

VOLUME I: THE CREATIVE WORK

This Old Man

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ABSTRACT:

This Old Man

This Old Man is comprised of a childhood section from a larger novel that interweaves the experiences of a group of childhood friends who, as adults, are compelled to return to their home town to face an evil they were haunted by as children. Due to word count constraints, the chapters submitted for the Thesis are from the ‘childhood section’ of the novel only.

The novel in its entirety explores how adult selves are shaped by their past experiences. This first thematic drive is explored alongside another, which focusses on ideas of agency and humanity in the face of these deterministic forces.

The larger work responds to Stephen King’s *IT*. It employs the tropes of the Horror genre to tell a story about manhood, boyhood, and what happens in between; a story about the summer when, as kids, the characters were hunted by The Farmer and his Doberman, and the summer nearly twenty years later when they return to finish the battle as adults: adults with inner demons that may prove to be stronger than the Farmer himself; adults who are facing the traumas of their past and attempting to find the capacity to forge and maintain relationships; adults who must finally grow up and accept responsibility for their actions and the fate of their lives.

‘An Act of Reading and Writing’

Why am I drawn to heroic genre fiction? Why did I choose it as a mode to explore agency? And why did Horror end up being the mode in which to do it?

What is it about the reinvention of these familiar structures that on the one hand fills a deep need for stability, but on the other challenges the way I think about the world?

Why do reading and writing act as a meditative process? What is it about fiction that evades essentialism, and how do prescriptive structures like the Hero's Journey act as a meditative space that open themselves up to interpret the world around us?

This exegesis explores these questions through a framework of discussions with texts that informed my work. Using a humanist framework centred on the agency of the individual to affect change, as argued for by Edward Said, I explore how literature acts as a kind of humanist theology in the post-modern world, as envisaged by Andy Mousley. I then explore how heroic structures in genre fiction might be a meditation on agency.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Jonathan Zweck

May 30th, 2017

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To Kirby and Isla, thank for putting up with all the grumps and often being more grown up than me.

And a last thankyou to Lucy the cat for being incredibly strange and sitting beside me for nearly every damn word.

CREATIVE WORK:

This Old Man

Jonathan

Zweck

This book is dedicated to all the boys I grew up with, but especially my brother Nick, and Hugh and Seb. I love you guys, never grow up.

I grew up not far from here but now nothing's the same

curiosity is killing me as my nine lives turn to eight

we have nothing we have love and we share each other's pain

I have plans for me and you and our lives are gonna change

-Wil Wagner, 'Something I Can Hold in My Hands.'

STEVIE ROY

*This old man, he played one;
He played knick-knack on my thumb;
With a knick-knack, paddywhack,
Give a dog a bone;
This old man came rolling home.*

Dec 20th, 1996.

It all started with Stevie Roy.

A black Doberman watched the boy through the cyclone wire surrounding the Albury swimming pool. The dog's ears were perched at attention listening to the babble of children's voices, sorting through them, searching: weak; strong; brave; sad; angry; anxious; nervous. But one boy, the one he was watching, wasn't making any noise at all.

Stevie hung from the lane rope and wiped the water from his face. The red and yellow plastic loops dug into the skin under his arms as he bobbed up and down on the small waves rolling out from the bigger kids' bombs and horsies. It was the last day of school for the year and the pool staff had cleared the ropes from all but three lanes. The one Stevie was hanging from was furthest in and sagged underwater. Toward the middle of the pool a bunch of the Year Sevens were laughing and carrying on. Although they were only a year older they looked more like teenagers than boys. At least they did to Stevie. They were dunking each other, waiting for the pool guard to look away before using the elasticity of the ropes to catapult themselves up into the air. It didn't work that well but it was forbidden and therefore cool. You weren't even meant to hang on the ropes, but the pool guards picked their battles; no one needed the lane to lap in, and because it was the last day of school any *real* swimmers knew better and trained early that morning in order to avoid the kids. One of the boys launched himself into a half backflip, making a loud *thwack* into the water. The pool guard whipped around too late to catch anything but kids laughing and splashing each other.

Stevie let his legs float in the water behind him and felt the sun warming his olive-tanned skin. It was only December but he'd already spent every Saturday and every

afterschool at the pool. He fingered the small green circular tag hanging from the rubber band on his wrist. His first season pass. It had been a gift from his mum and dad for his eleventh birthday. He couldn't believe it. When he'd come home from the river, shivering like usual, his whole family were sitting around the table with a cake and candles. A box the size of a television was sat on the table, wrapped in blue paper with ribbons his mum had saved from a present from her choir. A small card was stuck to the paper, *Dear Stevie, hope this keeps you out of trouble this summer. Love, Mum and Dad.* His dad winked at him across the table as he looked up. Stevie felt his heart race. He carefully untied the ribbon and unstuck the paper, so they could be used again, and revealed an old TV box. The box was way too light for a TV, his dad must have gotten it from work. He was a not particularly good salesman at a less than successful electronics store.

His dad stifled a laugh as Stevie pulled back the top of the giant box; lying in the middle of the cavernous space was a small green tag. Little white numbers marked his membership: 7861. A season pass to the Albury Pool. A grin spilled from one ear to the other; free entry to the pool any day all summer and half price waterslide tickets. He looked up at his parents. His dad was giggling to himself over his clever ruse with the giant box, and his mum was trying not to cry with sympathetic happiness. He practically jumped the table as he ran to wrap them both in a massive hug. There was no way they could afford this. He'd heard them talking about money since something called the *reseshion*, he didn't really understand what it was, but it was the reason mum wasn't working and was home more. He didn't mind because she was picking him up from school again, which meant not staying at Auntie Sue's house after school, which meant more time swimming in the river. But it also meant they had even less money than before.

'We figured you've been spending so much time in the river...' His mum tripped over the word river.

His dad tried to cover for her. ‘And the current’s too strong really for a boy your age, and there’s the snakes and snags... we just figured you love your swimming and...’

The river. He’d also heard overheard them talking about that. Not just them. All of the grownups. It was even on the local news. The boy they’d found in the river. They found him down around the bend, past the causeway, past the paddle-steamer *Cumbaroona*, past Hovel Tree Park, even past the pool. Police were conducting an investigation (which conjured up an image of a man in uniform waving a baton wildly as other men in uniform jotted in pads and put things in zip-lock bags). They hadn’t released the name of the boy, only his age. He was ten.

Most kids in Albury were strong swimmers. The Riverina was a sporting Mecca; you grew up in the water, in the river, in the weir, in the pool, in the dams. The swimming club dated back to before the city had even been incorporated. Stevie’s parents could never afford lessons though; he learned through doing, in the river and when the school had done classes. The Murray was only a couple of hours flowing time from the snow, so it was fast and only a couple of degrees this side of freezing. You learnt to swim with the current and to feel cramps before they set in.

The pool-water lapping over Stevie’s arms was warm from the sun, and probably heated by the machines near the old bommy-knocker trees that hung over the northern side of the mesh fence.

‘Stevie!’

George and Adler were standing on the opposite edge of the pool, across the open expanse of water. As usual Adler still had his cap tugged down tight, dripping wet, and George looked uncomfortable squeezed into his Stubbies. Everyone in Albury wore Stubbies for bathers, didn’t matter if you played footy or not (although life in general was

simpler if you did). Stevie waved and beckoned them over. They nodded and began trotting around the edge of the pool. Stevie looked up and down the pool and noticed again that everyone kept to the edges or near the ropes. George dove in while Adler lowered himself cautiously, making sure his cap didn't fall off. They made their way along the lane rope, and when they got to him George belted Stevie in the arm, before draping himself over the plastic links. George was slightly thicker (he was *fatter*) than the other two and the rope sagged noticeably.

Adler hooked his knees over the rope and lay back floating, the peak of his cap jutting up from the water. He spat a stream of water up in the air. 'We just went on the slide. It ruled!'

George just shrugged. 'It was alright.'

Stevie looked up at the slide, its light blue segments snaking their way up and around to the top of the steel tower. Every few seconds there was a shriek and a laugh as another kid barrelled down. He hadn't been on it yet. He couldn't ask his parents for the money and he didn't want to ask the other boys for charity.

'You should come with us next time.'

Stevie looked at the small cardboard ticket Adler had rubber-banded to his wrist and changed the subject.

'Yeah, maybe. Where's Tim?' Tim was the other member of the gang, and he was Stevie's best friend.

Adler shrugged. Stevie took in the expanse of empty water in front of him. He'd found it strange since he started swimming here that no one ever swam in the centre of the

pool. Even the middle lanes were left empty for all but the busiest training sessions. ‘Hey, why does no one swim in the middle of the pool?’

Adler and George exchanged a glance and Adler spat another stream of water in the air. ‘The *drain*.’

‘What drain?’ Stevie tried to hide that he clearly didn’t know something he was meant to know. He’d only moved to the town a couple of years ago but he’d quickly become the undeclared leader of the bunch and it was strange to be out of the loop.

George adjusted himself on the rope and looked around like he was worried they were being watched. ‘The one down there,’ he nodded toward the centre of the pool’s floor before considering what he’d just said, ‘but any drain, really.’

Stevie followed George’s gaze and could just make out a small black dot in the middle of pool’s floor. ‘Why?’

Adler pulled himself up and draped his arms over the lane rope before swapping a nervous look with George. He took a shallow breath before he spoke, like just the words were enough to steal his breath: ‘Story is, there’s this guy.’

‘The Farmer,’ George cut in from the other side.

‘Yeah, The Farmer, and...’ Adler stumbled on the ‘and’.

Stevie looked at them both. ‘And what?’

Adler and George both froze for a second. It was like The Farmer became more real with each word they devoted to him.

‘You just don’t go near the drain, that’s all,’ George said quietly. Adler had lost some of his colour and held the lane rope tighter. George ducked under the rope and draped the other way so his back was to the middle of the pool. ‘You just don’t.’

The water lapped against the ropes and the silence grew uncomfortable. Adler adjusted his cap. A hundred thoughts had descended on him but were travelling too fast to grab hold of. He needed to distract himself before it made him angry. ‘Alright, Alien vs Velociraptor. Who’d win?’

George grinned. ‘Depends.’

‘On what?’

‘Well, where for example? Are they on the *Nostramo*, or in Jurassic Park?’

‘Death Star,’ Adler shot back.

‘Alien, hands down,’ Stevie butted in. ‘Remember how much the raptor slipped around in the kitchen. Alien is way better suited to the Death Star.’

‘And what kind of raptor?’ George asked, ‘A giant one from *Jurassic Park*, or a real one?’

‘What if it was a pack of them, like in *Jurassic Park*?’ Adler said. ‘Because they were smart, right, they could trick the Alien into the trash compactor.’

‘Hey, spastics!’

Stevie, George, and Adler looked around as Mike worked his way down the rope from the Year Sevens.

‘Ha, you looked, spastics.’

Mike was Tim's older brother and hung with them heaps outside of school, but it didn't stop him being a Year Seven around his schoolmates. If anything it gave him greater license to rib them.

