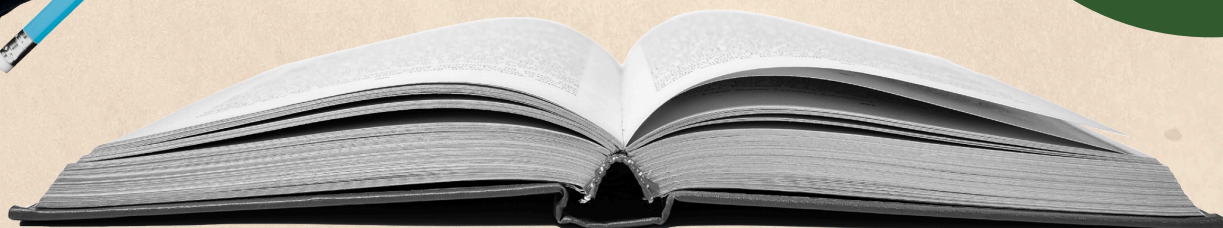


CITY OF
SUBIACO

YOUNG
WRITERS
AWARD

2023 - 2025

LET YOUR
IMAGINATION
TAKE YOU
SOMEWHERE
UNEXPECTED



YOUNG WRITERS AWARD

2023

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LOWER
PRIMARY



FOOD AND SPACE

SHUO CHEN



Hi my name is Fred, This is my friend Tintin he lives in space with Me, Eating Potatos and tomatos. We are best friends ha! No one can live better than us! Oh yea, I am seven and tintin is 4 years old. I am very smart and cool! Tintin's not smart and not cool (only cute).

Have you wonderd why we can run and jump in the space? Well, the technology has developed from 2023 to 3023!!! We can go to space whenever we want. Do you see the solar system in the background? Well, they are my friends.

One morning, we woke up, and we were hungry. So I said "Lets go to mercury!" Tintin was shocked "Why?" asked Tintin, "Because Mercury is hot and hotpots are hot too" "Imagine having hoptpot for breakfast!" "okay" said Tintin and we went to Mercury.

We drove off in the minirocket, and we went to mecury, we went to hot pot city and ordered 1 hotpot (as you might expect), and Tintin also said: "too hot!!" and I said: "Calm down baby?? But that didn't work at all, So he drank water instead.

After we finished our breakfast (which tintin is still mad about) I said "lets keep exploring!" which Tintin said "yes" But we felt a pulling feeling. "Do you hear that sound?" says Tintin. "I think we are being dragged by a blackhole" "run!" I say.

But we cannot run. The black hole is toooo strong! I want to Pull Tintin back, but it's impossible. Tintin got sucked in the blackhole. "No!" I said going with him "We are Dead!" We shouted sacredly "argh!"

But we were not dead. We were in a black tunnel Dragged along with snails, sand, and Two-in-one-men, Two-in-one-eye-Two-in-one-men. They didn't hurt us AT ALL. Instead, they smiled at us. Which we want to smile back. We were dragged to the end of the tunnel.

Suddently, We landed on a strange planet, We looked around, And found its' blue and green. "It looks like Earth" I Say "No, it's kepler-452d" said Tintin Angryley. We looked at this planet, it was beautiful! "I like it" I said patting on Tintin's back. he thought for a while and said to me: "I like it too!"

We wonderd for a bit, and dicided to go into kepler-452b. It was amazing! We were reeeeeeeeeeally fast, though it was pretty scarey AND Fun! I love it, love it soooooo much we went to the big country and BOOM! It was amazing!

After we arrived on the Kepler-452b, we saw lots of Junkfood men. There was pizza men, hamburger men, hotdog men, fries and coke men, they were adorable and sneaky! They were playing what they were playing. And didn't notice Tintin and me, Fred. We were surprised that didn't hurt us.

We looked around and, we were afraid that they will hurt us, so we jumped in the drain. I got in first and then Tintin came last closing the lid. It was sooooooooooooooooooooo dark in here that I can't barley see. It was actually fun.

We saw a broccoli standing there and she said "help the veggies please" Tintin said "Who are you?" "I'm a broccoli from Mars, But they don't like me so they put me in here." "So, how can we help you?" I said. "You have to go to Mars and call them to come here so this land is healthy." Said Broccoli. "Ok" we said and drove off.

We went in our minirocket, without being pulled by the blackhole to Mars. Mars was unusual because it was green. We thought it was green because of the light from the other planets. When we were approached it, we found out why it is green: the green juicy veggiebles and fruits.

They went to Mars and vegetables and fruits. Tintin asked peapod a thing. "Who are you?" "I'm peapod you can call us veg, but not to green apple men ok?" said peapod. "Ok" I said and Tintin said "Broccoli's stuck on Kepler-452b can you help us?" "Of course!" said peapod and they went in their big-veggie-tesla-plane. It was enormous or gigantic. It was white with too light eyes pop from the lights. The Tesla's two wheels seemed pretty mysterious. I was in the front controlling the steering wheel – while Tintin sits next to me seeing space. It has two wings as well, TWO BIG WINGS. Everyone except Tintin and Fred was calling "Faster!"

As soon as we arrived at Kepler-452b, tons of Junkfood were standing there. "Let's have a fight!" shouted Tintin "who ever wins gets a key and broccoli too!" cried Tintin and they had a fight. Peapod shot peas and hamburger dodged it. French Fries shot fries at pepper and he dodged it too! It was SUPER cool!!!

And they won it. They won it! they got broccoli's baby! It's FANTASTIC Today! We were celebrating. "Yay!" shouted Tintin. "You rescued me!!!" cried broccoli's baby. "Now what do we do?" I ask "Let's go back to Earth!" Said Tintin. "but before we go, I like to say a BIG hooray!" I said we said "HORRAY!!!" we shouted.

Two hours Later, we Leaved Repler-452b, We went to the MiniRocket and we went in to the Solar-system and Found..... EARTH!!!! I was looking At it and my head looked soooooooooooooooooOOOOOO Bigggggg! It was supe cool!

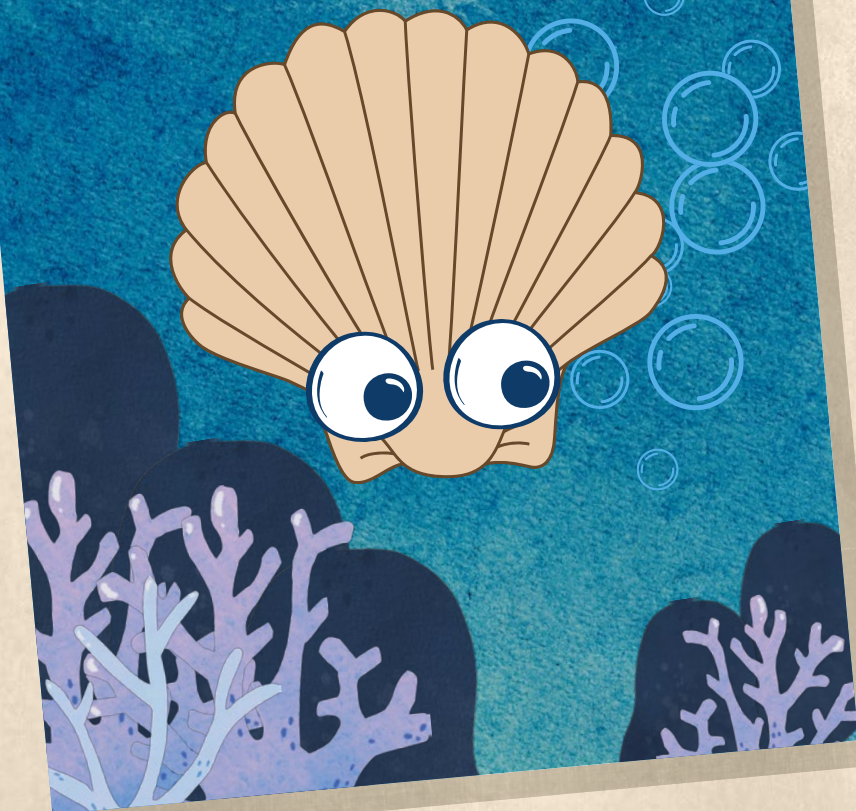
After we arrived at Earth, I said: "MOVIE!" "Um.... – yes!" said Tintin "But I want rest first." "Ok." I say and we rested for about 400,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 hours until..... MOVIE TIME!

The movie was about a friend called Fred and Tintin going to space and exxxploring vegetables and fruits and..... Junk food???!!!

– THE END –

CALEB KAMERON

SEA SPIRIT



Crash! A boy named Gabriel woke to the sound of rippling waves lapping against the shore. He looked out his window and saw vines crawling up the walls, seagulls squawking over his tin roof, (the house was shadowed by a weeping willow tree) and then his two small frangipani trees. Just then, he caught a glimpse of the magical endless path of silvery blueness. He had always loved the beautiful beach. When he went to the beach he always felt like another heart was entering his body.

Two weeks earlier, precisely four KM from the beach Gabriel usually visited, something Astronomically Amazing was happening! Floating on the ocean floor, a shell was being hit by a magical meteorite with dust that brings things to life! The magical dust looked like the pale, rocky moon surface. Just then, the meteorite went boom! Like a tsunami pelting down on the roofs of a million houses.

Pop! went the shell as two beady blue eyes appeared followed by two uncurling bright wings. Then came two short legs and two small arms. The magical metamorphosis was complete!

Gabriel walked confidently across the sunlit beach collecting lots of beautiful shells.

Suddenly, he came across a quiet rock-pool hidden by shrubs on the sand dunes. He started to dig into the golden sand. A shell flew out of the hole, startling the boy. He immediately snapped his neck towards the flying seashell. He held his hand out in astonishment and the shell fluttered into his palm. "You'll be safe with me," whispered Gabriel. He grabbed a chunk of clumpy seaweed, put it in his bucket, and lowered the shell gently on top.

The boy hurried across the rocky footpath and into his plant invaded backyard. He saw his dad in the kitchen making sushi for the boy's lunch. "Hey Dad!" "come over here!" he yelled. His dad came out and looked into the bucket. "You'll never in googolplex years guess what I found Dad"!

"It's a real life living shell"!!!!!!!

"Nice imagination Bub"! said the dad as he patted Gabriel's shoulder.

Gabriel raced up to his room to get changed and make a mini home for his shell. When Gabriel sat down on his bed, he noticed the shell examining his bedroom wall. The shell peeped over the edge of the bucket starting thoughtfully at his

underwater magazine posters. A jar of special violet coral sat next to a hard cover book – International Facts about the Sea.

“Wow” said the shell amazed by his surrounding. Gabriel lept up in surprise with his hands shaking knees buckling and eyes popping.

“Can you understand me?! Gabriel asked, astonished and overjoyed at the same time.

“Well yes”, said the shell “but only because you are one who loves and wants to protect the sea and all sea creatures”

During the week, Gabriel brought the shell to school with him for company. Whenever Gabriel was laughing with the shell, he felt like nothing bad had ever happened to him before. That afternoon Gabriel and the shell went up to Gabriel’s room. “Where did you come from?” asked Gabriel curiously. “I... um...came from the legendary edge of the world.” replied the shell.

“Really!?” replied Gabriel, excitement rising in his voice. Gabriel really wanted to go this amazing place but had second thoughts. He was worried about getting in trouble and more.

He tiptoed out of the house with teeth chattering, legs wobbling and thoughts bursting inside of him. He grabbed his dad’s jetski and hauled it onto the shore.

As Gabriel was roaring across the sea, he noticed rolling grey clouds calling in a raging storm. Now that Gabriel knew there was a storm, he actually felt the jet ski bouncing up and down. He then heard a clap of distant thunder followed by the earsplitting sound of a bolt of luminescent buzzing electricity. The shell clung to Gabriel’s pocket, his mouth wide and eyes staring at the extremely choppy waves.

A huge gust of wind suddenly blew Gabriel, with the shell in his quaking hand, into the merky dark depths of the sea. The icy cold waters, streaking in marvellous patterns around him, were becoming slower as Gabriel plunged towards the seabed.

Boom! Gabriel hit the seabed and felt mushy seaweed brush against his face. He could see nothing but a glowing thing. He picked it up. It was the shell! Relief flowed through Gabriel’s body. He had forgotten all about his little friend! “You can breath under here!” “Try doing it yourself”! said the shell. To Gabriel’s amazement, when he took a breath, the water formed a bubble around Gabriel so he could breath!

He reluctantly swam to the nearest shore with shell clutched firmly in his quivering hand. As Gabriel looked up, he noticed Dad standing with arms folded and a sour expression.

"What were you thinking?!" dad said, "It's not like you to do such a treacherous thing!"

"Well... um... I was just looking for the edge of the world", Gabriel explained.

"I love you Bub, but why did you have to take and lose my perfectly good jetski?"

Gabriel felt coldness sweeping into his heart, while teardrops splashed onto the seawater like soft rain.

That night, Gabriel was sobbing in bed and holding his special friend, the Shell. A warm glow started to help him overcome his emotions, and he began to drift off to sleep. That morning, his dad whispered in Gabriel's ear, "come on!" "I've got a surprise for you". Gabriel opened his eyes and saw his dad standing with a small smile. A neon-red glow filled his window as the sun rose higher and higher.

When Gabriel reached the beach with his dad, he could smell pure saltwater and hear waves crashing down on the gleaming sand. They put down their towels and lay down next to each other. "I forgive you. I bought you a snorkel and mask so we can explore the sea together," said dad. Gabriel rejoiced and felt his emotional bucket filling with love and kindness.

Gabriel whispered to his shell. "I don't really need the snorkel part."

"Correct, but let us keep it our little secret", the shell replied. Gabriel and his dad waded together into the biting waters.

When Gabriel's dad tucked him into bed that night, he whispered. "I believe you about your shell even if I can't see it".

– THE END –

WADE SEQUEIRA

The Best Sandwich Ever



In a town far away, there lived a boy named Jack. He lived with his parents. Jack was a 10-year-old boy, and he was quite an adventurous child. He had black hair, brown eyes, and pink, rosy cheeks. Jack and his family did not have a lot of money. They had a small home but not a lot of food in their house. Jack's dad was a coin collector and did not make lots of money, and because their town was so small, he could not find another job. His mum on the other hand was a pie seller who worked with Jack in a crooked stall, all worn out. Every day, Jack and his mum sold their pies, but not many people bought their pies because a few blocks away, there was another pie maker who made the best pies anyone had ever tasted.

A few days later, when Jack was eating his breakfast, the doorbell rang. "I wonder who it is?" He opened the door and outside there was a parcel and newspaper tied together. Jack took the newspaper and shouted, "Mum, there is a parcel for you!" Jack's mum took the parcel and headed out with it because it had a new sign with her business name on it and some new screws to fix the sign to the stall as all the old screws were rusted. Jack was a little bit bored, so he started to read the newspaper. Inside the newspaper it read "Welcoming everyone to compete in a challenge where you can collect ingredients to make the best sandwich ever. Jack was so excited and did not finish reading the newspaper which would lead him into trouble. Before gathering his things, he quickly read a sentence at the bottom saying **Warning! could be dangerous. Could take a long time.** But Jack did not understand what it meant.

Jack decided to be prepared as he was heading out, so he went to his piggy bank and took out a few dollars that he had found on the ground the previous day. Jack then went to the shops nearby, so he could buy a few things. Once Jack got there, he took a big water bottle, and a pocketknife just in case he needed it. Then Jack went to the counter, so he could pay. Jack then went back home so he could check if he needed anything else. Jack looked inside the newspaper again and when he opened it, there was a map! Jack took the map with him in case he needed it on his journey. Then Jack set off. Unfortunately, Jack did not read the newspaper properly. On the second page of the newspaper, it read: **if anyone eats the sandwich, they will get trapped a huge monster!**

Once Jack got outside, he started to follow the map. The map led into a huge forest. While Jack walked into the forest, all the leaves fell to the hot, rough ground. There were crickets chirping and each time Jack took a step, it got

darker. Jack started to get scared. After Jack walked through the forest, he came upon a big strong storm! Jack could not see where he was going because it was so foggy. Suddenly, Jack tripped and fainted! Twenty-five minutes later, Jack woke up and saw that he was in a forest that was like a leafy kingdom. "Wow, this place is amazing! I love it," he said. Then Jack looked at the map and it said to go underground. At first Jack did not understand but then he decided to dig a hole to fit him underground. Jack did not have a shovel but luckily, he found one hiding behind a big tree. He took the shovel and started to dig. After digging for a while, Jack missed his step and fell into the hole! When Jack reached the end of the hole, he came to an underground maze that had many different pathways! Jack decided to double check the map just in case he missed something, but unfortunately it did not say anything. "How is this a map if it doesn't show the path to get the ingredients properly?" Then he realised that nobody had gone to make this sandwich before.

Now, Jack still had to go to the other side of the maze. All the walls were made of stone, but they were not that high. Then Jack had an idea. Because the walls were so low, he could climb up them. Once Jack got up, the walls were a bit uneven, but he still managed. When Jack stood up, he could see the whole entire maze. Jack then started to walk on the walls. At first it was quite hard, but then he got the hang of it. When Jack almost got to the middle of the maze, there was a glowing light. Jack was determined to find out what it was. Once Jack reached the middle, he jumped down and came closer to the mysterious, glowing ball. Once Jack was as close as possible, he grabbed the glowing light. Suddenly the light went away, and the glowing ball turned into a piece of bread. The bread was smooth, and it was so sparkly. After Jack had a good look at the piece of bread, he put it in his backpack that he brought along and then he continued his journey.

Jack then climbed back up the wall and started to walk to the end of the humongous maze. Once Jack got to the end of the maze, he jumped down and started to walk deeper and deeper into the ground. It started to get darker and unfortunately Jack did not bring his torch. After some time of walking Jack tripped and fell. When Jack came to the end, there was some light coming from somewhere. When Jack came closer, he noticed that he was in front of a huge mountain. Because the light was so bright Jack could see that there was a door on the front of the mountain. Jack decided to explore what was inside. When Jack came inside, he saw an old man sitting in front of a huge fire. Then

the man spoke to Jack. He said, "Welcome to my home, I'm Neville." "Hi, my name is Jack, nice to meet you." Then Neville said, "I am a wizard." "Why have you come here?" Jack said, "I have come here because I want to make the best sandwich ever." Neville said, "Are you sure you want to make the sandwich?" Jack said yes. Okay said Neville, but I am warning you that something bad is going to happen. Before Jack left, he gave Jack a magic wand he said, "If you need any help just say *expinio purfectium*."

After Neville told Jack everything he needed to know, he was very happy. "Thank you so much," Jack replied. Then he continued his journey. He walked out the door with his brand-new wand, but after walking for a while, Jack fell into a trap! When Jack stood up, he noticed that he had fallen into a pit of snakes but luckily, they were all asleep. Jack then took out his wand and said " *expinio purfectium*." After, Jack saw that all the snakes disappeared. Underneath the floor was a passage. Jack jumped into the passage and started to walk. There were so many different lanes to take. Just then, Jack saw a glowing light again. Jack grabbed the light and held it tightly in his hands. Jack got two ingredients. The first ingredient was a tomato and the second one was a big, clean lettuce. This felt like a game! In front of Jack were huge blocks. Suddenly he turned into a video game character. Jack thought it was beautiful but then a huge gorilla came in front of him. Then he remembered his wand and hit the gorilla, and it went away! Then a tiger came upon Jack, so he did the same thing he did to it. After, Jack got hot, so he poured water on him, and everything went back to normal. Jack was now in a big passage, which had floating blocks everywhere. At first it looked easy but then the blocks started to fall. Jack decided to go underneath the big blocks so he would not get smashed. After running around for a while, the blocks started to disappear. So, he continued to follow the map.

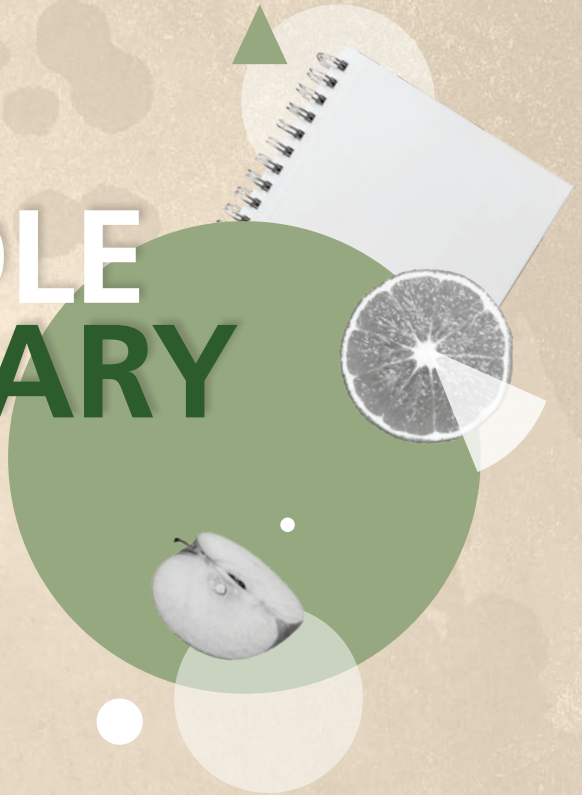
Just then, Jack saw another light. He had got two other ingredients! The ingredients were a mayonnaise and a tomato sauce bottle. By now Jack was extremely hungry so he took out his big bottle that still had about one gallon of water and started to drink it. Jack thought he had finished making his sandwich but unfortunately, he had not. Then he came upon another mysterious light, which was a big, shiny kingdom. The kingdom was shaped like a sandwich. Jack started to walk up to the towering palace. When Jack got there, it looked like no one was guarding the palace, so he walked in. When Jack got inside it looked bigger than the outside. After a few more steps millions of guards surrounded Jack. Jack knew he was in danger so; he quickly took out his pocketknife and took a piece of wood that was next to him. Then he quickly carved out a sword

from the wood. As soon as Jack finished carving out the wood, all the guards started to shoot different types of things you would put in a sandwich. After the guns ran out of food, all the guards fell and acted like they had fainted.

Jack started to walk forward. He noticed that he was walking on a bright red carpet. When the carpet ended, more guards came but they did not hurt Jack and instead they shouted, "sliced tomatoes, perfect bread, kneel to our master Big Mac Ted!" Suddenly the place started rumbling and Jack felt scared. After all the rumbling stopped, a huge sandwich came from out of the ground! It started to throw fruit and vegetables from his own sandwich. Because Jack was so hungry, he ate all the food that the giant threw at him. Once the sandwich ran out of food he disappeared and so did Jack and the castle. When Jack reappeared, he was in his favourite place with the sandwich that he had made. Jack then started to eat the sandwich. When Jack ate one bite he fell in a huge monster's stomach! It started to destroy everything! Inside the monster was lots of sandwiches that Jack had to fight. Just then Jack had an idea. He started to pour water on all the sandwiches, and they magically disappeared. When Jack defeated all the sandwich's, everything went back to normal. He went home to his mum and dad, and they told Jack that they now have lots of money! Jack still had his wand so if they needed any money, they just had to say expinio purfectum. They then lived happily ever after.

– THE END –

MIDDLE PRIMARY



MY SUSPICIOUS NEIGHBOUR



ANYA ARYAPUTRI-EDI

My neighbourhood had a cat lady who only moved in a few months ago. Her name was Miss Jenny.

Miss Jenny was old with pale, wrinkly skin and grey hair. Her clothes were simply black like her cat, Obsidian, which made her look like a witch minus the hat. She smelled musky like a tropical rainforest after a thunderstorm. She also had small wrinkly eyes, and her tiny mouth formed a tight line. Her nose looked like a tomato because Miss Jenny was allergic to cats, but she still kept one.

My mum always told me that if I didn't draw eyebrows on my character drawings, they were basically Voldemort. Miss Jenny too had no eyebrows, so I totally freaked out! Miss Jenny was meek like a turtle in its shell and rarely went out in the public unless she was grocery-shopping or going to the doctors.

She shyly thanked everyone for welcoming her into Lotus Drive on the day she moved here on April the 13th, a gloomy Friday. Lotus Drive was tucked in a peaceful neighbourhood where everyone knew each other. Our street had 10 houses and a cul-de-sac. My family were the Robinsons. We lived at the cul-de-sac number 7, opposite from Miss Jenny's number 4.

My parents had a soft spot for Miss Jenny because they assumed that she was a very lonely person, living only with Obsidian. I wondered what Miss Jenny mostly does in her house.

Over time, Miss Jenny seemed as lovely as a lamington. She helped us with our plants when we were away on holidays. When it was raining, she helped us push our wheelie bins in. Sometimes, my family would send her food in thanks for her kindness.

At times, I felt odd about her. She never really invited us to her house, and it seemed that she always shut the door almost instantly, as if trying to hide something. Her cat, Obsidian seemed mysterious and always glancing at us with her large green eyes. I found Obsidian as creepy as a goblin shark. I found Obsidian suspicious. I've been watching her ever since she'd stepped into Lotus Drive with Miss Jenny. Our peaceful neighbourhood had some strange happenings since then.

On one Saturday, I was riding my bike across the gravelly path, waving to neighbours who were gardening and enjoying the sweet, spring sun. I came across the Holly's front yard and saw Obsidian underneath their Toyota. I

thought this was normal, for cats have a knack of walking around and poking their stiff tails everywhere. I went past their house and continued, catching the lovely breeze.

The next day, I was cycling again when I turned to my street, and saw some neighbours gathering there, gaping. The Holly's car had smashed into their own house. They were unhurt but shaken. Their Toyota was beyond repair and a tow-truck came and took their car away. Obsidian was watching, too. I heard Mr Holly groan, "I don't have a car insurance!"

A few days later, another incident happened on our street.

I came back from school riding on my bicycle. I saw Hua, one of the Lin's children teasing Obsidian with her chiko roll. Hua baited Obsidian with her chiko roll and when she got close enough, she kicked her away! I told Hua off for doing animal cruelty, but she just shrugged and walked away. Obsidian was visibly upset, meowing sadly. For once, I felt sorry for Obsidian.

The next day, I woke up to ambulance wails sounding like an upset toddler coming from the Lin's house. I jolted out of bed and looked out of the kitchen window. An ambulance was parked outside the Lin's. Hua had choked on her chiko roll breakfast and nearly died. On the Lin's lawn, I saw Obsidian sunbathing and watching the commotion as if it was a movie.

My mouth went dry. Although Hua was not too friendly around me, I still felt bad for her. I pondered if black cats do bring bad luck.

Ever since then, I sometimes heard my parents talk about a few incidents that had happened over time. Lawnmower out of control... Thick branches falling into roof... Someone almost got hit by a postie... When I was at school, I wondered what was going on in Lotus Drive.

Another month had passed. It was also the start of my school holidays, so I thankfully had more time to monitor Obsidian. The Coopers love doing barbecues on Sundays. It was lunchtime, and I smelled the aroma of grilled lamb, steak, corn, and onions. My mouth was watering! A few minutes later, the lovely aroma had become a strong bushfire scent and it made my eyes water. I ran to my parents, who were downstairs in the kitchen and told them about the smoky air.

We ran to the Cooper's and saw their barbecue on fire! The whole time we helped the Coopers extinguished it, Obsidian watched leisurely on the fence!

The next day, I was so terrified of Obsidian that I didn't want to leave home. I wish that I wasn't neighbours with Miss Jenny and her creepy cat.

"Lily dear, breakfast is ready!" exclaimed my mother from the kitchen. I stayed in my bedroom and gazed out of the window. The sun was lovely, dew sparkled on the grass, and I nearly felt peaceful. Obsidian was the only thing that made me unsettled. I went down for breakfast. My mind was spiralling on the accidents that had happened so far.

I sat down and started guzzling my french toast with bacon and maple syrup. I chugged down my milk, and my mum bustled in the kitchen, baking warm apple pie.

"Lily dear, go to Miss Jenny's house and share this apple with her," ordered my mum.

"Mummy, I don't want to go to her house! I-I'm scared of her cat!" I wailed, and turned my back on my mum, about to go to my bedroom. My mother glared daggers at me before turning as red as a London double-decker bus. She yelled at me for being silly and I knew that I had no other choice.

A few minutes later, I got out of my house and dragged my feet to Miss Jenny's house number 4 opposite mine. The tray in my hands felt warm and smelled sweet, but my hands cold from my anxiousness. The door was ajar. I stepped in. The air smelled as fishy as Obsidian. I studied the room. Then I spotted Obsidian, her green eyes glowing like a lantern.

I jumped and realised that it was just a calendar on the wall, printed with a close-up photo of Obsidian. I let out a sigh of relief.

I was in a cosy room with a fireplace and red-velvet armchairs. There were several fraying rugs on the creaking wooden floorboards. I set down the apple pie on a mahogany table. It was covered with letters and a laptop lay open. The laptop was showing a lottery site and I could tell that Miss Jenny liked gambling. However, the calendar piqued my interest more.

I walked up to the calendar. I first noticed a star dotted on yesterday's date, Sunday the 4th of October. The name *Cooper* was scribbled beneath it. The Coopers? Was it their birthday?! I flipped to August. I saw a star on a Saturday with the word *Hua* scribbled below. I could never forget that day when Hua nearly died from her chiko roll! Then it struck me. These starred dates were days of calamities!

My heart dropped to my stomach. I frantically searched the previous months, each day of a catastrophe marked with a star. I flipped to November and there it was, my family's name with a star. I collapsed onto a chair near the mahogany table. My mind was spiralling and when I came back to my senses, I couldn't help but read the letters on the table. The letters congratulated Miss Jenny for winning many various lotteries and online competitions. Each of them was delivered on a day when a neighbour stroked bad luck.

I heard a creak.

I glanced at the door and saw Miss Jenny shuffling in, carrying her groceries, Obsidian at her heels. She stopped in her tracks when she saw me. "He-Hello, I'm here to...erm, drop off apple pie. I didn't know where to put it," I stammered. She smiled and thanked me.

I scuttled out of the house. "Goodbye, Miss Jenny!" I sang almost too cheerfully to hide my fear. I was sure I knocked over one of Miss Jenny's favourite pots, as I heard it crash on the ground. However, I didn't want to look back. I stared at my house, looking so distant although it was only 10 meters away and ran with heavy legs. I wanted to get back to the haven of my house as quick as possible.

I counted the days until it was my family's turn to get Miss Jenny and Obsidian's curse. I wondered what will happen. I had nightmares of it. *Roofs caving in. Losing my mint bicycle. Oven exploding. Swooped by magpies. So. Many. Possibilities.* ...and all underneath Obsidian's watchful eyes.

Days passed as fast as turning pages of a book and soon the day came. I woke up from a nightmare, cold sweat on my neck. I walked downstairs like a blob. I was staring at the floor so much that I walked into a wall. Mum made my favourite breakfast. Cheesy sausage, avocado toast and milk. Oh, the day would've been perfect without my suspicious neighbours in my mind!

I was drinking my milk when Obsidian and Miss Jenny entered the room. I nearly choked and couldn't stop myself from blurting out, **"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO TO US?!"**

My mum gawked at me. "Lily, manners! Why are you acting weird?" asked my mum.

Everything that I bottled up started pouring out, "I saw your calendar! You planned all these incidents! I saw your source of luck, giving the neighbours bad luck!" My mum turned pale. "Lily, what are you talking about?" she asked.

Miss Jenny laughed. "Did you see my calendar? Ah, yes. I was just here to talk to your mum about a baking competition we want to enter together," she explained.

Miss Jenny turned to my mum and asked her if she could have a quick chat with me. She led me to my patio, and I questioned, "Why did you put a star on the day the Hollies got a car crash?"

Miss Jenny smiled and said, "Ah... That incident reminded me to renew my car insurance, and the Cooper's fire reminded me to give them a new barbecue if I win one on an online competition". Miss Jenny explained that she loved staying home and enter online competitions and lotteries to kill time. I tried to process all this new information.

I suddenly got a flashback of knocking over Miss Jenny's pot. I apologised to her for that and for accusing her wrongly. She accepted my apology kindly.

I waved goodbye to her as she continued chatting with my mum. When she left, my mum nudged me, "You really tend to overthink, don't you?" and I couldn't help but smile. I guess I did overthink about Miss Jenny and Obsidian. After all, nobody could live a life without a few incidents, could they?

The day passed peacefully and that night I went to bed happy and calm.

I woke up early in the morning and heard a knock on the door. I walked downstairs and saw a new postie holding out a lumpy package. "For Miss Lily Robinson?" he said. I nodded quickly and asked him what happened to our old postie, George. I felt a strain to his voice and instantly knew that he must be hiding something.

He was so suspicious!

– THE END –

TWO TERRIBLE TEENAGERS

ROBBIE GLIDDON



Jack and Harry didn't believe in chores. This meant they had no pocket money. However, Jack really wanted an iPad and Harry was desperate for an Xbox. So, the boys started to brainstorm... "I know" said Jack gleefully "Let's rob a bank!"

A few days later the boys arrived at the local bank. "What now?" said Harry nervously. "I have a plan," said Jack. "We will cut the power off so no one will see us."

So, they did what they had planned. BUT the only problem was... they could not see anything inside the dark bank! People were confused, shouting, and bumping into each other, so they ran out of the bank and around the block. Eventually, when they stopped, they were gasping and out of breath.

"That didn't work very well" said Harry "but I've got another idea. Let's rob a house!" "But which house?" said Jack. "That one..." said Harry, pointing across the road.

So, they went across to the house and they peered in the window. There was no movement inside, so they went through an open side window.

As they looked around, they realised it was SO messy! "I can't see the floor!" said Jack. "We'll have to clean it up to find any money," said Harry.

Moodily, resentfully, the boys got to work. Although they cleaned and cleaned, no money was to be found anywhere.

Suddenly they heard a key turning in the lock! Disaster! They are home!

Until they heard... "Oh my goodness, the house looks great!"

It was the owner of the house, Mrs Messi, who gave the boys 200 dollars for cleaning up her house. The boys were in shock!

Crime doesn't pay, but cleaning certainly does!

