



# When Is Forever?

A QUIRKY TALE OF FAMILY LIFE



**Sarah Martin**

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By

Sarah Martin



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## Words

Karen is delighted that the noisy outpourings of her firstborn, Jack, are starting to sound like real words. At sixteen months, Jack's world is limited to tractors, front-end loaders, trains, trucks, bobcats, buses, and plain old cars – anything that moves on wheels, in fact – and most of his efforts at language are directed towards identifying each one as it passes in front of him on his walks down to the shops with Karen, or on weekend outings with his parents. He already understands that the real ones are much more exciting than the plastic imitations in his playbox. Karen and Mark are both secretly proud of their son's ability to differentiate between such a vast array of vehicles, and wonder if he is set for a career in engineering or automotive design.

Somewhere along the line Jack has also got his mouth around the idea of 'grandma,' whom he greets with loud cries of 'Gramba' on her infrequent visits. Gramba's gratification at Jack's effusive welcome leads Karen to believe that her mother is now ready to look after Jack solo.

'Mum, would you look after Jack tomorrow? I need to get my hair cut and ...' she pauses, not quite sure how her mother will react to *I just need to get out in the shops and try on some clothes*. So she finishes lamely with, 'Only for a couple hours over lunch.' Gramba is delighted with the idea. Will she invite her friend Amy around to show off her gorgeous grandson? *No*, regretfully she decides, *not this time. Better get her parents over for lunch so*

*they can spend time with Jack, their only great grandchild, whom they have hardly seen.*

With the birth of Jack, Gramba now qualifies as one of the 'sandwich' generation, caught between the needs of her own children in their mothering years and the needs of her elderly parents. With her mother still living independently and her father now in care, this has become a triple whammy. There have been times during Karen's pregnancy and in the last sixteen months when she has felt hunted by everyone wanting a piece of her. A plan for the day takes shape in her mind that will give her some time to herself.

She will invite her parents over so that they can have a good long session with their only great grandchild. Her mother (renamed Supergranny in the light of Jack's birth) can come over by taxi while she will take Jack over to the nursing home to collect Pa, and she'll give them lunch at her place. Pa's name will remain the same, as it was the name chosen by her girls, Karen and Tilda, for their grandfather; Pa's unlikely to remember a new name. Karen can catch up with her grandparents when she picks up Jack. A perfect day, which will leave Gramba free from all familial obligations for at least two days.

Tomorrow comes soon enough. Karen's bursting with pride at Jack's language proficiency (he has clearly enunciated 'woo woo' while staggering after Max in a vain attempt to make him eat the dog biscuits left in his bowl from last night). She can't wait to tell Gramba how quickly he is picking up new words each day. She transfers Jack's car seat to Gramba's car, and disappears in a whirl of excitement fuelled by the idea of freedom and shops.

Gramba decides to take Jack to the park to avoid transforming her house into a kid's playground that she will have to tidy up later. She spurns the pusher Karen has brought because she believes that Jack, although he is still a bit uncertain on his feet,

ought to be able to walk the two blocks to play on the swings before they collect Pa.

But walking even to the end of the drive is monumental. Jack is smitten by two white pebbles by the gate, which he picks up and puts down several times, as if undecided whether to take them with him or not. Then he is diverted by a stream of ants beating a path to a crack in the brick fence, and crouches down to watch them more closely. This leads to him noticing another almost-invisible crack in the pavement, which seems endlessly riveting. He runs his finger up and down the crooked line, muttering unintelligible words.

Gramba, impatient with the slow progress towards the swings, looks at her watch. It is a quarter to twelve. Goodness, if she doesn't get Pa out of the nursing home by noon he will be sitting down to lunch there and the whole point of the day will be lost. She picks Jack up, rushes to the car, and shoves him in the car seat. She struggles with the buckle on the car seat. 'Shit, shit,' *it won't do up*. It's been a long time since she has had to deal with one of these contraptions, and she is running out of time. She will just have to abandon that idea. Nothing for it but to hope her neighbour is home and can look after Jack till she gets back.

'I won't be long,' she tells Barbara as she dumps Jack in the family room. Luckily Barbara is playing trains with her latest grandchild and is happy to help out. Gramba rushes out, driving as fast as she can to the nursing home, which fortunately is not far away, and gets to her father just as he is being directed to the lunchroom.