Adler rolled his eyes and George retreated behind him and Stevie. Stevie fronted up to the older boy as much as you could on a lane rope.

'What do you want, Mike? Where's Tim?'

'He went for a ride. Anyway, get off our lane rope. You spastics are sinking it.'

George and Adler started to work their way back toward the shallow end to hop out. Stevie didn't budge. 'Or what?'

Mike watched him. In the water he couldn't stand over Stevie, who was barely an inch shorter anyway. In fact he was impressed by Stevie sticking it to him in front of the whole pool. 'Alright, spaz. If you get off the lane rope, I'll give you my waterslide ticket, still got all five rides on it.'

He held his wrist up out of the water, rolled off the elastic, and held it up. Stevie looked at it and back at George and Adler, who'd nearly made it out of the pool; they both nodded. He reached out to grab the ticket, and Mike whipped it out of his reach.

'That way.' He pointed across the empty expanse of water in the middle of the pool.

Stevie looked at the ticket, the slide, the drain, and then back at Adler and George's anxious faces. He looked across the still water; this was nothing. He'd swum in the river in winter, he'd swum under the causeway where the water surged like rapids, he'd swum in the middle of the full current of the river during a flood. This was nothing.

He looked at the water gently lapping against the far side. If it was nothing, why had his arms and legs started to tingle?

‘Sure.’

Mike made a long drawn out *oooh*.

‘Spaz here is going to swim the drain.’ He yelled it so everyone could hear. All around the pool heads turned. Even a few girls hanging off the opposite side of the pool turned. He noticed one of them was Beck Roberts and his stomach dropped an inch. His thoughts about Beck Roberts’ changing chest were interrupted by a splash as one of the older girls leant back from the rope. ‘Ah Mike, don’t be a dick.’

That sealed it for Stevie, he had to swim it now. If he didn’t, he’d have been saved by a girl, and in Albury that was practically social suicide. He reached out for the ticket in Mike’s hand. ‘Ticket. Now.’

Mike looked into Stevie’s eyes. Stevie was Tim’s best friend, which was confusing for Mike, because Tim was *his* best friend. He knew somewhere deep down he was taking pleasure in making the amazing Stevie Roy squirm.

The lane rope rose and fell as people adjusted themselves to get a better view. The regular splash of kids diving into the pool ceased and the water settled. The word spread fast as kids who’d been lying in the sun crept toward the edge of the pool. Stevie looked down at the drain. It was just a dumb story.

Stevie reached his hand out and Mike saw a glint of fear in the boy’s eyes. A wave of guilt swept up and he was filled with an overwhelming desire to call it off and just let him have the ticket. Shit, Tim went and played at Stevie’s all the time, he knew they had

no money. It meant more to him than it ever would to Mike. It was just a waterslide ticket. But the crowd had formed and there was no way out for either of them.

Mike handed him the ticket. The rubber band stung as it tugged on a couple of hairs as Stevie rolled it over his wrist. From the lane rope there was no wall to push off so he kicked the water and let go of the rope and took his first stroke. A small cheer came from Mike's mates. He wasn't sure if it was mockery or if maybe he'd shown enough guts he'd won a couple of them over. He pushed on. The second and third strokes were fine, the water felt good. He felt free. Pools were so still you could just make one subtle movement and you curled or cut through the water. He took a breath and dove. It felt best underwater. Completely submerged. He could see the blurred outlines of people's legs through the chlorine stinging his eyes. Below him the small black drain was hardly visible through the haze. He pulled with his arms and frog-kicked, his body punched through the water. He broke the surface to the sound of more cheers, his lone figure streaking across the pool. Nearly halfway there. He was nearly over the drain now.

Glancing around the pool, he could see the edges were lined with kids and they were all pumping their hands in the air. Straight ahead he could see Adler and George had camped on the concrete. Adler had taken his hat off, revealing his thick curls, and he was waving it madly in the air. George was hunched in excitement. Stevie rolled onto his back and did a couple of strokes of backstroke so he could look at Mike. He swore even Mike was wearing a slight grin as he shook his head. Rolling back over, he kicked under the surface. The cheers were muted by the dull churn of the water. Except the dull churn didn't sound quite right. A slight hum was cutting through it, like the dull tonelessness of low feedback. He shook his head. It was still there. Pulling his arms through the water he kicked again. This time when he broke the surface the cheers were even louder. Looking

down, Stevie noticed he was right over the drain. He took another long stroke under water. The hum formed a rounder sound, a deep comforting voice, it sang.

[Stevie]

The chlorine was stinging his eyes, and he couldn't see clearly, but the water down near the drain seemed clouded, turbulent. He quickened his stroke.

[don't go, Stevie. Stay and play]

He was imagining it. Overactive imagination. He broke the surface for a breath and saw Adler was jumping up and down on the spot. Just an overactive imagination. Like Adler.

'C'mon Stevie!' Adler cried.

[C'mon Stevie]

Stevie's long limbs stretched into a natural freestyle.

'He's... he's going to clear it.' Adler spun to George and grabbed his arm with both hands, shaking vigorously. 'He's going to clear it.'

George's eyes were wide like moons, he hardly even nodded and turned back to watch. He tried to stop his hands trembling. He could see the cloud in the water. Dirty water.

Adler whooped. 'Yeeaaaah Stevie!'

Stevie pulled through the water,

[don't be afraid Stevie, I don't bite]

the long strokes of a swimmer who knew how to go fast. He wasn't wasting energy thrashing in the water. The voice growled.

[MUCH]

His body jerked.

Across the pool, Mike stood on the lane rope and balanced as he scanned the water.

Stevie kicked again. He pulled forward half a metre then jerked back again.

His stroke quickened, his technique collapsed. He thrashed. Water splashed. Stevie's limbs smacked against the water as he fought... *as he fought what?* The smacking of the water was so loud no one noticed the cheers had stopped. Kids watched in frozen panic. The surging of the water built, huge bubbles exploding from the surface like a giant was rising from the depths. Stevie's arms occasionally whipped through the air, obscured by the white water. Then he was gone. The limbs stopped flying and the smacking sounds of the water subsided. The surface settled and silence fell across the pool.

Mike's eyes darted around the pool. The clouded water had cleared but he couldn't see Stevie anywhere. Around the edges of the pool a hundred sets of eyes stared back at him. Him, standing alone on a lane rope. Him, who'd bet Stevie to cross the pool, to swim the drain. Stevie who was... Mike looked back at the empty stretch of water where Stevie had just been.

George stared at the same spot, trying to understand what he'd just seen. Beneath the surface, magnified by the water, the small drain seemed to stare up at him. *You don't go near the drain.* He'd told him just before, he should have said something, he should

have... Stevie was gone. Beside him Adler's cap made a quiet thud as it hit the concrete. The lapping of water spilling into the overflow was split by a girl's scream. Kids who'd been hanging onto the edges began hauling themselves out, the others on the lane ropes yelled and screamed, and dove into the lanes, racing to the edge of the pool. Except Mike, who was still standing on the rope, stunned.

Mike looked at the drain. *The drain*. The small grate, only a foot wide, there was no way Stevie would fit down there. But something in his gut knew different. Something in his gut was certain Stevie'd fit down there. Mike dove headfirst into the water and kicked deep.

He could feel the pressure building as he kicked again. He hadn't taken a proper breath before he dived and his lungs started to burn. His fingertips awkwardly collided with the smooth surface of the tiles as he reached the bottom. Looking around he saw the drain was a couple of feet further away. He kicked again. His fingers found the metal grating. He tried to push them through the criss-crossed metalwork but the gaps were too narrow. He clawed at the edges. His fingernails were soaked from swimming all afternoon and kept bending and giving away. Two more hands joined his: chubby fingers. He looked up into George's moon eyes. Their fingers scrambled over the drain, but they couldn't get any purchase. Mike's lungs were burning, his eyes stung, his head ached. He tried to thump the grate with his fist, but couldn't get any momentum in the water. George gently took hold of Mike's wrist. His chubby cheeks had lost their red colour, he just shook his head and pointed up. They looked at each other. George could have sworn Mike was crying, but how could you tell underwater?

Their heads broke the water at the same time. Adler was looking expectantly from the side of the pool, his toes hooked over the edge, his cap gripped tightly in his hand. No words were needed. Mike shook his head. Arching back and looking to the sky, Adler

pulled his cap down over his curls and wailed. It echoed across the concrete and felt so good he did it again. As Mike and George climbed out of the water Adler started pacing back and forth, punching his fists toward the ground. He couldn't stop moving. Not Stevie. Not today. It wasn't fair. His throat stung, and then the tears came. They didn't hurt like normal tears. They just came, and they wouldn't stop. He tugged his hat down to hide them from the other boys.

As George wrapped an arm around Adler, Mike looked back into the empty pool. He couldn't help but notice how un-incredible it looked: just an ordinary, bog-standard drain.

Beyond the cyclone wire, beyond the boys' attention, the Doberman turned and trotted toward the weeping willows that lined the banks of the river. The banks that were not fifty metres from the pool's fence.

Stevie's body was found by an elderly couple taking an evening walk. After the police had fished the body out of the river Detective Shannon McGuinness carried out a preliminary investigation of the body on site.

Without knowing how long it had been in the river it was hard to do the maths on how much the body's temperature was affected. But Shannon's rough equation suggested he'd only been dead for a couple of hours. His height and colouring matched the description of the boy reported missing at the swimming pool, where there seemed to have been some mass hallucination that he'd been sucked down a drain. The pool staff had seen no such thing and the desk officer had put the report in the stack with UFO reports and Stickman sightings. The only reason Shannon knew about it was that funny

reports got shared on the radio to lighten the long shifts. The boy would probably turn up in a couple of hours anyway, they'd thought.

Shannon was a local boy. His people had helped build the Railway platform. Shit, he'd even gone to the same school this dead kid attended. And Shannon, like anyone who'd grown up in the town, had heard the stories. He knew the rhymes. But it was just a story. Still he couldn't shrug off an uncomfortable pinch in the muscles in his neck. Most physicians would attribute such a pinch to stress and Shannon, like most people, wasn't aware of his body enough to make the connection. Shannon was both inquisitive and shy, which meant he didn't have a girlfriend and had plenty of time to read. Since working some of the darker cases the town had seen he'd become fascinated with the town's history, digging through old newspapers and police records. He'd been unable to compare his findings with the records of towns similar to Albury, but he felt that a disproportionately large number of young boys were found dead in the region's watercourses. But surely they were just coincidences. The Farmer was just a story. Just a kid's story. The river was just wilder here. And the weir had its own dangers.

