

# Daddy’s Having a Horse

AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR NOTES

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Written by Lisa Shanahan, illustrated by Emma Quay

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## AUTHOR NOTES from Lisa Shanahan:

Like many writers, I tend to get the original inspiration for a story from the world around me; from things I hear, see and feel.

When I was pregnant with my second son, I can remember going to playgroup, desperately asking other pregnant mothers how their older kids were coping with the idea of having a new baby in the family. One of the mothers told me that her children were so excited about having a new baby that they couldn’t wait to tell everyone. In the middle of the deli, hanging over the butcher’s counter or in the fruit shop, her daughter would shout out ‘Mummy’s having a baby!’ and her son would chorus, ‘And Daddy’s having a horse!’

When I asked my friend whether her little boy seriously believed that his dad had a horse in his belly, my friend simply laughed. For her it was just a funny thing her little boy came out with one day, end of story.

But for me, it was the beginning.

While the other mothers chatted over morning tea, I went to my bag and got out my writing book that I carry mostly everywhere and wrote down those two sentences - ‘Mummy’s having a baby.’ ‘And Daddy’s having a horse.’ I drew a black square around those words because I felt a zing, some inner recognition that this tiny moment had the potential to be transformed into a story.

Later, I couldn’t stop thinking about that little boy. What would it be like to be so convinced that your daddy was going to have a horse, that whenever you rested your head against his hairy belly, you were sure you could hear it burp? What would it be

like to make plans for where the horse would sleep? What would it be like to turn up at the hospital with your grandparents, expecting and hoping to see the horse? How would you feel when you realized that after all that hoping and expecting there was no horse and never would be?

And so I wrote a story about Lachlan, a boy who in some vague way felt left out of his mother’s pregnancy, a boy who was anxious about his dad, and scared about giving up his position as the baby of the family. A little boy brimming with both fear and hope but who could not put this into actual words.

I wanted the story to have moments where children and adults could laugh together. I also wanted it to be tenderly gritty. I wanted to show the different ways adults responded to Lachlan’s firmly believed fantasy, from Lachlan’s exasperated parents, to his encouraging grandmother, to the good-natured but slightly condescending Sam the Handyman. I wanted to show that it was acceptable and understandable for children to feel a little ambivalent about a new baby, or even at times for them to feel like Lachlan and Caitlin, downright disappointed. I didn’t want the untidiness of their emotions to be swept away under a neat dose of saccharine.

Lastly, I wanted to show the gentle way Lachlan’s love for his baby brother creeps up on him, in the midst of milky burps, warm baths and dirty nappies.

### ILLUSTRATOR NOTES from Emma Quay:

After reading Lisa’s text for “Daddy’s Having a Horse”, I felt I knew the family in the story, so the look of the characters came to me fairly easily. Lachlan, Caitlin, and both parents look very much like the first wax crayon sketches I made of them. I decided to draw with a child’s black wax crayon, as I knew the medium would not allow me to get too involved with fine detail. I wanted to keep a light touch and a sketchy and open feel to the illustrations, with translucent washes of watercolour to complement the linework.

I tried to convey Lachlan’s excitement at the imagined imminent arrival of the baby horse through his constant movement. He can’t keep still—he is constantly galloping around the kitchen on a broom, or saddling up the couch to ride it, or kicking his legs in the air when he spots a horse shape in the clouds. This is in marked contrast to the scene when the children visit their mum and dad in hospital and Lachlan’s hopes are dashed. There is no horse—only a baby brother. Lachlan is motionless, his hands hanging limply by his sides. Almost all the colour is washed away when he runs down the corridor to hunch in a corner and hide. But, of course, that warm colour will gradually seep back into the pictures as he comes to accept and love his new baby brother, and ends up with his horse (in an unexpected form) after all.

In the internal illustrations of “Daddy’s Having a Horse” the horse is never depicted explicitly, and yet it is always present in some form. There is no horse character, but there *are* horse references everywhere, until they disappear with the birth of (human) baby Jack. I hoped that children would notice more of these references each time they revisited the book. I also hoped that they would enjoy finding in the early kitchen scenes the various elements that would go to making up the rocking horse from Sam the Handyman at the end of the book. Sam has recycled the parts of the old kitchen he is ripping out, to make Lachlan a substitute for the baby horse. The old ribbon fly screen is a colourful tail, the 1970s modular seating becomes the rockers, and the broom Lachlan has been riding is chopped up and becomes the mane and legs.

An interesting quality I wanted to explore with my illustrations to this text was the fact that several different stories are unfolding at once. The most obvious being Lachlan’s amusing and illogical imaginings, followed by his disappointment and eventual acceptance and excitement. But there is also his sibling Caitlin’s story—she had been hoping for a baby sister—and his mother and father’s. How would they feel at their two older children’s reactions in the hospital? I especially wanted to convey a realistic and unsentimental view of family, of pregnancy and bringing a new baby home. I didn’t want mum’s tummy to spring back down as soon as she had the baby. I wanted to show her uncombed hair, the dark lines under her eyes, her maternity bra strap slipping out from under her nightdress, the untidy house. I hoped to make her real, and yet maintain her dignity. I felt a great affection for her. After all, I’d been there!