Minutes later she is collecting Jack from next door. 'Thanks so much, Barbara, do the same for you another time!' She helps both Pa and Jack negotiate the two steps into her house. This is a mammoth effort as both seem to want to go in different

directions and she can't decide who is least steady on his feet. Supergranny arrives by taxi, looking cool and collected, and takes charge of Pa so that Gramba only has to wrestle with Jack, who hasn't forgotten the white pebbles at the gate and would like to go back to collect them. But Gramba is not in the mood.

Fortunately, she prepared lunch earlier in the morning. She has forgotten how difficult it is to carry out normal household functions with a child hanging on to her leg. Somehow she sets all the plates and dishes on the table without trampling her grandson beneath her feet. They sit down at the dining room table, and after she finally lifts Jack into his high chair, she can relax. Now they can all share in the glory of the darling grandchild.

Gramba is quite proud of the way she has managed things so far. She tells her parents how clever Jack is and how he is learning to talk, almost as if he is her own child. She too is absorbed into the fascination of the baby, even if he is waving his peanut butter sandwich around, a long way from his mouth. They all agree that babies are so extraordinary; you can see their brains whirring away inside their heads, every thought transparent, even though you would be hard pressed to actually pinpoint what the thoughts are. Jack is utterly divine, Gramba has to admit, only half noticing the bits of bread and peanut butter that drop to the carpet. Her parents agree. They can't take their eyes off him. He is probably the most beautiful child they have ever seen, as all first grandchildren and great-grandchildren tend to be.

They gaze at Jack expectantly. Jack opens his blue eyes wide and drops into the silence of adoration one word, 'shit,' which he repeats with great clarity several times.

'Oh dear!' Gramba exclaims, aghast, remembering just where he learnt the word.

It is a circuit breaker. Gramba, Supergranny, and Pa begin to giggle uncontrollably, and Jack stares, surprised at the effect he is having.

‘What am I going to tell Karen?’ gasps Gramba at last. ‘She’ll be so mad at me. She probably won’t let me look after him again.’

Supergranny always has an answer. ‘We’ll just have to teach him more words so that he forgets that one. When Karen comes back he’ll repeat the last one he’s heard.’

She begins by pointing to Pa and saying, ‘Pa. Look, Jack, here’s Pa.’ Jack watches curiously. Gramba picks him out of his chair and takes him to the window, pointing outside. ‘Tree, Jack, tree.’ And as a bird takes off from the fence, ‘Bird, pretty birdie.’

She washes his hands under the tap because they are still smeared with a peanut butter coating, and if there is one thing Gramba dislikes it is children’s dirty hands and faces, particularly if they are covered with leftover food. They sit on the couch and she plays with his bare toes. ‘Toes, toes,’ and taps him on the nose, ‘Nose, Jack, nose.’ Even Pa joins in with some words that are important to him. ‘Book. Book,’ and when that doesn’t seem to catch Jack’s attention he points to the picture on the wall. ‘Fish, lots of fish, Jack.’

Jack maintains a bemused silence as they redouble their efforts to engage him with every one-syllable object in the house. And, it must be said, they forget the purpose of the exercise, as Gramba and Supergranny compete to produce the most words. Jack watches them carefully, but does not open his mouth, so that they have no way of knowing if any of the words have ‘taken.’

Gramba is just beginning to feel worn out when Karen arrives, high with the excitement of her first three hours away from her son, out in the big wide world again, and the pleasure of shopping without a tag-along kid. But she has missed him, and is filled with the joy of gathering him up again in her arms. In

her heart of hearts she hopes he has missed her. But not enough to make it difficult to leave him with Gramba again – a complex balancing of emotions.

She lifts Jack up. ‘And has he been good?’ Gramba and her grandparents nod vigorously. ‘Yes, very good,’ Gramba says. ‘He is a little darling.’

‘And has he learnt some new words?’ Karen looks expectantly at each of them, then turns her attention to Jack, who is struggling in her arms.

‘Oh, yes, lots.’ Gramba is lighthearted, not daring to look at Supergranny and Pa. Who knows what will come out of Jack’s mouth? They wait, hardly daring to speculate. Gramba is pinning her hopes on ‘tree,’ Supergranny on ‘bag’ and Pa, if he is thinking about it at all, would certainly be barracking for ‘fish.’