– THE END –

IT'S OKAY TO
MAKE MISTAKES
SESANDI THEBUWANA



The sun shone brightly into Williams clear glass window, peeking out from the horizon as he yawned drowsily and walked down the narrow stairs. Boiling a pot of tea, he spread a layer of butter on a piece of toast and wolfed it down. He walked into the music room and sat down on the soft black stool in front of the highly polished piano. It was quiet and the small room was spotless with not a speck of dust anywhere. William arranged his sheet music on the stand and stretched his hands. Resting his spindly, elegant hands on the smooth white piano, William began playing. His hands danced around on the piano, caressing the many black and white keys and hitting all the notes with grace. After all, piano was his life.

William booted up his computer and began composing a new score. He aligned notes and entered melodies carefully. Suddenly, the doorbell rang loudly. When William opened the door, there was a little letter lying on the brown rough mat in front of the door. Running in with haste, William ripped open the letter greedily and read the letter. As his eyes moved down the lines, his smile grew wider. It said that he had been invited to play piano at the Parliament House. Excited at this new opportunity, William began thinking of what he was going to play. After all, this was the top of the game: he had to play for the leader of the state!

The next week William dressed up in his best clothes and drove to the Parliament House. Trees whipped by as his stomach grew steadily and steadily jumpier. Finally, they arrived. He stepped out from his car and marvelled at the splendour of Parliament House. He entered the building excited, worried and nervous. These feelings jumbled around in his body as he walked through the massive hallway. There were shining chandeliers hanging from the ceilings and the walls were painted a shade of shimmering white. A man dressed in a black uniform standing at the door of the Premiers office greeted him and opened the doors for him. William stepped inside and saw the premier sitting at a polished brown desk with a pen in his hand. William sat down on the velvet seat and started playing. He launched confidently into the beginning, accenting his notes perfectly. When he came to the chorus he froze, he had forgotten the notes. The two men sat there in icy silence and William shuffled uncomfortably in his suddenly uncomfortable seat.

William turned around and saw the premier smiling and encouraging him to play on. He felt his confidence coming back and William improvised a nice tune that fit the song he felt his happiness coming back as he steadily continued.

When he had finished the premier clapped loudly and handed him a certificate. "You earned this". He whispered into Williams's ear softly as they were taking photos. As William left the building, he realised that it is okay to make mistakes. When he arrived home William stuck the precious certificate on his wall and stared at it. He smiled proudly and sat down on the comfy stool in front of his piano, ready for another day's play.

– THE END –

UPPER PRIMARY



THE LOVED ONE



BUDDY BOVELL

As the sun started to poke its head above the horizon he sleepily opened his eyes and stretched as far as his legs and arms could possibly reach. Waking up is his favourite thing. He loves to cuddle the person he's lying next to as he starts to wake from his deep sleep. Then comes food, followed by the good stuff that he likes to keep a secret. After he's finished with his food he tries to find a comfortable spot because he doesn't know how long he's going to be there for. Ideally a spot in the sun. "If I wait really patiently, I might get to go outside", he thinks to himself. Eventually, someone nearly always does approach him to see if he wants to go outside and of course he does, although when he is outside he sometimes wonders why he likes it so much. Everyone is so much bigger than him. Although there is affection to be found, there is also a lot of running and hiding required and sometimes he finds himself wanting to go home.

He loves being at home, but he hates being alone. Often he cries just at the thought of being alone. He also loves to be at the beach. He could happily spend hours watching the little flies pop out of the sand as the waves retreat and chase them. People would sometimes point at him and laugh and say, "Look at him, he's crazy!", but he wouldn't care. He couldn't stop himself, it was just so much fun. He loved to run.

And he loved people. He considered all of the people in his neighbourhood to be his friends and loved to show and receive affection.

His garden was also a place he loved. He'd sit on his coach looking out at it. He liked to explore the garden and all of the different plants in it, and there was a fish pond too, although the park was probably his ultimate place to spend his time, especially when his friends were there. He was quite athletic and his friends were too. Deep down he felt he was the fastest, especially for his size.

He often felt quite protective and possessive of his house, he wasn't sure why. It would make him angry when other people came close to it. But if he didn't get to leave his house he would also get really bored. In fact, sometimes it would make him behave in ways he wasn't proud of. He might break or even destroy things. If he was honest with himself, he knew that he was just desperate for attention.

Sometimes, he got to go to new homes! None were ever as good as his home, but he was happy to accept them as a new home if that's where his people were.

Bunbury, Margaret River, Esperance...he'd been to lots of places all around the state. He didn't particularly like being in the car, but if he was with his friends then he was happy to go wherever they wanted to go!

At home, he was still enjoying exploring the unexplored. Today, he was having fun seeking out new sights and smells, but suddenly something felt off. It was too quiet. He began searching for others. Searching desperately for company. But no, his worst fears had been realised. He was home alone! He freaked out and worried. "Where did everyone go? Did they leave me?" he thought to himself. He went inside and peered out of the windows overlooking the street. He felt close to tears. He waited. He breathed. He looked. He searched. Eventually, he even slept. But always, when he woke, he felt fear at being alone. He didn't want to be alone. He had to do something so that he wasn't alone.

He spent a good deal of time thinking about how to find company again and, after a while, his plans began to crystalise in his head. First he would go around the side of the house. There was a gate there and under that gate there were some bricks. To the right of the bricks there was some dirt and he could see potential in being able to dig his way out in the dirt. So, he gave it a go and, to his astonishment, it worked! He was beyond the gate. He was dirty and tired and a little bit scared and sore from the squeeze, but he was finally free to find his people! That was all he wanted in the world. He wandered across to the park opposite his house. He had an amazing time there, truly free for the first time in his life. There were no time constraints and no one telling him to come or to do this or do that, he could just do what he wanted for a change. There he had the greatest time, running around and living a life, his best life.

Eventually, he got tired though. Every so often people he knew would wonder past him and make comments on his behaviour or appearance. He started to feel uncomfortable and out of place. After what felt like hours some neighbours invited him back to their place. There they cleaned and fed him. They could tell that something wasn't quite right. They contacted his family and looked after him until someone close to him could come and collect him. They were worried for him and he was too.

He had no idea just how worried his family were though. They were so relieved to know he was safe. They were so excited to see him again and so was he, he couldn't stop moving and wriggling and crying and showing them affection. Sometimes it was almost too much affection! He just had so much love to

give. His family couldn't stop telling him what a good boy he was, it made him so happy. When they eventually said to him, "Do you want to go home?" he answered loudly with a resounding "Woof!".

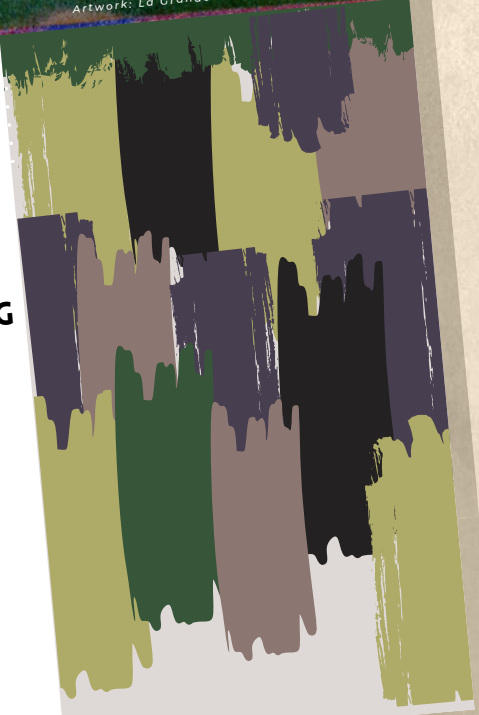
– THE END –



Artwork: La Grande Jatte - by Georges Seurat

EAVESDROPPING

by
Lizetienne
Burke-Hardy



// What do you think he'll call this one then?" the man asked his wife, indicating the area around them.

"Well, he's very literal," she commented. "It's Sunday afternoon, and we're on the island of La Grande Jatte. He'll probably just call it that." They looked on in silence until she pondered aloud, "Why do you think we're made of dots?"

"Because that is Seurat's preferred method," the man replied. "He thinks that dots provide more depth than just standard brushstrokes, especially from far away. Although that doesn't stop me from disliking it," he added. "Every time he adds them to my coat, it tickles."

"And look," his wife added, pointing to a nearby person. "We can see through each other."

Her husband stood, silently smoking his cigar before he gestured towards the footpath with a quizzical look. Huge, fluffy white dandelions meandered past the duo.

"Oh, Degas' ballerinas," she said. Most of the dancers were hurrying out of view, probably on their way to the theatre. "I don't understand why he had to make them look like that," she continued. "Our dots may look strange close up but they make us look good from far away. The strokes may make them feel whole, but it makes them very smeary people."

"Indeed." The man took a quick glance around him to check that nobody was eavesdropping and whispered, "I heard a rumour that Edgar Degas, even after painting that, wants to be called a realist."

"No!" the woman gasped, her eyes widening. "Is that true?" Her husband nodded sagely.

As the woman became distracted by the conversation, she didn't notice that her pet monkey was pulling on its leash. She looked down. "Claude!" she scolded. "Behave yourself!" Suddenly, a small dog appeared and scampered quickly across the grass, rolled over onto its back and wriggled. Its collar wasn't attached to a lead and its owner was nowhere in sight, so there was nothing anyone could do but watch helplessly as the puppy smeared the picture. People cried out, then covered when they spotted the giant paintbrush looming down to retouch the grass. They flinched and braced themselves, ready to be remedied. The brush dabbed over and over again until it finally disappeared.

Everyone sighed thankfully when it was over. But suddenly, the woman heard the unmistakable voice of the little girl in white ask:

“Mummy? Why is the spot pink?”

The woman lowered her gaze until she saw it. A random blotch of pinky beige in a sea of green, that the little girl was staring at sadly. Why had the painter chosen the colour so randomly? She nudged her husband and nodded towards it.

“Why didn’t he use dark green? Has he run out of green paint?” the man asked, contemptuous of the artist’s choice. “And come to think of it, the shadows over there don’t seem to follow the laws of physics. Look where the sun is, where the trees are and where the shadows should fall. Is this man an amateur?”

“Maybe it doesn’t matter,” the woman suggested. She contemplated the patch. “I think because the grass is now that colour, it’s a talking point. Who knows? The painting might even become more popular, and people might be more likely to discuss it. And then, maybe Seurat will be able to sell it. Not that he struggles like so many artists seem to.” She paused a moment before continuing. “And I think that what matters more than everything looking as if it’s in the right place is if a piece of art makes you feel something. It may not be everybody’s cup of tea, but hopefully this painting will make some people feel happy or peaceful when it’s finished.”

They stood in silence for a few minutes whilst the gentleman was clearly considering what she had said. The breeze blew gently as the woman in front of them lowered her fishing rod into the water once again.

– THE END –

Girl of the Sun

ASHA KRUGER



Prologue

People say that the desert is a dry and barren place. They say that it is constantly smothered in scorching, smoldering, horrible heat. They say that there is no life in such a terrible place. What they say is untrue. The desert is a seething sea of life. If you look properly, you will see things that most people don't. It's not about having good eyes. It's about how much you care about the desert. You will see the tracks that snakes have left when they slither through the pale sand. You will see lizards soaking up the sun on rocks and boulders. You will see one pair of human footprints. Just one, because even in this desert of life and biodiversity, there lives only one human. One isolated, solitary human. And that's me. My name is Ivy, but I call myself The Girl of the Sun. I've always wanted to share my story, but there were parts of my life that even I didn't understand. But now I understand. Now I understand it all. So here it is. I am the girl who lives alone in the desert. I am the girl who hasn't heard another human voice for years and years and years. I am The Girl of the Sun, and I'm telling you my story.

Chapter One

Fans of sunlight break the darkness of the early morning. Rosy streaks appear in the sky as the sun rises, bathing the pale, rolling dunes in a soft light. The sand ripples and shifts, then slowly comes alive with subtle movements. I see that the tracks from the previous day have disappeared, but new ones have been imprinted in the sand in their place. The sky is now a pale orange, tinged with a hint of yellow that is so pale, it's almost white. I watch the transformation of colours in the sky until it's just an endless sea of blue, then stand up. The soft sand flows this way and that under my bare feet, carried by the subtle air currents. I walk along the ground, the waves of sand trickling over my feet. The sun beats down relentlessly, its rays spreading far across the floor of the desert. I take shelter in the shadow of a large dune and pull out some food from my sack of supplies to make a meal. A few wild plums found from some trees around here, as well as a small handful of nuts. I prepare the food on a flat rock, then start to eat. The nuts crunch beneath my teeth and the plums have a sweet, tart taste. When I have finished my lunch, I set off to gather some more food.

The sky is an inky shade of deep purple as I make my way back to my camp. It's still warm but the air has cooled down a lot compared to this morning.

When I'm back at camp, I slump down on the sand, tasting the sandy air on my tongue. The stars are shining brightly above me, and I feel a sense of calm that I only ever feel in thy desert. Of course, there are lots of things that I only feel here. A sense of home. I only ever had that feeling before when I was a bright, happy twelve year old who lived in a small town that is a three day walk from where I live now. And now, with that sense of home, I fall asleep under the star-strewn sky.

In my dream I am twelve years old again. I sit on the dusty floor outside of the small village house that I once shared with my parents, throwing seeds and grain at the flock of birds that has gathered around me, laughing as they squabble for the largest bits of food. I feel a powerful emotion of relaxed happiness, as I sit in my village. And then suddenly, our safe sanctuary explodes into chaos. Masked figures appear, and jets of fire scorch the ground. I'm on my feet now, running through the jostling crowd of people trying to escape, searching for my parents. People press in around me, surrounding me. And then everyone is gone and I'm running and running for my life, into the desert. Flames surround me and then I fall into darkness.

Chapter Two

I am still in my dream, although I feel awake. I am floating in darkness. I feel as though I am alone until a disembodied voice rings softly through the nothingness. "What you just saw was what caused you to abandon your life and flee to the desert", it says. "You chose to live your life in the wilderness rather than return to your home, although I see that you also consider the desert as home. But the people at your real home need you. They are now ruled by those who attacked you, and only a handful of people are brave enough to fight back. Let me show you The Order of the Flame."

I am lifted from the darkness into my old village, although it is very different. No-one is outside except for three people, a girl about fifteen years old with coffee coloured skin, blue eyes and ebony hair, another girl of the same age with olive skin, grey eyes and brown hair, and an older man with copper coloured hair, green eyes, and pale skin. They talk in hushed whispers, and a can just make out the low, quiet of the man growl "Basement. Midnight. Fifteen others. Bring information." Then the three of them disappear into three different houses. Suddenly, the landscape seems to ripple. Everything freezes except for the weird, rippling, warping sensation. And then I am standing in a dark basement,

cobwebs clinging to the roof and walls like silvery, gossamer streams of feathery silk. A lantern sits on a table, casting a pale, flickering glow. Human shadows are gathered around the table. All of them are looking at a girl at the end of the table. She is only very young, perhaps ten years old, with dark hair, dark eyes, and satiny, olive skin. She is speaking to everybody there. I can hear what she is saying. "What I have deciphered from the assignment is that the enemy is growing stronger", she says. "We are strong too, if we work together. All of us here are brave individuals, but our own personal strength is stronger combined with others. It does not matter what we can do as individuals, but what we can do as a world, a country, a community. We are all stronger with our hands united. Thank you." A quiet applause echoes around the dim room. I briefly wonder why the girl is so young, but again I am falling into darkness. I can now feel the desert around me again. I smell the sand around me, feel the soft heat on my skin, though still my eyes refuse to open. It's weird, like being stuck in limbo between asleep and awake. Suddenly, the voice is in my ears. I can't refuse it because it isn't a real thing, just something ringing in my head, passing through my life and then leaving. "That is the Order of the Flame, the small resistance that fights back. They are not strong enough though. They are like beads without string. They are not united, for each has his or her own personal goals. That's why they need you. You will be their string, Ivy. I have supplied you with what you need. It is time to return to your home."

Chapter Three

I am truly awake. The disembodied, eerie voice in my head has not lied. A large chestnut horse is tethered to a stake driven into the ground, and a burlap sack sits beside me, full of whatever I will need. I sort through the sack. The bag contains one small coil of wire, an ink pot, quill and parchment and a golden armband with a flame design carved into it. I grab my net bag and fill it with all my food and water. Then I walk towards the horse. It lowers its head and I cautiously climb on. Around its neck there is a rope with gold letters hanging from it, spelling out the words of the horse's name: Hazel. "Hello Hazel", I say quietly as I gently squeeze my legs around her middle. Believe it or not, I have had a lot of practice riding horses. When I was living in my old village, I would ride the family's horse, Blaze, to the small lake that is an hour's ride from my village. There was a small hut there that always smelled like smoky pine needles, even though the fire there had long since died away. I would play there

all day, foraging for nuts and edible roots. Then I would start a smoky fire and go to a wild blackberry bush and strip it clean of its juicy berries. The nuts and roots would be cooked by then, and I would enjoy a meal of nature's food. I loved the feeling of the delicate skin of the berries breaking under my teeth, the crunch of the sharp-tasting nuts and roots. These memories are what give my knowledge of edible plants in the desert, as well as my knowledge of horse riding. These memories flood into my brain as Hazel gallops towards the setting sun. These shreds of forgotten memories are treasure to me. I hold onto them as I become closer and closer to the place that I have missed for years. I never returned there because I never knew if it was safe. And now I know that is not safe, and that is why I'm going there. Because I need to save my people. I am The Girl of the Sun and that is a bit of my story. I am The Girl of the Sun, and I am finally heading home.

– THE END OF BOOK ONE –

LOWER SECONDARY





Laces

Eleanor Kerr

The long day had driven the colour out of his cheeks, tiredness making itself known in the bloodshot lines marking his eyes. His hands made their way to the handle of the coffee mug. The brown liquid was his usual late-night saviour. He worked your average 9-5 and it was apparent in the way he set up his desk. The papers crowded the used-to-be white desk, huddled between ink stains and the scent of hard work.

The warm puddle of liquid energy touched the sides of his throat as he attempted to retain as much of his consciousness as humanly possible. His eyes travelled downwards, tracing the untied laces of his shoes. Thoughts of home and youth cascaded into his mind; almost as warm as the coffee singeing his fingertips. He bent down to tie the laces. Bunny hole, around the tree, over the mountain. Something like that.

Droplets of rogue coffee stained the white tips of his shoes like rain on a highway. He clutched his mother's sturdy hand. He was always told to do this, no point in risking a traffic accident. The rain fell hard, mixing with the mud crowding his shoes. The holes where his toes poked through were fraying at the edges, a sign of the adventures he had endured during the short period of the shoes' late life.

The loud purr of steam erupting from the back of the bus was evident as soon as it backed its way into the parking spot. The boy held his only 50 cents from inside his jacket pocket, to lose it would be a shame. Pushed forward by his mother's hand, he took a step onto the bus's tattered rug. The driver nodded briskly as he showed him the old silver coin. The boy nodded back; a silent acknowledgement between the two.

He traced the droplets of water flying down his window before they slid beneath his view. They made trails of thin rivers across the pane of glass. They blurred his vision of the outside world. A barrier between himself and the slick roads to his sides.

The bus skidded ever-so slightly as the breaks were hit and the doors slung open. His mother's hand found its way back into the grip of his own. The wind running amok before them as they watched a man run after his hat. Leaves stuck in the air like stars hung high on a night sky.

His feet left dents in the moist soil as the two made their way from the bus stop. The large sign posted high above the dull building was making its way through

the clouds. The air smelt of memories soon to be created and the beach on a summer day. His eyes found their way to the glass double doors. A smile etched to his features. They opened as he neared, some sort of technological magic.

Rows and rows of shelves lined the shop like flowers in a garden. Boxes swam through the ocean of employees and red-coloured shirts. He knew at an instant that this section of the shop with all its abundance of riches and unclaimed gilts was not what they were looking for. No, there were too many adults and too many signs. There were too many smiles plastered to the children's faces.

He took a step forwards, looking for anyone like him. He found his lead and took chase. The shelves lining the walls shrunk in size as he passed. The red-coloured shirts and boxes galore dissipated the deeper he ventured. The few boxes that remained were missing their lids and the usual new shoe smell. These boxes were without a shelf or a price tag. Money was not being thrown at them. Parents were not fighting over who's child got to take home the contents of the box. Yet the usual sight of no-one in particular brought warmth to his thoughts. The sight of discarded boxes and discounted shoes was no longer what he saw. His eyes widened as he scanned the boxes full of different lessons, different memories, and different opportunities. He stared at the boxes full of tipped over dreams and unseen sights. These boxes that, to one, might mark the border between the overpriced shoes and the discounted ones. To someone like him, they marked the border between planned travels and discounted adventures that had you wishing for more.

His hands gravitated to the lace-up shoes without an accompanied box or price. The white soles and high-rise fabrics caught his eye. His first pair of lace-up shoes. A milestone in a child's mind. They were creased and bent, and he didn't know how to tie them yet.

He tried them on, checked for sizing. His mother bent down; hands working diligently to tie the two black laces into something resembling a bow. Bunny hole, around the tree, over the mountain. Something like that.

His knees buckled as he stood back up, age getting the better of him. The cloth in his hand drained the coffee drops before they could stain the white tips of his shoes. He would love to go back to a time like that. A time where he found enjoyment in these little moments. A time when the tipped over boxes and discounted objects didn't bother him. A simpler time.

What he would give to go back to buying his first ever pair of lace-ups. Impossible. The shop was long gone, in a city that he no longer remembered. This was now a time he only said hello to on his most tiring days and longest nights. For now, the coffee will have to do.

– THE END –



**Our
Housekeeper**

Emily Natalina Rafala

C RASH! I heard the glass shatter in the kitchen. It happened again!
Meredith was always dropping things and we've had so many broken items in our house lately.

I loved Meredith. But she was getting too old for her job.

I remember when I was a little girl, and how Meredith was always there for me. She took to me school. Made my school lunches. Made dinner for us all when my parents came home from work.

She helped raise me. She has always been a part of my life.

Meredith was our housekeeper. After I grew up and got married, I asked Meredith to come work for me.

My parents retired and wanted to travel.

After working over 40 years for my parents, it was time for her to come help with my own family.

She was there when Adam was born. She was there when Lily was born. Meredith helped raise them while Jonathan and I were at work.

"Kathleen!" Meredith screeched to me.

I ran into the kitchen and saw three of my plates and two glasses broken and shattered on the floor.

"I'm so, so sorry Kathleen. I don't know what's wrong with me anymore," Meredith whimpered.

"It's okay, Meredith. We'll get this cleaned up."

She got the broom out of the hallway closet, and I grabbed the bin. We worked together to clean up the mess.

Looking at her, I noticed her short grey hair was really messy. She forgot to brush her hair again. She was getting really forgetful in her old age.

It was strange how her hair colour changed from when I was a little girl. I remember it being a light brown. I didn't know her hair could change colours like that.

She was wearing her light blue work dress and white apron.

She looked so exhausted.

"Meredith, how about you take a break this evening? Since I'm off work this week, I'll make dinner for all of us. The kids will be home from school soon," I said to her.

"I'm supposed to do the cooking, it's my job. I may be getting old, but I promise I won't break anything else," Meredith replied.

"It's fine Meredith. Have a seat on the couch and take a break," I insisted to her.

SLAM! went the loud sound of the front door closing. Adam and Lily were home.

"Meredith! Look what I drew for you in school," Lily said while running over to her.

My 11-year-old Lily, had become quite the expert in drawing. She handed Meredith a piece of paper.

As I watched from the kitchen, Meredith looked at it and for a brief moment, I thought she was about to cry. Then a smile, and I do mean the biggest smile came across her face.

"Lily, you drew a picture of me. This is the most breathtaking artwork I have ever seen," Meredith told her.

"Thank you Meredith. I wanted you to have something to remember me by," Lily told her.

"To remember me by? What are you talking about?" Meredith asked her.

I walked into the living room and sat down next to Meredith.

"Meredith, I think it's about time you retire. I can tell you're getting weaker and tired. It's hard for you to get all your work done," I said to her.

"I know I'm getting old Kathleen. I know I forget things and break things. But I love all of you. I don't want to leave my job," Meredith said with concern.

"I think you need to rest. It's just time for you to retire. I think it's best that we get a new housekeeper. To be honest with you, I've already called the company and informed them that we need a new housekeeper," I said.

There was silence from her. I don't know if she was sad or angry with me.

"It's okay Meredith. We'll always love you. You've always been there for us," Adam said to her.

My 13-year-old son, trying to make her see how much we care about her.

Adam hugged Meredith and Lily wrapped her arms around her as well. They gave her kisses on her cheeks and whispered private secrets in her ears. Meredith let out a small giggle.

Then Meredith spoke, "When do I have to retire?"

"Well, the agency is sending a replacement over tomorrow. I'd like you to stay and help train her. So, you'll still be with us for a few more weeks," I explained to her.

"Very well, if that is what you insist on," Meredith said in an irritable manner.

She got up and walked towards her bedroom. She shut the door behind her. We never saw her for the rest of the night.

Our entire evening was quiet. Jon, Adam, Lily, and I ate dinner, but without Meredith.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The next morning, Meredith was up before me. I found her in the kitchen cooking scrambled eggs and toast for the kids.

It was Friday. Adam and Lily's last day of school for the term, then it was the 2-week school break.

They ran up to Meredith, hugged and kissed her bye.

They gave me a hug and kiss as well.

Then Jonathan kissed me and mentioned he'd be home early to meet the new housekeeper.

I heard the car leave.

I walked over to Meredith. "Good morning Meredith," I said to her.

"Good morning Kathleen. I've made no mistakes; I've been good today. Nothing is broken either. I'll finish in here and then I'll start the laundry," Meredith said.

"That's fine. Thank you, Meredith."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The morning passed by quickly. So did the afternoon.

Jonathan and the kids were home.

DING-DONG! DING-DONG! The doorbell was ringing. It was 3:30pm, right on time.

Lily ran to the front door and opened it.

“Ahh-key is here Mum!” she was saying as I walked up to the door.

“Hello Miss Kathleen, I’m Bill, from the AHKI agency. I’ve brought along your new housekeeper and would like to introduce her to your family.”

I looked and saw no one else around.

Lily ran out the front door and around the corner of the house.

I heard Lily yell, “Look Mum, she’s over here.”

Lily came around the corner and was walking with a very young housekeeper. She looked like she might be around 20 years old. Tall, thin, with long and wavy auburn coloured hair. She was wearing a very tight, knee-length red dress.

“My name is Lily,” my daughter said to her, as they walked closer down the pathway towards the front door.

Bill saw me staring at the new housekeeper and observed the shocked look on my face.

“I know she’s young, but she’s new to the housekeeping agency.”

“Does she have any experience at all?” I asked him in a worried tone.

“Well, unfortunately she doesn’t. At the moment, Emma is the only housekeeper available. We have a shortage of housekeepers. People are so busy with fast paced lives, so everyone is hiring a housekeeper. Our manager thought that once Meredith trained her, you might be pleased with her. And if you’re not happy, you can always give us a call and we’ll put you on a wait list when another housekeeper becomes available,” he explained.

I was unsure. I mean, she was so young. No experience.

“Look, lilies, just like your name,” Emma said, pointing to the flowers along the pathway as she looked at Lily.

Lily smiled, grabbed her hand, and said, “My grandparents always grew lilies in their yard. That’s why my Mum and Dad named me Lily.”

It touched my heart that Emma connected with our daughter.

“Please come in,” I gestured to Bill.

CRASH! Another accident! Jon and Adam went swiftly into the kitchen to help Meredith. After the small clean up, they walked out.

Bill looked straight at Meredith and smiled.

“Hello, Meredith. It is truly an honour to meet one of our original housekeepers from the agency. There is no housekeeper left like you.”

Bill then introduced Emma to all of us and explained to Meredith how she needed to train Emma.

“I know you’re tired Meredith but it’s time that you retire,” Bill told her.

“I don’t want to retire. I want to keep working and take care of the family,” she ranted at him.

“Meredith, when everyone gets older, they retire and no longer work. It’s part of life. We all get weak, tired, forgetful and we can’t do our job properly. I’m 66 years old and I’m retiring next year. They consider me obsolete at the agency because of my age. And Meredith, you’re older than me. It’s about time that you retire,” Bill explained.

Meredith looked sad, but appeared to nod slightly at Bill in acknowledgement.

“Now, I hope you will give Emma a chance. Explain her duties and share your knowledge with her,” Bill said.

“If I must,” Meredith replied with a sullen look on her face.

“Thank you, Meredith. You’ve earned the admiration of everyone at work. You’ve done an amazing job for the agency. You don’t need to worry about working anymore,” Bill said to her.

Meredith turned and stared at Emma with total contempt.

