Rozanna Lilley grew up in South Perth, the youngest of five children. Her parents – Dorothy Hewett and Merv Lilley – were both left wing radicals and writers. They moved to Sydney in Lilley’s last year of primary school. After school, Lilley attended a drama school and was in two feature films: *Journey Among Women* (1977) and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978). Lilley has worked as a social anthropologist at universities in Australia and Hong Kong, returning home when her second child, Oscar, was born. Lilley then completed a second PhD in Early Childhood at Macquarie University. She has published creative non-fiction and poetry in national newspapers, literary journals and edited collections.
DO OYSTERS GET BORED?

A CURIOUS LIFE

ROZANNA LILLEY
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Memoir
First snow

Oscar wants to see snow. He’s been wanting this for a while now. Last year I took him to Canberra in winter. It was cold, but there was no snow. We both felt unaccountably disappointed. I’ve lived in Canberra, and never seen snow there. But sometimes I think that just wanting might be enough.

This year I have a foolproof plan. It involves spending money. We’ll drive to ‘the snow’. I’ve booked two nights at Lake Crackenback Resort. We’ll stop in Canberra on the way. This time, I won’t expect to see snow there. But it’s a dead cert we’ll see it at Perisher.

We pull into the Diplomat Hotel in Griffith. It makes me want to laugh. It’s some kind of 1970s panopticon. There’s an enormous central atrium housing an alarmingly draughty dining area and lounge bar. An almost grand staircase feeds guests from the atrium to their rooms on the first or second floor, all located in an obedient circumference around this well of plenty. There’s no escaping looking, or being looked at. Oscar thinks it’s fancy. My husband, Neil, says I’ve done well. An ornamental fishpond, replete with artificial waterlilies, is cleverly positioned under the stairway. ‘Are those beautiful, Mum?’ Oscar asks, uncertainly.
On the first night, a Wednesday, Oscar wants to go home. This is generally the case on holiday.

On Tuesday I’d purchased three DVDs for the car trip. It turned out our portable DVD player was broken. So I left them at home. This was not a good idea. Oscar points out he could watch them on his PS3. But that doesn’t make the DVDs miraculously reappear. As the hysteria increases, I wonder if we might actually have to get in the car and drive back to Sydney. But I don’t want to waste the money I’ve spent on the accommodation at Lake Crackenback. And, anyway, we still haven’t seen the snow.

I formulate a plan. I bought the DVDs in Coles, Leichhardt: 2 x *Power Rangers* and 1 x *X-Men*. Maybe we can find similar ones at Coles in Canberra. Oscar is sufficiently calmed by this promise to consent to stay the night, especially after I write out a reassuringly legible list of everything he wants for Christmas. Even better, next day, after a quick search in the Yellow Pages, my plan actually works. We emerge, triumphant, from Coles, Manuka, gripping two new *Power Rangers* DVDs and one Lego *Adventures of Clutch Powers* movie. The force is with us.

When travelling with Oscar, you can only budget for one activity a day. He has a limited tolerance for excursions and is easily exhausted. He needs downtime, with either his electronic games or his elaborate episodes of ‘pretend’.

Sometimes we read books, though this is not a preferred activity anywhere aside from school (where there are no electronic games or willing and able play practitioners). At the moment we are working our way through the whole of the Mr Men series, partly because I find the idea of reading a complete collection oddly satisfying and partly because I read somewhere that the Mr Men series was good for kids with autism because it helped them to understand different emotions and personalities.

Oscar likes staying in hotels. He’s a big fan of the buffet breakfasts. Our developmental paediatrician describes Oscar as having ‘a history of obsessive eating’. If the doctor had grown up with my parents, he’d know something about the extent of
that history – the determined parades of rockmelon and cottage cheese and the hopeful testing for abnormal ketones in urine forming a sporadic yet incessant backdrop to my childhood. (Even in his late eighties, my father fantasised about impressing the ladies, svelte in a white linen suit.)

