

Waiting for Anna Kate

Jenny bought the doll. It was the size of a three-month-old baby, cuddly with dimpled hands and a mass of blond curls, long lashes that opened and closed and a rosebud mouth. Back home Jenny put the doll in the sewing cupboard out of sight – after all, the baby might be a boy and her longing for a girl was inexplicable.

Over the next weeks, Jenny cut out and sewed a pile of baby clothes from soft cotton. She washed, ironed and packed them in tissue. Only then did she allow herself to pull out *Simplicity 8026 Dolls Clothes*. It had been unused since her daughter outgrew dolls – not that she ever played with them much; the clothes were mostly used to dress the cat.

Jenny smoothed out the crinkled pattern paper, then sorted through the odd bits of material she'd saved. Satisfied that she had sufficient, she put everything back and shut away the temptation to start sewing. Six months later Jenny's first grandson arrived.

He was the image of his dad as a baby – fine white hair, blue eyes and a healthy scowl that demanded food. He was so small in Jenny's arms; such tiny fingernails. She forgot about wanting a granddaughter and started making practical clothes in blues. But every now and then she'd find irresistible scraps in sale bins and add them to her collection – feminine swatches in cerise, pink and lavender.

Jenny went to South Africa to visit her brother that winter, and as she travelled she saw brightly dressed Zulu women walking along the highway. There were paddocks of burnt stubble, stark and black against the reds and yellows of the earth. They passed a grey stone church that had rainbow windows and a tall spire. The elegance was a strange contrast to the stunted huts and abandoned cars nearby where children and dogs played in the dirt.

There was a market at the native village. The colours of the country were reflected in Zulu designs on cotton scarves. Jenny spread one out and realised there was enough fabric to make a dress for the doll. She also bought a selection of braids, decorated with fine beadwork, to complete the costume.

When Jenny arrived back home she was greeted with the news of another pregnancy. For a moment, she heard the drumbeat of Africa. Jenny put the braids and scarves away in the cupboard with the doll. Once again, she spent her spare hours making baby clothes in white, cream and a soft green.

By now her first grandson was into jumbo building blocks, and Jenny had added a new edition of *Thomas the Tank Engine* to her book case. Grandson number two arrived six months later. He had a mop of black hair and a lusty yell. Jenny took him in her arms and fell in love again. He looked just like her daughter had when she was born.

As spring turned into summer, Jenny spent her sewing time in the garden, though now and then she took the doll

out of the cupboard for a cuddle. She had decided to call her Anna Kate.

That autumn, Jenny drove down to Nelson to visit her mum. The leaves were turning gold and there was snow on the mountains. One afternoon they tidied her mother's sewing box, and, when Jenny went home, she took some fragile silk and fine handmade lace from one of her great-aunt's petticoats. The aunt had been a suffragette. Jenny liked to imagine that the petticoat had been worn at a rally. She would stitch the lace onto a collar of a dress for Anna Kate and pass on a piece of history.

And then the anticipation started again. Another daughter-in-law was pregnant, though Jenny realised that, even if they did have a daughter, she wouldn't see her very often – she'd be growing up in England.

Weeks later, an email arrived. The scan had shown twins and one was definitely a boy. Several months later grandsons number three and four arrived, at six in the morning, with all fingers and toes and loud squeals. 'No more,' Jenny's son told her on the phone. 'I'm not going through that again.'

A month later, Jenny was on the plane, with an extra suitcase full of baby clothes. She had two more black-haired, blue-eyed grandsons. Jenny had always wanted twins, but, after ten days of interrupted sleep, she realised that maybe she'd been lucky. Feeling guilty, she escaped to London for a day, heading for a tiny street south of Sloane Square, where she knew she could buy printed cotton styled on the antique fabrics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Jenny had found the shop on the internet, plus another close by that sold antique looking floral cottons for \$95 a metre. She picked out a gently faded rose pattern on a background of 'tea-stained shades of beige and cream, with dusky pink'. After all, what was the point of taking an empty suitcase home?

Once Jenny's family started giving her grandchildren, they kept coming. Grandson number five turned out to be a honey, with soft brown hair, high cheekbones and grey eyes. As he slept on Jenny's shoulder, his breath warm on her neck, she loved him. Later, she consoled herself with the idea that it's good for girls to have an older brother. Surely the next one would be a granddaughter.

Jenny didn't know why having a grand-daughter was so important to her; there was just something special about girls – even girls who were tomboys. Still, it could be worse; at least she had had a daughter – her sister had only had boys, though she did have a grand-daughter now.

It was her sister who had taught Jenny to sew. Once, she had made Jenny a stunning evening gown. Jenny kept that dress for years; then, accepting that she'd never fit it again, used the fabric to make a fairy outfit for her daughter. There

were still scraps from the original dress in Jenny's remnant pile, waiting for her grand-daughter to be born.