He made sure no one was watching and shook the tingling sensation from his neck and spine. Pulling out a small pad, Shannon crouched down and took some notes with a pencil that was almost unusably short from too many sharpenings. The boy's Stubbies had been ripped open and his skin was crisscrossed with tiny scars. Something about his eyes didn't look right, so Shannon made a note. He rolled the boy over and confirmed his suspicion that the scarring definitely crisscrossed his entire body. The boy's shoulders slumped strangely and Shannon felt them gently. He was no expert, but they felt a lot like snapped collarbones as well, and possibly dislocated shoulders. There was some bruising on his wrists and ankles. But the worst bruising was around the back of the neck. It was hard to tell but it also looked like the scarring was concentrated there as well. He felt for

the poor parents who would have to identify the body. Hopefully the coroner would throw some pancake on the kid before they did.

He rolled the body back over, returning some of the boy's dignity. Standing up, he tapped the pencil against the cover of the pad. He walked over to the river and watched the current rushing quickly over some submerged snags. It was a stretch, but perhaps the boy was swimming in the river and he'd gotten badly snagged and the body was bouncing on the stones in the riverbed, or he was snagged in some sharp tree roots, maybe the Cumberoona's paddle wheels. Another thought, a more unpleasant one, descended on him and he wished it away, but it kept coming back.

He returned to the body and examined the face more closely.

There's this assumption that the faces of the dead are restful and at peace. This kid's looked broken. Like something had given before the lights went out. But it was more than that, Shannon realised. *His eyelids had been removed.* At first they'd just looked like the water had bloated them, revealing a red line of the interior. But they'd been cut. Shannon fought an impulse to throw up. Not from the body, he'd seen bodies in worse states, but because of where his mind went. He made a note and walked away from the body. He nodded to the orderlies and they carefully zipped the body up. Shannon did the kid the respect of witnessing every moment as they slid and lifted the body onto the gurney, transported him to the ambulance, slid him into the back of the truck, and closed the doors. And this was why he saw Timothy Birch sitting on his BMX, his eyes magnified by his glasses, looking on in disbelief as Stevie Roy's body was carted off to the morgue. For a second Tim looked directly into Shannon's eyes. Shannon saw a million emotions rush through the boy as his mind raced to understand. Maybe he thought he was in trouble, maybe he was just overwhelmed. But finally his eyes settled on terror, and he shot off on his bike.

‘Wait!’ Shannon called.

But Tim was gone, his bike rattling over the bumps as a plume of dust rose from his back wheel.

PART 1

December of 2014

EXPLANATORY NOTE AND SYNOPSIS

Due to the constraints of the word limit for the PhD, I am unable to present the novel in its entirety. Commercial publishers prefer novels in this category to be upwards of 100,000 words. Due to the scope of this novel, compressing this narrative was not possible while still retaining the necessary emotive depth to make Horror work. Instead I have decided to submit the Prologue and ‘Part 2’ under the title *This Old Man*, which encompasses the entire childhood narrative of the novel. I believe this section does stand alone and that it captures the essence of what I am trying to do in the novel as discussed in the exegesis. I will briefly explain what occurs in Parts ‘1’ and ‘3’ through synopsis.

To put things in context, ‘Part 2’s’ childhood narrative interweaves with an adult narrative that play out in Parts ‘1’ and ‘3.’ In ‘Part 1’ we meet Tim, Adler, and George as adults.

Tim

Tim works in a bar in Adelaide, where he has dropped out of life and hides out with a range of other misfits. One of the barflies, Noel, tells Tim war stories that manage to cut through Tim’s nihilism and make him feel something. The other person who makes him feel something is a seemingly carefree, strong-willed colleague called Polly. This

unrealised crush has developed over time but she also drives Tim nuts. At the end of this chapter, Noel tells Tim he has cancer.

Adler

We meet Adler on a film set where he struggles with bad acting talent, and even worse timeframes and budgets. He is now a successful Hollywood director, and is on the brink of superstardom (think a young Steven Spielberg or J.J. Abrams). He clearly thinks most people are idiots and, for him, life is a constant struggle to get anything done properly. Late for a meeting, he stresses over a production company he is trying to start; a production company that would give him time and control to make real films again and not the rubbish he's been making recently.

He meets the investor, Tomlinson, at a restaurant, and is surprised that Tomlinson isn't 'an idiot.' Adler goes to the toilet to relieve a severe cocaine habit and finally finds some clarity. He returns to the table and receives an offer from Tomlinson: Adler can have the money on two conditions: one, he writes and directs the first few projects, and two, that Adler's personal life choices don't get made public (he makes a point of the white gunk still in Adler's nostril).

George

Unlike the others, George has stayed in Albury, where he keeps a modest life disciplined around work and exercise. And unlike the other boys, George *can* remember the events of 1996/1997. In his spare time, he carries out research about The Farmer. He is now tall and thin, and gets around on a set of crutches.

George goes for breakfast at a café and flirts with the waitress, Beck Roberts. We learn how after the other boys left Albury, George had an adolescent friendship with

Beck, which he now realises was more than it seemed. But she married young and George watched that boat sail, even if her partner, Karl, is an abusive philandering jack-arse.

Later that day he realises he left some of his research (a newspaper article about the recent disappearance of a young boy) at breakfast and returns to retrieve it from the café, where Beck is closing up. As he enters he realises he is alone with her for the first time since they were seventeen. As the tension ramps up, George realises he isn't alone in his feelings and the two make love in the empty café.

Later that evening, he sips his tea and watches the Monument from beside the lagoon behind his house. As he does he has the horrible feeling that it's all happening again, and that The Farmer has returned.

As the Monument light flicks on, George's sperm enters Beck's ovum and a light brighter than the sun flashes for a millisecond in her womb. In L.A. Adler has an epiphany, in Adelaide Noel dies, and in the Hume Dam control room, Sammy Betts feels a shudder through the dam wall.

A Funeral

In L.A., fighting a terrible case of writer's block (with a production company on the line), Adler is on a cocktail of cocaine and whiskey and feels an overwhelming desire to return to Eastern Hill and recreate a vague memory of watching the Monument as the sun sets.

At Noel's funeral Tim remembers how there was no casket at Mike's.

PART 2

December of 1996

This old man, he played three;
He played knick-knack on my knee.
With a knick-knack, paddywhack,
Give a dog a bone;
This old man came rolling home.

MICHAEL AND TIMOTHY BIRCH

1.

December 21st, 1996.

Mike and Tim were so close in age that Tim made jokes their dad must have been on the way in while Mike was on the way out. ‘You probably used dad’s dick as a fire pole.’

Mike just called Tim ‘Afterbirth.’

They fought. A lot. They had bruises tattooed on their arms from a long-running game of ‘dead arm.’ It wasn’t that complicated. You just waited until the other one was least expecting it and then belted him as hard as you could in the arm. There was a spot on the side of the bicep where the flesh was thin to the bone. It bruised heavily and made the arm feel dead. Hence ‘dead arm.’

Like most brothers everything was a competition, and there was no holding back: backyard cricket, riding bikes, eating breakfast, burping, football, wearing short-shorts in deep-winter; everything. They’d built a circuit in the backyard, around which they raced their BMXs. They would hit that track like they were Michael Schumacher committing for the world championship. Not giving an inch.

One time, Tim had ended up tangled in the prickly bush so bad Mike had to cut him out with garden shears. They’d copped it pretty bad from their dad for that one. Another time, they’d hit the first corner so hard that Tim had torn up all the zucchinis and Mike had grazed the entire side of his face on the bricks. And then there was the time that got them banned from bikes in the backyard, full-stop. It was the seventh and deciding race for the afternoon. The stakes: the loser had to ask out Beck Roberts. With a mouth

full of raisins. Beck Roberts was, in their eyes, the hottest girl in school, so the potential humiliation was stakes for some fierce racing. They'd hit the last corner at full tilt, both desperate for track position. If you held the lead onto the brick path the race was yours (barring a failure to navigate an uneven concrete slab).

Mashing his pedals, bent low over the bars, Mike had grunted, 'You're drooling fruit tomorrow.'

Like a couple of track sprinters they leaned into each other, using the other's weight to stay upright as they barrelled into the corner. Despite having the inside line, Tim pulled away at the last minute, leaving Mike the chance to take the racing line into the corner. But Mike, presumably not expecting Tim to back off, ran wide and failed to close the apex. Tim saw a gap, a chance to steal the lead. In times to come the existence of this gap became the topic of some debate, but in the heat of the moment Tim knew it was now or never. He positioned himself low on the bike and leant into the corner hard, but the bike's wheels slid on the wet grass and he felt the bike slipping out from under him. Instead of cutting the apex of the corner and racing away to victory Tim and his bike went sliding into Mike's wheels. The handlebars jerked in Mike's hands and the bike jagged awkwardly, throwing Mike and machine through the asbestos wall of the shed. As Tim landed he shot his hand out to break his own fall and heard his shoulder make a strange click. Pain shot through it as it dislocated. With another bump, and even more pain, it clicked loudly back into place. From inside the shed there was a bunch of crashing and clinking as Mike tumbled to a halt.

Tim lay on the cold bricks and let the world catch up. 'Mike?'

'Yeah?'

'You OK?'

‘Yeah.’

Tim’s head thudded back against the bricks and adrenaline shot through his body. He jumped up and checked his bike. The handlebars were askew but he hadn’t broken anything. There were some new scratches on the right side of the frame, particularly on the rear stays, but otherwise the bike was fine. He checked his skin for blood. His right hand was pretty naked on the palm, the knee was open, and his right arm had a graze running the length of it. The naked palm had some decent holes where some gravel had punched through. He wasn’t looking forward to cleaning them. And then a wave of pain started welling up from his shoulder and he bent over with the pain, ‘Ohahhhh. Shiiiiit.’

He’d never been hurt this bad before. He looked up as Mike stepped through the gaping hole in the shed. He’d punched straight through, leaving a near perfect silhouette of a boy on a bike, just like in the cartoons. Mike looked at Tim and back at the hole. There was no way they were patching or hiding that. ‘Whoops.’

And then he burst out laughing. Tim took one look at the hole and lost it too. Mike collapsed to the ground, writhing with laughter. Tim sat back down, his shoulder hurt with each breath as he laughed, but he couldn’t stop. ‘Dad, ha, da, dad, mi, hah ha, dad might, ha, migh, he might actually skin us for this one.’

And they lost it again.

‘Skin us? If we survive whatever comes first.’

The laughs fizzled out as they began thinking about what their dad might actually do. Their gazes said the things they couldn’t speak aloud. They were scared of their dad.

Mike jumped up. ‘Bugger it. *Skinned!* All the better when you ask Beck out tomorrow.’ He lunged into a run, heading for the finish line. Tim was only halfway up as

Mike goose-stepped past him like a rugby wing, legs kicking out in front of him; it made a tackle from low down both difficult and potentially very painful. Tim didn't care and lunged out, copping a foot in the face. Ignoring the stabbing pain in his shoulder he somehow got hold of Mike around the thighs and dragged him down. Tim crawled over him, using Mike's back to springboard into a run, but Mike lunged, catching Tim's foot, which slipped through his grasp. It was enough to send Tim stumbling. By the time Tim had found his balance, Mike was right on him. It was all down to the sprint. They muscled into each other, side by side, fighting for every inch. Diving for the line, they skinned their knees and elbows and grazed their chests and hips through their clothes. It was a draw.

