

Milo and Me

I slumped down on the couch and sighed. Melbourne had been in lockdown for 100 days straight now. I'm so sick and tired of this! Being stuck at home all day. I just wish I could go outside. I miss going to school, I miss my friends, I miss the outdoors.

The name's Audrey Jane Williams, by the way. Just call me AJ. I'm 12 years old.

Suddenly, I felt something warm, wet and icky on my cheeks. Milo was licking my face! I pushed him away and groaned. That annoying dog! Ever since the day he arrived in our house, all my shoes were chewed on, there's fur all over my clothes, and the house smelled like dog pee! And how can I ever forget that time when Milo LITERALLY ate my homework, and my teacher thought I was just making a lame excuse. Why can't this Jack Russel Terrier just leave me and my stuff alone?

"Muuuum", I whined. "I'm SOOO bored."

"Why don't you play with Milo?" Mum proposed.

"Seriously, Mum?" I said annoyed. I'm pretty sure she's not oblivious to the fact that I loathed this dog.

"Just clean your messy room, then," Mum suggested.

I really didn't want to clean my room, but I'd rather do it than play with Milo.

As I was cleaning my room, I stumbled upon a box full of my old stuff. I began to sort its contents into piles: to keep and to recycle. One particular item caught my eye - an old leather book I don't recall having. Written on the front was the word 'Escape'. I skimmed through the pages and was puzzled to find them all empty.

The door swung open, it was Mum, followed by Milo who snuck into my room uninvited.

"How's it going with your cleaning, AJ?" Mum asked.

I showed her the peculiar book in my hand. "Is this yours, Mum?" I asked.

"Nope. Just pop it in the recycling if you don't want it," she replied as she left the room.

I opened the book again when Milo suddenly jumped onto my lap. I almost forgot he was still there. He started licking a page. Ewww! I was trying to pull the book away when I noticed something strange. Small lines appeared on the page where Milo licked for a split second and then they were gone. Could it be some kind of ink that reveals itself when wet? I shoved the book back to Milo's face. "Lick it," I told him, but I didn't have to as he already was.

The lines reappeared and I realised they were actually words! It read:

*This book will come to those who require
To be taken someplace they truly desire
Yearning just to take a break?
All you must do is utter 'ESCAPE'...*

"Escape?", I said out loud when suddenly, the word started to glow. Soon it was so bright I had to close my eyes. Everything started spinning and I fell down. I waited for my body to hit the hardwood floor but instead, I landed on something softer...

I slowly opened my eyes to find myself lying in the middle of golden sand. Where am I?

Not far off was the sea, its deep turquoise waters standing out against the coast. Taking a deep breath, I smelled the fresh sea breeze. I continued to explore, the sand slipping between my toes. Lush green trees can be seen in a nearby forest, not far from the shore.

It was paradise, the perfect escape from lockdown! Oh yes, LOCKDOWN! I was at home just moments ago. How did I get here? Then I remembered the book. Did that book bring me here? Like some sort of magic?

BARK! I jumped, startled. My face fell to see Milo peering up at me.

"Seriously? You're here, too?" I yelled at Milo "When will you ever leave me alone?"

I don't really understand what's going on but since I'm already here, I might as well just make the most out of it. I walked towards the shore and touched the water. It's warm, perfect for a swim! Just then, a wave crashed and before I knew it, I was swimming and enjoying myself. But I wasn't alone. Milo was paddling towards me.

"Go away!" I shouted as I tried to swim away, but he just wouldn't leave me alone!

I angrily trudged to the shore and, as expected, Milo came after me.

"Can't you just quit following me and bugging me?"

I suddenly have the great urge to throw something out of rage. I grabbed the nearest thing to me: a stick. I threw it across the sand and was astonished when Milo chased after it. He scurried to where it landed, picked the stick up with his mouth and ran straight back to me. Milo dropped the stick at my feet and looked up at me excitedly.

"Get lost!" I shouted as I threw the stick even further hoping that he would disappear, but he still came back.

I tossed the stick away again; Milo caught it and came back even more excited. I threw it one more time; Milo came running to fetch it but tripped and fell face down on the sand. I couldn't help but laugh. It was hilarious! Milo came back with the stick and his tail wagging.

I threw the stick again... and again... and again... Then I realised Milo and I had been playing fetch for a while now. I didn't notice as I was actually having fun.

Wait, am I starting to like Milo? Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be enjoying Milo's company. But here I am, running, laughing and playing with him.

Suddenly, the wind blew hard as I was throwing the stick. This time, it landed WAY too far, disappearing into the forest. And so did Milo, as he was chasing after it. I waited for Milo to come back... but he didn't. I called Milo's name a few times, but still no sign of him. I started to worry and decided to look for him.

I entered the darkness of the forest and discovered it was actually beautiful and enchanting. No time to appreciate the view, though. I have to look for Milo. I wandered around, calling his name repeatedly.

"Milo? MILO!" I kept shouting. After what felt like hours of searching, I realised I was lost, too. I started to panic. I couldn't find Milo! Nor my way back out of the forest.

I was running around in circles until I heard something rustling in the bushes.

"Milo, is that you?", I said as I crept towards the sound.

I stopped in my tracks. A shiver went down my spine as I realised what was making the sound. It wasn't Milo. It was... a SNAKE. Slithering towards me...

I slowly took a few steps back. The snake was following me when my foot tripped over a log. I tried to shuffle back, but I couldn't. My body wouldn't move. I didn't know what to do. I was done for. The snake was about to reach and bite me, then...

BARK! BARK! I jolted! So did the snake. It was Milo! He pounced at the snake. They were fighting! Soon the snake slithered away, revealing Milo on the ground, whimpering.

"Milo!" I cried, quivering through tears. "You- you saved my life! Are you hurt?"

That was a stupid question. He was obviously wounded where the snake bit him and was shaking on the floor. I hugged Milo tight, letting all my tears stream down my face. I thought about all those times when he just wanted to be my friend, and all I ever wanted was for him to get lost... Those times when he was just trying to be close to me, and all I ever did was push him away... And yeah, I regret them all... I'm so sorry, Milo...

Suddenly, I'm back in my room, lying on the floor. I sat up and found Milo beside me, lying still.

"Milo!" I hugged him, flooding with tears.

Milo jerked up! He was just asleep! Was it all just a dream?

"Oh Milo!" I squeezed him ever so tightly as he began to lick my face. This time, I didn't push him away.

The door swung open. It was Mum, her face pleasantly surprised.

"What's going on?" Mum asked, perplexed. "Since when did you two become friends?"

I just smiled and looked at Milo.

"Anyway, I'm here for the recycling pile. And that book, should I take it, too?" Mum asked, pointing at the book.

"No!" I exclaimed. "I think I'll keep it for now." I winked at Milo. He barked back, his tail wagging vigorously.

Milo jumped off my lap as Mum left the room. He then ran back to me excitedly, holding something with his mouth. My eyes widened. The STICK?!