busy morning foreshore had no idea what had just been accomplished in the renovated, blue-and-beige Queenslander across the road.

Clacey heard footsteps from above approaching the top of the stairs. They would be her brother's. Her father only returned from Perth on last night's red-eye, so he wouldn't be up yet, and her mother and sister always slept in on Saturday mornings. She was the family's early-bird. Neil rubbed his ear sleepily as he got to the bottom of the stairs. The old 'We like our lizards frilled, not grilled' t-shirt he still insisted on wearing to bed because it had a Jeep on the front was too small: his round, childish belly showed above his boxers. Their Dad always called him a ten-year-old egg on toothpicks. Neil stared at Clacey confusedly for a moment before his features settled into their usual phlegmatic expression. 'Is it done?'

Clacey, pleased her achievement would be witnessed so soon, nodded, got up from her seat and pulled him over to the table. She gave him a pen and pointed to the last page of the proposal. 'Sign here. It says you want the dog, will walk it two mornings a week and will feed it if I am away.'

Neil slowly printed his name—he still did his e's backwards—and left the dining room for out-the-back where the computer was. He spent most his time playing Moonbuggy. Jenny had brought up his increasing lack of exercise and other interests at the last family conference—she thought Mum and Dad should put a limit on his computer-playing time—but the meeting had ended early.

It had just been the four of them: Dad, Jen, Neil and Clacey. Mum was staying at Auntie Kay's again. When open discussion time began Jenny started speaking, but then the kitchen timer went off—croissants were ready—and Mum arrived home, so Dad adjourned the conference. Clacey had been ready for the meeting to end anyway. She had made her initial pitch for a family pet, and Dad had told her to get a proposal together. She was eager to begin and knew exactly what to do. Consequently, she had been distracted throughout the rest of the meeting by the thought of excel spreadsheets, estimated costs and a million other things. She saw but didn't dwell on the fact that Dad wasn't taking minutes like usual or that it was now the third family conference Mum had missed. She didn't hear the details of the star-chart system Jenny proposed to encourage Neil to spend time outside the house.

Clacey heard new footsteps upstairs. Jen. Wonder whether she has got over last night? Wonder whether she will sign? If she did Clacey would just need Mum and Dad's signatures. Jen soon came into sight, already dressed in a singlet and orange short-shorts, which, because it was summer and her freckles always darkened in the sun, made a three-way match with her strawberry hair. She ignored Clacey, walked past the black table to the fridge and grabbed an Up and Go: 'The Goodness of Two Wheat Bix and Milk.' Except for Sunday morning croissants, that was all she would eat for breakfast.

Clacey began clearing the stationary from the table, dropping things noisily back into the cardboard box so Jen would have to notice she had finished the proposal. But Jen still ignored her—she was in such a bad mood these days—and headed straight for the front door.

Clacey decided to risk it. 'I finished. Can you sign it, so it'll be ready for tomorrow morning?'

Jen turned around impatiently—grumpily—and Clacey couldn't miss that her eyes were red and her nose white, like it got when she'd been crying. 'Who cares about your stupid contract? It's never going to happen. It doesn't matter what we want.'

The heavy mass in Clacey's stomach—she could usually ignore it—began rising and Clacey's toes curled, gripping the floor as she tried not to panic. She felt she was being forced to open her eyes to something she knew would blind her. Samoyeds have almond-shaped eyes that stop the reflection of the sun on the snow damaging their vision. Clacey needed new eyes: blue and squishy and round wouldn't cut it. However, she fought back as best she could, and refused to acknowledge the thought that was hammering against the walls of her consciousness, demanding to be let in. 'What would you know?' she said.

Jenny turned away and yanked the front door behind her. A few minutes later it opened and Jen was back; she paused in the doorway for so long Clacey felt her insides gradually relax. The morning sun was behind Jen, frustrating Clacey's attempt to read her expression. Jen moved towards the table. Without speaking, she leaned down, fished through the Reflex box for a pen and signed the contract. Clacey looked at her, and rather than be pleased was scared. Jen's face was all mobile and crumpled, and she was looking at Clacey—kindly; her anger had softened to a mere ghost of exasperation. Clacey was disorientated; Jen was suddenly much more than two-and-a-half years older than her.

Jen walked out of the house again, still without speaking. Sitting at the black table Clacey could see out the front, glass doors and followed Jen's movement across the road until she scabbled down the rocks to the mudflats and was out of sight. Clacey felt the heavy air wasn't reaching her lungs, and had difficulty breathing. How could she lose control of her body just by consciously acknowledging something she had long suspected? She wasn't being blinded after all; she was going to suffocate.

On movies, when the hero jumped off a cliff into the ocean to save someone or escape something Clacey used to hold her breath as their head went under the water, and would keep holding it as they struggled to resurface. If she could manage without taking a breath, even to the point of getting dizzy, they would make it. Sometimes Clacey managed to hold her breath until the scene ended. Other times, when the suspense was dragged longer, her body would refuse to submit to unconsciousness and breathed against her will. It was always a surprise when the hero still broke the surface, and although she was glad they did she also felt guilty for failing them.

In a similar mix of gratitude and guilt Clacey found herself breathing even as she understood the earth was tipping on its axis. Clacey supposed her body's reaction wasn't entirely unreasonable. Life, of a sort, would still continue. She had read that if the earth's axis was positioned at 24 degrees an Ice Age would exist and at 22 degrees sea levels would immerse all land. How should she prepare for the change in her world? She didn't have instincts developed over thousands of years. How should she be loyal in this new world when boundaries and obligations were all in flux? She needed a new contract. It would be horizontal and only have three marks. It would never be written on paper or printed with ink.

Neil came creeping back up the hallway to the front of the house, probably looking for breakfast. Clacey took the proposal to the family pigeon holes that rested on the chest-high wall that divided the kitchen from the dining room and put the contract in her space. It was empty except for a parental permission form to visit the Supreme Court from her social studies teacher, and an offer to renew her National Geographic subscription.

'Why aren't you leaving it in the family conference inbox; it won't be on the agenda for tomorrow's meeting if you don't.' Neil said.

'Get changed and grab something to eat. We're going for a walk.' Her brother

obediently moved towards the stairs. When he returned they left the house together. As they walked barefoot across the hot tar to the foreshore the organic, moist smell of rotting seaweed—unpleasant when first encountered, sweet and comforting as the smell of one's own sweat when familiar—welcomed them.

'Are we going out along the flats? Or up the cliff?'

'We're joining Jen.'