‘TIIIIIMMMMM, MIIIIKKKKE!’ Their mum's voice bellowed from the kitchen door. ‘DIIINNNEERRR.’

Without time for a decider they had to deal with the draw. Neither of them won, which meant they'd both technically lost. And because neither would let the other off the hook with Beck Roberts, the next day, battered and bruised, the boys stood side-by-side, drooling raisins, as they asked a bewildered Beck Roberts out on a date.

2.

The day Mike saw the Doberman on Nail Can Hill they were having one of their 'friendly' games of golf in the backyard. After failing to cultivate a turf cricket wicket in the backyard, despite using tarps and everything, they'd turned their attention to grooming it into a putting green. It was the second of two yards that ran behind the house. The first (the one which housed their racetrack) was technically property that belonged to the church, but it was effectively a second yard for the Pastor and his family. After a trip

to the library with George (who somehow got drawn into researching every scheme they set their minds to and then got blamed when they inevitably failed) they set to manicuring the lawn. They mowed it three to four times a week and gave it lots of water. They'd dug some small holes and re-enforced them with old soup cans and 'borrowed' the orange safety flag off Mr Neeson's bike to act as a golf flag. They even dug some fertilizer out of the shed and used four times as much as George's research had told them to just for good measure. Despite all their efforts they were still struggling to put the ball in a straight line over the tough yellow clumps of grass that had survived.

It was the afternoon after Stevie had died and they'd been trying to take their minds off it. That's what all the grownups were telling them to do. 'Take their minds off it.' It seemed like good enough advice. It sure hurt to think about it.

They'd started experimenting with the wedge to get their shots to clear the rough turf. Once they'd got their heads around the basics, they found they could get a decent distance with the wedge, and they were actually needing to hold back on their swings. This soon felt a bit lame and Mike had the excellent idea that they should tee off from the other yard. This meant they would need the ball to clear the corrugated iron fence that separated the two yards, as well as the top of the orange tree, all without a clear line of sight to the hole. It would be like the opposite of hitting a six in backyard-cricket.

The first few shots didn't even clear the fence. The boys started tentatively at first because the golf ball was a lot harder and a lot faster than the tennis balls they used for cricket. Mike was the first to clear the fence and Tim naturally matched his brother with his next shot. The bit on the other side, the getting it in the hole, fast became a chore that delayed winding up their next tee shot. Soon they scrubbed the putting and were just walking back and teeing off every shot. Then the walk became a chore, so they just teed off each way. It wasn't long before they were walking further into each yard, increasing

the distance, and hitting the ball harder. After they'd reached the extremities of the yard Mike turned to Tim. 'Reckon I can clear both yards and get it on the street?'

'Go on.'

Mike walked back to the bag and pulled out an iron and swaggered up to the tee. He rested the head of the club behind the ball and looked forward, imagining the destination of the ball. The club wound up high above his shoulder and with a twist of his pelvis he rocked through the shot. *THWACK*. The ball sailed high over the orange tree, over the fence, and disappeared from sight. *CLANK*. Running into the next yard they found the ball lying in the garden bed, a metre away from a small dent in the far fence.

'Right.' Tim turned and strolled purposefully to the end of the other yard. Mike followed, crossing his fingers in his pocket that Tim wouldn't clear it. Tim fossicked through the front of the old leather golf bag and found a small red wooden golf tee. He delicately placed the ball atop the tee and pulled the wood from its sheath. He lined the thick head of the club behind the ball and practiced the shot a couple of times. *Focus*, he thought, *follow through, watch the ball, not the horizon*. Raising one finger like Babe Ruth, Tim pointed toward the horizon.

THWACK.

The ball shot like a bullet, in a dead straight line; it had much less lift than any of their other shots had. It flicked through the leaves of the orange tree. He'd hooked it slightly and it was heading straight for the church. With a tinkling crash it smashed straight through the stained glass window of Jesus holding a lamb. Tim and Mike stared at the image of Christ. The fingers of his hand were raised to the sky, only now he was pointing at a neat round hole in the glass.

Tim turned to Mike, who was staring at him with that *we are so fucked now* look plastered across his face. His mind racing, Tim flicked through options. Maybe a bird flew through it; some punk with a rock; the glass was old and fragile; an earthquake... now he was stretching. Then it dawned on him: the ball was inside. No story would work if his dad found the ball. 'We have to get the ball, if Dad finds the ball...'

'Right behind you,' Mike said.

They took one step into the next yard and their father's voice bellowed from inside the church: 'MICHAEL AND TIMOTHY BIRCH!'

Most people respond in one of two ways when confronted with deep ball-shrinking fear. Some stay and fight and some bolt as fast as possible. When you're an average twelve year old, familiar with every coming blow, you bolt. So they bolted like wild horses from the thunderclap of a rifle. Instinct guided them to what they knew best. They tumbled through the back door of the garage and out the other side on their bikes, so fast you'd have thought they'd sprouted them from their groins. They skidded to a halt, fumbling with the pin that held the front gate shut, and then pedalled off so quick they left the gate banging violently behind them. And then they pedalled like they never had before. It was one thing when they'd busted something they owned, another when it was something their dad owned, and another when it was something someone else owned. God only knew what the punishment would be when it was something the church owned.

They'd embarrassed him and that meant...

There was no coasting, no clicking as their freewheels spun in the back hubs. Their handlebars wiggled violently from side to side as they forced the pedals down with every sinew in their bodies. Their pedal strokes started from the arms and shoulders, bucking through their backs, abs, glutes, hamstrings, quads and calves. They hopped

curbs, slid around corners, ducked down alleys and ran stop signs and red lights. Their sides ached as they sucked air into their burning lungs.

With every rev of a car engine or squeal of a tyre they panicked, thinking that when they looked over their shoulder they'd see their dad's rage-fuelled face hunched forward over the wheel of his blue Falcon XD, its blunt nose growling through its grill. And each time it wasn't him, the relief or the terror, who knew which, would shoot through them, sending another surge of power through their legs. They could hear each other wheezing and shouted support at each other: *Go! Faster! You can do it! Harder!* A cloud of dust rooster-tailed off the back of their bikes and they skidded back onto the pavement of the next street.

Mashing down on their pedals, they heaved over their handlebars: they were climbing. Their legs burned with each pedal stroke as they pushed up the bitumen. It was slow. But up was safe. If they could get out of the valley, if they could make the bush that capped the hills ringing the town, they were safe. The hills were theirs; at least, they weren't the adults'. They glanced over their shoulders, anticipating the blue Falcon. The grill. The rage over the wheel. Beneath their wheels the bitumen turned to gravel and they shifted their stance on their bikes, snaking their way across the loose surface. They rode with their weight constantly shifting, stopping the pedal stroke from slipping the back wheel and losing speed. It had become so hard to breathe; it felt like they were running on a vicious cocktail of terror and adrenaline. They were like cornered animals. Unpredictable. Their eyes wide, pupils small.

The thick trunks of eucalypts blurred past amongst the smaller bushes. The trail got rougher, they started bunny hopping roots and picking lines to avoid rocks and rivets. Every metre further into the bush the terror eased and left in its place a deep fear and hopelessness. Their pedals slowed and they eased their bikes into a small clearing. They

came to a halt, bent over the handlebars, wheezing for breath. Tim started to see white and fought not to succumb to the dizziness battering at his brain. His stomach was flipping and flopping, his heart was racing so hard it felt like it might punch one of his ribs out. His lungs heaved for air. With a grunt Mike threw up over his handlebars; the sound of it made Tim's stomach bounce, but Mike's vomit didn't make it over the bars and instead it splattered back off the chrome. They collapsed off their bikes, not even noticing if they landed in their own spew. They watched the same sky spin, the same clouds changing colour, and together they blacked out.

Mike came to first. He sat up. Every muscle in his body trembled. The sun was making its journey home behind them. He squinted through the trees and tried to work out where they were. He shook Tim, who was dazy.

'Tim?'

'Yeah?' Tim slurred.

'I'm just going to work out where we are. Stay here.'

Mike looked at his bike but his trembling muscles screamed at the thought of pushing those pedals. So he trudged up the gentle incline of the trail instead. The path arrived at the peak of the hill and a gap in the trees revealed the town. Directly across the valley was Eastern Hill. Which meant he was standing on either Nail Can or Monument Hill. In the distance he could make out the old railway platform. The townspeople said it was the second-longest in the southern hemisphere, but Mike wondered if that was truth or 'truth.' Studying the patterns of the streets he figured they were on Nail Can. He started walking back down the trail to tell Tim and, despite the gentleness of the incline, his legs felt like jelly holding up a Jenga stack.

He looked back through the bush to see if he could still make out Eastern Hill. If the trees that ringed the town were their place, then Eastern Hill was their home. He wished he'd planned better while they were running, he'd wished he'd thought to head east, and that right now they were sitting over there instead: safe.

The sun crept over the horizon of the hill and the cool shadow of evening sent a chill through him. It was cold for summer. Even though it was December, evenings up on the hill could still get chilly—like desert evenings. He rubbed his arms with his hands for warmth. Maybe it was one of those evenings. Or maybe his body was so racked with exhaustion his shock was manifesting as cold. He rubbed his arms again, trying to warm the goosebumps that had risen on his skin. He peered through the bush again to see if Eastern Hill was looking back at him and his blood ran cold. Not forty feet away a black Doberman sat on its haunches, watching him. Its ears were trained forward, listening. Mike fought the urge to run. Somewhere along the way he was sure he'd heard someone say, *don't run from a dog*. But as he stared into the dog's emotionless eyes he started to worry about Tim. He was frozen to the spot, his legs felt like lead weight. But every second he stood there, he became more certain Tim was in danger too. He willed his feet to shuffle slowly backward down the path. As he inched down the trail, the Doberman's eyes followed him, but it didn't move, it just watched. A shiver ran down Mike's spine and a faintness started washing over him. Then the dog took a few steps forward. Mike felt his foot slip and he glanced down to check his footing. He looked back up to find the dog had disappeared.

Mike sprinted.

The path slipped under his feet as he took steps slightly too big. The impact of running downhill jarred up through his hips and ribs, and his already tired legs threatened

to give way at any second. He glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see the Doberman chasing him down, but instead there was nothing, just an empty path and the fading light.

When Mike got back Tim was sitting in a small clearing. He had his arms wrapped around his legs and he was shivering. Tim was thinner than Mike and felt the cold worse. His glasses were dirty from where the dust on his hands had mixed with his tears when he'd taken them off to wipe his eyes. Mike was just happy to see him safe. Tim must have seen his smile because he looked a bit confused. The dog's piercing gaze popped back into Mike's head and he felt a strange need that they be closer to the light of the Monument.

'C'mon, let's go look at the view,' he said.

Tim nodded and they rolled their bikes up the trail. Mike kept his eyes peeled for the Dog. For some reason he felt the need to keep it a secret from his brother, like he was protecting him. Instead he guided them to a clearing further along the ridge, over near the Monument. They found a spot where they could sit and take in the view. Tim took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes.

