

By J C Burke

Enduring Love

Aunty Claire's breath stinks so bad I feel the hairs in my nose stand up to attention. We're waiting at the bus stop near her house.

'Where are be boing?' It's easier not to breathe. I lean as far back as I can without seeming rude. Mum wouldn't like that. Every time I'm dragged out on one of Aunty Claire's 'blind dates', Mum says, 'Be polite. Pretend you're invisible.' That's when Mum glances at Dad and he rolls his eyeballs and mutters 'I'm not happy about this arrangement, Liv.'

Aunty Claire snaps her paper closed. 'Do you know that Gai Waterhouse still makes her Robbie's lunch everyday? Enduring love, that's what they call it.' I think she's talking to me although she's staring at something in the distance. 'Enduring love,' she whispers.

'Beg your pardon?' I did hear what she said, I'm just not sure what to say back. Besides, I don't know what enduring means, I'm only eleven.

There's always weird people hanging about near Aunty Claire's place in Paddington, popping their heads around the bus shelter, saying strange stuff like, 'Jesus wants you for his angel.'

Today, a man kicks the timetable pole with his black boot. Once, then twice. The blue metal vibrates and bends. I'm scared if he kicks it any harder it'll fall over.

I shuffle behind Aunty Claire .

'What's wrong with him?' I ask.

Aunty Claire doesn't reply. She stares ahead at that same spot in the distance.

A terrible thought pierces my brain. Maybe this man is Aunty Claire's blind date? Maybe Aunty Claire knows and that's why she's not answering me.

Terrible thoughts do that to me, pierce through my brain like one of the sticks mum uses for chicken satay, stabbing through my head and into the soft bit.

'Here's the bus, Jane,' Aunty Claire says, grabbing my hand, herding me up the stairs and down the aisle. I look out the window and now I don't care that the man is still kicking the pole 'cause we're on the bus. We're safe.

'Aunty Claire?' I hope it's all right to speak now. 'Where are we going?'

'A café,' she grunts. I notice my nose has got used to her breath. Isn't the human body wonderful, that's what my grandma would say.

I dare another word. 'Where *is* the café?'

'You ask a lot of questions, don't you Jane?'

I squirm in the seat. I don't think I ask a lot of questions. Wasn't that only my second one?

'Café Morpheus,' she sighs. 'In Kogarah.'

Aunty Claire has painted her fake nails red. Already she's peeled off the pinky. I want her to flick it off or stick it back on. Instead it clings to the scratchy fabric of her black skirt.

Once she peeled off nine fingernails before we'd even met her date. Ken. Or was it David?

When she picks her nails I know she's not in the mood to talk. So I stare out the window.

A lady in gym gear pulls a dog along behind her. I can see its soft black nose. The way it looks up at me makes

me think it's sad. It wants to escape, I'm certain of it. I wiggle my fingers at it.

'Jane?' Aunty Claire's has taken the photo out of her wallet. Her fingertips press it flat. It's the one from the glamour photo session Mum gave her for her fortieth.

'Jane, do you think I look slimmer – or fatter?'

I hate this question. It's a trick. No matter what I say I know I won't get it right.

'Um, um ...' The photo doesn't even look like her. It's fuzzy, like it's been taken through a fog. 'Don't know? What do you think?'

Aunty Claire holds it in front of her. I slide down the seat a bit. Everyone behind us will be able to see she's only draped in a sheet.

'Slimmer,' I say, knowing that'll make her put the picture down.

Her eyebrows knit together in a 'v'. I've got it wrong and she's about to tell me.

'Actually, I'm exactly the same.' But I wonder if she's telling the truth because I watch her fingers rip off two more nails.

'I noticed your mother's stacked a bit on.'

A bit of spit gets stuck in my throat. I try to swallow. This time I'm not going to say anything.

This is the eleventh blind date I've been on. They're usually at cafes. They didn't use to be. Aunty Claire's been salsa dancing, hot-air ballooning and swimming with dolphins. That's when it went wrong. No one told her she'd have to wear a wetsuit.

She doesn't go on adventure dates anymore. And now I have to go with her. She says my presence puts her at ease. But I know she's lying. Really I'm her spy.

We get off at a shopping mall. We must be close because Aunty Claire's hands are busy boofing up her hair.

'Can you see Café Morpheus?' she mumbles, sliding the lipstick along her mouth. She's missed a bit at the top but I'm not going to tell her. I'm still mad.

The only reason I spot Café Morpheus is because Dylan MacCaffrey, the biggest crush I've ever had, is hanging around the door. What on earth is he doing all the way out here?

'There it is, Aunty Claire,' I point.

DylanMacCaffrey sees me. Oh no, he thinks I've waved. I drop to my knees and pretend to fix my shoe. From down here I watch his feet walk along the footpath until they're so small they've almost disappeared.

'Well, up you get,' Aunty Claire snaps.

This is where I come in handy. What other kid would be doing this on a Saturday in November? 'What's he wearing?' I sigh.

'A – red – polo – shirt.' Aunty Claire speaks loud and slow like I'm stupid and likely to forget.

A red polo shirt, I mouth as I head towards the café.

Sitting by the window is a man in a red shirt and a hairdo like Homer Simpson. I'm about to report back when I notice a man with a beard also in red.

'There's two men wearing red,' I report.

'What!'

I shrug.

'Well what else do they look like?'

'One's got a beard and one's sorta bald.'

Aunty Claire flaps a print-out of her date's profile in my face. 'They're meant to have hair,' she spits. 'On their head and only on their head.'

'What do you want me to do?' I'm glancing around checking that Dylan MacCaffrey hasn't returned.

'Well, seeing they haven't stuck to the rules—' she is stuffing the profile into her bag. 'We're not going to either.'

'So we can go?' I hear my voice spring back to life.

She doesn't answer. Instead she grabs my hand and pulls me across the road. It takes three of my steps to equal one of hers.

'We'll just get the bus home and forget this ever happened.' With each word her hand grips tighter. Her seven remaining claws scratch my palm. 'It's not like I had anything else to do today.'

'Are we going home?'

'That is enough talking, Jane!'

I follow her down the back of the bus. By the way her shoulders are lifting up and down I can tell she's still muttering.

We sit in silence. I stare out the window and there crossing the road is Dylan MacCaffrey with a man in a red polo shirt.

But I don't say anything. I'm not allowed to.