Bill said his goodbyes and left Emma in our hands.

~~~~~

The first day with Emma was quite an eventful day.

Meredith was distressed and felt useless watching Emma figure out some of her duties.

She asked Meredith for help with certain jobs, like cooking meals and where to find things.

Meredith refused to help Emma with anything.

She was adamant about how she felt about Emma.

Then, that evening, Emma had burnt dinner. Meredith knew that she should have taught her how to cook.

After seeing we had no proper dinner, Meredith felt guilty and gave in. She taught Emma how to make a proper dinner.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Many days went by, and Emma was doing quite well with adjusting as our new housekeeper.

After 2 weeks, Emma knew everything required for her job.

Meredith, however, was simply exhausted. She realised that teaching Emma was stressful and required more energy to keep up with her.

She went and sat down on the couch. Jon, Adam, Lily, and I walked over to her.

“I’m sorry Kathleen. I look a mess, and I forgot to brush my hair again,” Meredith said.

“It’s alright,” I said to her.

She stared at me, then said, “I’m really tired. I think it’s time for me to go now. I’m ready to retire.”

I nodded at her with a sad smile. A tear started running down my face. We all started to shed a tear, knowing that it was time for Meredith to retire.

Since her hair was messy, I brushed it to make it look nice.

I looked at her and said, “You will always be a part of our family and we will always love you Meredith.”

Then I lifted the back of her hair. In tiny writing on the back of her neck, words were seen which read: Property of AHKI (Android HouseKeepers, Inc.)

I took my fingers and pressed inwards at the back of her neck for 2 seconds. She powered down.

The ‘Meredith Model’ was now obsolete.

– THE END –



ISOBEL TEH  
*Modern Daughter*



The old woman sat in the backseat of the magenta convertible as it careened down the highway, clutching tightly to the plastic bag on her lap, afraid it may be kidnapped by the wind. She was not used to such speed, with trembling hands she pulled the seatbelt tighter but was careful not to touch the patent leather seats with her callused fingers, her daughter had warned her not to dirty it, "Fingerprints show very clearly on white, Ma."

Her daughter, Mei Choo, was driving and talking on her sleek silver mobile phone using big words the old woman could barely understand. "Finance... Liquidation... Assets... Investments". Her voice was crisp and important and had an unfamiliar lilt to it. Her Mei Choo sounded like one of those foreigners on television. She was speaking in an American accent. The old lady clucked her tongue in disapproval.

"I absolutely cannot have this. We must sell!" Her daughter exclaimed agitatedly as she stepped on the accelerator; her perfectly manicured fingernails gripping onto the steering wheel in irritation.

"I can't DEAL with this anymore!" she yelled as she clicked the phone shut and hurled it angrily toward the backseat. The mobile phone hit the old woman on the forehead and nestled soundlessly into her lap. She calmly picked it up and handed it to her daughter.

"Sorry, Ma," she said, losing the American pretence and switching to Mandarin. "I have a big client in America. There have been a lot of problems." The old lady nodded knowingly. Her daughter was big and important. Mei Choo stared at her mother from the rear-view window wondering what she was thinking. Her mother's wrinkled countenance always carried the same cryptic look. The phone began to ring again, an artificially cheerful digital tune, which broke the awkward silence.

"Hello, Beatrice! Yes, this is Jennifer." Jennifer! The old woman cringed. I didn't name her Jennifer. She remembered her daughter telling her, how an English name was very important for 'networking', Chinese names being easily forgotten. "Oh no, I can't meet you for lunch today. I have to take the ancient relic to the temple for her weird daily prayer ritual."

Ancient Relic. The old woman understood perfectly it was referring to her. Her daughter always assumed that her mother's silence meant she did not comprehend. "Yes, I know! My car seats will be reeking of joss sticks!" The old woman pursed her lips tightly, her hands gripping her plastic bag in defence.

The car curved smoothly into the temple courtyard. It looked almost garish next to the dull sheen of the ageing temple's roof. The old woman got out of the backseat and made her unhurried way to the main hall.

Her daughter stepped out of the car in her business suit and stilettos and reapplied her lipstick as she made her brisk way to her mother's side. "Ma, I'll wait outside. I have an important phone call to make," she said, not bothering to hide her disgust at the pungent fumes of incense. The old lady hobbled into the temple hall and lit a joss stick, she knelt solemnly and whispered her now familiar daily prayer to the Gods.

Thank you, God of the Sky, you have given my daughter luck all these years. Everything I prayed for; you have given her. She has everything a young woman in this world could possibly want. She has a big house with a swimming pool, a housekeeper to help her, as she is too clumsy to sew or cook.

Her love life has been blessed; she is engaged to a rich and handsome man. Her company is now the top financial firm and even men listen to what she says. She lives the perfect life. You have given her everything except happiness. I ask that the gods be merciful to her even if she has lost her roots while reaping the harvest of success.

What you see is not true - she is a filial daughter to me. She gives me a room in her big house and provides well for me. She is rude to me only because I affect her happiness. A young woman does not want to be hindered by her old mother. It is my fault. The old lady prayed so hard that tears welled up in her eyes. Finally, with her head bowed in reverence she planted the half-burnt joss stick into an urn of smouldering ashes. She bowed once more.

The old woman had been praying for her daughter for thirty-two years. When her stomach was round like a melon, she came to the temple and prayed that it was a son. Then the time was ripe and the baby slipped out of her womb, bawling and adorable with fat thighs and pink cheeks, but unmistakably, a girl. Her husband had kicked and punched her for producing a worthless baby, who could not work or carry the family name.

Still, the woman returned to the temple with her new-born girl tied to her waist in a sarong and prayed that her daughter would grow up and have everything she ever wanted. Her husband left her and she prayed that her daughter would never have to depend on a man.

She prayed every day that her daughter would be a great woman, the woman that she, meek and uneducated, could never become. A woman with the ability to do anything she set her mind to. A woman who commanded respect in the hearts of men. When she opened her mouth to speak, precious pearls would fall out and men would listen.

She will not be like me, the woman prayed as she watched her daughter grow up and drift away from her, speaking a language she scarcely understood. She watched her daughter transform

from a quiet girl, to one who openly defied her, calling her old-fashioned. She wanted her mother to be 'modern', a word so new there was no Chinese word for it.

Now her daughter was too clever for her and the old woman wondered why she had prayed like that. The gods had been faithful to her persistent prayer, but the wealth and success that poured forth so richly had buried the girl's roots and now she stood, faceless, with no identity, bound to the soil of her ancestors by only a string of origami banknotes.

Her daughter had forgotten her mother's values. Her wants were so ephemeral; that of a modern woman. Power, Wealth, access to the best fashion boutiques, and yet her daughter had not found true happiness.

The old woman knew that you could find happiness with much less. When her daughter left the earth everything she had would count for nothing. People would look to her legacy and say that she was a great woman, but she would be forgotten once the wind blows over, like the ashes of burnt paper convertibles and mansions. The old woman wished she could go back and erase all her big hopes and prayers for her daughter; now she had only one want: That her daughter be happy.

She looked out of the temple gate. She saw her daughter speaking on the phone, her brow furrowed with anger and worry. Being at the top is not good, the woman thought, there is only one way to go from there - down.

The old woman carefully unfolded the plastic bag and spread out a packet of noodle in front of the altar. Her daughter often mocked her for worshipping porcelain Gods. How could she pray to them so faithfully and expect pieces of ceramic to fly to her aid? But her daughter had her own gods too, idols of wealth, success and power that she was enslaved to and worshipped every day of her life.

Every day was a quest for the idols, and the idols she worshipped counted for nothing in eternity.

All the wants her daughter had would slowly suck the life out of her and leave her, an empty soulless shell at the altar.

The old lady watched her joss tick. The dull heat had left a teetering grey stem that was on the danger of collapsing. Modern woman nowadays, the old lady sighed in resignation, as she bowed to the east one final time to end her ritual. Modern woman nowadays want so much that they lose their souls and wonder why they cannot find it.

Her joss stick disintegrated into a soft grey powder. She met her daughter outside the temple, the same look of worry and frustration was etched on her daughter's face. An empty expression, as if she was ploughing through the soil of her wants looking for the one thing that would sow the seeds of happiness. They climbed into the convertible in silence and her daughter drove along the highway, this time not as fast as she had done before.

"Ma," Mei Choo finally said. 'I don't know how to put this. Peter and I have been talking about it and we plan to move out of the big house. The property market is good now, and we managed to get a buyer willing to pay seven million for it! We decided we'd prefer a cosier penthouse apartment instead. We found a perfect one by the coast.

Once we move into our apartment, we plan to get rid of the housekeeper, so we can have more space to ourselves..." The old woman nodded knowingly.

Mei Choo swallowed hard. "We'd get someone to come in to do the housework and we can eat out-but once the housekeeper is gone, there won't be anyone to look after you. You will be awfully lonely at home and, besides that, the apartment is rather small. There won't be space. We thought about it for a long time, and we decided the best thing for you is if you moved to a Home. There's a very nice one just down the road."

The old woman did not raise an eyebrow. "I've been there the matron is willing to take you in. It's beautiful with gardens and lots of old people to keep you company! I hardly have time for you, you'd be happier there."

"You'd be happier there, really." Her daughter repeated as if to affirm herself. This time the old woman had no plastic bag of food offerings to cling tightly to; she bit her lip and fastened her seat belt, as if it would protect her from

a daughter who did not want her anymore. She sunk deep into the leather seat, letting her shoulders sag, and her fingers trace the white seat. "Ma?" her daughter asked, searching the rear-view window for her mother. "Is everything okay? What had to be done, had to be done." she said firmly, louder than she intended, "if it will make you happy," she added more quietly.

"It's for you, Ma! You'll be happier there. You can move there tomorrow; I already got the housekeeper to pack your things." Jennifer said triumphantly, mentally ticking yet another item off her agenda.

"I knew everything would be fine." Jennifer smiled widely she felt liberated. Perhaps getting rid of her mother would make her happier. She had thought about it. It seemed the only hindrance in her pursuit of happiness. She was happy now. She had everything a modern woman ever wanted; Money, Status, Career, Love, Power and now, Freedom, without her mother and her old-fashioned ways to weigh her down...

Yes, she was free. Her phone buzzed urgently, she picked it up and read the message, still beaming from ear to ear. "Stocks 10% increase!"

Yes, things were definitely beginning to look up for her...

And while searching for the meaning of life in the luminance of her mobile screen, the old woman in the backseat became invisible, and she did not see the tears.

– THE END –

# UPPER SECONDARY



# BITTER SWEET

HARRY BURBURY



**R**un! Run! Get there! He feels his lungs hurt as he gasps for air. It's hot, dry, dusty. He sprints, willing himself on. Tired legs scream. He ignores them. Must keep going. His hand touches leather. Not even a hand, a finger. Then he slams into something solid, unmoving. He's knocked to the ground, hard. He tries to breathe but the shallow, short breaths give him no respite. He groans and rolls over, looking up at the bright blue sky. It's an endless blue dome, unbroken by clouds. The scorching sun's rays burn down on him. He closes his eyes, takes stock of his injuries. Nothing that can't be pushed down, saved for later when he has time to recover. He hears the loud screech of rainbow lorikeets, squabbling over nectar in the bottlebrush nearby. The deafening drone of cicadas calling for a mate. He feels a hand on his shoulder. Someone pulls him to his feet. He wipes the dirt from his eyes. Spits out the grit. Takes another breath. Gathers himself and pushes on.

He loves this game. Loves the thrill of the chase, the contest for the ball. Arms pumping and legs flying behind him as he races across the paddock, the kind of freedom you only feel in dreams. His father played this game. Taught him how to handball. Showed him how to take an overhead mark and kick a torpie. Taught him what it meant to be in a team. To be part of something bigger than yourself. Playing a role and working towards a common objective.

It's a physical game, full of hip and shoulders, pushes in the back. There are elbows crushing ribs and bone-jarring tackles. He endures all this, welcomes it almost. It's part of the game.

He squints in the midday sun and sees the yellow ball soaring in the blue sky. He watches it float over his head. He turns and chases it. It was just him and the ball. Until it wasn't. He feels a presence. A dark shadow advancing. He tries to avoid the inevitable collision. Too late. Crunch. He feels the baked earth beneath him. Not much grass really. He's dazed and he shakes his head to clear his vision, still lying flat on his back and clutching his ribs. Everywhere aches. He tries to move, but can't. The umpire's shrill whistle cuts through the ringing in his ear like a squawking canary, awarding him a free kick. He climbs to his knees, deprived of oxygen. Finally, up to his feet. He takes the ball and walks back off his mark. Turns around. The siren sounds. Silence. His heartbeat echoes in his ears. The ball beneath his fingers. He looks toward the goals. Then he hears it.

Those words. Those same familiar words that have haunted him throughout his life. You never get used to them. Like gut punches each one. Never build up a tolerance. Only words, people say.

Names can never hurt you. And yet, what is this feeling if not pain? This feeling that you are somehow less of a person. Inadequate. Part of a team but never fully accepted. Words that are thrown about carelessly, thoughtlessly. Said without considering the hurt caused. Or then again, perhaps that was their intention all along. He takes three deep, shaky breaths, trying to push these words out of his focus. He walks, then jogs and drops the ball on his left boot towards the four tall sticks. His kick is off, across the face. He drops his head. Smirks are seen and jeers are heard, humiliation felt deeply burning in the pit of his stomach. Failure.

Three quarter time. In the huddle. He watches the coach's mouth move as he delivers his speech. Sees his eyes blaze and his spit flying. Barking orders and offering encouragement. He hears none of it. Shame eats away at him. Why is he even here? He feels unworthy. His head is full of doubt.

When will he be seen as an equal? When will he be seen for who he is? He feels his passion for the game diminishing. He hears his voice in the smattering of people along the boundary, he locks eyes with his father. Was there a small nod? Deep eyes, old beyond his years. A look passes between. An

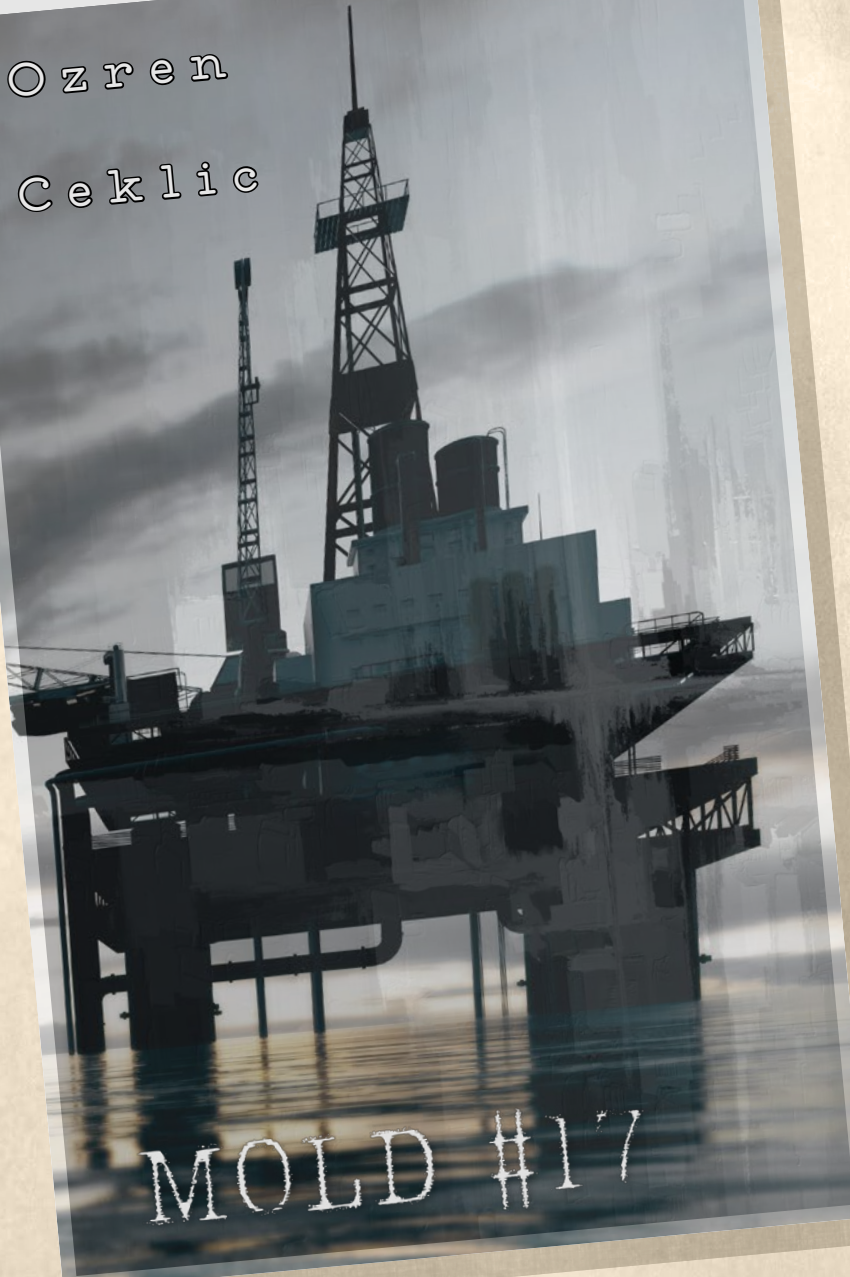
unspoken understanding. Old as time. A shared pain. A connection. A belonging. An understanding. Family. A swell of emotion like a tsunami hits. It's almost physical.

The game continues, final quarter. He feels his heart quicken as the whistle blows. He loves this game, the great outdoors, the bright blue ceiling. The red dirt in his boots. The deep ache of his muscles as he pushes his body to the edge. The exhaustion and exhilaration in equal measures. He breathes in deeply, tasting the heat. Feeling the dampness of his jumper sticking to his back. The umpire bounces the canary yellow ball in the centre... He is ready.

– THE END –

Ozren

Ceklic



MOLD #17

// Learn from me ... how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how happier the man is who believes his native town to be the world"  
-Mary Shelly, *Frankenstein*

### **Log 4/10/1987**

Birds heard multiple times. Weather cloudy.

### **Log 6/10/1987**

Minor oil spill on timestamp 5:45:36. Oil spill caused by accidental infraction by Employee #14. 16 (all employees) went past camera. Weather rainy.

### **Log 7/10/1987**

Employee #4 and #8 engaged in a verbal confrontation on timestamp 10:08:42. Argument about whether conditions on the rig were safe enough to continue. Employee #4 argued it wasn't, citing the mold (first mentioned on Log 15/9/1987) and weather as evidence. Employee #8 dismissed that as "groundless worrying for a Weak-Willed disgusting man". The argument increased in intensity until all employees were called for lunch at timestamp 10:35:28. Weather rainy.

### **Log 10/10/1987**

Mold has seemed to have reached hallway by now. Weather rainy.

### **Log 11/10/1987**

All employees try to destroy mold via a mix of baking soda, distilled white vinegar and water. Employee #2 and #11 cleaned the hallway from timestamp 3:10:45 to 4:55:12. Due to the cleaning, the normal duties are missed. This was noted and the infraction was filed. All of the employees spend from 00:05:35 to 11:13:31 cleaning the entire ship from the mold. Weather rainy.

### **Log 12/10/1987**

The mold is back. Weather rainy.

### **Log 13/10/1987**

Employee #13, the rig's resident biologist, attempts to find the type and taxonomy of the mold so the group can better destroy it.

He presents his findings to the group at timestamp 13:24:59. I have transcribed this here:

<<START OF TRANSCRIPT>>

Employee #13: Um... my findings are as follows. Mold #17, which is the placeholder I have decided to assign to it, is unidentifiable. I will...

\*All other employees shout over each other loudly.\*

Employee #2: You're a dumbass "biologist"!

Employee #15: What crackhouse did you get your degree from? Employee #7: You are full of shit!

Employee #13: Please listen to me!

\*All other employees begin to quiet down.\*

Employee #13: Listen to my reasoning... please.

\*The rest of the employees finish quieting down\*

Employee #13: Mold #17 began spreading on roughly the 14th of September from the boiler room. Um... in the month since, it has spread around to almost all of the rooms on this rig. It has eaten away at the food at storage units #3 and #4, rendering them inedible. It has also drastically decreased the air quality in various rooms, like Bedroom #5.

\*Pause\*

Employee #13: Mold #17 has a black or dark grey appearance. It is somewhat fuzzy and it started off as white spots. This seems easy to identify, right? It's a simple case of black mold, a genus called stachybotrys, which grows commonly in damp spaces. And this rig is certainly damp from all the rain and ocean currents. Case closed?

Problem solved? Right?

\*Vague muttering from the rest of the employees\*

Employee #13: Well, it's not. The best way to identify mold is to look at its growth structure and cells under a microscope. This process is morphology. That's where the problem is.

\*Employee #13 sighs\*

Employee #13: Mold #17, despite having all appearances and processes of mold, in a breach in all that is known to science, does **not have cells**.

\*Nervous noises from the rest of the employees\*

Employee #15: \*hesitantly\* Are you ... sure you haven't made a mistake?

Employee #13: Yes! I have spent days in my room, looking through all my books and all my knowledge I have learnt in my all-to-long decades on this planet in some vain attempt to understand this goddamn mold! But nothing... nothing I do makes any sort of sense. It violates all known laws of the natural world.

\*Pause & sigh from Employee #13\*

Employee #13: I simply don't know what to do.

<<END OF TRANSCRIPT>>

Birds heard. Weather windy.

### **Log 15/10/1987**

On timestamp 04:08:43, in Bedroom #4, Employee #4 did not wake up at the assigned time. They did not respond to the other employee's shouts and pokes. It was at this point the employees realized she was unconscious, likely due to the mold. She was promptly moved out of Bedroom #4 into the hallway. Employee #2, who was trained in first aid, analyzed the situation and gave CPR that continued for 12 seconds until Employee #4 regained consciousness at timestamp 04:09:59.

All 16 employees later unanimously decided to all sleep together in Bedrooms #1 & #2, as these were the only rooms not affected by the mold and to call mainland for advice.

Birds heard and passed in a left to right direction. Weather rainy.

### **Log 16/10/1987**

Employee #4 was indisposed for the workday, due to headaches, extreme fatigue and vomiting. Employee #13 attempted to relieve Employee #4 of their sickness.

Employee #3 & #5 attempted 15 times through out the day to communicate to the mainland via radio. This was not possible due to the rainy weather and some malfunctioning equipment from both parties.

Weather rainy.

**Log 17/10/1987**

Employee #4 was announced to be dead on timestamp 01:04:03. Employee #13 attempted and failed to find the specific cause of death, and ended up attributing it to "this eldritch fucking mold [sic]" .

Employee #4 was wrapped in cloth and was given a burial at sea. Employee #7, who was close to Employee #4, had this to say:

<<START OF TRANSCRIPT>>

Employee #7: Um... I've never had to give one of these, but I'll guess I try. The person we are remembering today is [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. She was a wonderful woman, partner and friend. She treated everyone with kindness where ever she went. When I had came where to this rig, nearly bankrupt and at my last resort, she gave me the support I needed. She helped me realize so much more about myself, and my relationships and my emotions and my...

\*Employee #7 quietly sobs\*

Employee #7: Um... so, yeah... that's all I have to say. Let's just get this over with.

\*Employee #4 is dropped into the ocean\*

<<END OF TRANSCRIPT>>

The group tries to contact mainland 35 times. All were unsuccessful. The mold has almost taken some entire rooms.

Weather rainy.

**Log 25/10/1987**

Employee #2, #7 and #15 have all died of similar ailments to Employee #4. The mold has taken over the majority of the rig, with the exception of the roof. It is because of that fact that the rest of the employees are now staying there. Over the last week, they have attempted and failed to call mainland 516 times.

Most of them want to give up. Birds were heard. Weather rainy. Log 27/10/1987

Employee #11, #12 & #16 quickly patch together a makeshift raft from various tables and chair from Bedroom #2. Despite the pleas from Employee #13 and #15 that the rainy weather will make it dangerous, the group argues that it is "their only hope to survive".

The group sets off to the mainland at timestamp 10:16:43 and they shortly disappear into the horizon.

At timestamp 11:55:12, the raft floats back to the rig without the group on it.

As of now, the whereabouts and states of Employees #11, #12 & #16 are unknown.

### **Log 29/10/1987**

On timestamp 2:12:55, Employee #14 & #15 fall off the roof, landing on the stairs on Support #2. This kills them instantly. It is unknown whether this was an accident or a suicide. Their situation suggests the latter. Employee #13 is now the only person on the rig.

### **Log 31/10/1987**

On timestamp 00:45:09, Employee #13 calmly walks down onto the ground floor, which by now is extremely affected by the mold, and lays down. His last words are transcribed here:

<<START OF TRANSCRIPT>>

Employee #13: This mold is beautiful, you know. It seems simple but it is infinitesimally complex. For example, it appears black at first but it is really all colors even some outside human perception. Right now, it is a blue that is blacker than black.

\*Pause\*

Employee #13: God... it's beautiful. It shows you things too. In the past few days living with this godlike... thing, I've experienced all possible existences. A peasant chinese girl in the 16th century, a tech billionaire in the 2000s, a supposed french prophet in far future. All of that in the past couple days. All of it... just all of it.

\*Laughter\*

Employee #13: The mold told me to come down here... yeah. It whispered to me in the most beautiful, ethereal voice. "Give yourself to me". It beckoned me with an outstretched hand. It felt nice walking down here. The mold telling me sweet nothings in hushed tones. It felt like that this... this is what I was put here on Earth to do. Like this was my purpose.

\*Pause\*

Employee #13: It felt fucking amazing! To be a part in this higher being's plan. Gosh, I was so vain before, trying to explain this god with science. "Black mold, stachybotrys" I declared. It was all bullshit. All I know that it's beautiful... it's beautiful... it's beautiful...

<<END OF TRANSCRIPT>>

Oh my god...

I see it now. He's right. I can feel the power of the mold, my master, through this screen. This feels right. This feels like my purpose also.

The mold is beautiful. It's beautiful.

It's beautiful.

It's beautiful.

It's beautiful.

It's beautiful.

It's beautiful

– THE END –



the  
HAND  
THAT  
FEEDS

Max McMillan

*I was waiting and while I was waiting I ran my finger along the edge of my thumb-nail and while I was doing that I was wondering what would happen if I ran it over the edge a million times. Would the repetition wear down the jagged, bitten edges and actually smooth the nail out like those bits of matte glass you find on the beach? Perhaps that would take so many reps that it would just be easier waiting for the nail to grow back smooth and rounded and shiny and perfect and new and ready to be bitten because that's what a nail's job is at the end of the day. You can go out and buy a stress ball if you like but God gave you five nails on each hand (and ten more if you're flexible and adventurous) for a reason. You bite it and it grows back because it knows you need something to bite and it doesn't try to argue with you because it's growing out of your finger and it wouldn't want to argue with the hand that feeds because what can you do with no food? You have no energy and you shrivel up and die and your body breaks down and your skin goes pallid and your cheeks sink in and your nails certainly don't grow back even though that's their job and if you managed to chew them down to painful rosy nubs even though you're too malnourished to run your jaw like a locomotive choo-choo-choo up and down and up and down and chomp-chomp-chomp—*

"Jesus Christ, Beth."

"What?"

"This is gibberish."

"Well I know. He was always a bit avant garde, you know that. But that was Dad and everybody loved him and—"

"No, Beth, you aren't hearing me. This is nonsense. It isn't potential. It isn't a dark, deep exploration of the human condition. It's a nothing burger. The mad ramblings of a schizo's last brain cells."

"Josh, please. Just think it over. Please. It isn't superhero schlock or whatever Michael Bay's taking credit for nowadays. But it's raw and it's real and there's a market for this kind of thing. Anderson might want this; Eggers, Kaufman, Del Toro even—"

"Beth, come on. Our last film cost three-hundred bucks and we filmed most of it in a Red Dot. I don't think Wes Anderson would call us if we had the Magna-bloody-Cartman."

"Carta."

"Carta. Whatever... Point is: I know you miss him. I miss him too. You think I like having a matching tattoo that matches with a dead guy? But he's gone. And I think you're trying a bit too hard to bring him back, Beth."

"Maybe you're right—"

"I am right."

"You *might* be right. It's just hard to have nothing, you know? Mum got the ashes, Uncle Larry got his car. Hell, at least you've got the tattoo! I don't even look like him, for Christ's sake, and I was the only one who stayed with him through thick and thin."

"You can't seriously be going there, Beth, right?"

"Am I wrong?"

"I'm on the other side of the country trying to make a name for myself. You know what kind of damage even a month off work is gonna do me? Even a *day*? What if Anderson did call and I was in Perth feeding dear old Dad pea soup and listening to him ramble about sea glass and locomotives *choo-choo-choo!*?"

"And you think abandoning him's gonna be so much of a better look, do you? Abandoning all of us? What do I mean '*us*'? Me. Just me. Coming home from twelve hours of stacking shelves to bathe him and wipe the pea soup from his mouth and lock up the cabinets he'd gotten into. It was hell, Josh. Actual hell. And now I can't even be glad that hell is gone because its departing gift was a dead dad and a stack of useless papers my brother barely even skims, sitting in his faux-leather nepotism throne, with his suit jacket two sizes too big, peaking at the secretary's cleavage and arranging business meetings at Dome where all he does is order a six dollar coffee and get disappointed when the server doesn't show as much cleavage as the secretary does and—"

"Beth—"

"What?"

"Here you are saying you've got nothing to remember him by. You talk exactly like the crazy bastard!"

“Yeah. I guess I do. I shouldn’t blow up like that.”

“That’s just what we do, I’m afraid.”

“Sorry about what I said.”

“I’m sorry that most of it was true.”

“It’s late. I’m tired. I have so much less to do now, but it feels like so much more. It’s hot all the time. I don’t remember the last time I woke up without a headache. And at the risk of sounding like a teenager, I am so *goddamn lonely*. All day. I’d rather hear about locomotives choo-choo-choo than just be left here. Alone. Trying to make sense of nonsense. Of nothing burgers. Y’know, the best part of my day yesterday was hearing someone cry in the next flat over. Just knowing I hadn’t drained this post-code’s tear reserve single-handedly. Isn’t that depressing? More than one depressing. That’s like depressing squared.”

“Jesus Christ, Beth, you didn’t tell me all that! Look. I’ll reschedule my flight. I can be there by Monday. Then I’m all yours until the funeral and maybe a week or two after that. Anderson can leave a voicemail—”

“No, Josh, I’m not trying to guilt you.”

“It wouldn’t work if you were. I’m in your head, Beth, *mi casa es su casa*.”

“Thank you, Josh. For reading it.”

“I love you Josh, I think you mean.”

“I love you Josh,”

“And I love you too—more, in fact.”

“I’m going to sleep now. It’s past midnight and—Jesus, Josh it’s like four o’ clock in the morning over there! Go to bed!”

“Yes, mother.”

“... Do you really think it’s nothing?”

“I think it’s something to you—to us. And I think that’s enough.”

So What?

There was another piece of paper in that house. A piece of folded up white that wasn’t found for six years, after Beth got her degree and moved out of that inferno, and it wasn’t unfolded for another two. By the time it came apart, a statue of Ron Blaten was erected in his home suburb in front of a library where

a picture of him had hung since his first novel's publication. Years passed; both his twin children, whose birth had emblazoned the West Australian thirty years prior, got married (not to each other, obviously); like a locomotive choo-choo-choo, life moved on.

Beth Blaten met a woman named Shell; they sip wine out of mugs after the kids are asleep and watch movies in their big Cottesloe abode. She doesn't know what makes her chuckle more, "Cottesloe abode" barely rhyming, or that her wife's name is shell and she lives near the sea. It's a blissfully boring chuckle either way. One Beth can't get enough of.

Josh's hypothesis was correct. The month away from Melbourne did indeed do damage, and it did indeed become more than just a month. In his absence, some unsavoury rumours that everyone knew were true came to the public's attention. Josh was forced to disband Blatantly Blaten after only seven months of operation. Operation on Daddy's dollar; "a schizo's last handful of change", he might say. Anderson never called. Nor did Del Toro or anyone else. His wife has a face he thinks is mediocre and an average sized bust. His home is too loud and hardly a home at all.

Ron Blaten's name lost its novelty after a while and became just another that the kids in year ten came to shudder at, knowing they'd have to dissect themes that to Ron were just facts. Facts of life that he squeezed and moulded until they meant something and sounded pretty. They were never meant to sound pretty to a fifteen-year-old's ears. Few things do.

When the piece of paper came undone, Beth read the first line and felt herself swallow a bullet of guilt. She drove to her brother's house and they read it together.

*Babies.*

*There was a colour a moment ago. It was just there, and then it wasn't, but I saw it long enough to register it. It was pink, but only barely. That glorious dollop of pulsing vernal pink. I knew it immediately. It looked just like your little hands. I must've told you this factoid but in case I haven't I'll reiterate: you two were born holding each other's hands. And you were holding them together so tightly and so sweetly that the doctors were worried for a second that you were conjoined or siamese or whatever the correct term is. And maybe you medically aren't. You can walk and talk and think separately. But I think conjoined is the perfect word.*

*The scariest part was that I did register that colour, and I registered that it was the first thing I had fully registered in a while. I take that back. The scariest part has been superseded. Now I don't even know if that part about the hand holding is true.*

*I feel like God knew that this parasite would be the way I went out. I know that's why he made me a writer. He took pity on me and my children; at the end of my line in his grand plan, he knew I'd struggle for sentences, so he decided to foreshadow that with my life's work, making sure I got as many of them out as possible while I could.*

*I know one day that my name will mean nothing. I will look like Ron, smell like Ron, have the same DNA as Ron's kids and carry around a piece of plastic with Ron's date of birth on it and his money in it. But that person will not be me, will not be Ron, will not be your father. I'm slipping, babies. Slipping out of this skin. It's someone else's turn in this outfit. Ron is being pushed out. I hope this new person loves you and makes your life easier than I can. I hope he can still write and cry when he sees a picture of his mother even if he has no idea who she is. I hope he remembers your birthday long after he can't count how many of mine he's missed. And I hope you can tolerate him long enough for me to find my way to the gates and ask Him myself why our lives had to turn out this way. I think God will like me, though. He and I have a similar sense of humour.*

*I hope I don't have to see you again. No father who is really a father does. But if that time comes, we'll gather somewhere ethereal and eat egg sandwiches on a blanket that looks like a big tea-towel and I'll nod while you catch me up on what I'm going to miss.*

*My guilt is as boundless as my love for you.*

*Forever and always,*

*Dad.*

Postscript

"You remember that fight we had?"

"I'm sure Anderson does."

"Oh shut up."

"What's that park called? With the bridge to the swamp; the mandarin trees?"

“Pioneer Park?”

“That’s the one.”

“What about it?”

“I need a walk. This gut I’ve accumulated would probably agree.”

“... I think he was wrong.”

“That isn’t a very bold statement. Wrong about what, exactly?”

“About slipping; falling out of his skin. As far as I’m concerned, he was Dad up until the very end. Still is, if you ask me.” She was silent for a moment.

“The hand fed us well.”

– THE END –







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# LOWER PRIMARY



# The Magic Hole



Noelani Graham

**"A** rmy Bear, can you play hide and seek with me? I've got the perfect spot to hide," Nursey bear calls.

"Ok Nursey Bear," shouts Army Bear.

"One, two, three...ready or not, here I come!" counts Army Bear.

Army Bear begins to search their bedroom. He looks under the bed, behind the curtain and in the wardrobe. There he sees some little brown furry ears poking out from under the hanging dresses.

"Found you!" he shouts. Just as he was about to pull his sister from her hiding place, she screams!

"Army Bear help! Pull my hand!" But it is too late. Army bear clutches his sister's hand as they are both pulled through the hole in the back of the wardrobe.

They suddenly appear into a different world. They look around. The sky is purple, there is orange grass and all around them are funny-looking brown mushroom houses with white spots. Army bear and Nursey bear look at each other in surprise.

"Where are we?" asks Nursey bear with a small voice.