'What are we going to do, Mike?'

'I don't know, mate.'

Tim pushed his glasses back onto his nose. 'We've never broken any of the church stuff before.'

Mike was lost for words. 'Yeah.'

'I've,' Tim said quietly.

'Huh?'

Tim hugged his legs. *'I've. I've never broken church stuff. You didn't do it. It was me. He's going to... man, I don't even know what...'*

Mike nodded. Tim wiped his face and Mike pretended not to see the tear fall in the dust. Tim sniffed. *'You should go back. If you get back for dinner, you could... you could tell them what happened. Just tell them I did it. And he won't... You'll be OK.'*

Mike kept nodding and rubbed his lips together. *'Yeah, but then I'd miss out on all the fun.'*

Tim wanted to reach out and give his brother a hug. Instead he leaned forward and hugged his knees. As he watched the dying light fade over the town he remembered Stevie's body lying on the river bank with the cop standing over him. How had he forgotten about it all afternoon? He'd been so busy thinking about his own trouble that he'd forgotten his best friend was dead.

Mike watched as his brother wrestled with his thoughts. He hated watching him suffer. He wished he could fix it. So he belted him in the arm. Right in the spot where it would bruise.

'Owww.'

'Dead arm.'

3.

The boys stayed up there all night and it was lucky they did. Their dad had been overseeing the Ladies of Christ's Gaiety hanging the Christmas decorations and had stared in disbelief as the ball had shattered the window and rebounded off the walls of the chancel, knocking the Paschal candle and denting the timber of the altar.

The ball rolled to a stop on the floor in front of him and he recognised the small V symbol of the Calloways he stored in his bag in the shed. He could feel the eyes of the Ladies of Christ's Gaiety boring into his back from around the church. The Paschal candle rolled slowly toward the step down from the chancel. With a clunk it dropped onto the wooden floorboards and splintered into several pieces. With it went his temper and he saw red. He might have yelled something, he couldn't remember. He stormed into the yard behind the chancel and felt even more ridiculous when the boys weren't there. Across the yard the amateur patching he'd made over the hole in the shed mocked him. He turned with a growl and set off for the other yard. The small red tee lay like a beacon against the yellow grass. A few metres further on the bag of clubs lay on the ground, the wood still lying where they'd dropped it.

He'd told them. Oh, he'd told them. Only putters in the yard! Putters, only. They should know better after the shed.

He heard the front gate crash and grabbed the driver. He didn't run. A man didn't run unless exercising. It was silly, running. He walked with long purposeful strides, through the yard, through the shed. He noticed the absent BMXs. He could feel his wife's terrified gaze through the kitchen window as he walked under the carport and out the gate. It only made the red burn brighter. How dare they embarrass him like that. The Paschal candle. One candle for the whole year. That was doctrine. How *dare* they. His moustache bristled as a fresh surge of red struck his temples. He marched out into the middle of the street, the gold club hanging in his hand like a mace. Down the road he could see the boys, weaving on and off the footpath to avoid people and cars. And now they ran.

bleeding cowards

No sons of his were *bleeding* cowards. He wanted to chase them, *but men didn't run*. Instead he started for the car. He slammed the door behind him as he twisted the key in the ignition. He could feel the 5.8L V8 engine under the bonnet. Anticipation for her throaty purr rolled through him like the arousal of seeing breasts in a film while he was sitting next to his wife. He longed for the roar as he pressed down on the pedal.

Ee Ee Ee Ee ee ee

[paddywhack]

The transmission refused to roll. He fiddled with the lights. Someone had left the bloody lights on. The boys! The boys must have been playing in the car. They must have stolen the keys from the hooks in the hall and played in the car. He smashed the dash with fist. 'Come on, you whore!'

He turned the key again. *Ee ee ee ee ee*,

[paddywhack}

'Crap! shit! ...FUCK!' He beat the steering wheel with his fists. The car rocked as he wrestled in his chair. With one last effort he twisted the key as hard as he could. The key turned but the lock didn't, and his fist went flying into the door. In the distance he could sense what must be pain in his knuckles. He stared at the sheared remains of the key in his hand.

[PADDYWHACK]

The valve blew. The world went red. Gripping the steering wheel with both hands, he pushed himself back into the chair. His head rocked back like a circus clown.

'Ha ha....ha ha ha. Ha ha HAH!'

Clarity washed over him like a cold shower. He could see the roof of the shed over the fence. *Those bleeding cowards, they would pay for this!* He stepped out of the car, picked up the golf club and strode back toward the shed.

Dust floated through a beam of sunlight that streaked from the shed door across the concrete floor. The light illuminated the contents of the old asbestos walls. Spider webs stretched between the corners, and cans of paint and bottles of pesticide lined the walls. A tower of unused pavers filled one corner, a bunch of ladders were stacked in another. And in another there were two benches. He could see clearly which bench was Tim's and which was Mike's. Mike's was meticulous. The small brushes were all resting in jars of turps, the miniature paint cans arranged by colour, the boxes neatly stacked. His model-scale spray gun was protected by a dust cover. Under another protective tent was a half-finished plastic formula one car, and next to it a half completed engine block. The other bench was clearly Tim's. Stripped plastic part-frames were littered across the table. A half painted F-14 Tomcat sat on the bench. The turps his brushes sat in was black. The miniature paint tins were scattered everywhere, some with their lids off, the paint inside solidified. Above the benches, suspended from the ceiling and arranged on shelves, were finished models. Spitfires were having dogfights with Hurricanes and a Mirage was firing a missile at an F-18 Hornet.

In his mind's eye the Paschal candle fell to the ground and splintered. The valve spewed and red came rushing. In his hands the wood swung and came crashing down in the middle of Mike's bench. A freshly completed Hawker Hurricane disintegrated under the head of the club. Glass shattered as he dragged it into the spray gun.

the clubs lying in the backyard

Tim's paint cans went flying as the club smashed down into his bench. He kept hacking. *Keys*. The solid head of the wood sending bits of plastic and glue pots flying. He swung high and the Tomcat exploded against the wall of the shed.

the boys disappearing down the street

COWARDS! The club became a part of him. It flashed in and out of his vision.

Paschal candle.

He found himself standing in the shed surrounded by shrapnel. The benches were gone, replaced by shards of timber. In his hand a warped and bent steel rod with a haggard wooden head hung limply against the cement. He heard the club clatter to the floor as he walked out the door.

The boys had to learn.

4.

Mike and Tim trudged in the next morning. Because of the rocks that had dug into their skin their backs were sore and they had that strung out feeling from not sleeping all night. They lay their bikes against the wall and slid the kitchen door open. Their mum was standing at the bench kneading bread dough. 'He's in the office.'

The boys nodded. As they turned she gave them some advice.

'I'd knock.'

When they walked in the door Colin Birch was sitting behind his large desk. The rage was gone, replaced by a cold contempt. On the desk in front of him were the

shattered pieces of the Paschal candle. Resignation trickled through Mike, dread through Tim.

‘I warned you, didn’t I?’

Colin stepped up from behind the desk and walked around in front of it, towering over the boys. A tic in his neck pulsed.

‘After the shed, I warned you. It’s like you don’t want to learn.’

His hand shot out and they both flinched but he just picked up the candle.

‘See this? This represents the light of Christ.’

He walked over to the window that looked out over the rose bushes. Tim hoped he didn’t notice the chunk missing out of one of them, where a particularly good torpedo had come to rest the week before.

‘The light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’ Colin turned and looked them both in the eye. ‘Till you two came along.’ His attention returned to the candle. ‘Gospel of John. Every Easter, we light it. But you know this, don’t you? Because you’re there every year.’

It was true, they had to go to church every Sunday. Except when they stayed with Stevie. *His* parents were only Catholic on special occasions and they liked Tim and Mike. It had been pretty full-on meeting them. They made the boys call them James and Reggie and they covered church for them with Colin.

‘Not just Easter, you’re there for every service. You see this every Sunday.’

Tim’s mind wandered back to Easter. Mum had been singing in the choir and their father had been up front presiding. The boys had been sitting on their own and had started

leafing through the Bible. They'd found a passage that alluded to masturbation, in King James English, and although they didn't really understand it completely they'd gotten the giggles. There was something about the gravity of the service that made the giggles worse. The memory sent a silly rush through him and he made the mistake of looking at Mike. From the look in Mike's eye, he was having a similar thought: the present situation was even heavier. Tim bit down on a laugh and felt the back of his throat burn. He hoped his dad didn't turn around now, because he was shaking just trying to hold it in. Beside him, Tim could feel Mike shaking as well. It radiated from him. He bit his lip and focussed on the pain. *Don't look at Mike.*

Colin's lecture continued. 'This candle reminds us that Christ's light scatters the darkness from our hearts and minds.' His eyes spat at them [*and you shattered that*]. He walked back over and returned the candle to the desk. 'Did you boys know the Ladies of Christ's Gaiety were hanging decorations yesterday?'

The giggles burst out of them like cheer from a fat kid at Christmas. There was something inherently funny about the name 'Ladies of Christ's Gaiety'.

'Right!' Colin roared, his moustache bristling. He spun around and grabbed each of them by the scruff of the neck, one in each vice-like grip. He pushed them down on the desk. Tim's glasses went skittering across the wood. His face pressed down hard. He could see Mike struggling with the urge to fight back.

'Those ladies talk. And now everyone's going to know that my boys thought it was real funny to break that candle.'

Tim felt bile rising. It wasn't fair, they didn't mean to. They'd just been mucking around. It *was* their fault about the window. But they hadn't broken the candle. Well, they had, but they hadn't *meant* to.

Colin's hands pushed their faces harder into the desk. 'You're *BOTH* fucked.'

Colin never swore in front of the boys. 'I know you were *BOTH* playing with the clubs.'

Colin's mind ran. But what could he do to them? They didn't watch TV. And grounding them wouldn't work. Letting them burn off energy was better than them using it around the house.

[I SAID PUTTERS ONLY! DISSOBEDIENT SHITS!]

'But first, I want to know WHO hit THAT ball.'

They both looked at the ball sitting in the middle of the desk. Tim willed himself to speak up. It was his shot. He shouldn't have used the wood. They'd probably have gotten away with it. If he'd just known when to stop, this wouldn't be happening.

But across the table Mike winked at him. 'It was me, Dad.'

His dad pulled them up and threw Tim aside, sending him tumbling to the ground.

'You stay,' he said to Mike. He looked down at Tim. 'You too.'

He crossed the room and pulled a long bamboo cane from a collection of umbrellas and walking sticks in the corner.

He pointed it at Tim. 'He wouldn't have done it without you. You watch.'

So Tim watched as Colin lay into Mike's ribs with the cane. It was always around the ribs, under the shirt, where no one could see. Where it wouldn't embarrass Colin Birch. Tim seethed with anger and chewed on the bile rising in his mouth. He looked at the broken candle. Scattering the darkness, huh. What a fucking crock. What a fucking hypocrite.

