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A CHRISTMAS WISH

The outback children were sitting comfortably in a sandy clearing between the clumps of Spinifex, just waiting to hear the latest story; except the storyteller hadn't arrived yet. They knew where she would be coming from, though, and all eyes were on the sky. Young goannas and baby desert mice looked up, as did four emu chicks; and very soon she was there – a tiny spot in the clear blue sky, growing bigger as she came closer and closer. Then, with a flutter and flap she landed on a dead tree stump, folded her wings and gazed down on the children.

Everyone was sure it would be worth the wait because Boobook was a truly wise old owl who knew loads of stuff that not many people did. She said once this was due to the fact that she was a librarian which was someone who worked in a library, a big house filled with books about all sorts of things. In truth she had never actually been inside the library; but most days she would sit in a tree outside the front door, listening to the human people talking of the books they'd read and what they had learned from them. Boobook remembered these things and told of them in her stories.

Seeing that everyone was ready, she hooted: "What I am going to tell you now may sound unbelievable, but the humans who talked about it said it was true." Her audience stayed wide-eyed and silent, and this pleased Boobook as she continued: "A special time of year called Christmas is coming; and when it does, something quite magical will happen. Long before it does, though, the human children will have written letters to Father Christmas, as he is known, asking for a particular present that they really wished to have. Then, late on Christmas Eve when all the children are asleep, this jolly man with a white beard wearing a red suit will visit each and every one of them; and he will leave them the presents they have asked him for."

"Excuse me, Ma'am," Shirl, one of the emu chicks interrupted. "Is this only for human children, or could we write to Father Christmas?"

"Not really," said Boobook, "The main problem is that none of us can write."

Baz, another of the emu chicks asked: "What if we told someone who could pass it on – you know, just say it?"

A third emu chick, Pearl, said: "Mopoke reckons Wiziwig the dust devil flies around to faraway places. Maybe he could take a message from us."

Boobook frowned. "You can't always believe what Mopoke says. I know he's my younger brother, but he makes things up a lot of the time."

"But we could try," suggested Gaz, the last of the emu chicks.

"Well," Boobook accepted cagily, "You could, I suppose..." Then she recalled a particular rule about Christmas that she hadn't mentioned. "But even if Father Christmas does receive your wishes, he won't bring them if you are naughty or not nice."

Once the storytelling was over, Old Man Emu collected his chicks and off they went on walkabout as usual. Whenever they took a break, the four emu chicks would talk about this Christmas message...

"Each of us has to think of something to wish for," said Pearl.

"Maybe that's being a bit greedy," suggested Shirl, "Asking for a present each, I mean."

"And greedy is actually being naughty," Baz reminded them, "So we can't be that or Father Christmas won't give us anything."

"Okay," put in Gaz, "What if we asked for the same present we would all really like?"

The chicks pondered the question for a long time; but when they thought about it, they had everything they needed and there was nothing extra that they really fancied. Then, one time their father took them up a small hill and they were resting at the top. As he was looking around at things in the distance, an idea came to Baz: "This present – what about wings?"

Pearl groaned. "We've already got wings, dummy."

"But they don't work, not like they do for other birds," insisted Baz. He tipped his head back to look up into the sky. "See that kite there flying around, not a care in the world. With his proper wings he can get to places in a flash that would take us ages and make our legs tired." He noticed the others weren't quite convinced and added: "Proper wings would be better than being on top of a hill: just imagine the things we could see from up there if only we could fly."

The four emu chicks talked about their Christmas wish for a while and finally agreed that asking for wings was the way to go. "But we have to make sure they are wings for flying," commented Gaz. "We don't want more of the ones we've already got. And we'll need two each – I hope that doesn't sound greedy. Let's go and give our message to Wiziwig."

"If we can find him," said Shirl. "He could be anywhere."

"I bet Mopoke knows where he is," said Pearl, "Seeing as he's the one who suggested the dust devil in the first place."

Off they went to the tree that Mopoke used to sit in, and asked the question. "No worries," the young owl assured the chicks. "I'll go get him for you. Take a bit of advice, though – keep your message simple: Wiziwig's amazingly fast and furious, but he tends to forget things; and he's not all that smart up top, if you know what I mean."

A short time later Mopoke returned with the dust devil following: spinning around he was; churning up the sand and swirling it into the air. Luckily he was able to pause on the spot so that the chicks could speak to him without choking on a cloud of dust. Wiziwig listened to what they wanted and said: "There might be a problem. From what Mopoke said, this Father Christmas lives in a place called the North Pole. That's miles away and I'm not allowed to leave the outback." Turning slowly, he could see how this news brought disappointment to the faces of the chicks. "However," he added on a cheerier note, "I have friends in high places who can help deliver your message. Clouds can go anywhere they like, even to the other side of the world. So, tell me your message and I'll pass it on to them..."