"I don't know. It looks like a kind of fairy folk land. Shall we explore?" replies Army bear. "I'm scared," whimpers Nursey bear. "Don't worry. I will protect you. Anyway, it looks like a friendly kind of land," assures Army bear.

The two bears cautiously walk across the long orange grass clutching each other's hands. They walk past an odd-looking mushroom castle covered in white spots.

"Is it safe to go on?" asks Army bear, eyeing some odd-looking fairy folk as they walk out of the castle. They have white skin, two short stubby legs and wear matching pink scarves with flowers carefully knitted into them.

The two fairy folk skip up to them and ask in a friendly voice, "who are you? How did you get here?"

"We came through my wardrobe somehow," answers Nursey bear shyly. Army bear thought she sounded scared.

"We are pleased that you have come to visit us," said one of the fairy folk. "Would you like to come to tea?" asks the other.

"Yes please," said Army bear in a polite voice.

The bears quickly follow the two fairy folk stumbling over tree roots and around fallen apples through the forest of pink trees. Finally, they arrive at a large tree stump with a small round door. "Come in," invites one of the fairy folk. "Please seat yourselves while we setup tea."

Presently the table was filled with delicious looking pancakes, sandwiches, sugary cakes with blue icing and lemonade,. "Please help yourselves," says one of the fairy folk, "we have more in the larder."

"Thank you," Army bear and Nursey bear say together licking blue icing off their fingers. They stuff themselves full of all the goodies.

Suddenly, there is a loud knock at the door. One of the fairy folk opens the door and in runs a short, plump fairy panting heavily out of breath.

"Lilly! Whatever is the matter?" exclaims the fairy folk.

"There is a robber in our little mushroom town! We need to catch him! The Fairy King has gone away to a ball. We are left here to work it out for ourselves," Lilly says fluttering her wings impatiently.

The two fairy folk look at one another with troubled faces. "What are we going to do? Who will help us?" They exclaim together.

Army Bear and Nursey Bear look at the troubled fairy feeling sad for the fairy folk town. "Could we try to help?" Army Bear says, "my daddy has told me many stories of catching robbers. Maybe I have a few ideas."

"Thank you my friends. That would be wonderful if you could help us. Lilly, what exactly has been going on?" asks one of the fairy folk.

The bears and the fairy folk huddle together to hear more about the robber. Then they talk and talk about ideas to catch the robber once and for all! Finally, they agree on a plan. Army Bear quickly explains the jobs for each person.

The five friends carefully make their way to the cold castle courtyard and tell the guards their plan. The castle guards agree with the plan and sit down to prepare for action.

The robber cautiously creeps into the cold stone courtyard. He glances one way. He glances the other way. He looks straight ahead. Before him is a sign; printed in large pink letters were the words 'PARTY THIS WAY'→. He sneaks and follows the arrow until he comes to a room that is draped with party

decorations. He carefully steps inside and to his great delight he sees cakes, cupcakes, sandwiches, sugar cakes, pancakes, and lemonade.

He quickly runs in and reaches forward and greedily snatches a cake and gobbles it up. The sweet honey flows down his throat. As he reaches to grab another cake, the delicious feast mysteriously disappears, and the door slams shut with a bang. Army Bear and Nursey Bear peep through the keyhole and to their surprise, they see Pandy Bear, the nasty bully from their school trapped inside the shed!

Suddenly, to everybody's surprise, a royal carriage strolls down the road. The royal butler opens the carriage door. The royal trumpets sound and out waltzes the King and Queen wearing magnificent crimson robes and golden crowns. The royal trumpets sound twice, and the king steps up to the Duke holding a brown torch with pink foam on the top. It was a microphone in front of him. He addresses the crowd of Fairy Folk Land.

"My good people of Fairyland. What brings these furry little creatures into my court?" he says observing the two bears.

Army Bear quickly replies, "Your highnesses of Fairyland, we did not mean to come here. We entered your world by mistake. We were pulled here by magic through my sister's wardrobe. We helped Lilly by trapping the thief, who used to live in the same place as us, the land of Furry Little Bears (FLBs).

"Welcome my friends! Thank you for coming to rescue the town from robbery. We are most grateful for your help. How can we ever reward you enough?" says the King of Fairy Land.

"Thank you, your highness. Your people have been very kind to us. The only thing we would like is to return to our Furry Village back through my sister's wardrobe." "Your wish will be fulfilled," answers the King. "Goodbye," shouts the fairy folk of the land.

"Thank you!"

The King waves his wand delicately and Army Bear and Nursey Bear are pulled back into the wardrobe through the hole.

Suddenly the bears are back in the wardrobe amongst the hanging dresses. They climb out of the wardrobe and sit on Nursey Bear's bed.

"What a big adventure!" exclaims Nursey Bear.

"It sure was a big adventure," agrees Army Bear.

The two bears take a bow.

The crowd applause and cheers. "What a great idea for a puppet show Noelani," said Levi fiddling around with his teddy bear. "Thanks Levi. You were great too." I reply. "Well done you two," said Mum. "I can't wait to hear of Army Bear and Nursey Bear's next adventure. Good night." Mum gives a kiss and tucks me into bed. I lie there cuddling Nursey Bear and talking with my brother about our next puppet show.

– THE END –

# A BIG ADVENTURE



B'ELANNA JONES

## **CHAPTER 1** the start of the journey

Once in the moist and wet climate of Kenya in Africa there was a family of glossy, shiny black chimpanzees. The family had 2 babies, 3 males and 6 females. The family lived happily together in the moist forest and the 2 baby chimpanzees whose names were Scamp and Rosie were always playing together. One night when the family was sleeping soundly together, all except the babies, something stirred the forest, and it sounded close to where the family was sleeping! Scamp and Rosie knew what to do. They alerted their mothers and Rosie limped over and told one of the males. Their mothers and the head male looked all around but they could find nothing. Just then, as quick as a flash something dropped from above! It was silver and glowed in the night. It had metal straight things around it. All the other chimpanzees got out of the way, but little Rosie was trapped! Her mother had told her things about this. She had called them cages. Before Rosies mother could reach Rosie, she was going up, up, up. She felt scared and frightened and even worse, Rosie feared heights! She wondered if she would ever see her family again.

## **CHAPTER 2** the new world

When Rosie woke up, she was in a big rumbling thing which was a truck. She looked out the window and all she saw were big trees and moors. Nothing looked familiar. She started to cry. She wished she was back home. Rosie missed her family so much. She felt very sad. Soon the truck came to a halt. The doors opened and..... was it home? It wasn't. A crowd of people were standing at the opening, and they were all wearing suits that said 'Taronga Zoo. For the wild.' Rosie didn't think it was for the wild because she had just been taken away from her family. She started to cry again. Just then she was wrapped up in a blanket softly and put in a crate. She was in there for a while before she was let out into..... Another cage? This time made of glass. She yelped and yelped but the staff didn't know what she was saying. The cage was quite big though. It wasn't what she had expected. It had ropes that she could climb on and tall towers. There were lots of other chimpanzees there but there was none she knew, and they were all aggressive to Rosie. She went and hid behind a bush, away from the other chimpanzees and hoping that no one would see her.

### **CHAPTER 3** a new friend

Rosie was given some food and water then taken into the crate again. She made a tiny quiet little hoot. She heard the vets say, "she's feisty". Rosie wasn't feisty. She was desperately trying to get home again. In fact, she was very gentle. When it opened Rosie was in a big room of interesting equipment which was the Veterinary office. Before she could even notice she was asleep.

When she woke up, she was in the glass cage again with somebody standing beside her. Their name tag said Kimberly. Rosie looked down at her own body and noticed that something was on her leg. She looked more closely at it and saw it wrapped all around her. She made a questioning cry. For the first time since Rosie met these strangers, she realized that this one was different. Something in her eyes told Rosie she could talk to animals. Kimberly looked down and said "that's a bandage. We fixed your leg for you when you hurt it in the forest. You might not have noticed but you were holding it funny. "But maybe..... started Rosie. "Maybe what? said Kimberly. "Maybe..... if you could help me get back to the wild again, I can be free. In return I can bring you some berries from the forest." Said Rosie "That's a wonderful idea and thank you. I can ask my vet team if you might be able to return to the wild again." "That's wonderful, thank you so much!" Said Rosie.

### **CHAPTER 4** going home

When Kimberly came back, she shouted "you can go back Rosie! Rosie sighed a sigh of relief. She was going home! It was a long ride back though. When Rosie arrived back home her whole family was happy to see her, and Scamp came scampering up to her. Then she saw her mother. She scooped her up in a big cuddle. And from that day on Rosie was never taken away from her family again.

– THE END –

# The Emergency Landing

Stephen Zhang



## **BANG!!**

"We lost another engine! There is only one left!"

"OMG! We are all going to die!!!"

## **Four Hours Earlier...**

My name is Stephen. Although I'm only seven years old, I am a well-trained and certified pilot. I was sitting in the cockpit, staring boredly through the window at the rainy morning scene of Berlin Airport, waiting for my co-pilot, Jack. Jack, only six years old, is still an uncertified trainee pilot. He really loves flying, but if he put as much effort into flight training as he does into football, he would probably have graduated by now.

"Stephen, it's 2022 now, and since the COVID-19 pandemic has been controlled, people have started travelling again," Jack said as he sat down, rubbing his eyes. Clearly, last night's football game had kept him up all night.

"Yes, so we need to test these planes first," I replied, looking at the old Lufthansa Boeing 747-400 we were about to test.

"This flight is from Berlin to Perth, covering 14,000 kilometres and taking 17 hours," I added as the four engines roared to life, signalling a good start.

"Do you think this will work?" Jack asked, a bit unsure.

"I can't be sure, but we have to try," I said firmly.

## **Crisis in the Sky!**

The takeoff went smoothly, and soon the plane was on autopilot. Jack and I both breathed a sigh of relief.

"Not bad, this old girl can still fly," I remarked.

Jack yawned, saying, "Oh, I can't take it anymore. I'm going to the kitchen to get some coffee and bread. Do you want anything?"

"No, thanks. I don't like eating while on duty," I replied.

Soon, Jack returned with a tray piled high with breakfast and set it on the control panel.

Suddenly, the plane hit turbulence. The tray tipped, and hot coffee spilled across the panel, causing a short circuit. The control lights flickered, and alarms blared.

"Jack!" I shouted, trying to mop up the coffee. But it was too late. The smell of burning electronics filled the cockpit.

"We have a problem," I said urgently.

Jack's eyes widened. "What do we do?"

"The coffee caused a short circuit. It looks like it's affecting the engine controls," I said.

A loud bang echoed from outside the plane. The emergency lights cast an eerie red glow.

"We've got a fire in the engine," I said, gripping the controls. "We need to act fast."

"Jack, contact Air Traffic Control (ATC) tower immediately. We need help," I said.

"Got it. Mayday, can someone hear me?" Jack repeated into the microphone, but there was no response.

"The fire must have destroyed our Wi-Fi. We can't contact ATC or use the GPS," Jack said, frustrated.

"Alright, it's not the end of the world. The display shows two engines are unresponsive, but we can still use the remaining two to get back to Berlin," I said, encouraging Jack and myself.

Suddenly, a loud bang.

**BANG!**

One of the remaining engines exploded, causing a fuel leak.

"We lost another engine! There is only one left!" I shouted.

"OMG! We are all going to die!!! " Jack said, despairing. "Oh, this is all my fault, Stephen. I shouldn't have wished to Santa in Coles for an exciting adventure."

"Calm down, we still have hope. How much fuel do we have left?"

Jack said, "10%."

I said, "Then, to save fuel, we need to completely shut down the other three engines. Even if they come back online later, we can't use them anymore."

Jack said, "What if the only working engine also fails?"

I said, "Shut up!"

Jack and I successfully shut down three engines and cut off their fuel lines.

"It works, the fire on the engine is out!" Jack shouted excitedly.

Just as we were celebrating, I suddenly realised a new crisis. Due to the failure of our Wi-Fi and the GPS equipment, we lost our direction in the sky and couldn't find our way back to Berlin Airport.

"We have to find our way back, but without navigation, we're completely lost," I said.

"What should we do?" Jack asked.

"Stay calm. We can use landmarks to navigate. Look outside and see if you can spot the Berlin TV Tower or the Brandenburg Gate. These are key landmarks in Berlin, and we can use them to determine our position."

Jack asked, confused, "The TV tower or the 'burger' gate?"

"Just the tower, please..." I said.

Jack peered out of the window, searching carefully. "I see the TV Tower, Stephen! It's over there!"

"Great! We can find our way back," I said.

### **Safe Landing?**

"I can see the airport and there's an empty runway!" Jack shouted excitedly.

"Yes, I can see it. We are going home," I said, feeling a surge of relief.

We had just enough fuel for one attempt at landing. But the fire had damaged the plane, making it difficult to keep balanced. As we approached, I could feel the plane wobble.

"Stay focused, Jack. We need to land this perfectly," I said, gripping the controls tightly.

The runway got closer and closer. I adjusted the flaps and prepared for landing.

"Almost there..." I muttered, my heart pounding.

With a final push, I lined the plane up with the runway. The wheels touched down with a bump, and the plane skidded along. I carefully applied the brakes, and after what felt like forever, we finally stopped.

"We did it, Jack! We're safe!" I exclaimed.

Jack sighed in relief. "That was too close, Stephen."

As we rolled to the gate, I couldn't help but smile. Against all odds, we had made it.

On our way back, Jack suddenly said, "Why didn't we just parachute out earlier?"

I laughed and said, "Thank you! That's the smartest thing you've said today! Since you haven't helped much today, you'll be the one writing the accident report."

Jack cried, "No!!!"

– THE END –

# MIDDLE PRIMARY





# LIFE CYCLE OF A SNOWMAN



written by April Baker



**Day 1:** You would never be able to guess how wonderful it feels to flutter down from the sky and hit the ground softly. I waited longingly for someone to build me.

**Day 2:** Today a little boy and girl came outside, and they built me. I was delighted! I could feel their soft gloves as they were crunching together my icy body. We played for hours. They gave me a carrot nose, sticks with gloves as arms, and even when I thought I couldn't possibly look any cooler (being a snowman) they gave me a pair of their dad's super stylish supreme sunglasses. When they left, I shouted out "come back tomorrow". I do not think they heard me. Let's just wait and see.

**Day 3:** They came back to me today! They must have heard me! Again, we played for a long time. It was wonderful. First, we played tag. I got "it" every time, but then the wind blew, and my carrot nose fell off and tagged the little boy. Next, we played hide and seek, the boy counted whilst the little girl took a blanket and covered me. I was so well hidden that I won the game! We played all day until it got dark. Large snowflakes fell from the sky. The children were called inside.

**Day 4:** It was too cold so the boy and girl could not come out to play. I didn't think it was cold. I thought it was pleasant. The snow was swirling in the air, it was thick and white, and I couldn't see further in front of me than the tip of my orange carrot nose. An exceptionally beautiful day.

**Day 5:** The weather changed today; it was dreadful. The sun was shining brightly, and to make matters worse, the children have gone back to school. I saw the big yellow bus come to pick them up this morning. They didn't even invite me to come.

**Day 6:** Now it is just hot. The boy and girl are not coming any more. I am feeling down and depressed. I am melting.

**Day 7:** I Don't even want to talk any more.

**Day 8:** I am now just a head. A big fat no point in life snowman head.

**Day 9:** I am now fully melted. Goodbye cruel world...

**Day 1:** You would never be able to guess how wonderful it feels to flutter down from the sky and hit the ground softly. I waited longingly for someone to build me...

– THE END –

# The Deep Dark Nothing

BY JONAH FLYNN



A aahh another day, another dollar working at the local phone store. George had just finished polishing the new iPhone screen when all of the sudden his boss walked in. "I TOLD YOU IF YOU DIDN'T SELL THAT IPHONE 78 PRO MEGA SUPER MAX I'D FIRE YOU BUT SINCE YOU'RE MY LAST EMPLOYEE, I CAN'T".

"Wonder why I'm your last employee" George muttered under his breath. "Well I guess my shifts over, time to go home."

"No." A strange voice calls out

"Who was that?" George asked

"You're not going home, you're coming with me." The strange voice replies

Before he had a chance to say anything he was off soaring through the now thick, and tough air. "Where are you taking me?" George shouted frantically.

"Nowhere" replied the ominous dark creature.

And before he could say anything more, George had drifted off to asleep.

Ok now is a good time to tell you George wasn't the brightest person on the planet, which is why he didn't know where he was... but soon enough he would see where he had been taken.

Just as George woke up he could see everything below him ...from the Eiffel Tower, to the Statue of Liberty and Optus Stadium- you name it, he could see it all below. Not only had he ticked the boxes of landmarks he wanted to see, he'd also ticked the box of having a panic attack, hyper ventilating, a super high heart beat, sweaty palms and eyes darting around space. All of them and yep, you heard it right- space!

George floated through space and time wondering what to do with what seemed to be immortal life. He questioned if he is even human? But all things do come to an end someday. On day 600,408,234,674,879,100 it was his last day in space. Stars were blowing up, new stars were being born a new galaxy had already been formed and now for the first time in millennia he saw something.

He saw the nothing that brought him here and he heard that strange voice yet again 'Would you like to go back to how life used to be?' 'Yes' George said behind all of his tears 'Okay, but I must warn you, no one will know who George Peter Barrett is' After 7 years of thinking George reluctantly agreed and as fast as you can watch the Lord of the Ring movies on 0.00075% speed and

pausing it every few seconds to explain to your younger sibling what's going on he was back on planet earth, now wondering what to do. No one knows who he is but he knew one thing, he wouldn't have to work for that mean old guy anymore and that's what he was happy about but on the other hand his family didn't know who he was but George had forgotten that.

George was sprinting to see his wife Kate and son Bob, as he arrived at his house, he realised this house looked different, his car wasn't there, and neither was Kate's. It was a house with a balcony and massive doors with a Ferrari parked out the front. It was a dream house so he was puzzled and wondered where his house that looked like a junkyard had gone.

Back on planet earth, yep you heard correctly! Back on earth which means George isn't actually on earth?! George's family are getting pretty worried. "What if we don't find him" Kate said feeling sad "waaaahhhhhh Dada Dada waaaahhhhhh" Bob screeched as he knocked down several toy towers he made earlier that morning.

"Don't worry Bob, we'll find him" said George's mum Kristy trying to calm Bob down and reassuring Kate.

George was actually on planet Zog which is an interesting planet because there aren't any humans, there's only ginormous and I mean ginormous... CENTIPEDES!!! Now, luckily George hasn't seen any yet because obviously they would eat him. George doesn't know he's on planet Zog but the nothing finally realised that he had taken George to the wrong planet. Suddenly George had seen something entering the planets orbit and before he could recognise it the nothing had picked him up and as he thought his journey was over the nothing started flying up into a star. "What are you doing?" called out George. "I'm taking you to where I was made" the nothing replied and before George could say anything he saw light beams shooting out of him from every direction and George for the last time asked "Who are you?" "I am a your 987,654,629,104 generation grandparent. Just as George was about to ask for a family tree explanation there was a massive Bang!!! George had exploded into a nothing and his grandparent faded away into nowhere.

– THE END –

# An Ugly Malarky!



**Jack Warburton**

Setting – Albany skate park on a Saturday morning

Jack and Tom are at Albany Skate Park on a Saturday morning for Leeuwin’s birthday. They were having the best time, riding dirt jumper bikes and doing the pump track with their friends.

When it was time for lunch, everyone came in from the track to gnaw down on some KFC. When Jack went out to get his bike “Dirty” (he’s actually pretty clean) after lunch, he saw it was gone! Jack was seething with anger! Jack looked around and saw some brat riding his bike out of the skate park. He jumped on Tom’s bike and chased the robber, yelling for him to give it back!

“Give me my bike back, brat!”

“Just you wait until I catch up to you!”

“Oh no you won’t” said Brat the Robber.

“Just try and catch me!”

Brat the robber (whose name is actually Malarky), rode Dirty to the dock, jumped in a boat and sped to his dad’s island. Malarky didn’t realise that Dirty had a tracker stuck inside of the frame. [Narrator here: Don’t ask me why Malarky is stealing Jack’s bike when his dad owns an island and can probably buy him 1000 bikes. I’m just the narrator]

Near the dock, Jack radioed to his Dad and asked him to bring his helicopter to the dock. When the helicopter arrived, Jack, Tom and Leeuwin climbed in and Jack showed Dad the GPS tracker for him to follow.

On arrival at a nearby island, they were greeted by a huge dark cave overlooking the ocean. The island and its cave belonged to Malarky’s family.

When they arrived, they crept in to the cave. It was really bright and loud inside – it was a bike factory! Malarky was riding Dirty around inside the cave, while his Mum and Dad were yelling at him to stop so they could start building another bike.

Jack raced over to Malarky and yelled “Give me my bike back!”

Malarky looked embarrassed and said “please can we keep it for a little bit as we would love to make some more bikes just like this one?”

Jack replied: “On the condition that for every new model of bike that you make, we can have one bike to keep.”

Malarky's Mum and Dad overheard the conversation and they quickly butted in, before Malarky could talk more. They said "Yes, you can have one bike of every model, if we can have your bike for three days so we can make more just like this. It would be so good. Thank you very much!" (Malarky could sure learn a few manners from his folks)

Even after a bad start Malarky, Jack, Tom and Leeuwin became friends and met at the Albany Skate Park once a week for a ride together. They rode the new bikes to test them and reported back to Malarky's Mum and Dad on how the bikes could be changed and improved.

And everyone lived happily ever after. The end!

...

Tricked ya!

10 years later, Malarky, Jack, Tom and Leeuwin went back to the island. Over the years the machinery and stuff (that's a very technical term by the way) had changed.

They were now building hoverbikes that you could never fall off from. Jack was now a professional rider and decided to use one of the hoverbikes to compete at the Olympics cross country event. Whilst every other competitor struggled Jack just cruised over everything.

After winning gold at the Olympics, Jack went back home and gave Malarky his gold medal. [Narrator here: Trust me, I'm gobsmacked too but Jack had other ideas and told me to keep telling the story.]

Malarky melted down the medal and used it to make Jack a hoverbike with a solid gold frame called Goldy (there was only 1 Goldy in the whole wide world).

Jack retired from professional cycling and that's where this story ends for now.

P.S. If you don't get these jokes, you got bigger problems than Jack had when Malarky stole Dirty!

P.P.S. – What do you call a bear that likes cheese?

(The answer starts with a C and ends with amembert)

– THE END –

# UPPER PRIMARY



# My Friend Jackie



Anya Aryaputri - Edi

I leaned back in my chair, munching on my avocado toast as I stared out into the morning sun, the ivy on the kitchen shelf filtering the sunlight to a vibrant shade of emerald green. The plants flourished outside, the ancient Banksia's with their fuzzy red flowers and the golden buds of the pom-pom-flowered wattle. They vied to catch the first of the morning light.

Moving to Australia had been hard. Singapore was where I grew up for such a long time. The leafhoppers had entered my stomach. Today I would be going to a new school.

I was the sole recipient of a prestigious scholarship- after all, Perth Royale was an extremely exorbitant school, costing about \$40000 annually.

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After breakfast, I stared in dismay at my uniform. My old uniform was so simple and equally comfortable.

Here I was with an oversized fleece blazer that made me feel like I was drowning with heat.

Fidgeting with the cottony dress, I wondered if the high collar was designed to elongate my neck or close my windpipe.

I frowned at the stiff shoes. They were as stiff as my desire to wear them. To make things more miserable, the name tags of these clothes bore the name of their previous owners.

I approached the garage, where a second-hand battered Toyota sat. Its wheels were coated in red dust. I grimaced at the long scratch a metre long running from the car's bonnet to its boot.

I was surprised how it still worked- it looked like it couldn't even make it to the main road, judging by its dismal demeanour. I got in, and the smell of regret and old leather choked me.

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Later on, we were driving by the city. Tall, towering buildings loomed ahead like fate, people bustling around in their spring fashion- floral dresses, chic handbags. A woman strutted confidently across the street, barista coffee in hand, boss vibes so strong.

Mum glanced over at me from the steering wheel, "Coffee is close to triple as expensive here. I missed Kopitiam."

My mum was wearing a blue-chequered staff polo top and black pants. She was accompanying me to school, for she was the new canteen lady.

We neared Lavender Avenue, where Perth Royale nestled in the fields of pristine houses. This flawless suburb taunted us mockingly with perfectly manicured lawns and burbling ponds like a mozzie bite. The more you scratched it, the more irritated your skin got.

Perth Royale definitely lived up to its name. It was a medieval palace brought back to life. It had a giant arch towering over you like the Bigfoot. Words 'PERTH ROYALE, EST 1867' were carved into a gold plaque hammered onto the peak of the arch.

Jacarandas graciously greeted each visitor, swaying branches creating a purple canopy, the waking sun sending down its sparkles that danced among the purple petals.

A procession of fancy cars completed the fantasy dreamland. Princesses and princes hopped off from their shimmering carriages, ready for another day.

Mum drove off to the staff parking. Barren garden beds awaited us, duller than the gravel road. I slipped and checked if the coast was clear.

I crept up the pathway to the oval and snuck around some trees. I caught a glimpse of green eyes. I blinked. Only a pine bush.

From the huge arch, there was a spiralling courtyard, blooming with boastful flowers, not a jealous weed in sight. Australian bush, showering with pollen. There was a huge Gum tree in the corner, a small, weathered bench bearing ancient wisdom being its only companion.

Loud hoots came my way. I shot up from my slouch and managed a glimpse of some kids. One boy was pointing at mum's car, the girls giggling like they had hysteria.

"Hey, look at that pile of scrap metal! What an eyesore!" he exclaimed.

He was so loud that everyone, even the flowers, turned to see the disappointment of their fancy school.

I blushed. Mum hung her head as if her neck had vanished. The kids departed.

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Sitting on the bench, I had never felt such loneliness before. I wanted to cry.

Then came Jackie. Jackie was picking up discarded rubbish, and I knew Jackie would be my friend from the start.

I helped him pick up the rest of the rubbish, and Jackie sat on the bench by the Gum tree with me to keep me company.

I was about to start sinking back into my troubled thoughts when a loud and equally comical barking emitting from Jackie's mouth cut me off. I giggled so hard, to the point I was worried my jaw would fall off.

As I felt confidence building up, I began to tell Jackie about me, every struggle I had to get here. He listened, warm eyes drinking every bit of information, my sorrow clouding his eyes.

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A few days had gone by, but me and Jackie had already formed a strong relationship, and part of the reason was that we were so similar. We both had insatiable curiosity and keen eyes watching 360 degrees.

Jackie always was the first to notice a new bird feeder or a small sapling amongst the lilacs and peonies.

However, me and Jackie never shared the same taste for food. Jackie had offered me some of his lunch, but it didn't appeal to me.

Since then, I spent my breaks sitting on the bench, chatting a little about the world's happenings with Jackie, my one and only soul friend.

"The war," I murmured. "Some kids had 'bread' made of bird seeds and donkey pellets. Tea, from sticks and leaves. And worse, no home?" Jackie listened intently. I continued, "We don't have war here, but it's just as disturbing that we have stabbings? Ever since that Bondi Junction stabbing, it's been popping all over Australia like a TikTok trend. Jackie, the world is becoming a *disaster*."

The next day, I sat down with Jackie, with a huge encyclopedia of birds on my lap. "Look, Jackie. The Swift Parrot was the Australian bird of the year! Aren't magpies way much better?"

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As I arrived at school the next day, a group of girls ask if I wanted to hang around with them. Not knowing what to say, I felt both embarrassed and tongue-tied. I knew Jackie was sitting on the bench, waiting for me. He didn't get along well with the kids. He was always the target of their soccer practice, so I just told the

girls that I preferred being alone. I could see the disappointment in their eyes.

Later at recess, I realised I forgot to bring my canteen money. However, Jackie had some spare change that he lent to me. The rest of the day passed in peace and quiet. The kids had left me alone, but I could feel their stares rippling in the spring breeze.

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The very next day at lunch, me and Jackie were pouring over a book about native Australian plants, when we heard some jibber-jabber coming our way.

I looked up, and there were my classmates coming our way, carrying a basket of softballs. They started to showcase an ultimate dodgeball game, and I felt my snake of fury slowly unravelling inside me. This place was meant to be quiet, since Jackie preferred listening to nature instead of unending shouts and chitchat.

But as every minute passed, I felt emotions of isolation trickling into my heart. It was like being a ghost and seeing people eat. Jackie was getting uneasy.

The game actually looked fun, and Isabel caught my grin. She yelled over, "Charlotte, you want to play?"

I was about to gladly accept when-

Isabel threw the ball a bit too high and way too strong, and it was heading straight to the magpie nest that was high in the tree branches.

My eyes widened in horror.

I jolted up as a black-and-white bullet shot past me like a flying Shinkansen. It was Jackie! The usually gentle and kind bird was now a screeching demon.

"Jackie!" I screamed. However, whenever Jackie was angry, all he could hear was his own thoughts of fury. My eyes frantically darted and saw that Jackie was heading towards Isabel.

Without even considering my safety, I ran and pushed Isabel onto the grass, luckily unscathed. This only made Jackie more annoyed. His maroon slits glared at me. Isabel screamed, "RUN!"

Before I could react further, Jackie flapped noisily in front of me. I felt a sharp slice on my ear, and Isabel gasped in terror.

I blinked. I patted my ear, and it was bloody. Now my ear had suffered the same

fate as Donald Trump on his Presidential rally.

Everyone rushed over to me and Isabel to shield us from Jackie. People were anxiously asking us, "Are you okay?"

Jackie had cooled off, and he was perched on the bench, warbling his little song.

Just then I heard my mum shout, "Charlotte, are you okay? This is why I told you not to befriend a magpie!"

"MUM!" I screamed. Great. Now everyone knows I'm the daughter of the canteen lady.

My knuckles balled up into fists to the point they were as white as the Gardenias growing in the garden beds.

"Um, Charlotte?" asked Isabel, catching onto my sleeve.

"Yes?" I asked, feeling exasperated.

"We knew the kind canteen lady is your mum. Audrey saw you crossing the oval," Isabel confessed, nudging a pale green-eyed girl. Oh, I thought. Not a pine bush.

"Hey," chimed a boy. "I noticed how you always hung around all by yourself, but Charlotte, you don't just belong there. You belong in the whole school."

"Yeah!" chorused many others. I felt bad for giving them the cold shoulder. It's often said that magpies go for shiny things-which is what I thought about my peers. I thought that they would only want to be my friend if I also stepped out of a fancy car. But I was wrong. The magpie wouldn't discriminate no matter how drab or shiny, just like my friends here.

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I glanced over and saw mum rushing towards me, first aid kit in hand.

"Mum," I almost choked. It felt so long since I had acknowledged her in the school grounds.

She began to tend to my ear. "It's a small cut, nothing serious."

"I'm fine," I told her. "Why do you think Jackie also swooped me?"

Mum bit her lip. "Well, you were closing up to everyone, and I'm sure Jackie would've saw that happened. Charlotte, I think Jackie swooped you to show

you that people care for you. He wants you to hang around with your classmates instead of fearing them. It's the way of the magpies. To help and teach."

I knew Jackie got angry because he thought my classmates were invading his territory, and because the dodgeball hit his nest, but I wondered if what mum said was true.

After school, I was exchanging goodbyes with my friends when I saw Jackie. He was perched on the nest with his family in the Gum tree.

I haven't talked to him since the swoop, but I was glad he wasn't relocated. The groundskeeper had told me that the magpie nest wasn't damaged- in fact, it had only shifted a bit because Jackie built a sturdy nest.

"Thank you, Jackie!" I cried, waving to him.

I had a flashback to my first day at school. Jackie had always been there for me. Befriending him wasn't just for a simple friendship- it was a joy crafted by nature. Jackie showed me the importance of family bonds, and the joys of what a friendship could create. Friendship wasn't a morning rush- it was a slow build-up of trust, respect, and patience. From my friend Jackie, I learnt that nature's wonders are not just around us- they are also within arms reach.

– THE END –

# Tower of Trials



Bethie Oldham

"Sam!" yelled Lizzie. "Get back here now!" Sam giggled with glee and ran harder than ever, clutching Lizzie's precious diary in his sticky little fingers. It was these things that drove Lizzie insane. Lizzie finally caught up with her little brother and snatched the book out of his grubby hands. Sam pouted and ran to tell Mum. She wasn't worried. Mum was always too busy to pay much attention to them. It wasn't her fault. Things hadn't been easy for anyone since the divorce.

It had happened when she was seven. She and Sam had come down to dinner only to see her parents' grim faces. Before she knew it, there was a lawsuit, arguing and then... Paperwork. So much paperwork. It had ended with her mum getting full custody of the children and she and her brother only seeing their dad in the holidays and for birthdays. Her dad sent child support money every month. It was the only way they could afford the house. Lizzie was 12 now and Sam was 7. Lizzie still had nightmares about that night, coming down the stairs, hearing the words... The cut was still too deep to heal.

