VIOLET MACKEREL’S NATURAL HABITAT
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ISBN: 9781921529191
HARDBACK
ARRP: $19.95 • NZRRP: $24.99
Violet Mackerel is at the shopping centre with her mum.
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It is Friday late-night shopping and they have been there for a very long time, buying violin strings for Violet’s big brother Dylan, and an *Encyclopedia of Natural Science* for her big sister Nicola, who is doing a school project for a special *Natural Science* display. They have not been buying anything for Violet, unless you count grey school socks. Violet does not count grey school socks.

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And now Mum has bumped into Mrs Lin from across the road and they are having an extremely long cup of tea in the food court.
“With petrol prices as they are,” says Mum to Mrs Lin, “it’s getting difficult to make ends meet.”

“I know,” says Mrs Lin to Mum. “My bills are going through the roof.”

No one says anything to Violet, so she thinks about Mrs Lin’s bills going through the roof. The roof of the food court is quite high up. Past two whole floors of shops. And there is a small brown sparrow flying there.
Violet wonders if the sparrow has always lived in the shopping centre, or if it flew in by mistake and can’t find its way out of the automatic sliding doors that creak open and shut as the people come and go.

She wonders if indoor sparrows are jealous of outdoor sparrows, which have leafy trees to nest in. Or if outdoor sparrows are jealous of indoor sparrows, which get doughnut crumbs and bits of hot dog to eat. It is difficult to know what small creatures think. But while Violet is wondering, the sparrow flies
down onto the floor of the food court and hops and jumps just near where she is sitting.

Violet wishes she had some doughnut crumbs, but since she doesn’t, she tries to think of what else a sparrow might like. She suspects it is probably a bit difficult for an indoor sparrow to find things to build a nest with, and that gives her an idea. The hem of her daisy skirt is coming unravelled and she pulls on a loose thread. It gets quite long before it breaks. Violet puts it down on the ground for the sparrow.

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“You can weave this into your nest,” says Violet.
The sparrow hops over, picks it up in his beak and flies back towards the roof of the shopping centre. Violet smiles. A new thought is forming in her mind. It is called the

Theory of Helping Small Things

and it works like this. If you do something to help a small thing, that small thing might find a way of helping you. Violet quite likes
helping, so she doesn’t mind if the theory doesn’t work. But on the other hand, it would be interesting to be helped back by something as small as a sparrow.

Violet waits to see if anything happens. The sparrow flies back down again. Violet wonders if it would like some more thread for its nest. This time it hops and jumps near Mrs Lin’s feet. Mrs Lin wrinkles her nose.

“Ugh, I can’t stand sparrows,” says Mrs Lin. “They look like mice with wings. It’s time I was going home.”

“Us too, I suppose,” says Mum.

“Thank you,” whispers Violet to the sparrow, very glad that they are finally leaving.
In the car Violet asks Mum about birds who live in shopping centres.

“Birds are good at finding places to build their nests and things to eat wherever they are,” says Mum, “but a shopping centre is not a bird’s *natural habitat.*”

“What’s a *natural habitat*?” asks Violet.

“The place where something lives and grows best,” says Mum.

Violet looks up at the evening sky where the clouds are hanging low. They look as if they are about to spill their rain all over the world and she likes watching them drift in the wind. You can’t see the clouds or the rain when you’re in a shopping centre.
Violet suspects that the shopping centre is not her natural habitat either.
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