At the Diplomat, Oscar discovers croissants. It is a relief that he eats the whole pastry. (As a young child, my daughter would only ever consent to taking a few mouthfuls of the soft interior.) He then devours a large plate of sausages and bacon smothered in tomato sauce. Schoolmarmesque, I show him how I am having one croissant and one glass of fruit juice. He looks me up and down. ‘Mum, you are Miss Perfect’, he comments neutrally. ‘Who am I? Mr Greedy or Mr Messy?’

I wonder how helpful Mr Men books really are.

On Friday we wend our way to the Snowies. I haven’t been here for a decade. Last time, it was a day trip punctuated by Spice Girls cassettes and tobogganing. Once, in my early twenties, I slid around the top of Kosciuszko in sandals. It was summer and I didn’t realise there would be snow. This time around, I am approaching our trip in a more methodical fashion. A SpongeBob SquarePants CD helps to fill in the rolling kilometres. Plankton is still searching for that Krabby Patty secret recipe.

At the Lake Crackenback store, we are all fitted for après-ski boots. A burly man barks orders at Oscar about the boots. I get tired of telling strangers he’s autistic, but can see I’ll have to take the plunge. Oscar is nine and not good with new shoes. If you say this to any parent of a kid with autism, they immediately laugh. Our acceptable shoes are black Clarks runners with velcro fasteners. When I buy him a new pair, I offer systematic rewards for wearing them. We start with five minutes, watching TV, and gradually progress to going out in them for short excursions. A lot of chocolate, and praise, is consumed in the process. So the burly man and the boots are making me apprehensive.

Oscar tries to respond to the rapid-fire instructions issuing from Mr Brusque, but has neither the motor coordination nor
the physical strength to do so with the kind of rapidity that oils the flow of social interaction. Our saviour appears in the form of Mr Merciful, ski beanie eccentrically askew. I know immediately that our ship has come in.

This guy is both marvellous and manic with Oscar. He finds the perfect pair of boots. He takes all of Oscar’s complaints seriously. He even tells him about the vegetation line, the edge of the habitat at which trees are capable of growing in cold conditions. Oscar doesn’t seem to be listening. I snap my fingers in front of his face. Mr Merciful looks at me sadly, gently admonishing, ‘It’s okay’.

He tells me about his younger son, diagnosed with Asperger’s and Attention Deficit Disorder and Oppositional Defiance Disorder. He then mentions his older son with an impressively long list of psychiatric conditions. ‘We are interesting people’, I muse. ‘That’s it!’ he replies excitedly, adding that Einstein and Van Gogh had Asperger’s. ‘Thinking outside the box’, he proudly proclaims. He concludes with a speech about how égalité is the greatest concept in human history, how that’s all he wants for his sons. Well, that and compassion.

I tell him Oscar has been diagnosed with autistic disorder. He looks at me doubtfully and replies, ‘He’d have a lot of Asperger’s in him’.

The next day we finally hit the snow, proudly wearing our hired boots. It is a great success. We throw snowballs; we build ramshackle snowmen; we eat in a cafe; we go tobogganing. Oscar even uses a public toilet. We disappear in a swirling mass of like-minded tourists, all intent on the democratic joys of the snowfields. Middle-aged women pose for the camera on candy-coloured plastic toboggans, aiming for an illusion of velocity. Perisher may be the natural habitat for those of us who aren’t sporty – égalité and all that.

Oscar is an unexpected devotee of the snow tube. This amusement involves sitting in a tyre and being hauled up a slope on a pulley. At the top, you then queue to be pushed down the
run. I watch the participants carefully. They are all grinning or laughing or screaming happily as they hurtle downwards. Oscar remains expressionless but wants to do it again and again.

Normally I wouldn’t contemplate a snow tube. I know my limits. But I’ve been taking antidepressants for a month or so, and a new possibility of recklessness, or maybe just a misguided sense that everything will work out all right, has pervaded my thoughts and actions. Oscar pleads with me. It seems simpler to agree than to resist.