Lizzie decided to take a walk. They always cleared her head. As she walked, she thought about her favourite books. The characters were always getting themselves into different worlds. She sometimes wished she could go there and be free. Free from the worries clogging her down. Free from all the pain. Just for one day... Lizzie suddenly noticed how far away she was from home. She saw a beautiful rose. Its petals pinky-yellow and its scent like her mum's perfume. She knew she should go back but it was just so pretty. It would make her mum so happy if she could see it! She had to pick it. Lizzie absentmindedly walked towards the rose. Before she knew it, she had it in her hand. Suddenly, she heard a rumbling sound. A bright light came shooting up from the ground and Lizzie was sucked up into the sky.

"Boom!" Lizzie's head was spinning. Was she dead? Was this heaven? She doubted it. It was too cold. Lizzie's vision had finally come back into focus. She was so confused. She was in a small room with a little wooden table to the side. It had a small loaf of bread and a glass of water on it. As she sat up, she heard something. It was soft, but she could hear it.

It whispered, "Welcome to the Tower of Trials. You have been taken for the way you have been treated. Our queen has decided to help you. She will grant you one wish. You can only have this wish if you can complete the three trials of Athena." Lizzie thought about what the voice had said. She knew Athena was a Greek god, so whoever had taken her believed in Greek myths. Her kidnaping

reminded her of the story of how Hades got his wife. Whoever had taken her sounded like they wanted to help, so she decided to hear them out.

"The trials will take place over three days. One trial each day. You will be given meals and clothes to sustain yourselves." the voice said. Lizzie was nervous, but she knew that her choice was right. If she got through the trials, maybe she could use the wish to bring her family back together. She just wanted to see her mum and dad watching a movie together. Or all of them going out to dinner in the city. Maybe, just maybe this could be the key to healing her family's five year wound.

"Eugh!" Lizzie moaned. She'd had the worst dream. She was lying on some sort of pillow fort. It had grown around her through the night. She guessed that the room was magic as a small wardrobe was growing out of the floor. Slowly, she half crawled, half climbed out of the bed. On the table, there was a meal of scrambled eggs on toast and orange juice in a crystal glass Lizzie dived for it. It was the most delicious meal she'd had in years! Her mum couldn't afford eggs. Or juice. Really anything other than toast hadn't been seen in her house since her dad moved out. In the wardrobe, there was a pretty blue dress and matching shoes. She quickly slipped them on as a voice was cast over the room. "Your first trial awaits you. You will have to find the picture that is different. Be ready," it whispered.

Lizzie bit her lip. She wasn't sure if she was ready, but she had to try. This was her one chance to make a difference. A spiral staircase suddenly revealed itself from the wardrobe. It reminded her of Narnia. It was one of her favourite book worlds to be read to when she was younger. As she slowly ascended the stairs, she wondered what Mum was thinking. She hated the fact that she was worrying her, but this was a one in a bazillion chance. Granted, she didn't have much choice in the matter, but if she had been given one, she definitely would have stayed.

Lizzie found herself in tiny room, not much bigger than a small shed. She could see a magnificent mural paint on one of the walls. She could see a miniature table to one side, with an old fashioned hourglass on it. The grains of sand were already dropping. She needed to get to work. Lizzie studied the painting. It was broken up into family pictures. As far as she could see, they all looked the same with the same happy family doing different tasks. Reading, talking, playing, you name it. Time was running out, and she had no idea what to look for! Suddenly, she spotted it. It was the same family, but a completely different mood was in

the air. Two grownups were fighting about something while in the background, a pair of young children were bawling their eyes out. With only a few seconds left, Lizzie stretched up on her tippy toes and just managed to press the picture before the time ran out. She had done it. She'd completed the first task.

The next morning, Lizzie woke up in the same room she had done her first trial in, but the room had changed. Like last time there was a delicious breakfast, this time pancakes, with maple syrup and whipped cream, on the table. A wardrobe to the side had sprung up again too. Lizzie gulped down her breakfast and slipped on a pretty gold dress and shoes that she'd found in the wardrobe.

Like yesterday, as soon as she had put on her clothes, a chamber appeared in the wardrobe. A little more bravely, Lizzie climbed up the stairs with some bounce in her step. She entered a relatively large room with a giant sphinx in the middle. Lizzie guessed, by the tile on the front, that she had to step on it to speak to the sphinx. As she did, the sphinx opened its mouth and started talking.

"I am the sphinx of this tower," it growled, her voice low and scary. "You can walk away back to home now, and I will not hurt you, or you can listen to my riddle. If you get it right, you will move on to the next challenge. If you get it wrong, you will NEVER get your wish." Lizzie took a deep breath and waited. The sphinx started to talk. " I am something you can break but never touch. I am something you can follow but never see. I am something that brings people together and tears them apart. What am I? "

Lizzie thought about it. She was there for at least half an hour, pacing around the room. Finally, she got it. "Heart," she eventually said. "A heart can be broken, followed and the reason to bring people together. The answer is a heart." Lizzie stood there, waiting. The sphinx grumbled, then said, "Correct." Lizzie smiled but thought about what she had said. Would she be better off with Dad back? She remembered the blazing fights that Mum and Dad used to have before the divorce. Would getting back together really be for the best?

The next day, Lizzie woke up, still thinking about the night before. She had thought about it all night long and now wondered if it was true. Her thoughts sloshed back and forth, back and forth. One side of her, was telling her that she should absolutely use the wish, and that everything would be better, but the other side (which strangely sounded like her parents) was telling her that bringing her parents back together would just bring back all the blazing fights and turmoil and that they were better off separate. She gulped down her

breakfast (waffles and chocolate sauce) and shook on the shimmering silver dress and shoes in her wardrobe. As she entered the towering staircase, she knew what she had to do.

The final room Lizzie faced was quite large, with tiles spread all over the floor. The tiles all had different directions on them. Lizzie saw a stack of books on one side of the room. In the middle of the room, there was one tile with a heart on it. She guessed she had to get to that. Lizzie quickly got the stack of books and threw one on the tile facing upwards. Immediately, the book flew up to the ceiling. Lizzie repeatedly threw the books one by one onto the same tile until there was a stack high enough that she could climb it. Lizzie leaped onto the same tile and was immediately thrown upwards. Carefully, she climbed up the wobbly pile of classic literature and onto the final book. Then, with a deep breath, she jumped.

As soon as Lizzie's fingertips touched the heart tile, the world went the right way up and she crashed down onto the floor. She brushed off her dress, and carefully stood up. A rumbling sound entered the room. Suddenly, a glistening bright light shone through the roof. Through it, a beautiful woman came. She had long brown hair and grey eyes with a beautiful golden chest plate, ready for battle. Lizzie could tell at once who she was. She stumbled to her knees, amazement on her face. It was Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and battle strategy.

"Hello," the woman whispered. Her voice was as soft as silk. "I expect you know who I am. I am here to grant you one wish. Make it quick. I don't want to be late for Zeus's party." Lizzie took a deep breath and said exactly what she wanted.

"I wish..." she stumbled. "I wish for my dad to have a good life without us, but to always love us and be happy." Athena smiled. "I'm afraid I cannot do that," she said. "Why not?" Lizzie cried, confused. "Your wish is for something that will already happen. Your father will always love you. Here, I think you'll like this." A shining door appeared in front of Lizzie. It was gold, with silver etching around the sides. Athena handed her a shining gold key. Lizzie took a deep breath, used the key, turned the handle, and went back home.

– THE END –

# THE CONCH SHELL

Andie Sutcliffe



## CHAPTER 1

“Try to cast it over there, then the current will move it, maybe?” I say, pointing to the left. “Listen, Holly, I’m trying to do my best here. Do you want a go?” asks Ruby, pushing the rod toward me. I shake my head and step away from her. I’m useless with a rod. At fishing altogether, really. I’m not too sure why Dad even gave me a rod. He knows I’m just going to give it to Ruby or put it down on the sand then wander off and look for shells. He’s just one of those dads who push and push their children to do all different kinds of things but only have one or two interests themselves. In child language, that’s translated into ‘big meanie’. Well, when he gets back I think he will be very proud of me. I gave my rod to Ruby and wandered aimlessly around the place for a while, but then I spotted a perfect conch shell uncracked and baby blue in the water. I tried to get it via swimming, but it was too far down and I couldn’t hold my breath for that long. So I had the genius idea to use the fishing rod. But, as I said, I am useless with a rod and fishing. My closest attempt was when I got it in the mangrove tree thirty metres away. So Ruby helped. Isn’t it funny how Ruby and I look exactly the same, were born within three minutes of each other, yet still have opposite personalities and hobbies? I like reading and writing and poetry- and ALL sorts of needlework: crocheting, knitting, sewing, the works. I’m basically an old woman. In comparison, Ruby is an athletic type. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her not wearing a basketball uniform or her soccer cleats. The only things we have in common are school (we are both straight-A students) and the love of sour straps and rock candies.

We cast for what felt like one hundred times, that conch shell was stuck into the ground as hard as a rock. Finally “I’m on! I’m on!” yells Ruby, as she yanks up the rod and starts winding the bail arm ferociously. “YES! Yes! Don’t let it go Rubes I really, really want that shell!” I scream and start jumping up and down. “Got it,” says Ruby, bringing it up so it sits right in front of my eyes. “OMG, OMG, thank you thank you thank you!” I squeal, and pull it off the hook. I hug it close to my chest and take a deep inhale. It smells like saltwater. That does not put a dampener in my spirits. My mother once told me that a perfect conch shell is so rare. She was thirty-seven when she died, and spent fifteen of those years travelling around Australia, particularly the west coast, and found exactly one. I remember something else and push the shell to my ear. I can hear the waves crashing, and the currents moving around submerged rocks. Suddenly there is a thump from behind me. I turn around to look. There is Dad, with the boat. “Come on then girls, if you want to go whale watching. Just a warning, it is pretty rough,” says Dad. Before he finishes speaking, Ruby and I are in the boat.

Dad was lying. It is not 'pretty rough'. It is more of a hold-on for your life situation. The waves are monstrous and the boat keeps tipping to one side, so much so that there is about three litres of water on the boat floor. I'm holding on for my life and pressing my conch shell hard against my chest like it'll save my life. CRASH! BOOM! We are launched into the air and the sound of the waves is enough to make anyone deaf. We crash back down onto the water and I'm seriously starting to wonder about how much I trust Dad's driving.

"Hold, on, girls!" says Dad and he accelerates the boat and turns hard left.

"Dad, we're not going to make it!" screeches Ruby. And she is correct. Because in the next second the boat has tipped and I drop my shell. I crash into the water and spin. I start to swim up but there is just no escape.

## CHAPTER 2

Huh? I open my eyes and a flood of light fills my vision. There are people in blue uniforms bustling around me and outside my room. My hands hurt and I look down at them. They are covered in cuts. There are a few stitches and lots of blood. I look around and see a girl with brown hair and eyes and lots of freckles. She looks so pretty, but on her face is a worried expression. There is also Ruby. What happened? I can't remember anything. I trawl my memories but none of them fit into what could have happened.

"Look, Charlotte, she's awake!" Ruby says to the girl.

I try to think of words, but can't remember how to do it. "Huh?" I ask. "Ruby...huh?"

"Holly!" exclaims Ruby and envelopes me in a hug. "You were in a boat crash. Oysters cut your hands and waves cut your brains. You've been in a coma for about two days. Are you alright?"

"Dad....where's dad?" I ask, looking around.

"In the old people's ward," says Ruby. "and this is Charlotte. She is the doctor's daughter. She's been reading to you while you were unconscious."

I smile. That is all I can do. "How long hospital me? I mean, how long will I be in the hospital?"

Ruby gives me a sorry look. "It depends, but best guess, multiple weeks. I'm sorry."

She should be.

## **MULTIPLE WEEKS LATER**

I was still in the hospital after nearly a month and even so, I could only remember things that happened before third grade. Since I am in the fifth grade, the doctors decided to still hold me captive. I remembered how to read, and did lots of that. I have also discovered that I had a passion for the midday movies on channel eight. I still sometimes mixed up words and thought walking and running were the same thing. One day, Ruby barged into my room all wet and smelling of seaweed.

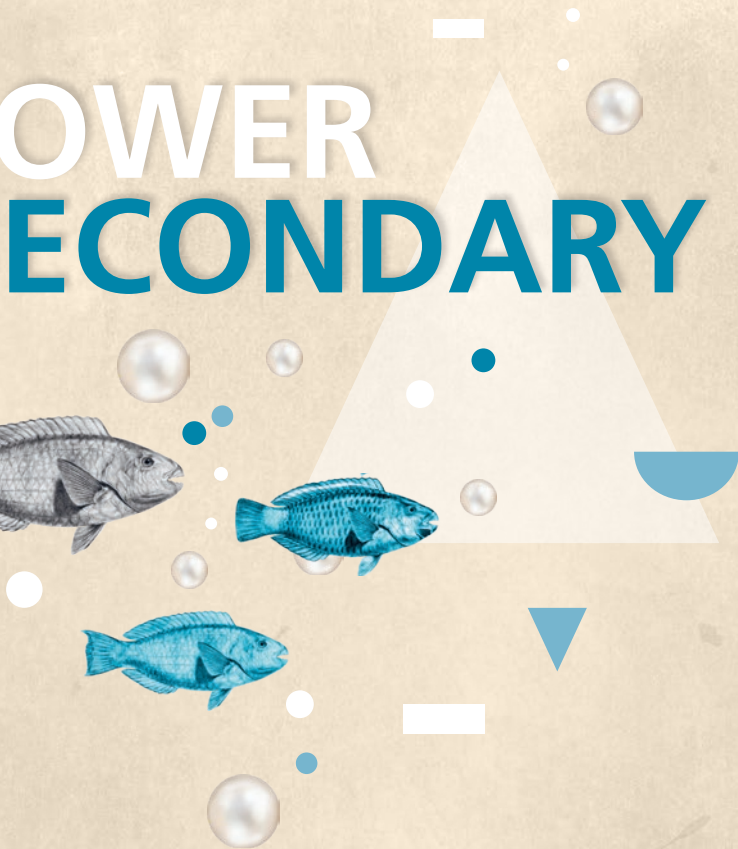
“I got it! Ruby, prepared to be let out of the hospital!” she announced and pulled something out from behind her back. It was a perfect conch shell, unbroken and baby blue.

In the next second, the room started to spin and a tornado of photos appeared before my eyes. I saw a funeral, with everyone dressed in black. I saw Ruby and I, taking a first day of kindergarten photo. I saw myself, spinning through water, trying to reach the surface and dropping my shell.

“I remember.”

– THE END –

# LOWER SECONDARY



# ANGUISH

LIZETIENNE  
BURKE-HARDY



**A**s I drove along the almost deserted roads of my old hometown, the only visible inhabitants being the odd seagull, I looked down at the flowers for my father's grave. Sighing, I kept moving, until I saw the beach. Ah, that beach. Memories came flooding back of golden sand and bright people disappearing into the aquamarine expanse, before the incident. I rolled down my window and smelt the salty, distinctive scent of the sea, and, checking my watch, I turned right to park near the cliff.

I stood on the gritty sand, looking up at the grey, cloudy sky, while the distant squawks of birds echoed around the high cliffs surrounding the beach. The smell of seaweed that had washed up on the sand triggered the memory. I closed my eyes, and remembered the last time I was on this beach...

I woke to the sound of murmuring outside my window. I swiftly pulled on my clothes and walked towards my window, where the tip of the sun could just be seen hovering over the horizon, staining the sky around it orange. I looked down to see a group of neighbours talking as they moved rapidly along the street. Quickly, I flung open my bedroom door, raced down the stairs and outside, towards the commotion.

Everyone was, I noticed, walking down to the beach, talking about something that had washed up on the shore. Then, I spotted my friend in the small crowd and ran to him.

"Hey, do you know what's going on?" I asked him. "All I know is that something washed up on the beach, but I've got no idea what."

"Same," he replied. Baffled, we moved on in silence.

Then, impatient at the walking pace of the others, I gestured to my friend, and we started to jog down the hill's winding gravel path, avoiding any twigs cluttering our way. Our shoes crunched on the dusty rocks as we continued our hasty descent, sending the larger stones skidding off the path completely.

As we reached the beach, we saw a stranded creature bound up in sturdy rope covered in slimy seaweed.

A few young boys were crowding around the beached animal, trying to get a closer look. And they were prodding this poor fish with sticks, trying to get it to move more. They laughed as it twitched helplessly.

I ran towards the group yelling at them to get away, as they obeyed, frightened. My friend kept watch for the kids while I edged closer to the barely breathing

fish, much of it obscured. But what could be seen of it was magnificent.

Shimmering, greenish scales sparkled in what little sunlight there was, throwing a pale, green light onto my jumper. They had a slight tinge of blue to them, and a few odd scales were a hue of purple.

Leaking out from under those scales were lines of bright red blood, a few dried patches a reddish brown. Its enormous tail fin was badly torn. The ropey canopy stayed firmly wrapped around its upper half.

Grabbing the net, I tried to lift it off, over the fish's head, but it thrashed out feebly, hitting me with its tail. It felt like the rope was embedded under the creature's scales. Townsfolk carrying buckets appeared at my side. They walked back and forth between the water and the shining fish and threw the water over its head and body. With each cascade of water the animal seemed to panic and struggle more. I saw a large stone fall to the ground next to the twitching fish.

I looked up and saw the children from earlier standing on the cliff above me, clutching small rocks in their hands. The sun was now continuing its ascent behind grey clouds, as if it was hiding from this melancholy scene. Another pebble fell only a few centimetres from me, and I could already see my friend running up the cliff to chase the boys away again.

Another rock flew down from the cliff, landing but a foot from the first one. In quick succession, three more rocks hurtled down, and one of them struck the bloody tail of the fish. I ducked, the sand billowing out from where the rocks had struck. More blood poured forth from under the animal's scales, washing over the others and staining the sand beneath red, the tip of the fin almost completely detached. I heard my friend's angry shouts as he attended to the boys.

I saw my neighbours now swarmed around the body. I remembered the pocketknife in my jeans and crouching next to the fish I began sawing through the thick, twisted nylon ropes of the net. The seaweed tangled with the cords, wrapping around the powerless creature. It felt like ages before I could finally pull the network of strings away, making everyone gasp.

A mass of matted, chestnut coloured hair covered the torso of a young woman, her eyelids fluttering open and closed over glassy turquoise eyes. Her chest rose and fell as she took in ragged breaths, but she seemed to be taking more effort with each one and I could hear the water thrown from the buckets gurgling

within her lungs. The blood beneath her continued to drain away as she closed her eyes, choked her final breath and became still. I looked at my neighbours, wide-eyed, before I slid my hands under her tail and back and rolled her over, to reveal a bright red gash running diagonally down her back. I could see the tip of a rib poking through the wound, shredded muscles surrounding it. To my alarm, pieces of broken green glass from a beer bottle were embedded in the flesh. This poor girl...

Over the next few months, more 'fish' washed up on the beach. Some were women. Some were men. A few were even babies, but that was thirteen years ago. Opening my eyes, I see the many bottles and plastic bags that litter the beach now. Nobody has washed up on the beach in ten years and the polluted water has driven all the tourists away. I look out across the murky ocean with sadness. I hope that, somewhere, at least some of them have survived.

– THE END –

# The Bookstore Bandit



**Clem Chapman**

Agent Rivas Montgomery sighed and rubbed her forehead. This was the seventh bookstore robbery this month. During the coldest August for seven years, a series of bookstores had been robbed. But the thing was, the thief hadn't taken money. They had taken books. Sci-fi, fantasy, dystopian and graphic novels had been taken during the recent bookstore raids. Ironically, the thief had even swiped several true crime books. Agent Rivas yawned and swiped her staff pass on the card reader beside the door. The mechanism gave a sad little beep and swung open. Rivas entered the dark shopping centre, and the door swung shut behind her. She flicked her little torch's ON button. Nothing happened. "Gosh darn it!" she growled and rummaged in her pocket for some batteries.

Once the little compartment had snapped shut and Rivas had turned the flashlight on, she attached the light to her headband and began searching for Dymocks. Her footsteps echoed in the halls and every breath she took sounded as loud as an exhaust pipe. Rivas eventually reached Dymocks and quietly pushed the door open. She had been alerted ten minutes ago that a Toll driver had spotted a tall man attempting to force open an air duct on the side of the building in a surveillance blind spot. Rivas instantly knew who the driver had witnessed. The elusive Bookstore Bandit.

As she crept into the room, Rivas immediately detected movement. She ducked behind a life-size replica of Harry Potter and peeked out from behind the edge. Standing in the Teen Romance aisle, a tall man dressed completely in black was casually selecting books and placing them in a large library bag. Rivas carefully reached for her handcuffs, but her hand hit a motion-activated light switch. Several LEDs flickered on and the thief abruptly shut his book and looked her way. She burst out of hiding and ran down the aisle towards the burglar. As she neared him, the thief picked up a hardcover Complete Works of Shakespeare and slammed the book into the side of Rivas' face. She fell in a spray of red as the burglar somersaulted out the open window and melted into the night. As Rivas lost consciousness, she thought to herself, I failed, and she was gone.

Detective Samuel Horowitz was worried. Seventeen hours ago, he had been telephoned by a hysterical Dymocks employee who had opened up shop only to find a dead woman lying in a pool of her own blood. Now, as he looked upon the sickening murder scene, he knew what had happened. An Agent killed in a bookstore? It had to be the Bookstore Bandit. But how? As far as he could see, there was no apparent murder weapon. As for footprints, the thief

had been wearing a shoe size consistent with around 30% of the population. His receptionist had suggested looking at surveillance footage, but the CCTV cameras had been vandalised by three teenagers with rocks earlier in the day. The perfect crime, thought Samuel as he inspected the aisle.

Later that day, Samuel interrogated the Dymocks employee who had discovered the dead body. "I was walking towards Dymocks when I noticed the door was open and the lights were on," she said. "I walked in and I saw a foot sticking out the end of one of the aisles. I rushed over and s-s-saw that she was d-d-d-dead!" Samuel let her go after an hour of questioning.

The next day, Samuel inspected the scene of the crime once more. He found the light switch, which was sensor-activated, and discovered that it was behind a life-size cardboard standee. He then compared the location of the standee with the location of the murder. It was in the direct line of sight. From this, Samuel deduced that Rivas had been inspecting the recent bookstore robberies and had gotten a tip-off from some member of the public. He hypothesised that she had entered, noticed the robber and hid behind the standee, accidentally setting off the motion-activated sensor on the light switch. The light had turned on, and the thief had seen the Agent. Rivas had likely attempted to arrest the burglar, who had panicked and killed Rivas. Simple. Now Samuel just had to find out who. *And boy, he thought, at least the thief will be charged with manslaughter.*

Three days later, the case wasn't improving. Samuel was still yet to discover who had killed Agent Rivas that cold August night. The station was growing busy due to a rash of bombings in Parramatta and there was even talk of dropping the Rivas case for good. That is, until the forensic expert called Samuel in for an interview.

"This better be good," said Samuel gruffly. "I woke up at seven o'clock for this meeting".

"I believe I do have good news," replied the scientist. "I found something that might be needed in this investigation".

She placed a small plastic bag on the desk. Samuel unzipped it and shook out something small and grey.

"It's a tape recorder, that a ten-year old was using to record his mum's conversation with his English teacher to show to his friends when she bumped into them at Dymocks that day. He left it there accidentally, and it was high enough on the shelf to record adults. It's as good as any CCTV camera!"

Samuel took out the little VCR tape and shoved it into the nearest player he could find. A grainy film showed on the television. Samuel flicked through the timestamps until he found something promising.

*In the corner of the room, a window with a broken latch is opened from the outside. A tall, thin man in about his twenties enters the room and casually strolls down the aisles, checking titles and picking out books. He is reading an interesting blurb when a woman in her forties enters via the door. She spots him and hides behind the standee, out of the line of sight of the man. Suddenly, the lights turn on and the man looks over at the standee. The woman springs out of hiding and runs at the man. As she nears him, he grabs a thick, hardcover book out of his bag and hits her on the side of the head with it. She falls down and he directly passes the camera. Then, he jumps out the same window he came in and vanishes.*

"Well, now we know exactly what happened to Rivas!" the forensic expert said.

"Wait, slow down the clip and roll back! I think I saw something."

*In slow motion, a dark shape blocks all light. For a split second, the man's name badge comes into view. It reads "Hi! My name is: DAN - I am a: QBD Literary Expert".*

"AHA!" exclaimed Samuel. "We've got ourselves a suspect!"

The next day, police brought Dan Susterland down to the station for questioning. During the interrogation, Mr Susterland admitted to his crimes. But when his motives were questioned, the answer was not as suspected.

"Yes, I stole the books, but it was because my work forced me to! Business has been tough and my manager thought that if we staged robberies, our next campaign could point out that QBD has never been robbed and Dymocks has!" wailed Mr Susterland, "He told us we could keep the books as well! I never meant to steal them! I just wanted to keep my job!"

*Three months later QBD Books was sued for coercion and grand larceny.*

*Daniel Susterland was not charged for any theft, but he was sentenced to two years in jail with parole for the unintended manslaughter of Inspector Rivas Montgomery.*

*Samuel was promoted from Detective to Chief Detective.*

Three years later...

Chief Detective Samuel Horowitz was enjoying his job and enjoying his life. He had married Mrs Samantha Horowitz, the forensic expert he had worked with for so long, and had three children. He was sipping a cup of coffee at his office desk when his receptionist stuck her head in.

"Chief Detective?"

"Yes?" replied Samuel.

"The Bookstore Bandit has struck again! But this time he's stealing eBooks..."

– THE END –

# Unveiling the Porcelain Gift



Alisha Gobalakrishnan

Chairs scraping the crayon-strewn floorboards, every girl sprung up from their seats, laughter bubbling with cheerfulness as she formed a line to receive her gift from Mrs Jones. The classroom, injected with splashes of visual energy from the vibrant paintings and colourful posters of the students' artwork, hummed with excitement. Anticipation danced in the girls' eyes, knowing what lay inside the gift box: a stunning porcelain doll - its skin as white as snow, its blue eyes twinkling with innocent glow; each adorned in a distinct coloured dress.

Restlessly, Lucy shifted in her position, mirroring the fidgeting of her classmates, all fussing over their uniform plaits with agitation. The room resonated with animated squeals as each girl unveiled her gift, enchanted by the doll's captivating beauty. Finally, the long-awaited day had arrived; the year end class party, known for its cherished tradition of receiving a parting gift from the class teacher.

Reflecting on the past year, Lucy had found herself caught up in the whirlwind of changes, adjusting to a new environment – a new country and a new school. To her delight, she had discovered that she assimilated seamlessly. Despite her initial apprehensions, she had effortlessly established her place among the girls who seemed to relish her company, the welcoming atmosphere of her school dispelling her fears. Lucy had felt free to be herself, embraced for who she was, and this sense of belonging was comforting.

While not always in the spotlight academically, Lucy did not mind. She understood her strengths and weaknesses, acknowledging that others might excel where she did not. Yet, there were occasions when she could not shake a sense of unfairness. Despite her efforts and occasionally outperforming her classmates in certain tests, she noticed that recognition often eluded her. Sometimes, she caught glimpses of Mrs Jones' peculiar behaviour, seemingly favouring other girls over her. However, Lucy had dismissed these thoughts as mere overthinking. Perhaps those who had received more recognition excelled in areas where she did not, or maybe her reserved demeanour made her less conspicuous to the teacher, she would reason, reassuring herself.

Her parents would often offer comments like: "Lucy, darling, everyone is different in their own way, and that is what makes life beautiful," or they would compliment her, saying, "Your deep dark hair and glowing skin are hues that make you unique. Embrace your individuality, Lucy; you are beautiful just the way you are." While she nodded along and appreciated her parents' sentiments,

she had never delved too deeply into their meaning. After all, why should she feel any different from her classmates? They were all the same age, wore the same uniform and sported the same neatly tied up hair.

It was not as if she was the odd one out.

In fact, she had felt quite secure in her popularity among her classmates who often chose her to be team leader in class activities (although Mrs Jones had never granted her with the same opportunity). Lucy's world was painted with the warm colours of friendship, laughter, and shared dreams, blissfully oblivious of the discordant notes playing in the background.

Throughout the year, she had exuded a carefree spirit, fully embracing the essence of childhood innocence. Now, all she awaited was the pinnacle of the year - the glorious cherry atop the saccharine, indulgent cake. Lucy's eyes went wild with excitement when her name reverberated through the room. Time seemed to slow down as she approached the front of the classroom, her heart pounding with anticipation. With each stride, she inched closer to the peak of the year's celebrations: receiving the gift, her ultimate gratification. Barely containing her eagerness, she locked eyes with Mrs Jones.

For the first time all year, Lucy noticed a particular twinkle in her teacher's eyes paired with a wide grin stretching from ear to ear.

When Mrs Jones softly murmured, "Enjoy your gift," Lucy's heart brimmed with unexpected bliss, sensing what appeared to be genuine warmth in her otherwise indifferent eyes. She savoured the pleasurable yet somewhat surprising exchange, unaware of the subtle smirk playing at the corner of Mrs Jones' lips. With a thrill surging through her veins, she keenly reached out to accept the precious gift from Mrs Jones' hands. Though the gift box had felt lighter than expected, her excitement only intensified.

The other girls gathered around Lucy, impatient to glimpse the colour of the dress her doll would wear, amplifying the suspense coursing through her. This was the moment she had fervently anticipated all year. With trembling hands, Lucy untied the crimson bow embellishing the gift box, unveiling the long-awaited doll. However, at that precise second, her buoyant expression faltered. The room, alive with the jubilant chaos of celebration, immediately hushed.

Her joyousness was replaced by confusion; her hopeful eyes met with dullness. They met with the sight of an ink-coloured doll, its skin the colour of dusk, clad

in an understated gown so different from its porcelain peers. The sight of a doll that so distinctly resembled her. And in that exact instant, Lucy's eyes glazed over, staring blankly at her mirrored image. It was the first time that the cruelty of life became clear to her.

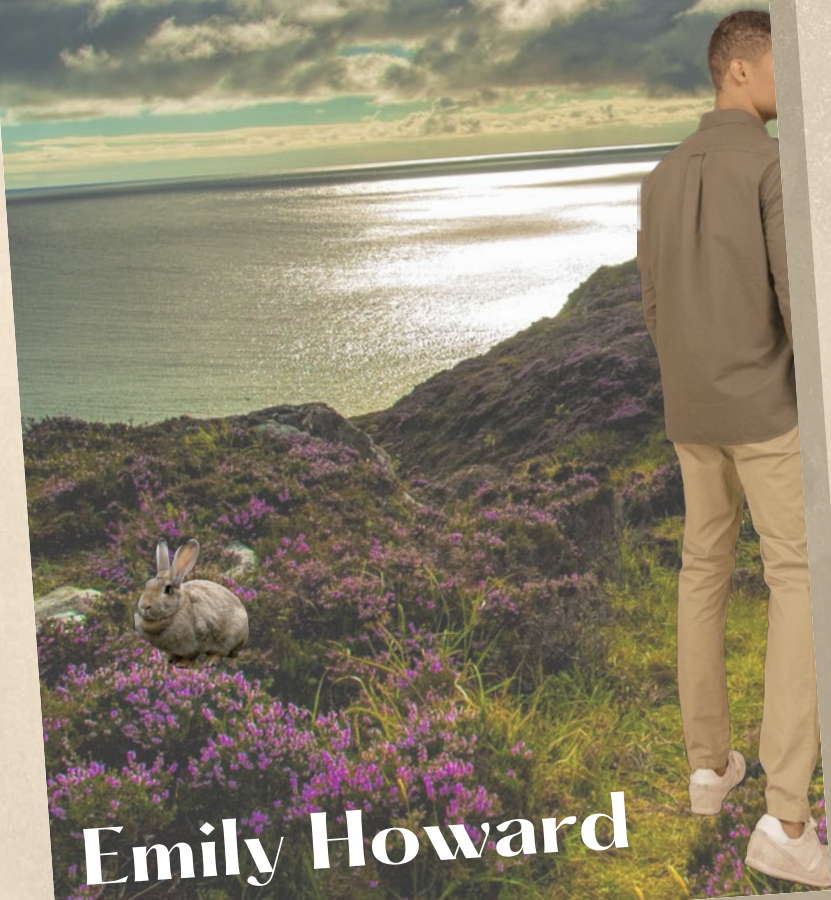
The first time that she stepped into the real world.

– THE END –

# UPPER SECONDARY



# The Path We Used to Walk



Emily Howard

He wanders along the jagged rocks lining the cliff edge, arms held aloft, teetering precariously along the ridge. The wind, once howling, has softened to a whisper, and the tips of his hair jump and float in a synchronised dance across his face. Frost blankets the grass that in turn covers the rolling hills, broken only by clusters of houses and long, thin, winding roads.

It's mid-March. A largely underappreciated month—the time of year when winter clings to the countryside, icy tendrils firmly grasped onto the small towns that suffer under its blue wrath. He's always loved it. The brittle cold seeps into your bones, fingertips turning purple under the north's icy chill, your breath condensing and hanging heavy on the air before you.

Alex has walked along these moors more times than he can count. He knows his countryside back to front; he knows the spot on the ridge that catches the last glimpse of light at sunset in spring; he knows the time of year when the crisp orange leaves start tumbling down, smothering the overgrowth; he knows where the grouse build their nests every May, and when the fledglings finally take flight, leaving the nests to crumble in their wake. He could find his way home with his eyes closed and make it back before tea.

He doesn't know how to leave.

*"Careful, Al."*

*He's five, adventuring across the boulders in his muddy little wellies. He wobbles a little, grabbing onto his mum's proffered hand to stop himself from falling. She smiles, a fond twist of the mouth pinching her left cheek. They walk together, him balancing along the crooked rocks and her walking beside him, making sure he doesn't fall.*

He's wandered up the hillside, joining the main trail that winds around the heath. It's a metre-wide dirt path meandering across the moor, nestled between banks of tangled undergrowth and overgrown grass; when it rains, it's filled with sludge, but in summer it's flocked with dog walkers and adventurous retirees enjoying the occasionally good weather.

He starts to nudge open the rotting wooden gate that divides the moor, stalling as the rusty hinges squeak in protest. He pauses in a moment of deliberation before he hoists himself up and over the gate, timber creaking under his feet as he climbs the slats and thuds to the ground on the other side. Miraculously, he stays upright, clinging to the gate in a determined attempt to remain on his feet.

*He's eight, watching the fading sun sink below the horizon, orange light tinting the whole countryside with a hazy orange glow. The purple heather and lush green grass are bathed in amber. His mum sits beside him, an old rug around their shoulders, legs dangling from the towering stone that erupts from the ground, jagged and angled. As the sun vanishes with a blink, the whistling wind sweeps in, bringing the evening chill to whisk away the sun's warmth.*

Alex stops at the old rabbit burrow, where he and his mum had found a family of little brown bunnies one spring. He's made a habit of having a look at it every time he walks past, foolishly hoping they might have returned. As always, it's a fruitless search.

*He's thirteen, walking their old spaniel, Martin, along the main path. He can see Martin's greying ears flopping about in the bracken that lines the path, hunting the rabbits that burrow underground. His mum walks next to him, humming some forgotten eighties ditty. In all his adolescent growth spurts, she still has a good twenty centimetres on him.*

*She stops at the gate, deftly mounting the old wood slats and jumping over it to the other side of the path. Martin slips through the gap between the stone wall and rotting wood, well-practised in their routine. Alex follows, stumbling a little as he lands on the uneven ground. His mum laughs, ruffling his hair as he regains his balance.*