Mike didn't make a whimper, he just gritted his teeth and took each whack of the cane. His nose twitched with each strike, his lips pulling back revealing his teeth. Like a dog snarling. But he didn't whimper. He even managed to sneak another wink at Tim. A wink that said: It's OK, I'm fine, I got you, I'll always be there for you, mate.

5.

When they walked back through the kitchen to go to their rooms their Mum was knotting the dough into rolls.

'Why don't you stop him?' Tim said coldly, trying not to cry. Emotional weakness didn't fly well with her.

'He might go too far sometimes, but you boys have to learn.'

'Whatever,' Tim whispered as he walked off.

'Sorry?' Her voice was like ice.

'Nothing, Mum, sorry.' He said. Apologising for *what?* It burned.

Mike walked stiffly as they collected their jumpers and went out to the shed. They flicked the light on and stared at the shattered remains of their models.

'Prick,' Tim said, choking on the word as his throat tightened.

Mike's shoulders slumped. 'One day we'll get away.'

The boys collapsed onto their stools, shoulders slumped, like gargoyles looking over their ruined cathedral. Mike flicked his lamp on to better see the damage. In the

carnage it had been knocked askew and its hood now cast its light across the wall of the shed. Three foot tall letters were painted across the asbestos wall.

[PADDYWHACK]

It made Tim's blood cold; it felt like it was draining from him. A drop dripped from the H and fell to the floor, where it splattered into nothing. The old rhyme rang in his mind. *This old man, he played one, he played knick-knack on my drum.* He knew the stories, everyone who'd grown up in the town knew the stories. And like everyone in the town, he'd made the story into a fiction and broken it down with reason. But this chilled him to the bone. There was something about the lettering...

'Mike, you can see that too, right?'

Mike nodded. His expression somewhere between disbelief and bitter disappointment. 'Yep.'

Tim looked at the wreckage. 'Dad's angry, but he wouldn't do that...'

'Nah,' Mike said, then he placed a hand against his ribs. 'I don't know. Wouldn't he?'

A gust of wind sucked the air from the room, slamming the door hard behind it. Tim stepped closer to Mike. The lights flickered out and back on. The boys found themselves standing back to back, terrified, ready to fight the dark. When they looked at the wall the light was back, but the writing was gone, leaving nothing except their broken benches and shattered plastic models.

'What's going on?' Tim said. More to fill the silence than anything.

'I don't know.' Mike said picking up his stool. 'But it's really weird.'

It made Tim feel better to know Mike was as freaked out as he was.

The boys waited for something to happen, but nothing did. And it still felt safer than going back into the house. Mike looked at Tim, shrugged, and started picking up the plastic pieces and laying them in a neat pile.

Start again, Tim thought. It was a process the boys were pretty familiar with, a strangely comforting ritual. There was the empty loss, but the feeling of how you could do it better this time. And having Mike there made the hard bits OK. They'd never talked about it, but Tim knew in his gut that his brother felt the same.

This old man, he played four;
He played knick-knack on my door.
With a knick-knack, paddywhack,
Give a dog a bone;
This old man came rolling home.

STEVEN, STEVEN, YOU'LL NEVER BE STEPHEN.

December 21st, 1996.

1.

Steven Adler was bored.

George was staying at his grandparents' place out near the weir, no one answered at the Birch's, and Stevie was... well, dead.

Dead. It sounded so final.

Yesterday Stevie *was*, and now he *wasn't*.

Since his tears had dried at the pool, Adler felt nothing. Not even numbness, just nothing. He'd tried playing Nintendo, but jumping Goombas and collecting coins didn't feel the same anymore. Usually he got sucked in and all his thoughts stopped except the synapses that twitched the tendons in his hands. His focus was solely on the small plumber leaping over spinning turtle shells. He'd run through landscape after landscape until his mum's call for lunch or dinner jerked him back into reality.

But not this morning. This morning no game would suck him in. He'd pulled his Lego out, and picked up and put down four different comics, but restlessness wouldn't let him go. He just wanted to keep moving.

'Why don't you walk around the block?' his mum had suggested.

So he had, on his bike. His street ran dead straight up the side of a steep hill. Very steep, steep-in-a-car steep. So going down it on a BMX was like cocaine for a kid. The bitumen whirred under his tyres as he sat back in the saddle, which he kept low like the freestyle riders did. In the periphery of his vision he registered the red of a stop sign and

pulled hard on the brake levers, bringing himself to a stop at the intersection at the bottom of the hill. He waited for a white Toyota to pass, and a blonde girl in a ballerina outfit stared back at him from the passenger seat. Adler tugged on his cap. What was she looking at, could she tell he'd been crying? Trying to shrug it off he pressed down on the pedals and rolled through the intersection.

As he approached the botanic gardens the light became scattered by the giant plane trees. He skidded left, then right, and through the gate of the gardens. A tall balding man in glasses yelled something at Adler as he cut across the gardens. Adler payed him no notice and raced out the far gates, where he saw the tower of the waterslide looming over the footy ground. He paused for a moment, thinking strange flat thoughts about Stevie. With a mental shrug, he hung a left to get away from the pool. The traffic was heavier near the highway so he took to the footpaths and followed the path of least resistance, going with whichever pedestrian light was green. His front wheel struck an unusually big bommy-knocker that didn't explode and Adler fought to control the bike as it jugged left and right. The rear of the bike kicked out in response and Adler skidded to a halt.

He looked up to find his school house looming over him, he could almost hear Mrs Hannigan's voice 'Adler, be quiet... Adler, settle down... Adler, behave... Adler, SHUT UP!'

He didn't like school, but then school didn't really like him. His report card had been hit and miss, the boxes that marked from poor through to excellent looked more like a geometric pattern than a report card. Excellent for art, poor for physical education, satisfactory for maths, poor for spelling and grammar. But it was the poor for attitude that got him in trouble with his mum. The comment wasn't much better: *Steven shows potential and a natural intelligence but his unwillingness to apply himself arrests his*

development. He is an energetic boy with frequent moments of hyperactivity, unfortunately this is often disruptive for other students.

Hyper. That's what grown-ups always called him. But they threw the word at him like it was dirty, like some kind of illness. Apparently it was better just to be the same all the time. Adler felt itchy just thinking about it. Being the same all the time was boring. He didn't understand how the other kids just sat still.

He'd tried.

Whenever the teacher kept him in at recess or lunch and made him write *I won't talk in class* or *I won't tie rubber bands around my fingers* or *I won't convince other students to tie rubber bands around any bodily appendages* or *I won't build catapults with my ruler and eraser*, every time the teacher said *Adler, settle down, Adler you're a smart boy, if you applied yourself you could do anything you wanted to*. He'd tried. He'd think to himself: after lunch I'll focus, I'll pay attention, I'll be quiet. And then for ten minutes he would. For ten minutes he'd hear everything, he'd read everything, and then his brain would inevitably speed up, he'd get bored, and next thing he'd be sitting at his desk after school writing, *I won't try and eat my pictures so the teacher can't see them*.

Casting a dirty look at the school, he pushed down on the pedals and kept rolling.

2.

He wasn't entirely sure how he ended up at the library, but he had. George, Tim, and Stevie loved the library, they always had their heads buried in books. Bored, Adler and Mike would end up out the front in QEII Square, throwing paper planes through the fountain, or doing tricks until security or the cops arrived with their thumbs tucked in

their belts, pointing at the 'No Skating' signs. To which Adler could never help but make wise remarks about bikes, skateboards, coffee, donuts, and real police work. This inevitably ended with a call to his mum, who would come down to the den, give him a token telling off and then disappear back upstairs.

He looked up at the library and its big windows looked back down at him. Adler couldn't read books. Well, it wasn't so much that he *couldn't* read, he read heaps; he read comics, and videogames, he just couldn't focus on novels. The other boys were all reading *The Lord of the Rings*, and Adler thought that they *sounded* awesome with all the orcs and elves and swords and magic. But the one time he looked over George's shoulder he'd nearly yawned at the number of words on just one page. *Swords, magic, and monsters* he thought, looking up at the library. Maybe *today* he'd find it interesting. At least it would kind of be like hanging out with them all.

He leaned his bike against the wall and trudged up the steps. With a whoosh the glass doors slid open and the cool of the air-conditioning washed over him. In the foyer a girl stood under the stairs, twirling the coiled orange public phone cable around her finger while she giggled and swooned at the voice from the receiver. The stairs led up to the kid's library whilst the grown-ups section sprawled across the bottom floor, with 'fiction' at the southern end and 'reference' the northern. The librarians' counter split the worlds of fact and fancy. But Adler, having never really been *in* a library, knew none of this and nervously walked into the grown-up section.

He felt self-conscious, and tried to take it all in. While trying to look nonchalant, he studied all the new details that surrounded him. Everywhere, grown-ups sat in chairs reading books. Standing in front of one of the stacks of books, was a tall man in a smart shirt and black-rimmed glasses; he nodded to himself with a smug grin as he flicked the page of a massive book. Adler looked at the cover, *Ulysses*. Wasn't *Ulysses* written by an

‘Ancient Greek’ man? They’d read some of *Ulysses* at school he thought. Apparently not, at least not according to this book’s cover. The man glanced over his book at Adler, and Adler could feel the contempt: *you don’t belong here*.

Adler’s attention was drawn to a short man with an eye patch, who was limping down another row, muttering to himself. To Adler’s right a severe looking woman who manned the librarians’ counter shushed a guy who’d dropped his stack of books. She turned and peered over her glasses at Adler. Already feeling out of place, Adler ducked down the nearest aisle to avoid the keen eye of authority.

The stacks reached up to the ceiling on either side of him, imposing towers that excluded him, their impenetrable walls bristling with books. He cast his eyes over their spines. He didn’t even know who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. How did you even pick a book? How did you know which ones were good?

He vaguely remembered being taught to use cards in the school library, so he wandered over to the racks of drawers. He opened the first one marked A. Flicking through the cards excitedly, he frowned. No Adler. His fingers kept flicking, Appleby, Arrington, Atwood. Bugger! *Names not Titles*. A teenager who had an undercut pulled back in a ponytail through a White Sox cap opened a drawer from the next rack. Adler noticed those cards had titles. The teenager efficiently found what he was after and slid the drawer closed and limped off with a clicking joint. Adler sidled over to that rack of cards and pulled the L draw open randomly. *The Langoliers*. Jackpot! Titles. *Flick, flick, flick. The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien, J.R.R., 823.912. He scribbled the number down on his wrist with the pen provided and jammed the card back in the drawer and slid it shut.

He turned to the seemingly endless row of stacks. Yellow tags signed the range of books in each row. Adler found the right aisle and set off, concentrating on the rows of numbers, fighting the sleep that counting invited. He tripped over a footstool and swore to himself. Someone in a neighbouring aisle shushed loudly and Adler's skin burned with resentment.