After they'd given Wiziwig their message, the chicks watched the dust devil winding up, then take off at high speed; along the ground for a bit before rising up into the sky to meet his cloud friends. Mopoke pondered thoughtfully: "Your Christmas wish was simple enough and I imagine even Wiziwig will remember the words '*eight flying wings*'; but you have to bear in mind that this message will probably be passed on from cloud to cloud. I only hope for your sakes that it doesn't get changed along the way and that you do actually get what you asked for."

True to his word, Wiziwig gave the message to one of his friends. This cloud took it as far as she was going, then passed it on to another cloud which was going further. By and by, the wish of the emu chicks reached Father Christmas in the North Pole. "Hmm," he muttered, scratching his white beard as he thought on the words the cloud had told him. "I don't think I've ever had a Christmas wish like this before. Perhaps my Elves can come up with something..."

During the next storytelling the chicks mentioned what they had done to Boobook. "Well," she said, "I hope your wish is granted; but if I were you I wouldn't tell anyone about it – wishes like this are best kept secret or they might not come true."

The emu chicks did what Boobook suggested and didn't breathe a word to another soul. They did, however, remember to ask the wise old owl to let them know when Christmas would

happen; especially Christmas Eve, whatever that was. They had to know so that they could all be fast asleep should Father Christmas come calling. In the meantime they made sure they were very good and very nice. And finally the special time arrived.

The sun was going down, casting long dark shadows over the outback as it dropped below the horizon. Snuggling up to the others, Pearl watched in wonder. "It looks different tonight somehow," she murmured.

"Maybe that's because tonight is a special time, so we have a special sunset," suggested Gaz.

"Shush, you two," hissed Shirl. "It's bedtime and we must go to sleep."

"Yes," whispered Baz, "Then, when we wake up maybe our present will be here."

It wasn't easy for any of the chicks to sleep, because they all kept thinking of the magical visit of Father Christmas; and that, unfortunately, would be a magical happening they wouldn't be able to see, which was a pity. What really mattered, though, was that the jolly man in the red suit wouldn't find them awake when he called; always assuming he came at all. Eventually, they were so tired with the excitement that they drifted off to sleep.

Just like the sun going down the night before, dawn the next day also seemed different somehow. The chicks woke up as it was just getting light and looked around. The little they could see disappointed them. "I don't reckon Father Christmas came," moaned Gaz. "There aren't any wings."

"Maybe he already put them on us," suggested Shirl hopefully, "And he did it so gently we didn't feel anything."

Pearl stood up and flapped her wings. "Nup! Mine still don't work."

"Maybe our message didn't get through," said Baz. "I guess we're stuck with the wings we've got. We'll never be able to fly..." Just then he began to cough as a swirling cloud of sand and dust announced the arrival of Wiziwig.

"What's the matter with you lot?" he asked. "Don't you want your presents, then?"

"Presents?" the four emu chicks gasped out in wonder.

"Those there floating above the ground," said the dust devil. "Eight flying things."

"Eight *what*?" puzzled Shirl.

"Flying things," repeated Wiziwig.

"But we asked for flying *wings*," said Gaz, "Not *things*!"

"Ah," mumbled the dust devil. "Sorry – must have got that bit wrong. Still, the things Father Christmas sent are sort-of like wings. He called them walloons - at least I think he did - and you *will* be able to fly in them, I promise. Come on – follow me."

The four chicks trotted after Wiziwig and he was making so much dust that it was almost impossible to see anything. When he stopped and the dust settled there before them was an amazing sight. Hovering just above the ground were eight brightly coloured balloons, each with a basket hanging beneath. The baskets weren't empty either. There were birds in them, the kind that had wings but couldn't fly, just like the emu chicks. A penguin in one called out: "Who wants a ride? I've come all the way from New Zealand and I'm your pilot."

"Me too," said a Kiwi in another balloon.

"There you go," said Wiziwig. "Climb aboard the walloons for your first flying lesson."

Once each of the chicks were in their own baskets, the balloons rose gracefully into the air. Up and up they went, and they were truly beautiful as they floated high above the outback. After they were back on the ground the chicks couldn't stop talking about it. "Our very first Christmas was quite wonderful," mused Shirl. "And I've been thinking - seeing as we've got eight walloons, that's four spare. We could take our friends on flying trips, particularly the ones who've got wings like ours that don't work." It was decided, then, that they would share their Christmas gift.

Baz did make another suggestion: "What about starting up a business, like a wallooning school?" But no-one knew what a business was, so they simply went with the first idea.