*"Steady on, lad," she says, eyes twinkling with mirth.*

He walks over the rock edge of the old quarry, where they'd sit and watch the sunset. Patches of moss have taken root in the stone cracks, and the cliff is weathered and covered in dusty soil. The sky hangs heavy with the threat of rain, grey clouds covering the horizon.

*He's seventeen, standing in the quarry in his stiff funeral black. In the brutal, relentless cold, the numbness melts away, battering rain eroding the mask he's worn for the past few hours. He's soaked to the bone, trousers splattered in mud from the climb, heart open and aching and exposed and-*

*At last, he can feel. He feels the grief tearing into him, claws finding the weak points in his armour and ripping through until he is shaking with anger, with sadness and frustration and helplessness and longing, longing for someone to relieve him of this pain, of the deep hollow feeling that bubbles in his stomach and clings in his throat sticky and cloying and all-consuming, suffocating him in overwhelming emptiness until there is nothing left to do but scream and curse*

*and sob at the sky because **how could you do this to me?** How could you take the one thing that knew me?*

*How can I go on without her?*

And now he's twenty, and the loss still stings. He still wakes up in the middle of the night, lips shaping the childish cry, "Mum, help-"

He still misses her.

And now he's twenty, walking in the same places she did, tracing the footsteps long since faded.

But now he's twenty, and the pain is muffled. Now he's twenty, and he understands the importance of letting go.

He's been up the moor for hours, haunting his past like a love-sick spirit. Walking alongside his mum, stuck in the past, anchored by fiction and fantasy. Her ghostly fingers clinging to him, icy tentacles wrapped around his wrists and ankles, rooting him frozen in place.

He stands on the boulder range, staring out over the moors; beams of sunlight filter down through the thick cloud, golden rays dancing along the ridges and bringing a whisper of spring echoing through the hillside. Slowly thawing the ice of the past.

He's twenty, and he knows it's time to leave.

– THE END –



*Your Favourites*

Nakita Plumridge

I saw a tree and thought of you, or rather, thought of the way you saw trees. It reminded me of the time we strolled through the Botanic Gardens, an oasis in the midst of a city that buzzed with life, vibrant and verdant in the early spring sunshine. You stopped abruptly when you spotted it. I recall how you tilted your head in admiration, a strand of hair slipping from behind your ear. You tucked it back with a casual flick of your hand.

"There it is," you said, with such genuine enthusiasm that I felt as if I was missing something remarkable. I was, as it turns out.

You stepped over a low wooden fence and wandered into the grove, leaving me to scramble after you, as I always did. You paused in front of a tree, one among many, seemingly indistinguishable. But it wasn't, not to you.

"Look at how the branches twist and weave around those of the other trees," you said. Or maybe it wasn't meant for me at all. "The way they've grown in a seemingly chaotic dance in pursuit of the sun." You patted it with affection and laughed a little when you noticed I was behind you. "What do you think?"

You'd brought me to see your favourite tree in the Botanic Gardens, the kind of thing I'd never considered having. You were always gathering favourites, or at least you did then, of peculiar little things. Your favourite pebble on the path by the pond, the one you said looked like a peanut. Your favourite type of cloud, cirrocumulus, but only in the late afternoon. Your favourite spot in the local bookstore, the nook by the window where the light fell just right.

I looked at your tree, unsure what to think, having never really focused on a single tree before. I made some silly joke about seeing the forest from the trees.

You shook your head and said, "I think it should be the other way around." You were never one for the grand scheme, and I was never one for the finer details. You lived in the intricacies, in the small things. You held them close and made them a part of you.

I wonder why that tree was your favourite. I've thought about that a lot lately. Did you see yourself in the tangled branches, in the intricate weave of twigs and leaves? Maybe you felt you had twisted yourself around others, weaving through the shadows they cast, growing in peculiar ways in pursuit of the light. Which was I, then, the shadow or the light?

That day was perfect. I didn't realise it at the time, but it was. Your hand in mine, your laughter surrounding us, the air fresh and crisp and full of promise. I was one of your favourites that day, a piece in your kaleidoscopic collection

of things and moments. What an honour that was. The shadows came for us eventually, the darkness, but not that day. That day, the sun sparkled all around us, banishing the shadows.

I don't remember exactly when the clouds rolled in and took you away. Only that they did. 'Took' is the wrong word, I suppose, a selfish word, a cowardly word. I let them take you, didn't I? I watched as your world shrank, as your discarded favourites scattered on the street and were carried away by the wind. I was scared. Scared you'd leave me like the others, so I ran away from it all.

You're gone now. I'm sitting on a bench, your bench. Or is it mine? I bought a small plaque and chose the words for you. "A place to rest, a place to grow, ever reaching towards the light." I made sure to include a g, lowercase, in Times New Roman. Your favourite letter in your favourite font. I think you would've liked it. I suppose the bench is really for me. The things we do in memory of others when they're gone are never truly for them, are they?

It's peculiar, the fragments we select from someone's life to define it once it's over. And you had so many fragments. I can't help but feel the mosaic you created will sadly never be complete. How many favourites did you have that you never mentioned? How many have I simply forgotten? What were the shadows you hid that made you a gnarled thing, twisted and bent?

I don't want to dwell on that, on those dark things that took you away, leaving the world empty and desolate. You always enjoyed Greek mythology, not in a pretentious way. You read textbooks on Prometheus on the train. Okay, maybe it was a bit pretentious, but I liked it. You taught me about Persephone and then made me Demeter. Did I get that right?

I've been obsessed with those dark things for a while, but I'm trying to shut them out. I'm trying to focus on that day in the Botanic Gardens where we did just that. I got sunburned, but not badly. "It will turn into a tan," you said, with a dismissive wave of your hand, a gesture that seemed to hold all the wisdom in the world. It's hard to describe how light I felt in that moment as the sun dipped towards the horizon, the grass provided a cooling balm from beneath my bare feet. You cupped my reddening face and laughed. You kissed me. I would live in that moment if I could. I'd hold it in my mind and let it grow and grow until it consumed me forever, became my everything. But I can't.

I should tell you, the tree I saw today is nothing like your favourite. It's not in the Botanic Gardens surrounded by its kind, vying for light beneath the canopy. It stands alone on a desolate, crunchy patch of grass. It's tall and straight and

unadorned. Its branches hold nothing, reaching mournfully away from its constant blanket of shade. It's not dead, but dormant, waiting for the sun to drive away the shadows. I guess it's my favourite tree for now.

I've started my own collection, you see. It was difficult at first to notice the details, the small things that make up the bigger picture. I've made a habit of it, a ritual. It helps me feel close to you, or at least it feels that way. My favourite chair in that café on Elizabeth Street, in the corner where the light filters through the colourful glass bottles on the windowsill and you can hear the hiss of the espresso machine. My favourite street corner, infused with the aroma of garlic and herbs from the Italian restaurant, where the old man plays the violin on his stoop. My favourite train station, the one with the walls adorned with vibrant mosaics depicting distant, beautiful places. I wish I could show them to you. Maybe you noticed them when you were here.

I'm sorry. I think you know that. I hope you do. I'm sorry I ran away when you retreated. I should've followed you. I thought I had lost you already then, but I didn't understand what loss truly meant, not really. I'm sorry we couldn't live forever in our garden, on that day, in that magic we didn't notice until it was gone. I see it now, when it appears. In my favourites and in yours. I hold them close and make them part of me, just as you did.

It's quiet here, on the bench. It's getting dark. I think I see the shadowy things that took you away. I understand now why you wanted to escape. I want to go with them too, sometimes. Would they bring me to you? I won't go with them, at least not yet. I think things will feel better in spring, when you return to me, like Persephone. Did I get that right? Anyway, I want to see your tree again, as it was that day, shimmering in its vibrant foliage, bending and yearning, growing. Yes, I think things will feel better in spring, as they always do in the sun.

– THE END –

# Limerence



Fareeha Ullah

*So I bet all I have on that  
Furrowed brow*

*And at least in this lifetime  
We're sticking together.*

*- Mitsuki Miyawaki, Me and My Husband*

\* \* \*

**T**he house is awfully quiet now.  
And the pomegranate on the dining table remains untouched.

The *clicks* of the oven timer resonate throughout the house.  
The smell of flesh crawls over the kitchen and seeps into the space of the dining room.

I hope the smell absorbs into the walls.  
So that it can be a testimony to my existence. For Him.

Now, I hear His dress shoes rhythmically tap against the tiles, sharply punctuating His presence, slowly and seductively.

*Ding.*

He pulls the tray out of the oven and the smell ripens. It clings onto the air. Its sharpness carves itself into every crook and crevice of the house.  
The cadence of His steps draws closer to the dining room, building to a crescendo as He approaches. And there it is.

My body on a platter.  
All for Him.

I take up space in the corner of the dining room, next to the humming lamp, which paints the room a warm orange, as if the room had been dipped in honey, and left to ferment.

He comes and He goes from the dining room, each time bringing a piece of me. The smell of tender flesh intensifies with each plate.

As the surface of the dining table starts to be replaced by pieces of my body, He lets the pomegranate roll off the table, leaving a trail of crimson rubies. It travels

to my feet, its insides shining under the lamp. Raw and exposed, juices flowing and pooling at the sides.

I had cut it for Him before He came from work. I saw it at the markets and though they aren't in season, I thought it would be nice for us to share it together. The back of the knife moulded itself into my hands as I cut through the outer shell of the pomegranate. My hands were lathered in its sticky, sweet residue after I ripped it open. When I placed it on the dining table, I made sure that the rubies were exposed, so it would be easier for Him to eat, since He never liked messes.

The dining table holds parts of me. My hands. My legs. And right in front of Him: My heart.

His crisp white buttoned up shirt I had ironed two nights ago is covered in my blood, as His teeth sinks into the flesh of my hand.

I remember the way He would hold my hand and guide me behind Him whenever we went out with His business friends. The way He would tighten His grip whenever He felt me slip away.

He always led me, and I would trail behind Him like a shadow cast by his presence, shielding from the world.

He always knew what was best for me.

He told me I should take care of my body. To eat less sugar. To cut down my calories.

But now, looking at him, I wish I could've indulged myself. So that I could taste better for Him.

As He continues to rip the flesh off my bones, patting His lips with His handkerchief between each bite, the wrinkles between His brows carve into His forehead, and His upper lip presses into a thin line.

My eyelids begin to burn, my vision blurs, and the walls of my throat begin to press in on itself. I hate when He makes that face. I hate knowing that I did something wrong. Something to disappoint Him.

Did He not like it? Was it not good enough?

I want to cusp His face into my hands and ask Him what I could've done better. But I can't move. I am stuck. Helpless and useless.

He leaves me unfinished. Bones exposed through chunks of flesh. And now

what is left is my heart. His eyes linger on it. He teases it and pokes it with His silver fork and then punctures it, with a force that turns His knuckles white.

And then He just...sits there.

His eyes dissect my heart with His piercing gaze.

Letting it lay bare, all for Him to see.

But then He shoves the plate away from Him, stands up and walks away.

The tapping of His dress shoes leaves a lingering trail of echoes that fills the house.

The lamp continues to hum, its soft glow the only warmth left in the room.

Did I make Him feel sick?

Will the evidence of my existence that turns in His stomach, poison Him?

I look down at the pomegranate at my feet.

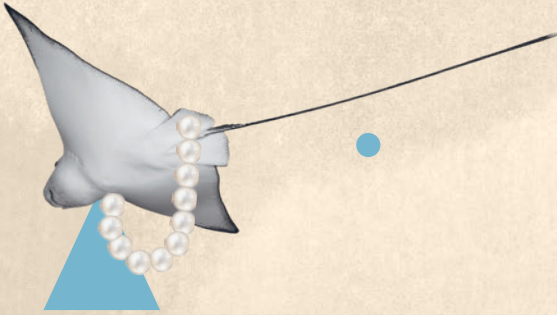
The pools have now evaporated, and the musty, earthy aroma blends into the heavy air. The rubies, which were once plump and red and glistening, are now mottled with dark, bruised spots.

Its hollow gaping interior, a silent invitation.

Patiently waiting to be devoured.

– THE END –





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# YOUNG WRITERS AWARD

2025

LET YOUR  
IMAGINATION TAKE  
YOU SOMEWHERE  
UNEXPECTED



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We received over 1180 entries for the 2025 Young Writers Award. We saw jungles, main characters as animals, humour, heart and reflection. A wonderful collection of diverse themes makes up this anthology. These entries rose to the top because of their unique ideas, technical skills and passion. Please enjoy this collection of award-winning prose.



# LOWER PRIMARY



# JIMMY THE FORGETFUL DINGO



EMILY  
GRAHAM

A long time ago, in the Dreamtime, there was a very forgetful dingo named Jimmy. Jimmy and his mate, Lyla, lived alone in Blaze Den, one of the many dens in the boiling Australian bush.

One silvery, scorching and silent night, Jimmy was awoken by a terrible noise. "What's that noise?" he mumbled sleepily, still only just waking up. Jimmy saw Lyla laying on her back, waiting and waiting and waiting. Jimmy gasped when he saw her. "You're having a baby!" he cried with delight. "Well," Lyla countered "I would like to know when it will come out." They both went back to sleep.

In the morning, Jimmy sets out to see Sally the magpie seer. Jimmy asks her when the baby will come out and she says in a hoarse voice, "Have a seat, I will be right back." So, she left. After what seemed like forever, Sally came back. "The baby will come out in two months." She said in her hoarse voice. "I will be on my then." Jimmy said "and thank you!"

After three months, Jimmy starts to get extremely worried. The baby should of come out a month ago. Sally never, ever, ever wrong!! Jimmy goes and check on Lyla. She looked more worse than ever. "So," Lyla said quickly "do you know what in a dingo's den is going on here!?" "I don't think that me knowing would make much difference." Jimmy admitted dramatically. "But do you know!" Lyla probably woke all the owls in Australia. Jimmy considered this for a moment. "Hmmm, no." He said. "I feel sick." Said Lyla suddenly. "Don't worry, I can look after you." said Jimmy. After five more months, Jimmy starts getting worried all over again. It should of come out six months ago!!! "Hello!!!" Lyla called weakly. "Hello!" called back Jimmy, but quieter. "Just come here!" She yelled back, furiously tired of his games. Jimmy wandered in, laughing hysterically. "Haha, very funny." Lyla said sarcastically. I've got an absolutely amazing plan! I've remembered something!" Jimmy sang over and over and over again.

The thing that Jimmy had remembered was that he needed to make Lyla medicine to make the baby come out. He also remembered the recipe. One rabbit, two gumtree leaves, some billabong water and a quarter of a lizard. all mushed up together. Once he had this, he gave Lyla the medicine which ate looking cunningly confused. "So, what's this and what's it supposed to do?" Lyla asked. "It's medicine and it will make the baby come out, which will make you feel a lot better. It's also what I remembered earlier." Jimmy answered her. "Then, I feel better already!" Lyla said joyously. "Well thats good." Jimmy smiled.

Three weeks later all was well again. Jimmy and Lyla had the baby and named her Betsy and Jimmy asked a very silly question. "Hey Lyla, what's a baby dingo called?" He asked her. "Oh Mr forgetful" Lyla said "they are called pups." She shook her head.

– THE END –

# MONKEY POWER

## HANS TEO



The scorching hot sun blazed directly on the fence and ground. That was where Malchy the monkey lived. He enjoyed roaming around the grassland and the freedom within the fenced area which was separated from humans.

One early morning, a group of construction workers took down the fence because they needed to relocate it to the local Primary school Mount Hawthorn.

The monkey was very furious. He bared his teeth at workers and with a murmured voice he told himself "I want revenge"!

Malchy went to the school to search for his fence. He brought along some weapons from the forest. The weapons were banana peels. He flooded the entire floor with banana peels near the classrooms. He hid and waited patiently like he was invisible until the recess bell rang. All the teachers and children rush out from their classes to the canteen. The floor was slippery with the banana peels and all of them fell over on to the ground and injured themselves. Children were screaming and sobbing while the teacher stumbled and fell over again and again trying to stand up.

Finally, the construction workers were left with no option but to come to a conciliation with the monkey. The workers agreed to replace a new fence and they planted ten more banana trees for him.

Malchy was on cloud nine after winning the war! This was his most memorably day ever!

– THE END –

# The Monkey Scientist



**Olivia Wong**

Long ago, in the deepest and darkest part of a jungle, an old, clever monkey scientist named Mr Monkey Minestine was looking out the window and saw a big storm was coming. Now Mr Monkey Minestine was actually excited, in fact he just remembered it was the first day of Winter. Mr Monkey Minestine opened the door and ran outside with all his tools for his experiment. His hands became colder and colder and so moved a bit quicker. It then started to hail. Mr Monkey Minestine quickly got out his special, gold glass jar and collected most of the hail on the ground, when suddenly, he saw metal roofs fly away including his. Mr Monkey Minestine ran into his roofless house remembering about his other friend's roofs then running straight out of his house causing the door to fly off too. First he ran to his best elephant friend Sam. He was holding his heavy door back. Mr Monkey Minestine called out to Sam and said "my door is already off, come and help me!" They spent a good few hours chatting about the weather wondering how they were going to get the roofs and doors back. Sam and Minestine were standing near the doorway, and then suddenly they blew away in the storm. Sam tried to grab on to Minestine's hand and he did then they had a hard landing on a grassy hill.

Sam spotted a tiny, not gone door. Sam knocked on it and the door opened. Minestine pulled Sam into the house. Inside was bigger than it looked. Minestine looked inside and he was astonished. He found his things were all neatly in the room. His glass jar, 6 roofs and 2 doors that belonged to Sam and him. Soon they heard a sound bing bang bing bang! so they turned and saw a shadow then the shadow turned into a ...

"Monster!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Sam said, hiding behind Minestine's back "monster?" said the scary thing? "I'm not a monster!" Sam ran out the door screaming, making Kayla the koala wake up from her big sleep in her gumtree. Sam asked if he could come up the tree to safety? Kayla said yes in a sleepy voice. But as soon as Sam got up he fell off into the storm . This time the wind kept blowing harder and harder. Then he remembered about his good friend Minestine. Sam pulled himself down to the grassy hill and opened the little door again. He slowly pushed his way through and got a bit stuck before entering. The little girl noticed and pulled Sam's trunk through the door so that he could get in.

Inside Sam saw something very different than the last time Minestine was at the table having lunch with the monster, who was actually a little girl. Sam was confused. She explained what happened and said that she looks like a monster because she was doing a competition to dress up as something

really spooky and the winner gets 6000 dollars. After a long and tiring day, she offered for them to have a nap on her spare beds.

## **Part 2: The Scientists Meet**

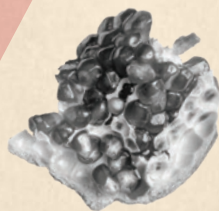
Sam was exhausted so Minestine woke up before him and looked around, and could hear peculiar sounds coming from the next room. Minestine peered into the next room and saw the little girl doing an experiment, similar to what he was doing outside with the pouring hail and she was using Minstine's special jar. He briskly walked to the little girl and said, "Are you using my jar of hail?" "Yeah I am, I thought while you were asleep I could help you with your experiment because I have always wanted to do this one but I didn't have a big enough jar for it." You could have asked me" exclaimed Minstine. "Hang on," said the little girl whose name was Lucy not even replying to Minestine. Are you the cleverest monkey scientist on this land? "Ah yeah I am" replied Minestine. Lucy explained how she had seen him in the newspaper and how she had always wanted to meet him.

Soon they heard Sam waking up from his big sleep in bed. When he looked around he saw everything except his dear friend. Sam marched out of his room to see what was going on and saw Lucy and Minestine in their white lab coats finishing the exciting, cool and unfinished hail experiment. Even though Sam was still feeling sleepy, his eyes opened wider as he looked around. There were large science posters, tall test tubes lined up on a shelf, vibrant coloured liquids, different types of growing plants plus a huge pool of different crystals surrounded by exploding vulcano-like things. He found it baffling as seeing a bird reading words.

Sam started helping them then said "I was looking for you Minestine ". After they finished the experiment they all celebrated and went outside to repair their friends' houses. Sam, Minestine and Lucy got a thank you gift from the animals that had lost their roofs. In the end Minestine invited Lucy over for a play at his house. At their house they played some Sciency games like Tip the Tube where you put different liquids into the tube and see what happens. Over the years, they had many playdates at both their houses, exploring new discoveries together. Sam sometimes came over to join them. They became well-known in the jungle as the three were an odd combination being an elephant, a monkey and a little girl.

– THE END –

# MIDDLE PRIMARY



# Rong Fu and the Emperor

Clare Chia



Long, long ago in a village with golden corn that reached towards the sun, with fields as green as the colour of spring itself and the pine tree in the town square was so tall that fully-grown men were gnats compared to the tree. Amidst all this colourfulness lived a magistrate named Rong Fu. He was a kind governor of the village and a young man. He always showed compassion to his subjects and had them pay low taxes but however he always tripped and fell and often ( always ) broke things. He dropped vases, bowls, plates, dishes and even spoons! I cannot tell you how many objects he dropped! The villagers teased him, "Clumsy Rong Fu," they said, "Always stumbling and breaking things. Whatever you do, watch out for clumsy Rong Fu!" They always said these things behind his back, so he never knew a thing and completely oblivious.

One fine spring morning on the twenty-first of June, a messenger came to Rong Fu's humble palace and gave him a letter from the emperor himself! He saw that it was genuine as the emperor's seal was on the letter. The letter was for the inspection of the year's crops; it said to come to the imperial palace in one month. Rong Fu was shocked, that he wanted reports on the crops so early in the year and usually he would send him a letter on the progress of the crops. What was going on? He thought to himself all night and finally decided that he must take action at once.

Rong Fu hurriedly rushed to get everything ready as perfect as he could. He groomed his horse that he would ride to the palace but not without clumsily upsetting a bucket of water and frightening the horse. He went to the seamstress and politely asked her to sew him a beautiful red silk garment with some silk he bought from the cloth merchant. She agreed, all the while thinking that he dropped the cloth on the way there and will drop his clothes on the way back and in a month's time Rong Fu looked as though he was the emperor himself. But there was something very dreadful and embarrassing that would happen in front of the emperor....

A month later Rong Fu had everything ready. His horse glimmered in the sunlight as the mud from last night's heavy rain stuck to the horse's shiny hooves. He rode his horse carefully to the palace trying to not get his garment dirty. The road was wet and dirty and the pond next to Rong Fu's house which was once a sparkling blue with lotus leaves and flowers floating on top of the water, was now a dirty brown colour and you could vaguely see the lotus leaves at the bottom. It turned out that the storm had made everything look terrible with its howling wind, crashing lightning and booming thunder.

Rong Fu thought about how he could see the emperor in all this dirtiness which would contrast with his clothes. Just then a rabbit hopped out of a rabbit hole and jumped in front of Rong Fu's horse which bucked and nearly threw him off.

When he finally arrived at the palace he was amazed at the luscious peaches growing and the golden koi swimming in a crystal-clear pond. Which appeared to have been cleaned a while before in the morning. What marvelled him most was two beautiful turquoise and green hummingbirds sitting in the cherry tree. At the doors two well-dressed servants in robes of verdant green escorted him to the great hall to meet with the emperor in person. The emperor had dressed in beautiful garments as blue as the sea itself with a wellmade pattern of gold and white koi swimming over the blue. The great hall was as big as the village square including the tall tree which was the tallest tree in the kingdom. In a shorter version, the great hall was enormous! The marble pillars were as white as snow with glass-like diamonds making patterns all over the great foundations.

The emperor greeted Rong Fu warmly and invited him to take a walk around the palace with him. The palace was as beautiful as the front garden. There was an orchid that held trees blossoming flowers, ready to grow fruit in the spring and countless servants dressed in an earthy brown some watering beautiful roses of every colour of the rainbow and some planting saplings in the muddy soil. It was clear that the emperor's garden was well looked after every day. Rong Fu clearly saw that the emperor's garden was much larger, but Rong Fu tended to it well every day (without the help of hundreds of servants) as a result the garden thrived and flourished in his care. As the two were leaving the back garden Rong Fu nearly tripped over one of the servants! As they were walking Rong Fu was trying to talk with the emperor. He stumbled over all his words and the emperor furrowed his eyebrows in utter perplexity. They stopped to look at the koi while sitting on a bench near the fishpond.

As Rong Fu was babbling like a brook about all his nonsense he slipped off the bench and fell face flat into the pond! This proves how clumsy he was! Rong Fu expected the emperor to be furious as him as he got out bedraggled with his garments soaked through and the once-rich red was darkened to a crimson shade. But when the emperor saw him and his clothes drenched through, he bellowed and hooted with sheer laughter. Rong Fu was astonished, even

more marvelled than the two hummingbirds in the cherry tree or the emperor's invitation to come to the imperial palace himself in the first place!

The emperor told Rong Fu that what he did was the most hilarious thing he ever saw in his life! He declared that annually, once a year, everyone in the kingdom should dress to perfection in their finest red clothes and accessories, decorate their houses with koi fish and most importantly, fall into a koi pond or any pond. He let Rong Fu name the event, and he named it a funny name: Fall into a Pond Day. Not one of his subjects had any clue that it was the magistrate clumsy Rong Fu, that always tripped and fell, made this hilarious and peculiar event.

– THE END –

# THE OTHER BROTHER

Caleb Kameron



## **Jett**

My little brother, Mikey, doesn't know what's happening to me. Should I tell him? I'm not sure. He's only seven...

I remember the day my brother was born. It's my warmest memory. The touch of his little marshmallow hand against my cheek, and the love that flowed through my heart – and still does. I peered carefully into his cot and whispered in his ear, "I will always protect you."

Right now it's like I'm watching a video on fast motion. I see myself zooming down the street, doing wheelies with Mikey in the pram. "faster," he yells. I hear crying and screaming in the night, but I'm not bothered. I even put up with the stink of dirty nappies. We play hide and seek and I fake surprise when he chooses the same spot Every. Single. Time.

The years whizz around like a tire swing. They're filled with bubble bath beards, flips on the trampoline, and my favourite, water gun warfare!

Youch! I'm snapped out of my daydream by the whacking of a stick. "lets fight," says Mikey. Ching Ching goes the clash of stick swords while I pretend to be Darth Vader with my rasping voice. Even though I'm in high school, I still love a good sword fight. "Pant, pant, pant – I'm just too tired, bro, I just need a rest," I say as I collapse onto the couch.

## **Mikey**

My big brother, Jett, doesn't think I'm old enough to understand. But I know what's going on. It's hard to believe, but he's really a superhero.

Flash! It all started adding up one blustery night while I was brushing my teeth. All of a sudden my eyes were pierced by a bright burst of light. I ran to Jett's room but he wasn't there! I ran up to my mum and she said something had happened at the pharmacy and Jett had just run off! And in that moment, I just knew he was out there, catching robbers when they strike at night. Running, jumping, climbing like a speedy ninja.

Born a daredevil, Jett's probably the bravest person you'll ever know. I've seen him climb 10 metres high in a tree, plunge into 3 metre deep sea waters, and let's not forget that time he jumped off our roof!

Ding, Dong! I race to the other door wondering who it might... "OH HELLO THERE!!!" booms our neighbour, MR Williams. "Shhhhhh, be quiet," I warned him, "my brother's taking his regular nap after being out on duty all night." "Oh

I am so sorry to disturb, I just wanted to give this to him so he knows we're thinking of him," says MR Williams in a hushed voice, as he hands me an envelope. I add it to the pile of gifts from other people Jett must have rescued.

Jett wakes and scrambles off the couch, his heart racing. "Bye, Bro," he says as he closes the front door. "What's he doing?," I ask myself. Quickly I race to the window, just in time to see three people wearing secretive masks beckoning Jett into a van. "they must be other heroes too," I think, "It must be some sort of weekly training workout because Jett always disappears at this exact time each week." I watch as the van screeches out of the driveway, leaving only skid marks behind.

Just as the van turns the corner, I see a flash of a word written in bright red on the side door – Can-ker, can-cer. I'm not sure what it means, but I'll add it to my journal.

## **Jett**

"Check mate!", yells Mikey as he knocks over my King. "how did you get so good at chess?" I wonder out loud.

Mikey gets off his chair to go make lunch, but a scrunched up dictionary page slips out of his pocket. Highlighted in yellow is the definition of 'cancer': any type of malignant growth or tumor, caused by abnormal and uncontrolled cell division.

Mikey walks back to the table and hands me a vegiemite and cheese toasty. Suddenly he notices the page and says, "Don't worry, I'll keep your identity secret."

It is sooooo time to tell Mikey, I think. Here it goes. I feel shaky, as though I'm about to race in an 100 metre sprint. I just want to get it over and done with.

"Mikey, there's something I've been wanting to tell you. I've been sick, like really sick," I say.

"Have you been poisoned by the bad guys?" asks Mikey.

"No mate, it's called cancer. I've spent the last few weeks in hospital," I explain.

Mikey's eyes widen and his face looks pale, as he pauses and stares for a moment. Then he asks, "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

I think for a while then say, "I wanted to wait until you could understand, like properly understand. And I didn't want you to worry until I knew I would get better."

Mikey asks in a small voice, “how will we know that you’re better?”

“I’ll get to ring a bell at hospital when I finish my treatment. “It’s a tradition,” I say.

### **Two weeks later**

“Did you know you could fry an egg on your head if you stood outside for 3 hours?” jokes Mikey as we walk down the hospital corridor.

I feel like I’m dragging a bag of rocks with each step as we move closer to the bell room. I catch a strong whiff of that familiar antiseptic smell. I nervously open the door to a room with a golden bell standing on a platform. Mum, Dad, and a few of my oncologist doctors and nurses are all crowded around the bell waiting for my arrival. My hands are trembling, and the clapping sounds distant and muffled.

My legs feel cardboard stiff as I slowly approach the golden bell. Above is a plaque with the words engraved:

*Ring this bell*

*Three times well*

*It’s toll to clearly say*

*My treatments done*

*This course is run*

*And I am on my way.*

As my hands wrap around the bell rope. I feel a sense of love for Mikey and a reflection of everything we’ve been through. I ring the bell and hear the calming sound ding, ding, ding ring through my eardrums, echoing inside, as I think of the words...

*My treatment done*

*this course is run*

*And I am on my way*

As I step down the stage, I overhear my kind specialist say to Mikey, “remember, not all heroes wear capes.”

– THE END –

# Dinosaur Ate My Homework

Homework

(A+)



Eleanor Mullen

Oh no. It's Friday morning, time for school. Let me tell you why that's so bad...

See, Friday morning means only one thing for me: time to turn in the week's homework, get all the maths questions wrong, get lectured for the fifteenth time that week about being "responsible for our learning" by my teacher, Miss Blake, and get on with the day. Only problem is, I don't have my homework. We've all left it at home before, but this is different. My pet ate it. My pet dinosaur.

I'm Amy Greyson, eleven year old year five C student. I'm a pretty boring person. Everyone says so. Well, I was up until a few days ago. That was when I got Rio, a fifty tonne Argentinian dino, when I travelled back in time with a toothbrush. Now... well, let's just say life isn't quite as monotonous in the Greyson household anymore.

Now, let's get back to the homework issue. Miss Blake always asks if anyone hasn't brought their homework. Jimmy Barns always has to put his hand up. He's the naughtiest boy in our year, and, trust me, that means he's pretty bad. Today, though, it's not just him. Miss Blake calls my name, asking me to explain. "My dinosaur ate my homework." I state, plain and matter of fact as ever. "Nonsense!" Miss Blake scolds. "That's as ridiculous as saying Hawaiian pizza tastes good. Sit down, you'll be losing your playtime for this. Really, I would never expect such disgraceful behaviour from you, Amy. Goodness!"

After that, the day goes past in a whoosh. You know that feeling when you've been waiting in line for the highest roller coaster in the theme park, and then you get on, do the huge loop-the-loop and it's not nearly as bad as you expected? That's exactly what I'm feeling. Before long, the school day's over and I'm back with Rio for an afternoon of humour and hijinx. But today, I've got a plan. I call to Rio, then shout to dad, who's baking, and mum, who's watching soccer on the TV that I'm taking Rio out for a bit. They never mind me doing that, replying, "Sure thing, love. Be back for dinner!" I head into the backyard, grab Rio and we gallop down the garden path, preparing to make mischief galore.

First stop: the pizza shop. That's right, we're heading down to my buddy Pepe's to grab a "Magnifico Hawaiian" as he calls them. Mmm, I can almost taste the cheesy deliciousness. But this one isn't for us. Nope, today we're making a special surprise delivery.