On the way up, Oscar politely introduces me to the attendant. ‘This is my mum, Rose. She is a little bit afraid.’ Rudely, the attendant doesn’t respond, so he repeats it over and over. Eventually I tell my son that the lady is not interested in my fears. She smirks.

At the top, Oscar turns and offers me his place at the front of the line. With an expansive arm gesture and an impish grin that almost passes for charm, he announces, ‘Ladies first’. As I wonder which cartoon he learned this chunk of the debonair from, I am pushed unceremoniously from the top, hurtling backwards down the steep slope.

Fear is the only emotion I experience. By the time I reach the bottom I am in a state of shock so profound I have trouble standing upright. I look for comfort, sobbing, in Neil’s enveloping arms. Oscar is distressed. He cannot bear other people’s tears. Rapidly recomposing, I thank Oscar for encouraging me to go on the ride. I explain the inadequacy is mine and not his. But he remains visibly upset.

As the day progresses, the incident is gradually transformed into a family joke. Oscar teases, ‘What was the part you hated most, Mum? What was the part you hated second? What was the part you hated third?’ We are all laughing, complete.

Levity has never been my strong point. That’s why I make too many jokes. The connection I feel with Oscar, deep and strong as any love can be, is in part a shared disposition towards the world. As a child I was Miss Timid.
Each year my family made the pilgrimage to the Perth Royal Show — the usual sour-sweet medley of garish rides, fairy floss, animal dung and dust. In the House of Horrors I lost the plot. Weeping copiously, I was rescued by a man in a gorilla suit. As he removed his gorilla head, revealing a body half-human and half-ape, my tears turned to screams. He delivered me thus into the waiting arms of my amused mother.

Sometimes I was Miss Vague or, even, scanning the horizon from my deep emerald nest atop a camphor laurel, Miss Tomboy. As I got older, those labels morphed. Perplexed boyfriends called me Miss Remote. My family were forced to wrestle with Miss Anxiety, or perhaps I was wrestling with them. At the cinema, *Counting by Numbers* encapsulated my general approach. I had developed a compulsion to create patterns, seeking symmetry as I counted the letters in each word I read or numbered the items of dirty cutlery as I stacked the dishwasher. Somewhat debauched by the 1970s, I prefer my universe predictable and my ballpoints all in one jar.

We return to Canberra the following day, a Sunday. As the landscape of rocky outcrops embedded in forlorn paddocks and leafless poplars lining the long road unfolds, Oscar and Neil play pretend. SpongeBob, fortuitously, has met the X-men. Wolverine looks in amazement at SpongeBob’s sweet home in Bikini Bottom. ‘You live in a pineapple!’ he exclaims. Oscar feeds Neil lines about infinity fractals. The Hulk joins in.

Oscar imperiously commands the front seat. I am relegated to the back. Bored, I take notes. Such are the perils of domestic ethnography. From my vantage point I can contemplate Neil’s hair, now peppered with grey, and, as he nonchalantly steers with one hand, the age spots that have recently begun to dignify his gestures.

Officially, it is the last day of the New South Wales school holidays. But Oscar has an extra week off. There is a school camp, and neither he nor they could possibly cope.

Every Friday Oscar is allowed to buy a game or a toy. It is the longed-for object that helps to get him through each difficult
week. He strategises about his Friday purchase on every other day. There is no travelling exemption. Thankfully, we found an EB Games at the DFO outlet in Canberra’s outskirts. Oscar chose a PS3 game on the way to the snow; now he wants to return it. This time, Mario and Luigi save the day.

Still revelling in Oscar’s enthusiasm for our brief but snowy holiday – ‘I wish I could see all of Australia’ – I relax in front of the evening news at University House. In my world there is no exemption from the ABC news at 7 p.m. I have borrowed this obsession from my father, who roared with punctual anger if anyone dared to speak during the sacrosanct transmission of daily horrors. These outbursts were the least of his maniacal shenanigans, prone, as he still is, to giving free rein to fantasies of pugilistic triumph. These days, though, his prodigious memory, especially for verse, is failing him. I watch an item about tourists being stranded on chairlifts at Thredbo. Even though we never went near a chairlift, or to Thredbo, I feel uncommonly lucky.