Jack squirms his way out of Karen’s embrace, and heads for the door, those two white pebbles on his mind. There is an obstacle; the door is shut.

He reaches up for the door handle, but it is way out of his reach. He bangs his fists hard on the door, but it still doesn’t open. He can’t get to the white pebbles, and Mummy will soon be putting him into the car to go home. He wants those white pebbles badly. ‘Oh dear!’ he says, and stamps his foot.

## Where's Jack?

'Where's Jack?' Gramba asks, conscious that she hasn't heard any noise from Jack for some time. She turns in alarm to Dadpa. 'Where's he gone? Can you find him?' They are in Karen's kitchen preparing the evening's celebratory dinner, a process made more difficult by Gramba's inability to locate a sharp knife. She thinks Karen, in her paranoia about safety for children, has probably hidden all the sharp knives in some obscure place.

Gramba and Dadpa (so named by Jack) have come to look after Jack while Mark collects Karen and the new baby from hospital, and Gramba wants to get everything ready before they arrive home. So far Jack hasn't shown much interest in the new baby. Karen and Mark have talked him through the changes that are coming, and now that he is over two and with a good command of language and concepts, they are confident there won't be any problems. *Huh*, thinks Gramba, *little do they know!* She remembers the sense of displacement that Karen experienced when Gramba brought Tilda home. It wasn't fun! The fact that Jack has disappeared just at this moment only reinforces her concern. Of course he will find it difficult to accept that he is no longer the centre of everyone's attention. But what if he has already understood that his world has changed and run away? Can one do that at his age? Gramba can't help imagining the worst.

‘Don’t panic,’ Dadpa says, ‘I shut the front gate after Mark left, so he can’t have got out.’

‘Well, that’s a relief!’ At least she doesn’t need to worry about cars on the road or stranger dangers. He is somewhere around. It shouldn’t be too hard to find him, and sort him out before Mark and Karen get home. A few cheerful words about what a good boy he is and how he will have to help Mummy should do the trick.

‘Can you go and look for him? I want him to be in a happy frame of mind when Karen and the baby come home, so we’d better find him quickly.’

‘True.’ Dadpa goes into the living room, calling, ‘Jack, Jack, where are you? Coming, ready or not.’ It is a game that Jack loves, although he is still inclined to stand in the middle of the living room with his hands covering his eyes, believing that no one can see him. But not today. He is well hidden, Dadpa discovers, as he goes from room to room without detecting any hint of Jack. No muffled giggles or sharp intake of breath to warn him he is close to his quarry.

Upstairs in Karen’s and Mark’s room, he stoops to look under the bed. Jack loves lying there waiting for someone to find him, and he will stay still for ages. Sometimes Karen leaves him there for an hour, while she gets on with other things, and when she does go to collect him he is fast asleep. But today the space under the bed is empty. Dadpa even looks in the bassinet on its wheeled stand that is next to the bed on Karen’s side, ready for the baby. Next door, in Jack’s room, he checks under the bed, behind the door and in the wardrobe.

Jack must be out in the garden. Dadpa goes out on to the deck and down the steps onto the grass. Under the apricot tree is another favourite haunt of Jack’s. There are tracks gouged out of the earth that Jack uses as a racetrack for his cars and trucks,

and Dadpa with a smile follows the lines to the back shed and beyond. But Jack is nowhere to be found, despite a good search of the woodpile. He looks down the side of the house, a bit of a wasteland with old bits of wood and metal stacked up and Mark's and Karen's bikes leaning against the house. But no Jack.

Dadpa goes back inside, puzzled, and rather more worried than he had been before. He and Gramba consider the position. 'Perhaps he went outside the gate before you shut it? How soon after Mark left did you shut it?' There is no mistaking Gramba's anxiety. She is back with thoughts about cars on the road and stranger dangers, and she doesn't think she can cope with all that as well as make dinner. And it would be terrible to lose one grandchild just as another arrives.

They go out the gate and look up and down the street. No squashed little boy on the road and no suspicious looking characters loitering nearby. But they wouldn't still be here if they had taken Jack, would they? Gramba tries to think logically about all the possibilities, and not get carried away by the panic that is threatening to engulf her. 'Should we call the police?'