A few minutes of walking later, or in my case riding on Rio's head later, we've arrived at our destination: possibly the most bland, uninteresting house ever. It's gonna get interesting soon though. I peek through an open window, and, sure enough, there, watching Antiques Roadshow on an ancient television, is our client, the one and only Miss Blake.

The Dinosaur Delivery Service here isn't like Doordash, Uber Eats, Deliveroo, the lot. We don't leave your lunch in a soggy bag on the doorstep. We do more than delivery to your door. We do... Well, you'll see.

Rio grabs the pizza, still in its Pepe's box, in his mouth, before sticking his head and a quarter of his insanely long neck through the lovely Miss Blake's window, mumbling through his mouthful of cardboard, (yes, Rio is a talking dinosaur) "Pizza? It's Hawaiian."

– THE END –

(OR IS IT?)

(YEP, IT'S ACTUALLY THE END)

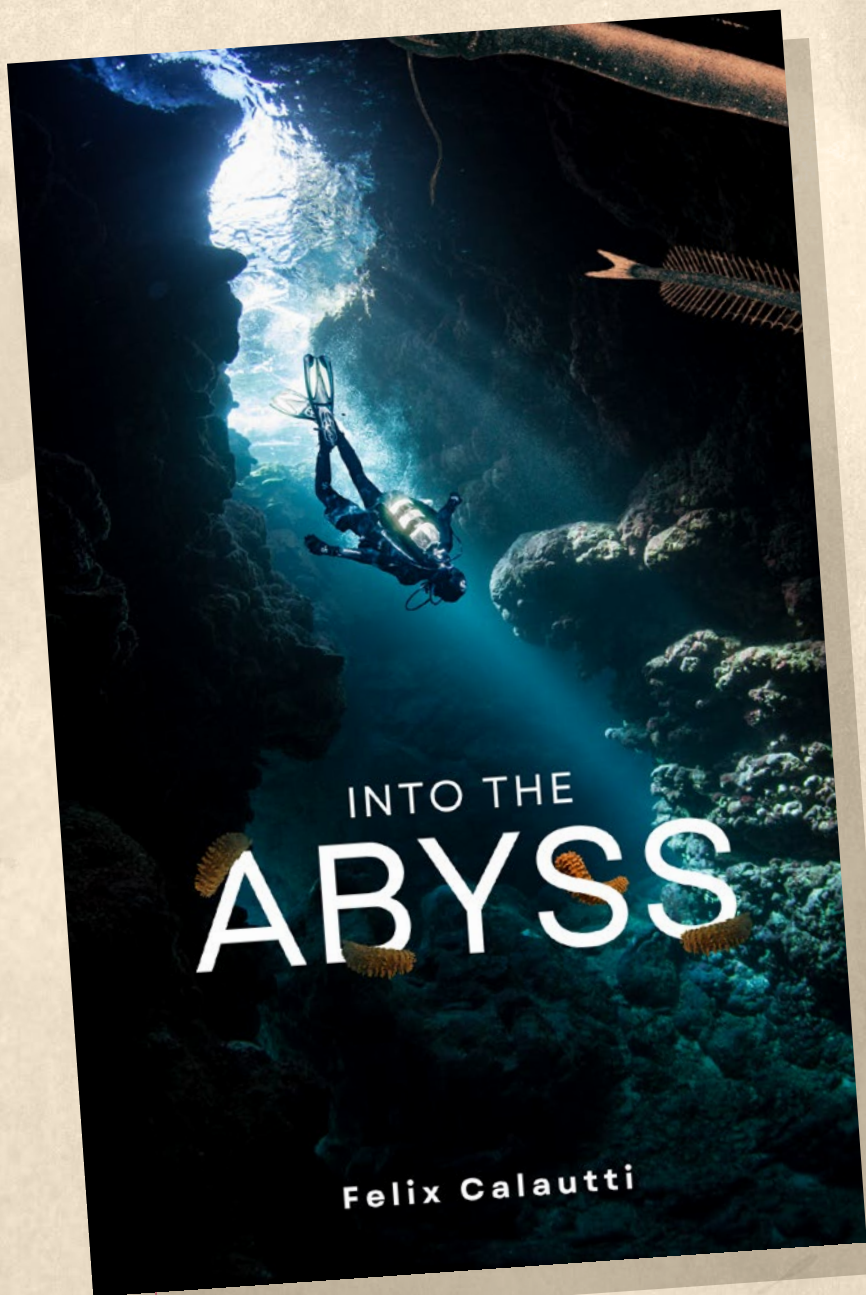
(I THINK?)

(THIS IS GETTING VERY CONFUSING)

(WE HAVE CONFIRMATION. IT IS THE END!)

# UPPER PRIMARY





INTO THE  
**ABYSS**

Felix Calautti

Trent entered the submarine for the fifth time, risking his life yet again. He was slightly more on the chubby side, with chestnut hair that flopped, uncared for, over his eyes. He was of average height and had a distinguishing crooked nose, not quite the person you'd expect to be going on a mission to save the world, and yet, here he was.

Trent wore a sleek skintight wetsuit, with its colour perfectly matching the grey-black exterior of the machine he was entering. Once he was inside, Trent stared around in awe. Although he had been in here five times before, the constant whirl of buttons and screens still amazed him. He waved a quick goodbye, to nobody really, and closed the hatch. A hiss of air let out as the cabin pressurised and the submarine prepared to dive.

Trent could see the countless number of scientists looking down at him from the separate boat, each holding a perfectly blue clipboard. They were there to supposedly 'monitor' Trent's results, and yet he could swear all they did was just stand around all day and scribble gibberish on their papers. And then, they took credit for making it to the bottom of the Bacta trench.

'Ugh, stay focused!' Trent thought angrily to himself. He couldn't let his wandering mind hinder him. Suddenly, the floor lurched downwards and Trent had to grab his seat to stop himself from hurtling upwards. He had begun his descent.

After ten minutes of watching as the light grew dimmer and dimmer, Trent's ears began to pop. After another twenty minutes of staring out the window he eventually gave up and took a walk around the confined spaces of his cabin. Trent was just about to sit back down again when he heard a mechanical voice drone, "3 hours until Bacta trench reached. 3 hours until Bacta trench reached. 3 hours until Bacta trench reached." The name Bacta reminded him of why he was here. Bacta C40.

It was a virus, and a deadly one at that. In the past half hour he had sat in his chair, nearly twelve thousand people would've died. If it wasn't for the urgent work of scientists across the globe, the whole of earth's population would be gone. The one thing saving nearly nine billion people?

Sea cucumbers. Trent almost laughed, floating blobs were saving the entirety of earth? It never got old. But then again, they weren't ordinary sea cucumbers, it was a special species: Biotransescent Trinco's. And of course, they were

only found at the bottom of the worlds deepest trench, Bacta Trench, hence the name Bacta C40.

The mechanical voice rang out again, “Ten minutes until impact. Ten minutes until impact. Ten minutes until impact.” Had it really been three hours? Trent had spent the time reading, sleeping and staring into the depths. In just a few more minutes, he would suit up, and enter the seabed. His mission? Collect as many sea cucumbers as possible. They were huge, nearly the size of a small dog, and so a single animal could save over fifty people. That meant that a successful trip could save the lives of five thousand people.

“Put on suit. Put on suit. Put on suit.” The voice echoed again. Trent did as he was told, pulling the more chunky waterproof fabric across his body. He was equipped with a self pressurising helmet, a speargun, underwater goggles and a diver propulsion vehicle; all courtesy of the SPE Centre, otherwise known as the Save Planet Earth facility.

The facility had claimed immediate responsibility when the virus was first released, and was given an extensive amount of power by the governments across the globe. Trent thought it was fascinating, how when the earth was suddenly faced with a deadly crisis everyone put down their weapons and came together, a united world. Wars ended, conflicts swept away.

The thought put a smile on Trent's face, but it was quickly wiped away as he remembered what he was here to do. ‘We're here to save lives,’ Trent remembered his grandpa always saying that. He was gone now. He lived his every day saving hundreds of lives each week, and yet there was not a single person to save his own. Trent remembered the very day he'd died, it was a Sund - stay focused!

Pushing his previous thoughts to the back of his mind, Trent entered the airlock, listening for the satisfying hiss of his helmet sealing. After doing a quick safety check, Trent prepared to exit the hatch. Deep breaths in, deep brea - “Exit the vehicle. Exit the vehicle. Exit the vehicle.” Trent scowled, but eventually opened the hatch and stepped into an entirely new world.

Ever since Trent had first visited a beach, he had wondered why everything seemed so blue underwater. Just a few weeks later, when his grandpa had explained that water absorbs red light, Trent had fostered a life long relationship with the big blue.

Although he spent most of his leisure time reading books about the strangest sea creatures, or watching documentaries about the weirdest waters, Trent had never once imagined that he'd be standing on the deepest seabed in the world, let alone saving hundreds of thousands of lives through sea cucumbers.

And yet here he was, a single boy, millions of lives resting on his shoulders.

Trent had exactly one hour of air, he'd have to be quick. He would harvest the sea cucumbers through a vacuum, that would then pull the animals back to the submarine. It was a delicate process, probably a third of the animals that went in would not come out alive, but the world had to risk it if they wanted any hope at all.

The sea cucumbers were slow and easy to catch, but an hour? Trent didn't like the sound of that.

He started out searching around the ship for the glowing bodies but only found a few. He had two options, keep looking close to the submarine, or pick a direction and set out for larger patches. The first was safer, it wasn't hard to lose yourself in the murky waters, but then again he had limited time and the latter would certainly speed up the process.

Eventually he chose to head out in a northerly direction, after all, even if he only found a single sea cucumber more, it would be worth it.

After barely three minutes of walking Trent realised his decision had paid off, nearly ten cucumbers had passed his way, now off to save lives. Trudging further he uncovered a large patch of the animals. Within mere seconds five cucumbers were whooshed of down the vacuum.

Trent spent the better part of the next ten minutes navigating the treacherous terrain. Along the way he only found a few small sea cucumbers, and his hopes began to dwindle. He couldn't go back with only twenty cucumbers! 'Uggh, I need to stay on task!' Trent thought angrily to himself, 'Thousands of lives are at risk!'

Barely a few seconds later, Trent noticed the huge rock formation looming out of the dark. It almost looked like a huge pencil, with its tip burrowed deep into the murky sand. The blunt end seemed to be home to an array of strange looking fish, and a oddly shaped eel that swam in jerky bursts. Trent decided to move on, he was here to harvest sea cucumbers, not fish. But before he could even take his first step, Trent spotted something hiding in a small depression behind the formation, could it be a cucumber?

Changing direction, he made his way to the jagged pillar. At closer look, Trent found that the rock was on the verge of splitting down the side, it had clearly been there a long time. Making his way around the wide base, Trent finally got a closer look at the mysterious creature. It certainly looked like a sea cucumber. Trent was just about to use his vacuum when the figure shifted. Trent took a step back. And then it lunged.

Trent felt oily skin brush his suit, if it wasn't for the water resistance he would be dead. Now that the creature had finally come out, Trent realised what it was. Sort of. Its huge teeth and scaled body told him it was a deep sea dragon fish, but it was way too big. Normally creatures like this would grow to a maximum of 60cm, but this had to be at least three metres. Big enough the swallow him whole.

Backing away Trent noticed the creature draw back, about to lunge. This time he sidestepped, and managed to whack it with his vacuum. This only seemed to make the dragon fish angrier. Their routine repeated another few times, with it lunging and Trent dodging. Although Trent's wetsuit was designed for extreme pressure, the dragon's sharp teeth were wearing it down. He needed to get out, and now. Trent began to back away but his eyes didn't leave his attacker. At first he thought it was working, but that quickly changed when the eel like monster swam across to cut off his escape. Trent was tiring. Worse, his air was running out. Trent had started with an hour of air, and now he had ten minutes left. That was exactly how much time it had taken for him to get here. In short, Trent needed a miracle if he wanted to live. As chance would have it, a miracle came.

The monster had been circling the pillar when it happened. The pillar fell. The dragonfish was instantly killed, with half of its body lost under jagged rubble. But it wasn't all good. Trent had two tubes that led back to the submarine: his

vacuum tube and his air tube. The latter was no longer. His air had gone from ten minutes, to two minutes. Mere seconds separated Trent from death, he would have to act fast. He didn't bother trying to walk back, it was pointless. Trent needed a solution, he couldn't rely on another miracle. What was there? He could try cutting open the fish and see - no, he wasn't that desperate. Yet.

Trent already knew the lack of oxygen was affecting him, as his eyes began to see giraffes and rhinos swim by. Dots of pain appeared in the corners of his vision, and suddenly it seemed as if his suit had disappeared and the weight of the ocean rested on his shoulders. He collapsed to the seabed. And then his grandpa materialised.

Trent remembered the Sunday his grandpa had died more than any other day. He had finished a long day at school and was looking forward to spending the day with his favourite person, Arthur. Trent's mum, Maria, had died of cancer a few months after Trent had been born, and just a few years later his dad had left. Arthur came to finish what his son had started and took care of Trent for 13 happy years. In Trent's eyes, he was a hero. And then Sunday rolled around. Trent rode home on his bike, imagining the new things he would do this afternoon. He was less than a kilometre away when he saw the smoke. It took him another few minutes until he could smell it. Everything was gone, there wasn't even a speck of recognisable piece of home left. Nothing. Trent was later told that it was a bushfire but it didn't matter, life had struck again.

Trent awoke. His situation was the same. A minute of air. He almost wanted to give up until he found what he'd been waiting for. A chance. He crawled desperately over to his vacuum tube and peered inside. It would be big enough. He let himself squeeze inside, clicked the button, and then waited. He didn't have too wait long. His body zipped along the tube, gaining scrapes, scratches and speed. Trent lurched, it was over. He was safe.

– THE END –

# LIFE THROUGH THE EYES OF GIZMO

DANIELLA FISH



Hello! Let me introduce myself, my name is Gizmo, but most people know me as (drum roll please) Gizmo The Great! (No one calls you Gizmo The Great –ED) Okay okay no one calls me Gizmo The Great, people just know me as Gizmo. Let me describe myself to you, I am fairly tall and have a stunning body covered in white and black hair, on my elegant head are two tall horns and every girl has fallen head over heels for me. (I am sorry that I have to but in, but no girl has ever fallen head over heels for you-ED) stop butting in this is my story! (Okay I won't but in any more –ED.) If you haven't guessed already, I am a goat.

Another thing about me is that my life long goal is to get to The Bush. The Bush is the most delicious looking bush on the universe. The only thing stopping me from getting to the bush is a fence. As most of you know goats don't jump fences, only sheep jump fences. So that was a problem, but that wasn't the biggest problem. The biggest problem was Bill.

Bill is a small brown goat, he has brown hair and brown eyes and he hasn't stopped following me since Farmer Pete brought him home from the market. Yesterday afternoon a miracle happened, Farmer Pete left the gate open! As soon as I saw it open I bolted as fast as the speed of light (dude a snail overtook you –ED) stop interrupting. (Fine-ED) You will never believe what happened! I got to The Bush with Bill (sadly) and it was super GROSSSS! It tasted like Farmer Pete's old socks and the barns wooden table. (Oh so a bit like Brussels sprouts -ED) Yeah! Bill on the other hand, was in heaven.

Just as I was about to walk back to the farm a weird white blobby car rolled up to me. Then the window came down and there were more people like Farmer Pete inside. Except there was a little girl, an older girl, a woman and a man. The man was clucking a bit like Brenda the chicken. I decided that he needed help; to get him out I started to kick and head butt the white car. The car didn't like it so it rolled away. I saved them! Some now call me a hero. (No one calls you a hero –ED) Stop! (No-ED) fine.

Just as I had found some nice grass next to The Bush the clump of people walked up to me. I ran up to them. (Bill on the other hand ran home) Maybe they had food! The woman definitely did. I decided to be super friendly to the woman and when the older girl tried to go to her, I jumped on her protecting the woman. When I wasn't looking, the little girl went to the woman and hid behind her, the older girl hid behind the man. They all try to walk back to the house, but I don't let the woman go, I can smell food coming from her.

The man and the two girls have made their way to the gate and are struggling to close it. The woman makes a run for it, she is surprisingly fast.

The woman makes it to the gate and helps them push it and the gate closes with a clink. I start to run, my run turns into a sprint and this time I am really fast. The gate is getting nearer and nearer. As I try to turn I realise I can't; I can't stop either and then I realise the truth. I am going to hit the gate! The gate is now only inches from my horns and then CRUNCH!! I hit the gate! (Soooo elegant-Ed) Stop you are being mean! (Just tell the story-ED) Okay, well I hit the gate so hard that my precious horns on my elegant head are stuck and wedged in the gate. I am devastated my beautiful horns are now stuck in their gate!

The people took photos of me and my horns because after all I am still a model (you are not a model-ED) Says who? (Says me-ED) Who made you in charge? (You!!-ED) Oh, but... (Just continue the story-ED) Okay where was I? Oh yes...

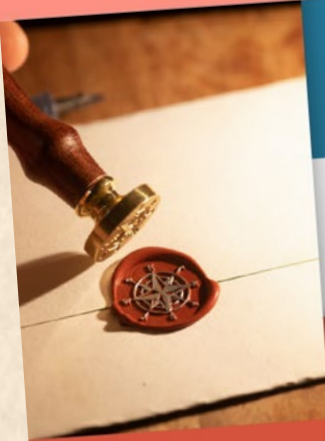
The people took photos with me then left. Not before calling someone special, Farmer Pete! I stay like that until Farmer Pete comes over to collect me. When Farmer Pete's ute comes to collect me, he has to cut the gate to free my horns, he then ties me to the back of his ute. He drives me home even though we only live next door. When we get home I am in so much trouble. Bill doesn't get in trouble. (Maybe because he came home and wasn't stuck in a gate-ED.)

As Farmer Pete was yelling at me, I noticed that Bill is standing behind farmer Pete. Bill sticks out his long slimy slobbery pink tongue at me and lets out a ha ha. When farmer Pete turns around I get ready to run to Bill. I do the same thing a bull does when it's about to run to its target and charge towards Bill. Even though I have perfect eyesight, I didn't see Farmer Pete in front of me. (Dude you need glasses-ED) No I don't (just tell me what happened-ED) Okay um... oh yeah! Then I accidentally hit farmer Pete in the back of his leg, he falls forward and with my bad eyesight (you admit it!-ED) Yes I do, anyway I mistake Farmer Pete's bum for Bill and bite it. Hard.

As punishment for biting Farmer Pete's bum, I get tied to a tree. Not just any old tree, my favourite tree, an olive tree. As I decided I don't want to be tied up any more, I also got hungry! I looked at my tree and its beautiful little olives shining in the evening light. Just begging to be eaten. Then a very good idea popped into my head (I will give you a clue it involves eating and olives) I think I know how to get out...

After I get in trouble with Farmer Pete about eating his tree, I head out into the paddock “to think about my actions” as Farmer Pete would say. Then something three different shades of green caught my eye, I see a new bush.

– THE END –



# Forte

I press down on the pedal, my extravagant chord hanging in the air. I listen until it completely fades away before I turn to Agnes and bear the awaiting praise. "Beautiful Wilhelmina, absolutely breathtaking!" The corners of my mouth curve up in a shy response, "Do you think I'll be ready for the test on Sunday?" She doesn't miss a beat to respond, "I think you're ready today!" I feel a pat on the shoulder as she points to the clock. I turn the rusty door knob and bolt past the shops, my auburn hair flying behind me. I don't stop until I reach the little bungalow I call my home.

I place my book on the grand piano and chow down some cereal. "Hello mama." I muffle when she walks into the kitchen. No response. She's talking on the phone to someone, so I leave for school. I look down at my wrist then remember I forgot my watch. The Doesburg sunrise suggests it's about eight o'clock. I breathe in the fresh October morning and smile at the little buildings that house the street. I hang my head over at the sight of my old magnificent house, I miss the radiant garden and the cozy fireplace, but I know my parents couldn't pay the mortgage. I wince at the thought of Noah Janson, an obnoxious boy in my year, living there now.

The words 'Doesburg Junior School' tower over me, my piano playing helps me forget that I will only be here for another month. I grew up in this school, being part of the year group since daycare, but the piano scholarship test for the Doesburg Music Academy is nearing. My eyebrows furrow to think about an alternative for high school but I quickly brush off the idea. My parents are mad about music and if I don't win the scholarship, I doubt they'd be willing or able to pay the full fee. I run up to Lucille, my best friend. Some people say we look related, with our hazel eyes and petite stature, but I don't think we are. There is one major difference in our appearances, my auburn hair as opposed to her dirty blonde locks. I notice Lucille's prize possession (her cello) slung on her back. "Hi Helmet." She giggles, Helmet was a silly nickname she made for me in year two when we first met. For some reason, we both burst out laughing and skip off to class.

The day goes on as usual, maths and history for periods one and two, then music and English before lunch, and sport followed by spelling after lunch. I walk home and immediately start practicing piano the second I step through the door. If I really want the scholarship, I have to perfect my piece, 'Clair de Lune'. I wish Agnes was there to help me but my only company is a tiny finch perched on the window sill. A warm tear runs down my cheek and drops onto middle C, followed by countless more. My forehead presses down on

the keys creating a cacophony, 'What will happen if I don't get chosen for the scholarship?' The thought creeps up on me as more tears streak my face. I use the back of my hand to wipe my cheek and walk to the faulty computer which must be 15 years old. My shaky hands log onto a website called 'The International Conservatorium of Music'. I then grab the dusty video camera and film myself playing my song. Once it's all uploaded, my parents arrive home from work.

I can barely sit on the piano stool, my body is aching all over as I assess the damage from the belt. Papa gets very angry when I'm on the computer instead of practicing. He can be harsh, but I know my parents just want me to succeed. I can feel the welts on my rear start to swell as I try to keep calm. I finish the song flawlessly but receive no recognition. The day finally arrives for my scholarship test. I wake up with a start and check the time, seven o'clock. That will leave me enough time to visit Agnes before the test at nine. I pull a nice dress on and head off, I reach her house just in time before the rain starts pouring down. "You look quite nervous, Willie" she points out, stating the obvious. She hands me a tin of sugar biscuits. We sit there in silence, deep in our own thoughts, until she breaks it again, "You know Wilhelmina Bakker, I have nothing left to teach you."

I bite down on my lip and my fingers reach for the lace ribbon my mother put in my hair. My eyes are fixed on Noah playing in the sound room that I'm about to enter, he takes a charming bow and smirks at me when he leaves. How I hate Noah Janson, so full of himself. I replace my apprehensive expression with a bright grin as I enter the fancy room. I introduce myself and my piece. The panel of judges gesture for me to take a seat behind the dazzling grand piano. "When you're ready Wilhelmina" the middle judge tells me in a monotone voice. "This is it" I tell myself. Note after note after note, I don't even need to look at the music anymore, everything comes naturally. I press down on the pedal, my chord hanging in the air, a million thoughts rushing through my head. After answering a few questions about 'Clair de Lune', I curtsy and walk off. I've done it.

Weeks go by and everything seems to go back to usual. Lucille told me all about her test and is very confident that she will secure a spot. Everyone seems as happy as a horse but something keeps gnawing on the back of my mind. I can't put a label on it though. My welts have calmed down a bit but still hurt from time to time to remind me about the consequences of disobeying

my parents. Twice a day, I check the mailbox to see if I have a letter from the Academy, twice a day I'm disappointed. I start to lose hope, I can only manage a maximum of five hours of sleep per night. I can't miss this scholarship I worked day and night for, it will ruin me. One day, on my way to school, I see Noah in the front of his house, punching the air. There is an eggshell coloured envelope in his hand, I squint my eyes and make out the Academy seal. Oh no.

My heart beats like a drum against my chest, what will my parents say? What will Agnes think? What will I do? I try to run away but my muscles are frozen. I always knew there was a possibility of failure, but deep in my heart, I thought I would get it. I knew I would get it. Forcing myself to make it to school is a challenge, my eyes are blurry with tears but I managed to make out a head of dirty blonde locks in front of me. "Wilhelmina!" Lucille exclaims, "I won the cello scholarship!" I push my mouth into a smile and hug her. "That's great!" I reply with a wobble in my voice. I can't hold it back any longer, I burst into tears and Lucille doesn't need an explanation to know what's wrong.

When I arrive home from school, my parents are waiting for me on the front doorstep, I brace myself for punishment, they must have found out about Noah. My mama has her head down and a tear falls from her cheek, my papa has a unintelligible expression on his face but I know he's extremely disappointed. "Wilhelmina, we have decided to have you repeat grade six because you did not receive the scholarship for the Academy." My father tells me, my jaw drops, I can't believe they are doing this to me. "We think it's for the best." My mother adds. I run to my room and sob into my pillow. The next morning I wake up, rub my sore eyes and go check the mail box. It's become part of my daily routine and I still have the slightest hope that they sent the envelope to my old address (Noah's house) by mistake. I lift up the cover and find an envelope, my quivering fingers run over the smooth paper. I switch my attention to the seal, it is not marked with the Academy crest but a globe. I open it and read, '*Dear Ms Baker, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into The International Conservatorium of Music. You leave tomorrow.*'

– THE END –



# LOWER SECONDARY



# The Tide-Keeper



Chloe Chin

The town of Port Sorrow was a joke, a name the kids at the next town over had coined, and it stuck. It wasn't because of anything particularly sad, just because nothing much ever happened here. The main street was three shops long: the post office that sold lollies, the hardware store that was also a fishing bait shop, and the old milk bar run by Mrs. Pritchard, whose sole expression was a sort of weary tolerance. We lived on the tide, a steady rhythm of ebb and flow, and it felt like that's all we ever were—a place that just waited for things to wash up and then get carried away again.

Me? I was sixteen and mostly waiting. Waiting for the last bell, waiting for summer, waiting for something that felt more alive than the slow churn of the sea. My older brother, Finn, had been the only real spark in Port Sorrow. He was eighteen, a year out of school, and he had a way of seeing the world in bright, chaotic colours. He talked about cities with buildings that scraped the sky, about music that made your bones shake, about a life that wasn't measured in tide cycles. Then, three months ago, he'd packed his beat-up Commodore and just left. No fanfare, no big goodbye. Just a scrawled note on the fridge that said, "Gotta go find the music."

My parents didn't talk about it much, which meant they talked about it all the time with their silence. The house was a quiet place now, a ship with its anchor cut. I felt like the only person still trying to hold on to the rope, standing on the shore, watching it drift.

That's when I started finding things.

It began after the big summer storm, the one that tore half the sign off the milk bar and left a thick, dark carpet of seaweed and debris on the beach. While everyone else was cleaning up their yards, I went to the shoreline. The storm had spat out a whole new world. Among the usual driftwood and dead jellyfish, I found a lone, waterlogged paperback with a cover that had almost entirely peeled away. I took it home, dried it out page by page. It was a dog-eared copy of some old fantasy novel. On the inside cover, in faded pencil, someone had written a name: M. Davies.

The next day, I went back. This time I found a single, smooth, sea-worn chess pawn—a rook—and a small, ceramic shard of what looked like a bird's wing. My collection grew. I found a tarnished silver earring shaped like a crescent moon, a handful of smooth, perfectly round marbles, a tiny, intricately carved

wooden boat no bigger than my thumb. Each item was a single word from a long-lost sentence. I wasn't just picking up junk; I was piecing together a life.

I became the tide-keeper. Every morning before school, I'd walk the shoreline, my eyes scanning the sand. My room, once a mess of forgotten clothes and textbooks, became an archive. I had a shelf dedicated to the "Davis collection," as I called it. I would sit for hours, arranging the items, trying to imagine the person they belonged to. I pictured a girl, a few years older than me, who loved to read fantasy, who played chess, who had a silver moon earring. I gave her a life, a story, a face. It was an escape, a way to focus on someone else's mystery so I didn't have to think about my own.

The truth was, every item I found, every piece of a story, was a piece of Finn. Each day, I'd wonder what he was doing, who he was talking to, what new world he was discovering. He had promised to call, but the phone stayed silent. The emptiness left by his absence was a physical ache, a constant low-grade hum in my chest, and I couldn't figure out what to do with it.

Then, one Tuesday, I found something different. It wasn't a small, worn piece of history. It was a jar, one of those old-fashioned ones with a wire clip. It was tightly sealed and half-buried in the sand. My heart hammered in my chest. This wasn't a mystery; it was a message.

Inside, wrapped in a plastic sandwich bag, was a single photograph. It was of me, maybe eight years old, Finn's arm around my shoulder, his grin wide and mischievous. He was holding up a half-eaten ice cream cone and I was laughing. On the back of the photo, in his familiar, messy scrawl, were two words: Keep going.

The sea-glass, the chess pawn, the little wooden boat—they all fell away from my thoughts. I held the photograph, its edges worn but the memory sharp as a freshly broken shell. I turned the photo over again and looked at the words. Keep going. I wasn't sure what he meant, but in that moment, standing on the same beach we'd walked a thousand times, with the same wind in my hair, I felt it. The hum in my chest didn't disappear, but it changed. It was no longer the sound of an empty space. It was the sound of a voice. A voice I hadn't heard in months, but one that had been there all along, carried on the tide.

I tucked the photo in my pocket. I knew I couldn't keep collecting someone else's past, because I had my own to live. I still walked the beach, but I wasn't looking for fragments of a stranger's life anymore. I was just walking, feeling the sand beneath my feet, watching the waves roll in, and listening. And with the wind in my ears and the ocean's steady rhythm, I heard my brother's voice, telling me to just keep going. And for the first time since he left, I felt like I finally could.

– THE END –

# Cloudbound

Abigail Koh



grief

/gri:f/ - noun

intense sorrow, especially caused by someone's death. evidence that something was loved deeply, mattered immensely, and made our life more than it was.

\*

Max wandered through a forest.

A thick green forest, with shrub that curled lazily around his feet every step he took; the sunlight peeked through the gaps between the canopy of mingling leaves above him. Its light wasn't harsh, just dazzling enough for the rays to catch the miniscule insects that flittered around before his eyes, just glinting enough to warm him up.

He hadn't felt this warm in a long, long time.

His fingers brushed against the bark of a tree. It felt rough but alive, like the tree was breathing beneath its skin. There was a knot in the wood—smooth in the center, solid beneath the warmth of the sun. The life of the tree pulsed through the trunk, and he could feel it, steady and growing. It was like the tree breathed, slow and steady, under his touch. It didn't move, didn't flinch, but he swore it felt like it was listening. Like it knew things. Things about stillness. About growing tall even when the wind tried to break you.

Max retracted his hand.

He let go.

Then he continued his walk. *This place is cool*, he thought. *It feels like the back garden at home.* Striding over a line of scuttling ants that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, Max didn't look back. Ants always came here. Maybe it was refuge. Maybe it was a final destination.

A patch of white. Between the bushes, catching Max's eye.

He wandered over, calling out, his hands coming up to cup his mouth. "Hey! You!"

It ran.

Max followed. Worn-out sneakers - the kind that clung to his feet like old friends, no matter how many days passed here - thudded softly against the

forest floor, sending crisp leaves spiralling into the air like little paper birds, startling a small grey rabbit, its nose twitching as it tried to make out its new surroundings.

"I'm not here to scare you!" he cried again, chasing after the rapidly hastening white *thing*, arms flailing about as he attempted to gain balance - until the trees parted like curtains and spilled him onto a yellow bricked path with grass overgrowing around the edges. But then, the path melted away beneath him, and the grass turned soft and shining, endless stretches of pale silver-white, textured like whipped cream smoothed over by wind.

Clouds.

His eyes cleared and he could make out just what the white thing was - a retreating dog. A scruffy, darting little thing with a tail like a feather duster and legs made for running. It glanced back just once, like it knew him from a different story. The dog shifted from the yellow path, skidding onto the cloud-ground. Max, still intrigued by the white creature, tailed it.

"Hey - wait!" he shouted, still half-laughing, but his sneaker caught on a particularly rebellious patch of cloud and-

Whump.

Down he went, arms flung out, legs tangled beneath him like a puppet dropped mid-dance. The cloud-ground puffed beneath his fall with a soft *whoof*, as if it had been holding its breath and finally let go. He lay there for a moment, blinking up at the sky, which looked suspiciously like the floor, wondering if he'd just fallen upwards. A pause. Then...

Patter patter patter.

The white dog came bounding back, tail wagging like a metronome gone wild. It skidded to a stop beside him, nose sniffing eagerly, tongue lolling out in an expression of absolute delight, as though this had been the plan all along. The boy laughed again, full-bodied this time, and tried to sit up, but the dog beat him to it - leaping forward to lick his chin, his cheek, and then flopping down half across his chest, like a fluffy badge of honour.

"You're not very mysterious up close," he mumbled, ruffling the dog's ears. "Just very... dog."

"Well, that's rude," it said, voice a little scratchy like it hadn't used it in a while, but undeniably a voice. "I was going for enigmatic." The boy froze. His hand stayed tangled in fur. His breath hitched somewhere between his ribs and the clouds.

"...You talk?" he whispered.

The dog tilted its head. "Obviously. You think I was just running around for the fun of it? I was trying to lead you. You're incredibly slow, by the way." Max (attempted to) sat bolt upright. The dog didn't move, so he sort of half-sat, half-carried the dog on his chest like a fuzzy, opinionated backpack.

"You're a talking dog," he said, as if saying it more times would make it less absurd.

"Yes, and you're a boy with terrible coordination," the dog replied, rolling off him with a huff. "Now that we've established the obvious, shall we go?"

"Go where?"

The dog gave him a long, patient look, like he'd just asked if water was wet.

"To the beginning, of course," it said, as if that explained everything. "You've got a lot to remember, and not much time to do it." Then the dog bumbled a few paces ahead, tail swishing, and looked back expectantly. Max looked around - at the cloud-ground shimmering underfoot, at the sky that looked more like a painting than weather, and at the dog, who had just insulted him.

He stood.

"Okay," he said. "Lead the way, mysterious dog."

"Miso," the dog said proudly. "Like the soup."

"I like soup," Max said. "I haven't had it in ages, though." He paused. "What even does enigmatic mean?"

They walked for a long time - or at least it felt like a long time. There weren't any clocks here, and nobody was yelling at him to hurry up or telling him how much time he had left. That was nice. Max didn't even care what time it was. His chest didn't hurt when he breathed anymore, and the air felt big and light, like he could take a million deep breaths and still want more. If someone asked him how he felt, he'd probably just say, "Good." Or maybe, "Really good." He

liked Miso. But he talked kind of funny too - like the cowboy people on Max's cartoons, all drawly and slow, like every word was chewing gum.

Miso finally stopped at a hole. A hole in the cloud-ground, the pearlescent fluff, luminous, full of the hush of dreams, ending abruptly. "Watch your step. One wrong move and you're going to tumble down there," the quadruped quipped.

"Where?" Max asked.

"There." Miso raised a paw as to gesture to the hole, or more specifically, what lay below the hole. Max walked over, slowly as if he might fall again, and tilted his head down.

The people, they were undeniably people, were gathered in a cluster of dark shapes against the green, some holding black umbrellas though it wasn't raining. It was just *that kind of day* – heavy with silence, where even the birds didn't dare to sing too loudly. From this high up, they looked like petals dropped around a stone, all slowly shifting, heads bowed. A few shoulders shook, a few hands reached out and found each other. Someone knelt near the flowers. Someone else stood completely still, as if time had stopped just for them. There was a girl, probably a sister, holding onto a small, crumpled tissue in one hand. Her face was pale, and platinum blonde hair was messily tied into two pigtails which hung down each shoulder like a pair of unwilling mice. Her eyes were all red and shiny.

Max sneezed.

The girl's face was tilted up for a second. Like she was looking for a sign. And for a moment, just the faintest one, as he sneezed, a breeze moved her hair. He stared for a moment, then pointed.

"That's Lily," he said softly. "She has my Gameboy. I let her borrow it. I haven't got it back yet." The dog didn't answer. Just looked at him. Max caught the glance and furrowed his brow. "What?" he asked.

"Max," Miso said gently. "Look at the gravestone."

He hesitated. Then leaned forward, as if getting closer might help bring the words into focus. The clouds parted just slightly below, as if making room. The stone was worn at the edges, the writing etched with a delicate care.