In the meantime, Jenny made fancy-dress costumes for her grandsons. The oldest of the bunch were then three and four. Jenny collected turkey feathers from the paddocks, saved the tail feathers from ducks and pheasants, bagged on opening day, and stitched them all onto sacking to make Red Indian headdresses. The pirate captain had a flowing coat made out of an old black skirt, and Peter Pan used up the remains of green fabric. The boys dashed around the furniture with cardboard swords, and when Jenny called the pirate Captain Hook, she was told firmly that he was now Captain Jack Sparrow.

Jenny loved the noise in the house and missed the boys when they went home, but she'd been told there was another baby on the way. She figured the odds had to be in favour of a girl this time. She took Anna Kate out of the cupboard, sat her on the sewing table and opened *Simplicity 8026 Dolls Clothes*. The first pattern was for a christening gown.

Jenny chose a piece of cream chenille and slid the pins through the paper and fabric. The scissors were sharp and did not snag. But then she folded the pieces in an old tea towel and put them and Anna Kate back in the cupboard. To go any further would be tempting fate.

Grandson number six looked like his dad. He smiled at Jenny. She knew it was only wind, but he had the wide grin she'd seen in three generations of her husband's family. He demanded that she love him, and she didn't even try to resist.

Over the next year, Jenny spent hours babysitting. The train of an alphabet jigsaw stretched across the lounge floor, and Dr Seuss still twisted her tongue. Her grandsons met her with arms extended and beaming faces. As Jenny hugged them tight, the depth of her love for them surprised her and put her longing for a granddaughter into perspective. She hadn't taken Anna Kate out of the cupboard for ages, but still found herself buying the odd pieces of material – just in case.

After all, some pieces were so special that it would have been criminal not to add them to her collection. The yellow brocade highlighted with gold thread, for example. It had to be a cape to throw over an evening gown. Jenny found it in Paris, in a tiny shop on a narrow street, shaded out by ancient buildings, festooned with blackened gargoyles. She'd been following an elderly woman, hoping to get a chance to photograph her.

The woman was Jenny's idea of French elegance. She was dressed all in black, her white hair pulled tight and caught high in a comb. The spike heels of her shoes clicked the pavement and beside her, on a bright-red lead, trotted a shampooed poodle. Jenny followed her into the shop, but forgot the photograph, when she spied the remnants bin.

Jenny limited herself to three pieces. The brocade, of course; the batiste (a lightweight, delicate fabric in a plain weave, a bit like cotton, that she would use as lining for a dress of lace – she would look for lace in Venice); and the

chambray – a soft fabric woven in white and magenta. The assistant said they sold a lot of remnants for patchwork. Jenny told her she was using them to make doll clothes.

"You have a granddaughter, maybe two?" the assistant asked.

"Not yet," Jenny replied, but admitted she had hopes – there was another baby on the way.

Grandson number seven was born a few days before his dad's birthday. It was a quick birth and he was beautiful – clear skin and deep, dark-blue eyes that were wide open and took everything in. Later, Jenny studied the photographs she took of him at that moment, and it seemed to her there was knowledge and sadness in those eyes, though his parents and brothers were smiling, rejoicing.

Jenny remembered swallowing bitter disappointment. She watched as his mother cuddled him. Her son flicked the baby's black hair and called him his little pipsqueak. His brothers were happy too – they hadn't wanted a girl, anyway.

Three days later her son cried over the phone. There was a problem with the baby's heart. He was on his way to Starship in the helicopter. Ten days and several family conferences later, the medical team decided to withdraw the baby's life support.

Jenny was cried out – haunted with guilt that she hadn't wanted another boy. But she couldn't bear to lose him, either.

The nurses took out all the tubes, except the morphine line. Jenny held him in her arms. His brothers helped to make foot and hand prints on white paper. At eleven o'clock that night, Jenny helped to give him a bath. He relaxed in the warm water, his head resting in his mother's hand. The nurse topped up the hot water to lengthen his pleasure. Jenny left sometime after midnight. The nurses had joined two beds together, and her son and his wife were resting with the baby between them.

Jenny didn't open the sewing cupboard for months.

Then, one morning, she took Anna Kate out and sat on the spare bed with her, stroking her curls. She rolled Anna Kate in bubble-wrap, gathered the piles of remnants, the cut-out christening gown and *Simplicity 8026 Dolls Clothes* and tucked them all into a large box. Jenny wrote a short note to her sister, put it in the box and taped it tight.

At the courier's, the girl behind the counter asked if her parcel contained anything valuable.

"No," Jenny replied. "It's just a doll."