But Dadpa is much calmer. 'No, I am pretty sure I shut the gate right after Mark left. He must be somewhere in the house or garden. I'll just have to look more carefully.'

'Maybe he's got out on to the roof?' Gramba can't rid herself of images of a little boy lying dead somewhere. It is too awful to contemplate, but try as she might, she can't stop some horrid scenarios flitting into her mind, like the ones that you read about every day in the paper. She is sharply aware that accidents do happen even in well-ordered households where someone like Karen has considered all the safety issues.

They go inside and Dadpa begins his search again, only this time more slowly, opening every cupboard and doing more than peering in. He sweeps his arm under and over the clothes in

Karen's and Mark's cupboards, and opens every drawer in their room and Jack's bedroom, even though he knows it is most unlikely that Jack could climb in and then pull the drawer shut behind him. But you never know, stranger things have happened, and little boys can be quite ingenious.

He has given up hope of finding Jack in the house by the time he comes into the kitchen again. Gramba looks at him anxiously. She has found it impossible to leave the kitchen and search the rest of the house, since she feels that Jack will appear in the kitchen at any moment, and she needs to be there to keep hold of him and reassure him about the baby and that they all still love him. 'What will we do?' she whispers to Dadpa, real fear in her eyes now.

Dadpa thinks hard. He is starting to panic too. But he knows he must stay calm or Gramba will become hysterical. The minutes are ticking by. Mark should have collected Karen and the baby from the hospital by now, and they will be on their way home. He can't help thinking that it's not going to be a great start for the new baby if she hasn't got a big brother around, and parents in despair as they activate a manhunt for their first child. And it's not going to be a good homecoming for Karen if Jack has disappeared into thin air with only her parents and the dog here to welcome her home.

Thinking of the dog brings a flash of recognition. Dadpa smiles at Gramba. 'I think I know where Jack is,' he says, as he goes out the kitchen door on to the deck. Max's kennel is in the corner. Dadpa stoops down to peer in the low door. In the dim light he can just discern a small figure, with arms wrapped around the curly neck of Max, both of them fast asleep.

'Look,' he calls Gramba over. Gramba's relief is palpable. She pats Dadpa on the hand. 'Thank God for you,' she whispers, 'I would never have thought of looking for him here.'

'Process of elimination, that's all it was. Should have thought of it sooner.'

'How are we going to get him out and cleaned up before Karen and Mark and the baby arrive?'

'Leave it to me,' Dadpa says. 'You go back to the dinner. I'll manage.'

Gramba, relieved of all worries, goes back to the kitchen to prepare a salad and turn the roasting potatoes. As she tears lettuce leaves and puts them in the bowl she remembers again how difficult it was when she first brought Tilda home. Karen had been wildly jealous and there were tantrums for weeks. Would Jack cope better with his new baby? Gramba believes it would be easier if the baby had a name, but as yet no name has been chosen. She thinks it is a bit off to leave a child so long without a name, although in truth it is only two-and-a-half days. She hopes that by the time they get home the baby will have acquired a name. Mark had hinted before he left that they were not far away from making a decision, that he has chosen one name, and Karen another, and they just have to choose between them. Now that Jack has been found, Gramba can go back to worrying that they might be about to announce some crazy name like Apple or Maddox, sort of gender neutral, following the trend of film stars Gwyneth Paltrow and Angelina Jolie. She was relieved when Karen and Mark chose such a good solid name like Jack the first time around, but she can't be sure they will do the same with a girl.

Meanwhile Dadpa squats down on the deck near the door of the kennel. The first thing is to wake Jack and Max gently. The kennel is crowded with the two of them in there, and if Max feels threatened he might get up abruptly and roll on Jack. Max is a large overplayful standard poodle, with a nervous temperament. He is Mark's dog from his premarriage days, and

as Dadpa remembers, rather a possessive dog. And there isn't much room to manoeuvre inside the kennel. If Jack, on waking, panics, it could be a disaster. Dadpa has never had anything to do with Max before and he is not sure whether Max will react kindly to his reaching into the kennel to extract Jack. He doesn't know whether this is the first time Jack has been in the kennel, or whether it is a habitual thing, but Dadpa feels he can't afford to take any risks.

Dadpa takes out the mouth organ that is always in his pocket, and begins to play, softly at first and then a bit louder. A soft clumping sound from the kennel suggests to him that Max has picked up the sound. Dadpa guesses that his ears are pricked.

