

PIXIE DUST A Memoir Excerpt

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Crime

Even though the shop was open and most of the goods were stacked in the storeroom, Betty still kept a few things at the house. We went off to school each weekday and when we came home there would be boxes lining the hallway, and we were fascinated by the coloured labels of cigarettes, tobacco and confectionery. Betty would take some of them down to the shop on Sunday morning and stay for a couple of hours catching up on paperwork. It was at one of those times that Ross signalled me into the lounge room.

'Under the bed,' Ross said. 'I saw Betty checking it when they arrived on Friday. She emptied all the boxes, put them into a suitcase and shoved it under there.' Ross pointed to the brown suitcase under the bed in Dad and Betty's room. 'See it?'

'What's in there?' I asked.

'Lollies for the shop. I'm going to have a look. Stay here and keep watch, if you hear anyone or anything, call me.'

'Wait a minute. This is going to get us into big trouble.'

'It'll be okay. She won't know if we're quick,' he said.

'I don't know. You know what she's like.'

'Yeah, well Dad said we all share in the shop, so I want to see my share.'

He darted across the hallway into the bedroom and slid under the bed, his belly leaving a clean path as he mopped a strip of dust on his way in.

He grabbed the suitcase by the handle and yanked hard, but it wouldn't budge.

'Give us a hand. It's stuck.'

My heart was pounding and my knees shook. I wasn't at all sure about this. With a deep breath, I dived across through the door, a gap that seemed as big as the lounge room. With less skillful ease, I skidded over and grabbed the handle.

'You pull, I'll push,' he said.

He kicked with thumps of gusto from behind, while I pulled with all my might on the handle. We were making a dreadful racket and there was dust everywhere. Bits of fluff drifted around and landed on us and the bed, as our wriggling bodies stirred up weeks of neglected under-bed cleaning. We puffed and panted inhaling the fine powder with each breath. I sneezed.

'Holy cow, Bonnie. We're trying to be quiet.'

'Doesn't she ever clean under the bed?'

'Who cares. Keep pulling.'

Each push and pull eased the case until at last, with one final shove, it came free.

It was like discovering lost treasure and being on an adventure in the caves on the Cornwall coast. We couldn't think of anything other than the booty inside. Ross raised the lid and a mingle of sweet aromas hit us. We ogled the neat stacks of

coloured boxes – every variety of lolly imaginable. Ross reached in, grabbed a box each of Musk Sticks, Juicy Fruit and PK Chewing Gum, slammed the lid shut and we began to force the suitcase back under the bed. A corner covered with our blurred fingerprints remained sticking out as we dashed back through the doorway into our bedroom.

Ross tore the cellophane covering from the PK gum and it revealed two rows of tiny packets, each filled with little pillows of delicious, sugar-coated gum. He handed me a box of Musk Sticks. I unwrapped the cellophane and a wave of musk hit my senses. I picked one up, slid it through my moist lips and chewed. Ross squeezed one full packet of gum into his mouth; then another and another, until there were six packets in there. His mouth was so full, rivers of dribble flowed down his chin as he tried to control the giant chewy mass.

Then the doorway darkened. Betty. Her face was an ugly mask of anger.

'What do you think you are doing?' she asked.

Lolly wrappers and cellophane were strewn across the floor. I froze, clutching the box against my chest with a musk stick paused on the way to my mouth. Ross tried desperately to conceal his bulging cheeks. Betty wiggled her fingers for us to hand over the remaining uneaten lollies. When Dad came home from work, we were called into the kitchen where the opened packets sat in the middle of the table. He gave both of us six on the backside from the strap and we were sent to bed without any tea.

The following morning, after a chilly breakfast, Ross and I were ready to leave for school when Betty called us into the kitchen. On the table was a cardboard carton, a roll of string and a pair of scissors. She ripped two flaps from the carton, picked up the scissors and rammed them into the ends making jagged holes, through which she threaded and tied the string to make a loop.

'We're going to be late for school,' Ross said.

'If you're late, you're late,' she said. 'You will wait until I have finished.'

'Can we help?' I was wondering why we were watching her making door signs.

She slammed the cardboard flat on the kitchen table, grabbed the pen stuck between her specs and her ear then scratched large letters with wild strokes while Ross and I stood at attention, glancing at each other, wondering what she was doing.

She's cranky, mouthed Ross. *Very*, I mouthed back.

Betty picked up the signs, thrusting one at each of us and said, 'Put those on. You will wear them to school today. All day.'

We turned the signs around, stunned by what was written on each.

I am a thief.

'We have to wear these to school?' I said.

'We're not going to,' said Ross. 'You can't make us.'

'I can't wear this to school. I just can't.'

'Oh yes, you can,' Betty said. 'This is what happens when you steal.'

'But we got the strap from Dad last night for that,' I said.

'Well, that was his punishment now this is mine. Now go.'

'I don't like you,' said Ross.

'I don't like you either,' I said, in agreement. 'You're horrible and mean. I'm going to tell Dad.'

'Good luck. You do that. It won't make any difference.'

School was going to be ruined because we pinched a few lollies. Walking down the hill to school wearing horrible signs I wanted to jump into one of the holes on the slag dump and stay there.

'I can't go to school like this.' I said.

'Let's take them off,' said Ross. 'She won't know. We'll put them back on when we come up the hill.'

'Where'll we hide them?'

'The big pepper tree on the dump. We'll pick them up after school.'

We removed the signs and stuck them under the pepper tree before heading down the hill to school. On the way home, we put them back around our necks. Betty was standing at the back door when we arrived home.

'You wore the signs all day?' she asked.

'Yes,' we said.

'All day?' Hands on hips and thin lips stretched wide, she leaned in and spat at us with cigarette breath through clenched

teeth, head wobbling from side to side. Around her forehead, rows of bobby pins held bits of brown hair in tight curls. I noticed one strand of hair wobbling and beginning to unwind.

'Ye...e...s.'

I spoke to Mr Burwell. He didn't see you wearing any signs.'

'Well, we didn't wear them in class, just to school,' said Ross. I nodded in agreement.

'Didn't I say all day? You didn't wear them all day, so now you will wear them all week. Give them to me.'

She snatched the signs, whipped the pen out from her hair, scribbled on each and shoved them back at us, holding them in front of our noses.

'You will wear them for the rest of the week and I will make sure by taking you to school myself. I will take you to the gate and watch you walk into class so everyone can see what disgraceful children you are.' She shoved the signs at us.

We stared at the writing, horrified. I was sick with fright. A warm trickle ran down my leg and formed a puddle around my feet.

I didn't want to go to school anymore.

The sign now read - ***I am a thief and a liar.***