

[ Megan Holbeck ]



## WILD THINGS

## The Universe is Expanding

Kids: the ultimate in perspective shift.

An hour and a half into the walk, it was time for lunch. It wasn't just any old break: we cracked out the sandwiches, then the swimmers and I launched into the Grose River. For the next hour Marleen and I clambered around on the boulders with our daughters, sunning ourselves until we were hot enough to go back in, each fresh dip accompanied by squeals and those ridiculous arm flaps you do when you're trying to psyche yourself up for a plunge. We found a rock to jump from that was high enough to test everyone, taking it in turns to bomb to the bottom. Then we put clothes and rucksacks on, and we were off toward the Blue Gum Forest again. Three hours in, and a few kilometres down.

It was my daughter's first overnight walk, and I soon realised that it wasn't just the timeline that needed to change. It was also my approach. I'm used to getting into a rhythm and sticking to it, pausing for water or views but covering the kilometres. Not with nine year olds. Every few minutes Hatty or Hannah would stop dead in the middle of the track. We'd usually avoid a mass collision, then stop for a few minutes to adjust something/distribute food/examine a leaf/take in the view/complain, before setting off again. I quickly realised it was a choice between frustration and acceptance and opted for the second, throwing lollies around and appreciating leaves, bugs and scratches with enthusiasm.

The others were new to both overnight walking and the Blue Mountains,

so I embraced 'mum facts' with gusto. Like dad jokes but marginally less funny and way more educational, these fascinating tidbits are often met with a groan rather than the rapt attention they deserve, especially with such fascinating topics as Blue Mountains' conservation history, bushfires, gum trees, and other party starters. (They're not all strictly 'facts' either: my memory has been dulled by decades of life; although the general gist is right the details are iffy). So we relaxed into the walk, lulled by my lectures, and inched along the river through scratchy, grabby growth towards the Blue Gum Forest.

Before I had children I didn't think too hard about how I'd make the outdoors work: I'd seen photos of beautiful families carrying kids and huge packs and everyone looked very happy—I'd just assumed that would be us. But like most things, it's harder than it looks and less sunny than the pictures. I've been itching to take Hatty on an overnight adventure for years, but also wanted to wait until it was actually going to be fun. And this March we were finally off, carrying everything we needed for two days away, each with a friend for fun, distraction and to appreciate our complaints.

The river flats seemed to go on and on, due to both our slow, slow pace and already knowing how long it *should* take. Hatty disappeared into the waist-high undergrowth, Hannah's head poking out behind, and they launched themselves at logs or limboed under, complaining of each new scratch. But soon there were trees, big ones, and

dappled light and ferny undergrowth and magic in the light, the atmosphere and the walking. "These are blue gums," I said, in answer to another variation of the "Are we there yet?" question.

"But when can we stop?" The answer was soon, and this time it was true. We reached the sign officially welcoming us to the Blue Gum Forest, and downed packs and frolicked in the forest. (Or the girls did—Marleen and I set up...)

After dinner we played cards as the light faded. I'd been wanting to come here for 20 years and was soaking up the atmosphere. "Imagine if this had been logged and there was a train track down here, or a farm." The leaves rustled in the breeze. "That would be sad," said Hatty, in a classic understatement. My grandfather was a boy when the area was saved, and I've had the luxury of waiting my whole life to go, knowing it was there to visit. With a bit of luck it still will be for my grandkids, all because of a small group of people armed with foresight and passion.

Later that night Marleen and I sat on the grass, leaning on a massive log as we watched stars appear through the trees. We talked of life, plans—bigger things than at home—and listened to whispers and giggles from the tent. Talk turned to our next walk, other adventures, how long it would be until our four-year-olds could have their turn. The tent grew silent. "How awesome for them to have done an overnight walk," I said. "And for us," said Marleen. They were growing up; their world was expanding. And so was ours.