Maxwell Orion Tully

1998 – 2005

Beloved Son. Always Looking Up.

“...That’s my name,” Max said, barely a whisper. “But... I’m right here.”

He stood still, like maybe if he didn’t move, none of this would be real. His eyes lifted to Miso, wide and shiny and a little scared. But there was something else too - something like... understanding. Like a puzzle piece had just clicked into place.

“Do they... still think about me?” he asked quietly. His voice sounded tiny. Breakable.

Miso leaned against him, warm and solid. “They think about you all the time, kid.”

“Really?”

“Really really.”

Max swallowed. “I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

They both looked down again. There was a long, quiet pause. Below them, the girl with the ribbon - Lily - laid a single white flower on the grave, her lips moving like she was telling a secret. Someone else, Max’s dad, maybe, reached over to steady her, his hand shaking as it touched her shoulder. Miso gave a small, knowing nod and stood up, tail drooping just a little. He looked back at Max with gentle eyes.

Max kept watching too. His hands were tight at his sides. His chest hurt in that weird way again. Not like before. This was something different. Like a balloon stuck in his throat. “...What if they forget me?” he asked, voice all wobbly now.

Miso shook his head slowly. “They won’t. Not ever. You’re in their stories now. In the way they laugh, in the way they cry. You’re part of their forever.”

Max wiped at his face, even though it didn’t help. The tears just kept coming, dripping off his chin like leaky taps.

“I want to go back,” he whispered.

“I know,” Miso said. “It’s okay to miss them. But you’re not lost, Max. You’re just somewhere softer now.”

Max didn't say anything right away. He just reached out and grabbed a handful of Miso's fur, holding on tight like it was the only thing keeping him from floating away..

"What now?" the child asked.

Miso looked ahead. The cloud path shimmered, soft and glowing like the sky was calling them forward.

"We keep walking," he said gently. "There's lots to see. Lots to meet. It doesn't end here."

– THE END –



When She's  
Born  
Shaun Toor

“Do you think she’ll have her mother’s nose?”

The question hovered in the air.

Morning peeled through the blinds in narrow gold bands. Margaret sat upright, spine rigid against the starched pillows, her body wrapped in linen so thin that it was almost translucent against her papery skin. Her hands rested in her lap, the wedding band loose on her skeletal finger, trembling as if plucking invisible harp strings.

The nurse stepped inside with a practised quietness, her rubber-soled shoes sighing against the linoleum. She adjusted the curtain with its frayed edges, sending dust spiralling through the sunlight. It settled on Margaret’s shoulders like misplaced snow.

“Whose nose?” she asked.

“My granddaughter’s,” Margaret replied, mildly offended. “My daughter will be delivering any minute now.” Her fingernails, still faintly pearlescent with the remnants of last week’s polish, tapped against the IV tube taped to her wrist. The doctors had diagnosed Margaret with dementia. And her heart was failing, too. “They’ve made her wait three days past her due date. Typical of her – always fashionably late.”

She pulled the wooden chair closer and sat.

She exhaled softly. “Big day.”

“She’s naming her Ellie. Isn’t that lovely? Simple. Sweet.” Her thumb rubbed absent circles over her ring finger. “Just like her grandmother’s middle name.”

The nurse nodded.

“She’ll be stubborn,” Margaret remarked, gazing out the window. “Just like her mother. Wouldn’t stay in one place long enough to take a proper picture.”

“Sounds like she made you laugh,” the nurse said.

“She was laughter,” Margaret spoke, her gaze distant. “All wind, never the leaf.”

Room 205 smelled faintly of lavender and antiseptic. The ceiling paint was cracked in the corners, and the TV droned on, cycling through a morning show no one watched. Outside, the hallway buzzed with quiet wheels and softer footsteps. Inside, Margaret’s world spun smaller.

Later, the nurse helped Margaret into her robe—a faded lilac thing with pockets stretched from years of carrying tissues, peppermints, and a silver locket that no longer closed properly. The collar bore a single brown stain from a long-ago spilled cup of Earl Grey.

They strolled through the corridor towards the hospice garden. The garden was a postcard of curated tranquillity. Stone paths wound between rose bushes pruned to obedient geometry. A fountain trickled somewhere nearby, its rhythm syncopated with the distant beep of IV alarms through open windows. The air smelled of damp earth and something sharper beneath—the sterile sting of cleaning alcohol beneath the roses. Margaret inhaled deeply. “My daughter used to braid wildflowers into my hair,” her fingers brushing her thin scalp as if recalling the weight of blooms. “Daisies, mostly. Said I looked like a fairytale witch.”

“I used to rock her to sleep,” Margaret spoke wistfully, more to herself. “She’d scream until the moon came out, then fall asleep like nothing ever happened. She had this tuft of hair—stuck straight up like a dandelion gone wrong.”

The nurse smiled.

“I sang to her. Badly. She said my lullabies sounded like dying cats.”

The nurse guided her towards a wrought-iron bench, its paint flaking like sunburned skin.

“Careful-” The nurse faltered, then went on, “Sorry, Margaret.”

Margaret, who didn’t seem to notice, chuckled, the sound in sync with the water gushing and the birds chirping. Her gnarled hand patted the space beside her. “Sit, dear. The ground’s too damp for your knees.”

“I told her the name,” Margaret murmured. “Ellie. Told her it was always my favourite.”

“I’m sure she listened.”

“She said it felt like clean sheets and open windows.”

The nurse looked away, blinking.

“I wish I could be there,” Margaret daydreamed. “In the delivery room. But they said I’d catch something. Said it wouldn’t be safe.”

“She understands.”

Margaret turned to her. “She told me I’d get to hold the baby first. Can’t believe my daughter is giving birth...” Her voice shook, but she blinked the tears back.

The nurse took her hand. They sat there, fingers knotted, nothing left to say.

Back in the room, lunch came and went. Margaret picked at the toast. Her eyes stayed fixed on the window, sipping her tea.

“I like this new tea. What blend is it?” Margaret questioned.

“Earl Grey,” the nurse replied.

A comfortable silence settled between them, broken only by the distant hum of the ward. Suddenly, Margaret’s eyes widened.

“She kicked,” she said suddenly. “I felt it.”

The nurse glanced up.

“She’s excited,” Margaret’s eyes twinkled with happiness. “She knows I’m waiting.”

“You’ll be a wonderful grandmother...”

Margaret stared at her hands. “Haven’t held a baby in years. I forget how tiny their heads are.”

“You’ll remember,” the nurse assured her.

Margaret reached for her tea again, missed, and knocked the cup over. Liquid spread across the blanket like a wound. The nurse moved quickly, dabbing it up.

“I’m sorry,” Margaret said, her eyes dropping to the soaked blanket.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s just... never mind.” Margaret’s voice trailed off.

The nurse paused, napkin in hand. Then sat again.

Neither spoke.

Evening settled, the sun’s final rays painting the sky with a mix of warm hues. The nurse helped Margaret into a fresh gown and tucked her in with practised care.

“Will you stay?” Margaret asked.

“I will.”

“She promised I’d hold her first.”

“You will.”

“I already love her,” Margaret said, drifting. “And I haven’t even seen her face.”

The nurse didn’t speak.

“I hope she looks like my daughter,” Margaret spoke with a distant gaze. “But maybe with my laugh.”

The nurse smoothed the blanket. “She’ll be lucky to have it.”

Margaret smiled, then sleep took her—soft and complete.

The hallway outside was still. The nurse stepped out and leaned against the wall, eyes shut.

That night, something stirred the nurse from her light sleep in the staff room. The hallway was darker than usual; the motion lights were slow to respond. A low beep echoed from a distant monitor. At first, she thought it was nothing—just the usual rhythm of hospice life ticking along without her. But then, a sound pulled her up straight.

A voice. Low, urgent.

She slipped her shoes on and moved down the hallway.

Room 205 was empty.

Her chest tightened.

She found Margaret in the east corridor, barefoot, her gown dragging like fog behind her. She stood near the window where a potted fern curled in the moonlight, looking out at the parking lot.

“I can’t find her,” Margaret whispered, eyes wide, breath catching like a child’s.

She crossed quickly, with a sigh of relief, gently wrapping a blanket around her frail shoulders. “You’re not supposed to be up,” she said softly. “It’s late.”

Margaret didn’t look at her. “She’s crying. I heard her. I heard her, and I didn’t go. I’m a terrible grandmother.”

The nurse knelt beside her. “You’re not,” she said instinctively.

"I had her right here," Margaret said, pressing her hand to her chest. "I had her in my arms. I was humming. I swear I was."

"You were dreaming."

Margaret's face crumpled. "Then why can I still feel her weight?"

She didn't answer. With tears at the brink of her eyes, she guided her back through the dim corridor, one slow step at a time. When they reached Room 205, the nurse flicked the nightlight on. The room filled with a soft amber glow.

Margaret paused by the doorway. "Is this the nursery?"

"It's your room," the nurse corrected.

Margaret looked around, uncertain. "Looks nice. Warm."

The nurse helped her back into bed and adjusted the blanket. She brushed a strand of hair from Margaret's face, tucking it behind her ear.

"Will my granddaughter and daughter be okay?" Margaret asked, voice barely audible.

"I'm sure they will be fine."

Margaret's eyes fluttered. "She'll have trouble sleeping. Just like me."

"Then you'll both be awake together," the nurse thoughtfully responded.

A small smile curled on Margaret's lips.

Margaret reached out, her fingers brushing the nurse's hand. "She'll have your eyes. That deep sort of blue, like rain."

She blinked. "You think so?"

Margaret nodded slowly. "And your patience. God help her."

The nurse almost laughed. Instead, she leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Get some sleep."

The monitor beeped softly. The room settled. She stayed for a moment, watching the rise and fall of Margaret's chest.

A doctor passed by, clipboard under his arm.

"Hey," he asked her. "You're still here?"

“Yeah. Just heading out.”

But she didn't leave. She couldn't sleep after that incident.

The nurse pulled a chair close and sat by herself outside.

When the sun rose again, it found her still there- eyes red, posture folded in. She got to her feet, rubbed her face, and stepped into the hallway.

“Stayed all night?” another nurse asked, surprised.

She nodded. “Couldn't sleep.”

She walked the long way around the corridor, opening the door.

Margaret was sitting up again, hair combed, eyes bright like glass catching the morning light.

“Do you think she'll have her mother's nose?” she asked.

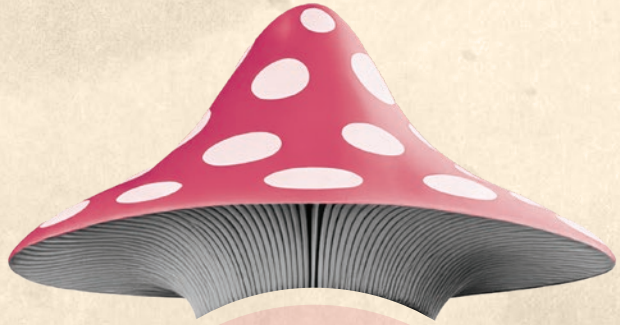
Nurse Ellie smiled, walked to the bed, and took her grandmother's hand.

“I think so.”

*To love someone with dementia is to witness both love and loss simultaneously.*

— Richard Taylor

– THE END –



# UPPER SECONDARY





BEAR

Tristan Adams

Note: *Bear* is written as a chapter from a larger, unwritten fictional study. Chapter 19, titled *Speculative Harm*, focuses on a patient named Suzy and her experiences living with mental illness.

## **BEAR**

XIX

### SPECULATIVE HARM

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While intellectual fraudulence and the undervaluation of one's achievements are linked to depressive cognitive errors, or an entire disorder for that matter, it is not, of course, the sole cause. This particular patient, Suzy, while not making it clear to her doctor, had suffered from a degree of adolescent trauma; prolonged neglect from not just carers but friendships as well, and familial favouritism, likely laid a foundation within the patient for her feelings of pervasive inadequacy and extreme self-criticism.

Dr. Hallbeck was able to transcribe one of Suzy's experiences during their third session:

"The dog was very big, but he was calm, his name was Bear and I enjoyed looking after him for that while. We had been out for a walk in the morning and I remember it was very cold, it was January, and it was snowing. I was walking him through the next neighbourhood, I can't remember where, it was like mine. We were the only ones out that morning, I think it was too cold, but then we saw another man with a big dog too. Bear started barking at the other dog, and he tugged on his leash and pulled us towards them, but then he jerked suddenly, and he was off, he ran and ran to this other dog and they started fighting. They fought and fought and fought, it was so violent and savage, and I tried not to cry. But then I thought, what if Bear had done that to me? What if he got so upset that he wasn't calm anymore,<sup>45</sup> he was like a real

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<sup>45</sup>The line between projection and transference is razor-thin

bear this time, and his spur gashed through my throat and pulled my tongue from the back of my head, and there was so much blood, so, so much, and it was the only time you could ever see for yourself, watch your own blood spray so high above you,<sup>46</sup> as high as the ceiling, that it paints the entirety of it all. It was the only time I ever felt like that, while they were fighting, and then the sun came out and I felt it on my face and on my throat, and although the dogs were still fighting, I felt warm and calm.”

Dr. Hallbeck may have thought that Suzy wished to kill herself, but this would have been a significant misjudgement. Firstly, it is important to note that while graphic recounting or ideation may appear alarming in a clinical and confidential setting, such expressions do not consistently correlate with active suicidal intent. Dr. John Redfield (2006) presented such an understanding to the APA: “Imagining an end is, for some, the only way to endure the present.” Suzy’s use of speculative and conditional phrasing (“...what if Bear had done that to me”) places the entire experience within a hypothetical framework. It is possible, then, that Dr. Hallbeck’s clinical training, while extensive, may have been clouded by the affective force of Suzy’s language.<sup>47</sup> But language, particularly in the mouths of the traumatised, is rarely direct.

Suzy did indeed, weeks later, return to her story about Bear—this time unprompted, Hallbeck noted. Her tone had noticeably shifted to a more resolved perspective. Whether this indicated a processing of the event or a rehearsed narrative remains unclear. What was said, however, complicates the initial interpretation entirely:

“I’ve been thinking about Bear again, like what happened after it all. I didn’t tell you everything, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry. I said the other dog was big, but he wasn’t really, no, he was small and long and I think he was a girl because he was wearing a little pink collar. Bear could’ve killed her, but he didn’t, he just pinned her down and looked at me. And I don’t know how to explain it, but he was looking at me, I think, and was waiting for something, not help, not my help or the other man’s, but it was like he wanted me to decide what to do right then. Like I could decide everything then and there, and he was just waiting for me. So I rushed to him, I pulled him right off, and we ran away. We didn’t say sorry to the other dog, we ran. I told Bear he was a good boy, and I

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<sup>46</sup> Wataru Tsurumi, *The Complete Manual of Suicide* (Tokyo: Ohta Publishing, 1993), ch. 4.

<sup>47</sup> This is by no means an attempt to undermine Hallbeck’s ability as a psychologist. Understanding suicidal communication is an acutely difficult task, even for professionals of his experience.

gave him a piece of my granola bar while we walked home. But when we got back, I didn't take him off his leash. I walked him to the back shed, and I locked the door extra, extra tight. Then I went back inside and read my big book

Dad gave me. For a while after, I heard his barking. Gosh, he barked so loud. And he scratched the door so, so much. I kept thinking how calm he was before his fight. But now he wasn't calm, no, no. He was a big bear now, a real bear, and he was very upset. After three days, he stopped barking and scratching. I said it was an accident and that he ran away.”

(Suzy pauses here for a full minute; Hallbeck waits.)

“I don't know why I did it. Maybe I wanted to know what it felt like. To end something so calm.”

In a case such as this one, self-criticism can become so extreme that it establishes a nihilistic worldview. In some instances, where an individual no longer sees themselves worthy of life, they may choose to inflict harm on others to initiate an angle of control, such as in the case of some mass shooters. Other individuals, like Suzy, feel the need to end things that once brought them a sense of “calm,” as she describes it, simply because they no longer believe they are worthy of them. For those who feel so fundamentally inadequate, even calm can seem undeserved.

*Walkin' 'round with a big gun in my hand /  
And when I look you in the eye /  
You're gonna tell me that you love me and  
hold me tight /  
'Cause you know that I have no fear.<sup>48</sup>*

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<sup>48</sup> Alexander Giannascoli, *Powerful Man* (New York: Domino Recording Co. USA, 2017). While Suzy's behaviour is undoubtedly strange, what is even stranger is Bear's. His almost farcical actions have led many experts to believe that his existence is entirely made up. A completely feasible and more straightforward substantiation of Bear, however, is offered through Giannascoli's narration. Guns as physical objects have long been used to symbolise theoretical concepts such as power, protection, resistance, and collective trauma. While Bear is an animal and cannot use weapons, he can become a weapon himself, completely controllable by Suzy. While it remains unclear how she can stop Bear's attack by simply looking at him, Suzy meets Bear with love and assurance, despite the fact that they both know exactly what he is capable of. A familiar phenomenon discussed in Chapter XV can now be driven back into focus: cognitive dissonance. Here, it may prove Bear's existence as an individual through whom Suzy negotiates guilt, control, and worthiness—not unreal, but instead, as Suzy insists: unbearably real.



# **A Kite in Gaza**

## **Misha Anwar**

## سلام (PEACE):

"No way!" you exclaim. You're practically bursting with excitement as you lunge to accept the gift from your Baba. Your Mama beams from behind him, her eyes shining like lanterns in the dim room.

"It's the best one from all the markets," your Baba adds, his voice gentle but tired. He didn't want to simply make you one from scraps; he wants you to have the best.

'My own kite,' you whisper, as if saying it too loudly might make it vanish. You look up to your parents and meet their warm ebony eyes. All those months of begging, whining, crying, and now it's really yours.

Your fingers brush over the shiny, smooth fabric, soaking in the vivid rainbow patterns. You couldn't get bored looking at the kaleidoscope of colours and patterns that light up the full, empty grey room. A room where the only trace of colour was the faded, mottled blues of your mattress and the sickly browns of the water stains tainting the crumbling, yellowed ceiling.

There were stripes, swirls, and spots just like the sweets in the shop window you used to go to. And in the centre: a majestic white dove, its wings outstretched as if ready to soar to the clouds. You just know your kite will fly as high as that dove – higher, maybe than the blockades and the watchful towers, higher than anyone can reach.

But you didn't know about the extra hours your Baba worked to get you that kite; you were asleep long before he got back. You didn't know about the dirty copper coins that were pinched from your Mama's plate; she only told you that her stomach hurt. You didn't know the meaning of the words whispered behind closed doors when you were assumed to be asleep: ration, curfew, ceasefire. You didn't know about the sacrifices made for 'premium' polyester, wooden dowels, and nylon string. But they didn't know that you would've been just as happy with a plastic bag, tree branches, and thread.

## **تعطيل (DISRUPTION):**

“Hold on tight!” your Baba cautions. But the wild winds howl at you, knowing that your frail 6-year-old body is unmatched against it. They chuckle at your flailing, they chortle at your knuckles turning white from the strain, and cackle at the fact you are mere seconds away from letting go. The wind in Gaza is a trickster sometimes it brings the smell of the sea, but more often than not, your nostrils are filled with dust and your ears with the echo of far-off sirens. The wind tugs and pulls at you, laughing as your skinny arms tremble. You feel the reverberations in your bones; it feels the same as when the ground quakes in fear when the tanks grumble by at night, and when the walls shiver from the distant booms. You glance up, squinting against the harsh glare to see that your kite is violently darting and dodging the invisible evils up above. Somehow, it seems to be reaching... no, straining for the sun, aching to leave for a place better.

As the blue skies become filled with the familiar grey blanket of smoke that threatens to smother it, you begin to lose sight of it. Soon, the kite is devoured by the clouds. As if it wasn't worse enough, the winds carry with them dust and sand, flinging it into your eyes, which sting, feeling like tiny shards of glass. Your eyes flutter in a feeble attempt to dislodge the shrapnel, but you remain blinded. You can't even breathe as every gasp takes in the dreaded sand, and something else bitter you can't name.

You don't know why the wind hates you, only that with a fierce push from behind and with a violent tug from the front, you are dragged forward and almost up into the skies. The kite soars higher and higher.

You try to dig your feet into the thirsty earth, your toes clenching to the thin soles of your slippers, but again the wind gives you no mercy and drags you forward, your feet drawing strikes into the dust and dirt. Holding on seems futile now, as one by one your fingers begin to unlatch. You groan with the effort, desperate to cling on.

Just as you were about to let go, your Baba kneels behind you and draws you in against him. Your head leans against his chest, and you melt into his warmth. His large, calloused hand grasps your bony shoulder, acting as a comforting weight that anchors you. His other hand envelopes your two hands whole, supporting your hold on the kite string. You let out a strangled sound of relief. You look at your Baba, seeing him already looking down at you with a small upwards tug of his lips and a twinkle in his creased eyes, “I've got you.’

## يأس (DESPAIR)

Tears well in your eyes as you mourn the loss. You didn't understand how it happened, only that you're left to pick up the pieces and move on. Your kite... destroyed.

You stare numbly at the ruins in your hands; the now splintered wooden dowels you had heard break with a sickening 'crunch' like that of breaking bones. The kite itself has torn so violently, in so many more places you could count, you would've thought it was a merely a pile of ribbons. And the dove. The poor dove, almost destroyed to the point of unrecognition. The head looks like it was snapped backwards, its wings jutting out in unnatural directions. When once, the dove was cawing with a joyful cry, now its beak remained open in a permanently petrified scream.

Why didn't you listen? Your Mama told you that outside is too dangerous for you to play by yourself. Yet, you snuck out anyway, returning with fat droplets rolling down your tear-stained, sunken cheeks, and to your mother's pale face and trembling hands. Your heart was pounding in your chest as you had wondered what your punishment would be. You had expected a scolding, but you didn't get punished. Instead, you were scooped up and crushed in a bone-breaking hug your Mama pulled you into. All the breath in you had left your tiny body. "Next time, wait for one of us to take you." You tried to nod in response, but your face was smooshed into her chest, her hand was placed on the back of your head, and your snot from your blubbering induced congestion had leaked onto her faded shawl.

"It's just the winds," you remembered you had mumbled to yourself. The memories of the dust storm had faded from your head. However, you didn't know that your Mama wasn't talking about the wind. She made sure you didn't.

Now, you slowly wrap the remaining kite string around each and every finger, weaving in and out, around and about. You pull the string tight, savouring the tightness and marveling at how the little fat you have in your finger bulges out and flushes a brilliant ruby red. You notice how the string begins to fray and stick out in weird directions, just like the awful white hairs that stick out from an onion when you leave it out in the sun too long. The tight braids it was woven into are too intricate for your clumsy, bony fingers to stick the edges back into. When you try, it only makes it worse.

## أمل (HOPE)

Gluing. Sewing. Stapling

Patching. Connecting. Joining.

Praying. Wishing. Hoping

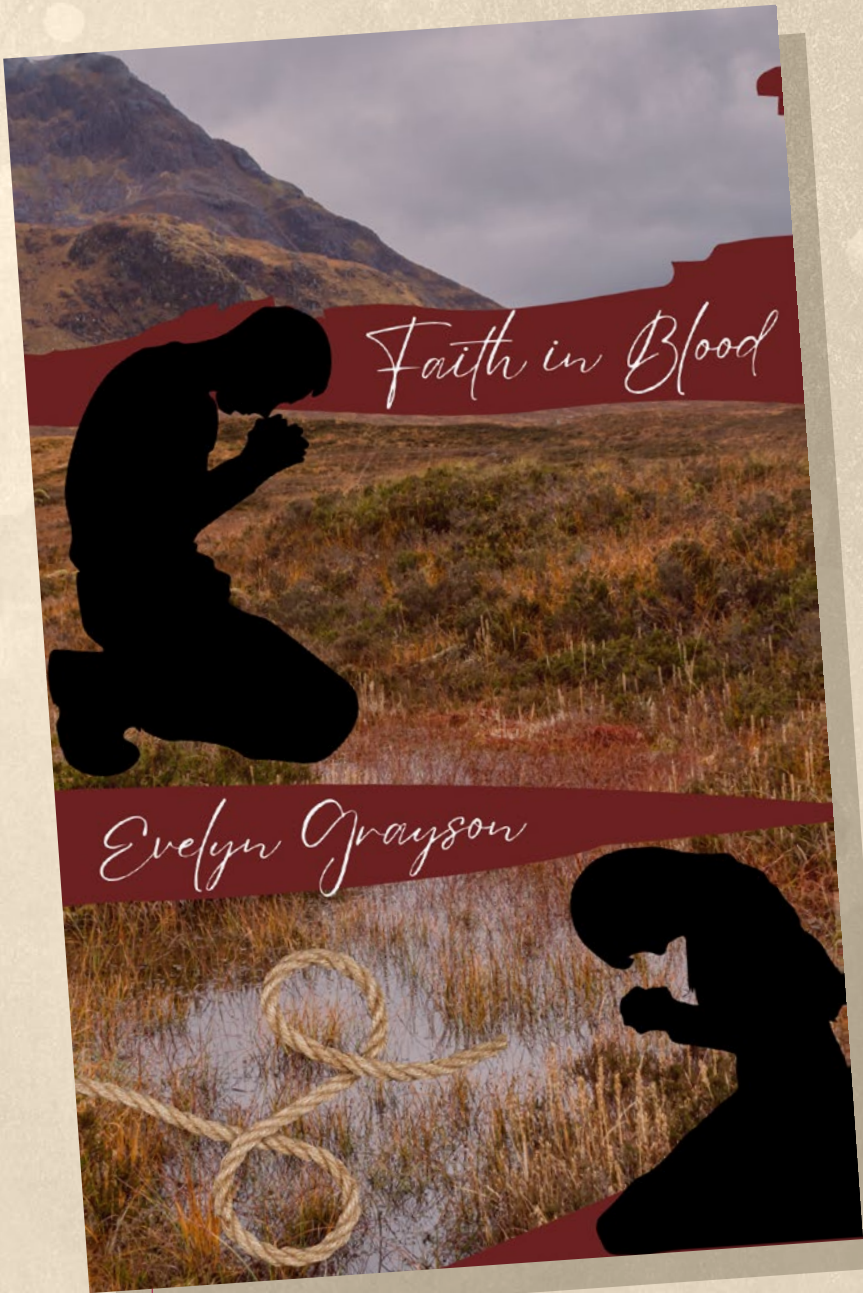
You and your Mama work side by side, fingers sticky and sore. You look at her, your eyes shining. “Will it work?” you ask, your hope fragile as an eggshell.

Your Mama looks down at your wide eyes and timid smile. “I don’t know habibi”, she says. She sees your face fall and your shoulders sag. She lifts your chin with her thumb and index finger. With a soft, tired smile, she adds, “We’ll try it tomorrow, yes? Maybe tomorrow the wind will be kinder.” You merely nod in response, pressing the repaired kite to your chest.

You ask if Baba will be back tomorrow to fly the kite with you. Your Mama gave you a tight-lipped smile that didn’t seem to reach her eyes. She stills for a second. Then a second longer. “Not tomorrow, my love,” she answers, her voice steady but far away.

## سلام (PEACE)

– THE END –



*Faith in Blood*

*Evelyn Grayson*

I savour every bump in the road, every twinge of pain as the cart jostles me, the hard wood digging into my spine. They remind me that, for now at least, I am alive. Starkly, vividly alive.

I look out to the countryside through the slats as the tumbril rattles along. The rolling, crashing, tumbling ocean of green that holds so many memories. Thousands of years of blood spilling and soaking the ground. A thousand thousand bodies just below the surface, buried in the bedrock. My blood will soon soak the same sacred ground, enrich the earth, and appease the almighty Goddess.

I am numb, apathetic to my imminent death. Is this Her with me, soothing my fears?

The men who drive the tumbril do not utter a word to me. Perhaps they feel bad for me. Perhaps they're jealous. Maybe my death will mean something, unlike so many others. Maybe the violence will finally end.

Maybe.

Perhaps the land will flourish after my death, bring a bountiful harvest. Perhaps my blood will nourish, will protect, will unite the land.

Perhaps.

The bog is peaceful. Serene. I feel an odd sense of comfort in the earthy, musky, sulphurous smell. I feel in my bones the ancient, powerful sentience of this place that has survived so long. Water reeds sprout from the muddy earth like tufts of hair from the head of some giant submerged in the bog. I look down to my reflection in the dark waters. I see my mother's stern lips, my father's deep eyes, every curve and edge of my harsh face softened by the thought of all the people who have come before me and have entrusted me with carrying their legacy.

As I watch, transfixed, my face begins to twist and morph until its features are no longer my own. A faint silvery sheen tints the translucent skin; bottomless pits meet my gaze, a great tangle of reeds and moss and memories emerges from the scalp and drifts about the face, pushed to-and-fro by some dark current. My Goddess. She rises from the water with nary a ripple, naked as a babe. I know the men behind me do not see her. She is here for me.

I flinch as her icy hand cups my cheek, jagged nails scraping my jaw. Her skin is colder than the deepest winter night; a cold that could only originate in the endless abyss of an unborn universe before time or space or matter. She holds my gaze as her fingers trail down my throat, across my chest, until her palm rests against my stammering heart. I shiver.

She wants... What does she want?

She pushes against my chest, and I stumble back a step, my heart stuttering as her icy cold fingers delve into my flesh without breaking skin, brushing against my bloody, beating heart. She retracts her arm, and I understand: She wants me to leave, to live.

I stumble back a few more steps and begin to turn... As a loop of rope is strung around my neck. The coarse fibres scratch against my sensitive skin as I am shoved to my knees, waist deep in water. The bog no longer seems so peaceful. The coldness of the bog water leeches into my skin, bone deep, clutching at my lungs and stealing my breath. Every sound, every scent, every touch against my skin feels heightened.

"Wait," I say, moving to stand, "you don't understand. She-"

I am shoved to my knees again, my arms twisted and held behind my back. I thrash and flounder like a fish out of water, but their hooks are too deep.

The noose tightens.

I gasp out my pleas: "Don't" and "Please" and "Stop." My gaze meets that of the man tightening the noose. He hesitates, his grip slackening as silvery hands wrap around his. My Goddess! She is back! She will save me from these savages; she wants me to live and be happy. I am chosen.

My Goddess entwines her fingers with the man's, holding tight. Then the noose begins to tighten again. Together they pull, and pull, and pull. The man's gaze hardens, bolstered by the goddess who guides his hand.

No breath can enter my lungs. My heartbeat slows, sluggish and somnolent. My vision whitens and my limbs grow heavy. My thoughts swirl and eddy away.

The bog surrounds me, envelops me in its warm embrace. I sink down...

And down.

And down.

And...

I am... Nothing. And I am everything. I am the peat of the bog, I am the pods that float on the breeze, and I am every blade of grass and croaking frog and budding flower. I am every current in every river that flows across the land. I am every person who has ever or will ever live. I am.

But I am not, also.

A thousand times the sun rises, and a thousand times it sets. I begin to hate it—the sun. I hate its cheerful glare, how it watches all and does not care. An endless cycle of apathy.

My corporeal body rests in the muck at the bottom of the bog. It does not rot; it does not moulder. It hardly changes at all, kept by the bog. My goddess is long gone, as are the men she led here. She has abandoned me here. My death meant nothing to her.

I don't know exactly how long I have stayed here, in this bog, floating above my body, watching from afar as the world continues to crumble.

I feel a tug, as though a rope were tied to my rib. I see it: a silvery line that extends from my chest going... who knows where? I should follow it. I know I should follow it, but for what? Perhaps it will lead me to the afterlife, rather than this incorporeal existence. Perhaps it will show me the secrets of the universe. Do I want to know the secrets of the universe?

I grab the line, and I am immediately pulled away. My body, if you can call it that, is ripped from this plane of existence. I travel through a tunnel, of sorts. Space and time swirl around me, catching on my fingers as I reach out a hand. Flashes of history, memory and long passed times assault my senses. The crackle of a hearth fire, the warmth of an embrace, and the coppery tang of blood. Faces twisted in anguish, in pain, in pleasure. The lives of billions of people over thousands of years. Nothing ever changes. Pestilence, war, famine and death. There is peace, sometimes. There is joy, sometimes. But there is always, always pain.

I am jerked to a halt, deposited back onto the earthly plane. Where am I? When am I?

Cries and jeering reach my incorporeal ears. I am surrounded by a rioting crowd, hatred and rage twisting their gaunt faces. I follow the crowd's gaze to a raised platform, atop which a woman stands, blindfolded. Her torso is bare,

her head is shaved and coated in something black and sticky. Tar. A noose rests against her bare collarbones; phantom fibres scratch my neck.

Why is she here? What has she done? Wave after wave of red-tinged thoughts crash against my mind, emanating from the jeering crowd.

*Whore. Traitor. Turncoat. Conspirator. Snake.*

I hear only silence from the woman. She does not speak to me. I cannot hear her pleas. Does she deserve this punishment? Does anyone? To be humiliated and violated and murdered in cold blood?

Maybe her god will save her as mine did not.

I drift towards her until my face is inches from hers. Her gaze is defiant, but I see the tears that roll across the landscape of her face. I know her fear. I am her and she is me. I reach out and brush away her tears. I almost think she reacts to my touch, that she can feel me here with her.

She is beautiful. She is afraid.

Someone must stop this. I should –

The noose tightens, and I am pulled away.

Dizzying, disorienting, disconcerting shapes and colours swirl around me. A thousand voices merge and diverge, screaming, whispering, comforting, hurting. I try to grab hold of something, to pull myself back to her, but nothing is real here. I am pulled and pushed through an ocean of memories, my senses battered and bruised by every new sound, stroke and sight.

I am set down more gently this time, my motion slowing until I am dropped into some new place. This landscape is familiar: rolling hills stretching into the distance. I feel at home in these peaceful, empty fields. I must be here for a reason; there must be something here for me to see.

I turn and see a wide channel of cleared land, small rocks covering the dirt. This is not familiar to me. Two metal lines run parallel along the cleared land, spaced apart by wooden beams laid along the ground between them. These strange structures run far, far into the distance, disappearing into the horizon in either direction.

There is nothing man-made for miles around except for these strange metal lines. Except – wait. What is that in the distance? Before I can even form the thought, space and time warp around me, and I am beside the new object.

A series of strange metal boxes sit atop the lines, joined together into a long chain. I stand beside the last box in the chain. As I watch, a group of men emerge from behind the box. Four of the men are bound and held in place by eight others, struggling in their grip. The four appear young, on the cusp of manhood. I see their blue eyes and brown hair and sharp jaws. I see the tender looks that pass between them. Family. Brothers, perhaps.

They are speaking, all the men, but I cannot understand their tongue. I hear the animosity between the bound and the unbound in the pitch and tone of their harsh voices.

The unbound men take out more rope, looping it through the bindings at the brothers' wrists. As the rope passes through the eldest brother's ties, he spits in his captor's face. The man's face twists in anger, and he reaches for the brother's throat, grasping some charm strung about his neck and ripping it off. He throws the charm away.

It bounces once, twice, before landing at my feet. A plain, wooden cross.

The rope, now strung between the four brothers, is tied to a loop of metal at the base of the final box on the lines. The eight men move to the side of the box, slide open a door and climb inside. The brothers must be restrained while the other men rest, then.

The boxes begin to move, slowly at first, then gaining speed. The brothers stumble after the boxes, hardly managing to keep on their feet. I have seen this before, men trailed behind a horse speeding along. They rarely make it out alive.

I must untie the knot. I'm sure if my will is strong enough I could, even with my incorporeal form, influence the matter around me and-

The first brother stumbles and his feet are ripped from beneath him. I catch a glimpse of his brothers following, but I am again pulled away.

The now-familiar tunnel of memories surges about me, growing in intensity and crashing against my formless body. A deep sadness burrows into my bones, worming into my bloody, pulseless heart. How many times will this happen? How many gods will lead their followers to this madness?

I am buffeted and beaten down by thousands of deaths, thousands of violences, thousands of hateful beliefs: A throat slit for fertile land, A liberated woman burnt, A cudgelling for conflicting faiths. An illegitimate babe thrown

to the waters to gain the acceptance of people who were supposed to be family. And everywhere, everywhere, the glint of a charm strung about a throat, a whispered prayer, a faceless god, a cross, a star, a meaningless symbol of peace.

When will it end? Will it ever?

My body still lies in the depths of the bog. Someday, they will dig me up, preserved as a saint. They will know my story. They will hear my voice, though I can speak no words to them. And they will know, as I know.

That my death has meant nothing; that their deaths have changed nothing.

And that every victim will have their day.

– THE END –







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