

MATCH REPORT

by Kate De Goldi



10.04 a.m., Kōwhai Manor Rest Home. Tea and chocolate fingers. We're alone, so G and I suck off the chocolate.

"So ... remember we played Paroa this week?" I say.

G nods. "At Arthur Fong Park."

"Arthur Fong Park," I agree. "With the Grey River on your right –"

"And the Tasman Sea on your left ... bowling from the town end," G finishes.

We have a routine, me and G. Match reports in tandem.

"I called the toss right, for once, so I put Paroa in to bat."

G nods again, this time approvingly. "A green wicket. The ball always slides off."

"You got it. Another chocolate finger?" I offer G the plate.

"Don't mind if I do." Grandad's got a roaring sugar habit. He snarfs a party pack in an hour. Who cares when you're eighty-nine?

He eats steadily while I continue. "Harry Pugh opened the bowling –"

"Bonce's boy?" G asks.

"Great-grandson, actually. Jacko Byrne was at the other end –"

"Facing into the wind!"

"Don't worry, Jacko's tough as."

G leans forward, his milky eyes wide. His good hand is up, the half-sucked chocolate finger a baton, conducting my commentary. I continue.

"Then –" Sandra barrels through the door, distributing laundry and pills and info about the outing, which G does *not* want to go on. He doesn't want the pills, either. He says so very firmly. She'll have to try again later.

"Now go away," G says in Sandra's direction, not *exactly* rude. "I'm hearing the match report."

"Match report?" says Sandra.

"But wasn't it ...?" I put a finger to my lips. Sandra stares, mouth gaping. Then light dawns, her mouth snaps shut, she gives a little smile. I like Sandra.

"Then," I say, back to G, "*then* came a clever bit of bowling from Harry, some sharp work by Fitz behind the stumps – and Ron Regaldo's gone. Paroa's dangerman. Key wicket. It was beautiful." I sigh happily, picturing it all.



Ron Regaldo is actually *Veronica* Regaldo, but G can't cope with girls playing cricket. So I lie, even though it's disloyal. Veronica's sixty-three not out last year was something else. She was born to bat. Best cover drive on the West Coast.

"Regaldo, eh?" G says. (I know what's coming.) "His old man was handy with the bat." (Her great-uncle, actually. Old Joe from Rapahoe.) "I always told Joe that Italians can't play cricket." (And then along came Vettori.) "And then along came Vettori, with his little hand grenades. Joe never let me forget it."

Grandad loved Vettori, too. When he could still watch TV, he'd load up his old test match tapes for us to watch. Daniel Vettori helped G to forget that his body was packing up, bit by bit. G could be in Vettori's body instead, coming round the wicket, arm over, friendly little ball leaving the hand, then *whammo* ... the batsman's all skittles at the other end, head down, walking off. "See that, see *that*," G would say, slow mo-ing with the remote so I could see again what Vettori did.

There's a great photo of G on our mantelpiece. The day he bowled his best figures playing club cricket: five for thirty-three. The photo's black and white, but the sky's cloudless, a Greymouth summer, with just a hint of breeze. G's white shirt billows a little, and there's a streak down his pants where he's shined the ball over and over. He holds up that ball, big smile for the camera.

"I worked to live," G always said. (Fifty-four years for the Railways.) "Real life happened after work."

G's hand is out again, beckoning greedily.

"So it was a brilliant start," I say, doling him yet another chocolate finger. "Then Jacko took two wickets in one over. Three for twelve. But Leo McKeefry likes to hit out, so I set a defensive field."

"Is he a big boy?" G asks, "like all the McKeefrys?"

"He'd be 2 metres, for sure."



"So, you put protection on the square leg boundary?"

"And at long on," I say. "And at short extra cover."

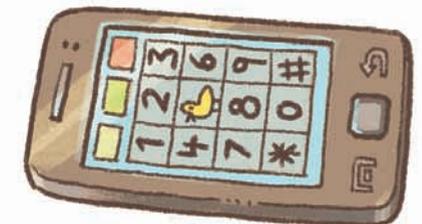
"And at silly mid-on," says G, like he's saying Amen. Grandad can see it all, I know. His inner eye is scoping Arthur Fong Park – the scrub boundary, the Corsican pine, bent from decades of westerlies. The bobbing seagulls. I've described the new clubhouse to him, with its view out to sea.

"Leo made *forty-nine*," I spit. "He was dropped twice by Max Blanchfield. Twice!" It'd make you cry. "Leo would have made more, but he ran out of partners," I add.

"That's the beauty of cricket!" says G. "When you least expect it, a player hits his form and turns the game. Anything can happen."

"We should have kept them under fifty," I say bitterly. "The rest of their batting line-up's rubbish." Harsh but true. "They all went cheap: three, three, seven, duck, duck, duck." We both laugh. It sounds like a wonky phone number.

G thrusts his cup towards me. He wants more tea. His hand's shaky – it's dangerous pouring for him. "So where were we?" he asks.