He bent down to rub his shin and sitting right in front of him was *The Fellowship of the Ring*. He looked at the number, it matched the one scrawled on his wrist but not the ones on the yellow tag at the end of the aisle, nor was it remotely similar to all the books around it. A prickling uneasiness asked why the book had been in the exact place he shinned himself, but he shrugged it off. Nothing was going to ruin the small and rare glow of pride that bubbled up from somewhere deep inside as he pulled the book from the shelf. He'd found the book he was looking for. He thumbed through the pages. It was a big book.

Between a gap in the shelves a single eye blinked and abruptly disappeared. A couple of thick legs limped past in time with laboured breaths. Adler closed the book. Was he being watched? Who'd be watching him? Adler stood up and peered through the gaps in the shelves. In the next aisle an uneven set of shoulders lurched away. Nestled atop the shoulders with no neck was a head shaped like a ball, bald, covered in liver spots, blemishes, and scars. A ring of white hair sat like laurels atop the spherical skull. It was the man with the eye patch from earlier. With every second step the man drew a heavy breath. He muttered to himself and occasionally growled.

The man's limp was severe but didn't detract from the determination of each step. Adler's curiosity got the better of him. Why had the man been watching him? The man scared him. He reminded him of the strange men who worked at the Albury show.

Adler looked down at the book in his hand. He'd got what he'd come for. He could just leave. The silence of the library made it seem even creepier. Adler knew he was probably just scaring himself with his *overactive imagination*, but there was something odd about that man. Adler slipped his shoes so he could sneak up on the old man. Reaching the end of the aisle, the man barrelled across the no man's land between the two sets of stacks, into the land of fact. Adler waited until the man had entered the aisle across the gap and, ignoring the severe librarian's disapproval at his bare feet, he darted across to the aisle parallel to the one the man had just disappeared down. The bald head bobbed up and down, partially obscured by the books. The muttering had become stunted as the man's breath became more laboured. And he was gone. At least Adler couldn't see him in the gaps anymore. He bent down to peer through the lower gaps. And there he was, sat hunched, leafing through a massive tome. Adler tried to see the title but the man held it flat.

'You've got to be in here somewhere,' his gravelly voice muttered. The man scratched his peppered beard. Adler was mesmerised by the leather eye patch strapped firmly to his skull. The man sat with his head cocked on an angle so his good eye was closer to the book, and the single pupil darted madly across the pages.

'I've seen you in here somewhere.' His thick thumb traced across the pages, his stubby fingers curled in a loose fist. He finished the book he was leafing through, shoved it back into the empty slot on the shelf and pulled the adjacent one out. He flicked through the second one just as quick, the thumb stabbing pages and tracing words or photos. Adler couldn't tell which. The man slid the second book into the shelf and grabbed a third. His page turning was becoming less frantic and his thumbing more measured. Adler desperately wanted to see what the man was reading. The man was hunched in the aisle with his back to the middle of the library. What was the worst that could happen, Adler

thought to himself? His stomach fluttered as he crept back up the aisle toward the next break in the stacks.

He crept around the corner with his back to the end of the stack like they did in the films. Peeking his nose around the corner like James Bond he caught a glimpse of the man. He was riffling through a fourth book now, the third one left open on the ground next to him. Adler stepped carefully around the corner his hand behind him, letting the tips of his fingers dust the shelves to keep him aware of their dimensions. He swung one leg across the other, lightly placing the ball of his foot first, spreading his toes to absorb his weight evenly before letting the heel rest into the carpet. He'd closed the gap to roughly five or six feet when the old man stiffened, his head straightening as much as stunted neck would allow. Adler froze. Seconds stretched and Adler wondered how long he could hold his pose without losing his balance. Over the man's shoulder Adler could see the book. It was turned to a page about the 1923 Grand Final. The old man tore another book from the shelf and dove into it. Adler looked back at the safety of the foyer, and the light that trickled down the aisle.

The man muttered to himself. Adler felt curiosity pulling him once again. He turned back and crept toward the old man. Four feet, the old man flicked a page. Three feet, someone coughed in a parallel aisle and Adler froze again. The old man didn't react in the slightest, his hand just kept thumbing through the book. Two feet, Adler peered over the man's shoulder. He had a bunch of books open in front of him. There was an old year book, an Albury Tigers football annual, and the records of the Albury Municipal Aquatic Complex. They were all open to old black and white photos. The men in the photos looked like the old photos of soldiers from World War I. Adler thought there must have only been two kinds of men back then: strong muscular ones with tans and teeth, and lean sinewy ones with gaunt faces. He looked at them and wondered if they were the

granddads of kids he went to school with. Or which ones had died without ever having passed on their knowing smiles.

‘It’s rude to read over someone’s shoulder.’ The old man turned to face Adler. Without much of a neck to speak of, this meant his entire torso twisted as he did. He was grinning, his lips pulled back to reveal a set of stained, chipped teeth. Deep weathered wrinkles converged at the corner of his eyes. Adler’s stomach dropped and a surge of adrenaline pumped through his body. The man placed one stumpy arm on the ground and began labouring his good leg to get up.

Run! Adler thought, and jammed his hand into the nearest stack and pushed all the books onto the floor between them. Turning, he bolted. He raced down the aisle, not even wasting the time to take a glance at his pursuer. Barrelling around the corner he nearly collided with the teenager with the undercut and the Sox hat. Adler spun around him, barely missing the stack of books on jetfighters and Formula One cars clutched in the young man’s hands.

‘Watch it, ball-bag!’ the guy yelled.

Adler ignored him and made for the doors.

‘No running in the library!’ The librarian yelled at Adler in that voice that grownups thought kids wouldn’t notice wasn’t a whisper.

The doors whooshed open and the girl on the phone watched Adler barrel out the door and down the steps. She turned back to the phone and coiled the cord around her finger and breathed in sharply. ‘No! She did not? Get out!’

3.

Adler got to his bike and realised he was still carrying his shoes and the book which he hadn't borrowed. He tied the laces together and quickly tossed them over the handlebars. Pushing the bike forward with his spare hand, he leapt onto the pedals. They were metal eggbeaters and his left shin scraped down the edge as his foot slipped off. He got the bike back under control and pounded the pedals up to speed and checked his six. The brick laneway was empty. He looked down at the book he'd just accidentally stolen and then at his bleeding shin. Why did this kind of shit always happen to him? His brain was racing, his heart pounding, and his blood felt like some futuristic fuel smashing through his body, making all his nerves and muscles fire at once. He looked up to check for traffic and his heart plummeted. Standing astride their mountain bikes, Donny, Ram, and Arnie stared at him like he'd made their day. And he probably had. School holidays were most likely just as boring for pricks like them, especially without the easy prey of the schoolyard.

'Hey there, Jew-boy!' Donny said.

Being anything but Catholic in a Catholic school brought some inherent racism from most of the other kids. It didn't help that in weekly mass all the non-Catholic kids were segregated into one of the wings of the church. It made singling them all out that much easier. Ram and Arnie laughed. Adler prickled.

'Looks like Adler's been at the library. Find your friends in there?' Donny taunted.

A pang shot through Adler. A pang made all the worse because Donny had struck close to the mark, his friends weren't here. *Stevie*.

‘Was Superman there?’ Donny pouted his lip like a baby. ‘Oh sorry... *Clark.*’

‘Watchout Donny, don’t ruin the secret for him. He might cry.’

Donny crossed his arms. ‘I bet you he’s been crying since Stevie Roy died. Stevie Roy, Stevie Goy, The Jew-boy and the goy. You been crying Jew-boy?’ Donny nodded sympathetically. ‘Just a bit? It’s OK, you can tell me.’

‘My name is Adler.’ Adler paused dramatically and then exaggerated every syllable ‘Don-o-van.’

Donny went red. He hated that name. Using it was a guaranteed death sentence.

‘Kick his arse,’ Donny growled. The gang lurched forward.

Adler wheeled his bike around and pushed down on the pedals, the steel digging into the bottom of his naked feet. His shoes flicked back and forth dangerously close to his front wheel. Holding the book in his left hand made handling the bike incredibly difficult. The small bald man with the eye patch watched from the library steps as Adler shot past with Donny and his gang hot on his tail.

Somehow Adler managed to keep the bike upright for a couple of blocks, despite the awkwardness of holding the book. He wasn’t even sure where he was going. He found himself running the curb along the side of a reserve when one of the shoes banged awkwardly against the front wheel. With only the one hand on the bars, the wheel turned violently into the cement bank and he went tumbling across the sidewalk. Donny, Ram, and Arnie were on him in a heartbeat. Their bikes clattered to the pavement behind him as they pinned him, Donny and Arnie on each arm and Ram’s considerable weight planted firmly on his legs.

‘Can’t go me alone, can you, Donny? Need help, huh?’

Adler tensed, waiting for the blows to start raining in, on his ribs and the sides of the head most likely. Where it would hurt but wouldn’t do the kind of damage that would land them in real trouble.

‘Wait!’ Donny’s voice said. ‘I’ve got a better idea. Over there.’

Arnie and Ram whooped like a couple of chimps. Adler didn’t want to think about what was ‘over there’. He felt them drag him to his feet. He wished George and Stevie were here. Or Mike and Tim. But he was a runt. He knew it and it sucked. He’d always been the shortest, the weakest. He got sick on a regular basis. It wasn’t fair. He looked up to see what ‘over there’ was. Across the reserve was a picnic site. Pine benches, a redbrick BBQ, some play equipment for the kids, and a rendered toilet block.

Injustice burned as they shoved him forward. Ram’s meaty hands had him by the neck and shoulder and Arnie had his other arm. He wrestled against them, writhing and bucking, but they were too strong, they just tightened their grip. Even if he broke free, Donny was a walking vanguard. The tears started welling up. There was nothing he could do. He’d never been flushed. He’d been threatened. He’d seen it in the movies. But he didn’t think anyone actually did it. It was *meant* to be a myth, a threat. The prickly bushes were real, getting a belting behind the pepper tree was real, having your lunch stuffed down your pants was real, but *flushing*: that wasn’t mean to be real. The helplessness was the worst part.

His feet slid on the grass in front of him as he tried to push against their weight. But the toilet block just kept getting bigger. To Adler the door started to look like a mouth, salivating at the sick pleasure of feeding on excrement, on mess that we don’t like to see, on waste that risks our health. He could almost smell the sour stench of stale piss

and the earthy stink that remained from every shit that had been deposited in that porcelain. But there was something else. Something darker and more ominous about it. The thought of the porcelain made him sick, he wanted to cry. He was burning with shame already. He'd rather be dead. He'd do anything.

'Please, don't,' he screamed.

'Shut up, faggot.' Arnie shoved him with an elbow.

'Don't, I'll do anything. Just don't. Please,' Adler started to beg.

No matter how much he tried to hook his toes into the grass they kept slipping across the blades.

(PLEAASSEEE)

[You're fucked, kid]

They were almost at the block. He looked for anything he could use. Some uneven ground, a branch, a tree root. But there was nothing between him and the door of that block.

'Down the bog! Down the bog! Little Adler's going down the bog!' Donny's voice was crazed.