Max growls, a deep guttural sound, but waits without moving. *This is a good sign*, Dadpa thinks; *it means that Max is aware of the small burden hanging around his neck and that his first instinct is to protect it*. Dadpa walks towards the kennel speaking softly to Max. Once again he senses a response from Max that is protective. As he approaches the kennel, Grampa hears a slurping sound, and when he looks in the entrance, Max is licking Jack's face to wake him. Dadpa speaks reassuringly to Max, 'Good boy, Max. Stay there. I'm just going to get Jack out so you've got more room.' Slowly he reaches his hand in to the kennel.

Jack stirs. Waking up to darkness and an unfamiliar environment, he begins to cry, big stabbing sobs. Max becomes restive. Dadpa can feel his tension. 'Jack,' Dadpa speaks quietly but firmly. 'Hold on to my hand and crawl towards the door. Be careful not to hurt Max. Just come slowly out.' Obediently, Jack takes his hand, and Dadpa slides his other hand under Jack's body so that he is scooping as well as guiding Jack towards the narrow entrance. Max stays still in the kennel. At last Jack's head appears in the doorway and Dadpa is able to extract him. As Jack

stands up, Max also emerges, to lick all Jack's available skin, a companionable gesture that Jack accepts without moving.

He looks up at Dadpa. 'Where's Mummy?'

Dadpa cocks his head, listening to the sound of the gate opening. 'I think she's just come home now, with the baby.'

And then they are all in the kitchen, delicious roast chicken smells wafting around. Karen has the baby in her arms, and Jack leaps up over and over again to kiss the baby and Mummy at the same time, although he can't reach either of them.

'Hang on, Jack.' Karen leads the way into the living room. 'Sit on the sofa and you can hold baby.' Dadpa grins a bit to himself. The baby is going to be covered with dog smells and dog hair right from the beginning. If Karen only knew! But it doesn't matter. The important thing is that Jack bonds with the baby right away. Karen puts a cushion across Jack's legs, which stretch straight out in front of him. Then she lays the baby, wrapped in its swaddling muslin, on the cushion. Jack's eyes shine with pride and a gentleness that they didn't know he had. 'Hello baby,' he stretches out his hand and strokes her cheek. Mark and Karen and Gramba and Dadpa sigh with relief. It is going to be all right.

'And has the baby got a name yet?' Gramba can't wait to ask.

'Well, Mark and I have narrowed it down to two.' Karen is happy to be home at last; it seems like a week since she has seen Jack and he has grown so much. She longs to give him a big hug because she missed him these last two days. But all his attention is on the baby.

'And ...?' Gramba is impatient.

'The two names are Serena and Fenella.' Mark thinks it is best to get it all over with quickly.

From the sofa Jack pipes up, 'I like Serena best.'

'Okay, that's it then,' Mark gives in without a struggle. 'Serena it is!'

Karen looks across at Mark gratefully as she bends down to kiss Jack. She has had the name Serena in mind since the very beginning of her pregnancy.

‘Hello, Serena,’ Jack says, breathing all over the baby and tickling her under her chin. There doesn’t seem to be a neck anywhere. ‘You’re my little baby sister.’

Later, after dinner and after Karen has fed Serena, it is time to put Jack to bed.

Karen carries him upstairs to his room. She is surprised to see the bassinet jammed against Jack’s bed.

‘What’s the bassinet doing here, Jack?’

‘I brought it in, Mummy, cause she’s mine. Serena is my baby sister. I can look after her.’ There is a strong emphasis on the word ‘my.’ Karen can see that he has well and truly bonded with the baby.

‘No, Jack, she has to stay with me. I have to feed her in the night.’

‘But I want her here!’ Jack is cross. He and Karen pull from either side of the cradle. The wonderful harmony of the evening dissipates quickly under the strain of ownership of the bassinet and its contents. Jack is mutinous and disappointed. But it has been a long day with much excitement and he is more than ready for bed.

‘I tell you what, Jack. Let me have her tonight, and tomorrow we’ll think about where she sleeps in the future. How about that?’

Although Jack is not happy, he agrees, as he is too tired to continue the battle. He climbs into bed, sobbing over the loss of his baby sister. He is soon asleep.

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