"We needed seventy-five runs to win. Only fifteen overs available."

"Tough ask." G knows our batting line-up, every kink.

"So remember that change you've been on about?" All season, G's been gunning for a boy on our team, Billy Treacy. He's been saying I should open with Billy.

G straightens. "Not Billy Treacy?"

I replace the teapot, sit down again ... taking my time. It's all part of the deal. G loves the suspense. He gets no result until the very end, like real time; he wants all the strategy, every twist and turn of the play.

"Yep. I finally promoted him," I say.

"I used a left-hander and a right-hander as the opening combo, kept the bowlers thinking."

Billy's a left-hander like G. And like Bert Sutcliffe, G's other hero. G holds his breath. I put two more chocolate fingers in his saucer, spinning it out.

"You'd have been proud!" I finally say.

"Billy went straight to business, hit all round the ground. It was ..." I need a commentator's word. "It was *magnificent!* A pull shot made it to the beach! Thirty-four, caught on the boundary by Ron Regaldo." (Veronica can field too.)



G couldn't be happier. He sits back, stuffs both biscuits in his mouth, and relaxes into the rest of our innings: Fitz's run out, Harry's seven, my eleven (caught behind), Api's fifteen ...

"So we're sixty-seven for five, and then ... incredible ... a miserable run of ducks: Max, Jared, Chris. And then Leo McKeefry bowls two maiden overs."

G grunts. His wispy old eyebrows go up and down. He's mentally ticking off the balls remaining, the batsmen to come.

"Twelve balls. Four runs needed. Two wickets in hand, and then Leo clean-bowls Eddie Moynihan." I've dropped my voice, slowed it. I sound like G when he's retelling the epic 1953 Boxing Day test match story: New Zealand on a hiding, Bert Sutcliffe – head swathed in bandages – returning to the crease ...

"Enter ...," I say.

G's completely still. We're both thinking about that walk to the crease across the soft grass, your cricket pads knocking, helmet rattling, your box a bit loose, roaming in your undies.



After our moment, I continue. “Enter Jacko Byrne! Great bowler. Rabbit batsman. Average of one. Paroa has four slips, all itching for a catch.”

“But, cometh the hour, cometh the man?” says G. He’s full of hope, and I spill the last part in a rush.

“There’s a thunderbolt from Syd Apanui – and somehow Jacko edges it through the slips, and they run like crazy. Two! Everyone starts chanting, ‘Jac-ko! Jac-ko!’ – even the parents.”

G gives a little groan.

“Then Syd sends an absolute lemon down legside – a big slash from Jacko, but he mistimes ... only *just* connects ... but the ball goes down fine leg and they run another two! Everyone goes *bananas!*”

“Hooo-ray!” crows G, banging his good hand up and down on his bony knee. The grin could split his face. I’ve made his day, for sure.

“We’re hanging in there, G. The next game’s against Karoro.”

We sit together for ten minutes, quiet, finishing off the biscuits.

“Dad’s strung up a ball for me – from the verandah roof,” I say, breaking the silence.

“You doing a Bradman?”

I smile. “Kind of.”

Donald Bradman did something similar, only he used a cricket stump for a bat and practised with a golf ball, which he hit against a water tank.

“I do two hundred strokes a day, G.”

“That’s my boy.” He hugs me with his good arm, then switches off his hearing aid.

Sandra’s at reception as I leave.

It’s started raining.

“You’ll get soaked,” Sandra frets.

“I’ll dodge between the raindrops!”

“Who won, by the way?”

“We did, of course.”

“In your dreams.”

Dreams. I run between Kōwhai Manor and our house like I’m running hard between wickets. It’s been raining the whole weekend. Cricket was cancelled. That’s three weekends running. But I can still dream up a good game and deliver it to G. It makes him happy. And, who knows, it could have been like that. Anything’s possible, G says. Good cricket’s about dedication and imagination. True words. Dedication and imagination, and you can arrange things so that the rain never interrupts play.



illustrations by Gavin Mouldey

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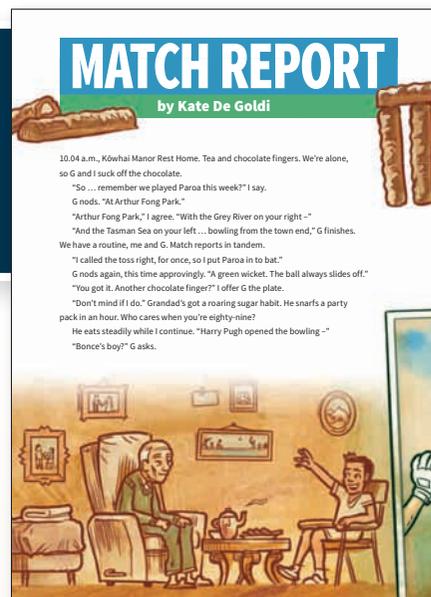
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