



The Regal Fox

HIDDEN HOMES by Madeleine Johns

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Amy Ellis was only five years old when she discovered a new world. It was underneath the ground, hidden away from prying eyes and adults too busy to look down.

It was a warm sunny day and she was eating sticky jam sandwiches cut into neat triangles, on a picnic rug on the side of the mountain near their house.

Her mum was busy with Amy's baby brothers. Trying to feed the twins and calm them down. They were crying.

They were always crying.

Amy tried to ignore the screaming babies and instead watched the ants that crawled in a straight line, marching towards the picnic basket that held the remaining jam sandwiches getting warm in the sun.

She reached out and poked an ant to see what it would do. It scurried away, around her finger and re-joined the line, marching onwards. She stood up and wiped her sticky fingers on the front of her dress and began to follow the line of ants in the opposite direction, to see where they were coming from.

“Don’t go too far!” her mum called out, and Amy nodded, but before she could respond the twins began to scream again. She followed the ants, down the dirt path, around the bend, past the rocks and into a shaded area full of gum trees.

Amy knelt down next to the ants nest and peeked into the hole in the ground they were streaming through. She wondered what it would be like to be so small.

She heard a strange snuffling sound, like someone breathing with a cold, and turned around to see the furry behind of a big brown wombat, wandering through the undergrowth, sniffing the ground as he waddled.

“Where are you going Mr Wombat?” she asked. He looked back at her and wiggled his whiskers, so she began to follow him, the ants now forgotten. She crawled on her hands and knees behind him, copying his shuffling movements and frowning as the dry grass and gum leaves stuck to her palms.

Soon they came upon a big dark hole, dug out of the earth, big enough for the wombat to easily walk through, and for Amy to follow on her hands and knees.

A magpie flew down and landed on top of the rocks next to the wombat hole and Amy paused, “Do you want to come too?” she asked, watching as the magpie cocked his head in reply. He squawked and flew away in a blur of black and white feathers and Amy resumed her journey with Mr Wombat.

Inside the wombat hole it was dark and cool. Amy blinked multiple times waiting for her eyes to adjust. Ahead the wombat trundled on, unbothered by his strange new companion.

A moth flew in and Amy laughed as the moth landed on her nose. The wombat turned in indignation at the loud shriek of her giggle and Amy covered her mouth. “Sorry Mr Wombat.” she whispered and continued their slow shuffle down the wombat hole.

The wombat stopped a few feet ahead and dug into the ground, sticking his nose in to smell, and then resume digging. Amy copied him, and used her sticky fingers to dig into the soft cool dirt covered in small wombat footprints. A wriggling long worm was in the dirt and she pulled it free. “Here you go,” she whispered, and tossed the worm towards the wombat.

Mr Wombat sniffed it, his whiskers quivering, but after a long inspection he ignored it, and instead continued to dig and snuffle in the dirt. Amy watched as he ripped a white root out of the ground and grunted in delight. He settled down and chewed it noisily.

The worm wriggled gratefully back into the dark earth below, free to live another day in the wombat tunnel.

The odd pair continued on.

The tunnel was long and Amy was growing tired. She was glad when they came to a hollowed out room at the end of the darkened dirt tunnel. She sat up and looked around in the dim light as Mr Wombat waddled quickly over to a pile of fur in the corner.

The pile of fur moved and Amy saw that it was three little baby wombats. She watched in delight as Mr Wombat nosed around the babies and they snuffled back happily. There were multiple tunnels leading off this room and stockpiles of leaves and roots and bark stashed away in corners.

Just then another wombat came into the room from a different tunnel and made grunting noises in Amy's direction, and nudged the bottom of her shoe with its black wet nose. Amy held very still.

"Are you Mrs Wombat?" she whispered, and watched as the second wombat went and joined Mr Wombat and the babies.

She left them to their dinner and started to crawl back through the tunnels the way they had come. On the way she met another 3 moths and 2 worms. She spoke to them all and continued her journey back to the world above.

She didn't want to go back, but seeing the wombat with his family had reminded her about her family eating a picnic above them. She imagined them sitting on top of the wombat tunnels, unaware that if the ground were to open up they would fall down and find themselves having dinner with a wombat family in their dirt dining room. She giggled at the thought, picturing her mum's shock. Maybe the wombats, with their quiet tunnels and dirt walls that muffled all sounds would even be enough to distract her baby brothers from crying.

She finally reached the end of the tunnel and was surprised to see it was a lot darker outside than when she had originally followed Mr Wombat into his home.

She dusted her dress off and began to walk back to where she had left her mum. She stopped by the ants to see how they were progressing, and was happy to see they were carting tiny crumbs of food into their nest.

She picked off a sticky strawberry seed from the jam on her hands and placed it in front of one of the ants. It immediately waved its front arms and danced around inspecting the seed that was almost as big as it. Another ant rushed forward to help pick it up and they hurriedly re-joined the line, proud to have something to bring back to the colony.

Just then a shriek echoed through the air, raising the hairs on Amy's neck, and making cockatoos screech in protest and fly up into the air.

"AMY!" echoed through the mountaintop and shook off the trees around her.

"AMY! WHERE ARE YOU?" the screech came again, and Amy realised that it was her mum.

"Mummy, I'm here!" she called back, and started to walk.

But the calls and pleading screams continued, her mum sounding scared and angry. Her voice echoed off rocks and surrounded Amy until she too felt scared and began to run. She ran and ran, gravel flying off the path in front of.

Trees surrounded her and she didn't know where her mummy was. Everything was a blur of gum trees and rocks. It all looked the same.

"I'm here, I'm here! I've been with the wombats but I'm back now!"

She began to cry. Maybe she would never find her mum, and she would have to go back and live with the wombats, and eat tree roots.

Just then footsteps crashed through the leaves and her mum ran towards her. Amy saw in shock that her daddy was here now too, running after her mum, holding the screaming, crying twins in his arms.

For once Amy didn't mind the sound.

Her mum scooped her up and sobbed about how she thought Amy had been taken, and that she had called daddy to come home from work and help search, and how Amy had been gone for so long, and must never, ever wander off on her own again.

Amy listened and nodded and wiped her mum's face and agreed she would never, ever wander off again. Her fingers left sticky streaks down her mum's face, blending sugar and crumbs and tears with dirt. But for once her mum didn't seem to mind the mess, and instead buried her face in Amy's hair, breathing her in deeply.

"Where have you been!" she scolded.

"With the wombats," Amy replied happily, "Did you know there's a whole other world below the ground? I can't wait to show you."

Madeleine Johns is a writer and obsessive reader who has lived in Canberra her whole life. She is in a never-ending battle to own enough bookshelves to fit all her books. If she's not writing, you'll find her reading (most likely with a cup of tea and her cat on her lap!)

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