Oscar is busy with his new Nintendo game. A temporary hush descends on our room, the wooden patina of the heritage-listed decor softly luminous in the still evening light. Our academic meditations are rudely disturbed by Oscar’s mounting frustration with Mario and Luigi. He cannot complete a challenge within the specified time frame. Neil offers to help out. He can almost do it. With each passing turn, Neil yells louder. ‘Oh, god, no’, ‘I can’t believe it’, ‘Damn!’ Oscar can take neither the suspense nor the shouting.

At 7.30 p.m. he uncharacteristically asks, ‘Mum, can we go to bed?’ We retreat. Oscar closes the door so he can’t hear Mr Frustrated’s increasingly irate remarks. We read Mr Men. At 8 p.m. Mr Victorious whoops with joy. The door is opened and Oscar emerges from bed.

The following day, Oscar, on waking next to me, wonders aloud if there will be a *Toy Story 4*. He demands I come up with plot ideas for the film. Eventually I offer a *Toy Story/Night at the Museum* hybrid, set in Japan. Oscar is very satisfied with my
invention and explores the possibilities, aided by an unerringly accurate recall of each film frame. He responds with disbelief if we are unable to remember these details. ‘Hello!’ he sarcastically intones.

I remind Oscar that he stormed out of Night at the Museum at the Sussex Inlet cinema a few years earlier, abruptly announcing ‘That’s it! I’m getting out of here’. A sense of solidarity with the hapless museum guard, played by Ben Stiller, forced his peremptory exit.

I thought Oscar might find this story funny. I was wrong. He is enraged by his own behaviour. With tears in his eyes, he butts his head repeatedly against the pillows of the bed, wailing over and over, ‘I’m such an idiot!’ My efforts over the years to redirect his head-butting away from hard surfaces are paying off.

At breakfast, Oscar methodically inspects the bain-maries. ‘I want three sausages, a couple of bits of bacon and two hash browns.’ Our uneventful morning is interrupted by a fire alarm. I am in the ladies, enjoying an instrumental version of ‘Morning Has Broken’. I can hear announcements but I can’t make sense of them. I wonder whether terrorists might be storming my alma mater. I figure that if I crouch on the toilet seat, they might pass my cubicle by. I do, after all, sometimes watch shows other than the news. Hesitantly emerging, I’m reassured by a waiter that the alarm was accidentally triggered by kitchen smoke. My heart still pumping a little nervously, I go to rejoin my family. But Oscar has long since fled the building.

The road trip home is an extended episode of Super Mario Bros pretend. We pass a truck. Oscar asks, ‘What’s Bing Lee?’ Armed with this new information, he tells Neil, ‘You have to be Bowser and go into a Bing Lee shop and find they don’t sell weapons’.

Bowser is in Tokyo. He has chanced upon an all-you-can-eat restaurant. They serve seafood and sushi. Bowser is eating and punching his way through Japan. It is the future. There are flying cars. The Powerpuff girls make a guest appearance.
‘Dad, Dad, Dad. You have to be Bowser’s DNA and appear.’ ‘Dad, Dad, Dad. You have to be Blossom.’ ‘You have to be Buttercup and say, “The DNA is the true monster. We have to get rid of the DNA.”’

The relentless Sunday has settled into a slate-grey gloom. Cockatoos wheel across the sky. I dispense sticky sour squirms, methodically, from the back seat.

Oscar is a general. The General solemnly addresses Bowser: ‘Sometimes we are misinformed’. In a theatrical aside, he tells Neil, ‘You have to be Bowser and don’t know what that means’. Neil obediently replies, ‘What does that mean?’

Oscar explains, ‘It means we might be wrong and we might be right’.

Miss Predictable watched the ABC news last night. The weather is, as they say, unseasonal. This year it is still snowing in October.