The calm afternoon sun should have been nice but there was an eerie stillness. As they reached the path that ringed the block, his bare feet gripped the cement. He bucked as hard as he could, rocking his head back. It connected with Ram's nose and he felt a crunch. The meaty hand loosened for a second, enough for Adler to wriggle free. Arnie lost his shoulder but still had his arm. Adler rocked sideways into him, knocking him off balance and breaking Arnie's grip. He was loose. He sprinted as hard as he could. He

checked over his shoulder and could see Ram clutching his face and Arnie trying to find his balance.

He was free!

He ran. He felt like a racehorse. No, he thought: a wild horse, a brumby. His knees pumped high; long punching strides like a sprinter, and then the air was knocked out of him as Donny fly-tackled him to the ground. Adler felt grass and dirt mash into his teeth as he gasped for breath and bucked against Donny's grip. But Donny was just too much stronger and held Adler down long enough for Arnie and Ram to arrive.

Ram clutched his bloody nose 'Let me at the little...'

'No,' Donny said, a cruel look crossing his eyes, the same look that had crossed them when he'd first killed an ant. 'No bruises, no scars. Nothing he can show to his friends and tell them how tough he was. Just the flush.'

Whether he knew it or not, Donny had learnt from a young age that shame was much worse than physical pain. Shame broke you.

They heaved Adler up onto his feet and resumed sliding him toward the block.

'No, don't, please.' Adler's voice was just murmurs now.

'We might have just hung you in there before, but this time the button is getting pressed,' Donny whispered in his ear.

'Please.' Adler lost control of the burning in his throat and the tears started rolling down his cheeks.

Donny laughed, 'He's crying, guys, the piss-ant's crying.'

Ram's laugh was muffled through his congested nose and Arnie's stuttered as he struggled to keep hold of Adler. Adler's limbs gave up. He'd fought. He was tired. He was alone. His will broke and he just flopped.

[HA HA HA. YOU ARE A PISS-ANT]

The pads of his bare feet tore on the rough cement as they dragged him across the path into the toilet block. The stall was already open. Adler stared at the porcelain bowl.

'Please,' he whimpered, 'Don't.'

'What's that?' Donny asked. 'Not much without your friends, are you, huh? No Mike. No Stevie...'

Stevie. Stevie's name surged through Adler's body, giving him strength he didn't know he had.

'Yeah, Stevie Roy, Adler's goy,' Arnie blurted.

Stevie. Adler bucked hard and Ram lost hold of his arm and nearly lost hold of his neck; Arnie tumbled over. Ram pushed Adler hard toward the bowl, flicking Adler's cap to the ground. Adler's arms shot out and grabbed hold of the sides of the stall. Ram leant his shoulder into Adler's back and pushed, but Adler held his ground. A blunt pain exploded in his left hand and he lost his grip, smashing into the bowl with Ram's weight behind him; his chest caught the front of the bowl, and from how much it hurt he counted his luck it hadn't been his head.

Donny shook his fist in pain. 'Ah, that hurt. You're getting a second flush for that.'

Ram pinned Adler's legs with his own and grabbed him by the neck. But Adler fought with every muscle and tendon.

'C'mon guys, help,' Ram grunted.

Ram's hands were joined by others. Adler strained. His neck hurt. Cold porcelain pressed against his face. He could see the shit stains down on the walls of the bowl. A brown stain leaching through the water. His legs lurched up into the air and he was hanging, head in the bowl, bouncing from one cold wall into the other, trying not to think about the skid marks.

A voice echoed around him in the bowl. It was a deep gravelly voice and Adler could feel the hatred that dripped from it. It scared the shit out of him, it scared him more than the impending rush of water. Faintly in the distance he could hear laughing, and screams. He didn't recognise the laugh, but the screams were Stevie's. There was no mistaking them. Was it some cruel trick? Was this Donny? 'Stop it,' Adler whispered.

[It's not them...Adler]

Adler's heart stopped and his body filled with some kind of primal energy; he started writhing and bucking. But the voice didn't care, and Stevie didn't stop screaming. And someone, someone was singing.

[You're mine]

The water churned in the cistern and *whooshed* out of the porcelain collar.

[You, Mike, Tim, and GEORGE]

The water rushed over his face.

'Flush him!' they whooped.

He forced his lips together so hard he thought they might cut into each other.

[MIKEY MIKEY TIM'S BIG PSYCHY]

Water filled Adler's nostrils and surged into the back of his throat. He choked on it and some of it coughed into his mouth.

[TIMMY TIMMY BLIND AND SILLY]

He coughed to not choke and water rushed into his mouth.

[AND GEORGY GEORGY GORGEOUS GEORGY]

Not George, Adler thought. Anyone but George. The voice was awful. The cistern hissed as it refilled and Adler choked, coughed, and spluttered for air. Donny leaned in front of him so Adler could see his face over the lip of the bowl.

'Was that fun?'

The cistern churned again and Donny's face was obscured by a second wave of water.

The water churned around him and sucked. Adler felt something pull at him. Adler remembered Stevie's body jerking in the water. Ram's grip tightened on his ankle.

'What the fuck! Arnie, quit it!' Ram shouted.

'I'm not doing anything,' Arnie yelled back.

[STEVEN STEVEN EVEN STEVEN YOU'LL NEVER EVER EVEN
STEPHEN]

Stevie's screams reverberated from the rushing water and Adler struggled as Ram and Arnie violently pulled him out of the bowl. They went tumbling onto the floor.

‘What the fuck is wrong with you guys,’ Donny screamed.

Ram and Arnie stared at Adler. Adler collapsed on the cold floor, spitting water on the concrete.

‘C’mon,’ Donny ordered.

Ram and Arnie pulled themselves up and walked out, staring back over their shoulders at Adler with wide eyes. Adler lay on the cement. The cistern’s hiss faded as the water reached the top. And Adler heard Stevie’s muffled whimper:

[dam]

The toilet door banged closed as Adler reached for his hat so he only saw the word as he turned back around. Scrawled in rough letters across the door:

PADDYWHACK

The door was covered in graffiti. *Marcus is gay*. ‘Gay’ had been crossed out and ‘wicked’ scrawled in. *Natalie has herpes. Fuck Keating. Fuck Howard. Call 02 213472 for head*. But the word PADDYWHACK stood out. The lettering looked old. Like it had been there since Hume and Hovell had ridden into the valley, bringing their alphabet with them. But it couldn’t have, because this toilet block was no more than thirty years old. And Paddywhack... every kid in the town knew the rhyme. Kids the world over knew the rhyme. But kids in Albury knew it different. It was recited at sleepovers to scare each other. The word Paddywhack was muttered under your breath at school when someone beat you at chasey or handball. And you kept it as far from your mind as possible when you were alone.

Adler stared at it. He told himself it was just some kid thinking it would be funny. When someone sat down on the bog, they’d look up and read those words and shit

themselves. But a sense of foreboding started creeping up the back of his neck. It hadn't been written in Texta or paint. The lettering was ragged. Scraped in by something sharp. He wanted to get away but he was mesmerised by the letters. Children's voices sang the rhyme.

[This old man,]

[He played through]

The voice he'd heard on the bowl sang in his head.

[He played games with me and you]

[With a knick knack paddywack, give a dog a bone]

A chorus of children's voices had joined the first.

[This old man came rolling home]

The voices started the first common verse. *He played one*. In the distance Stevie whimpered.

(Adler, what's knick-knack?)

Stevie swam into his mind. Stevie with his arms slung over the lane rope.

(why does no one swim in the middle of the pool?)

Stevie's voice broke Adler's fixation on the word on the door and he heard his own voice:

(Get out of here.)

Adler looked around the concrete bunker that housed the stalls.

(Now Adler, get out!)

He shuffled back to his feet, pulling his hat down hard on his head, and then he bolted. His raw feet stung on the concrete. But as he hit the grass he came skidding to a halt. Someone was watching him. He could feel the gaze boring into his back. He spun around. A black dog was sitting still as a stone under the weeping willows that ran along the side of the river. He recognised the breed. It was one of those guard dogs. His old neighbours had one. *Doberman*, that was it, it was a Doberman. Its eyes were fixed on him. The black coat on its powerful chest glistened in the sunshine, highlighted by two small tan patches that matched his feet and snout. His balls were tucked up, ears jutting forward. Adler saw for the first time what a perfect hunter the animal was. Designed to hear, to stalk, to sneak, and tear the throat from whatever it caught. It reminded him of the Velociraptor in *Jurassic Park*, except this wasn't a film, and there was no T-Rex to save him. He looked over his shoulder and saw his bike back at the road. At least they hadn't taken it, or thrown it in the river.

He looked back at the dog and stepped one foot carefully toward the road. The dog's eyes focussed, but otherwise it didn't react. Adler took another step. The dog cocked its head but didn't move. He took a couple more paces, quicker this time. The dog's lips curled back, revealing long sharp yellow canine teeth. But it didn't move.

Adler's steps quickened; he was jogging, and the Doberman stood up. Adler's jog turned into a sprint and he focussed on his bike. He imagined himself sprinting like a track runner, his fists pumping, his knees high. He tried not to think about a Doberman launching and colliding with his back, its fifty kilos dragging him to the ground. Its jaws clamping those yellow teeth around his throat and then holding. Its wet breath slobbering over him. A hunting dog calculating whether to rip out his jugular or not. The thought of those wet slobbering jaws urged him on. He was nearly there. Twenty metres.

He crossed from the territory of sprinting to running. From anaerobic to aerobic, but he'd burnt himself sprinting and his lungs heaved for air. Fifteen metres. He could see the lettering on the frame clearly. The weight still hadn't thumped into his back. His side ached. Ten metres. He could see the cover of the book. Two figures walking toward a small castle, a wave of water thundering past. He glanced over his shoulder. It wasn't there. He slowed and bent over, sucking in air in painful heaves. Between breaths he focussed on the distance. The Doberman was still near the willows but was walking slowly and purposefully forward. It had been joined by a man.

The man was tall, with long legs, and despite the heat of the afternoon he wore a worn oilskin coat. A long stick was slung across one of his shoulders. A battered hat obscured his face, except for an angular jaw. It was hard to tell but from this distance it looked like he was grinning. Adler wasn't about to wait around and find out. He picked up his book and his bike and, slinging his shoes back across the handlebars, he set off down the street, not thinking where he was heading except for *away*, and as fast as he possibly could. With his raw feet mashing down on the steel pedals and one bruised and battered hand gripping the handlebars, he had one thought:

Up!

This old man, he played five;
He played knick-knack on my thigh.
With a knick-knack, paddywhack,
Give a dog a bone;
This old man came rolling home.

GEORGE AND THE KELVINATOR

December 21st, 1996

1.

George dug his hands into his pockets and started walking home. He'd missed the bus to his grandparents' place, Adler wasn't home, and neither were the Birches. He kicked a rock that pinged off an iron fence. In front of him the main street turned into Monument Hill. On top of the hill a single white concrete pillar rose into the dying late evening sky. The Monument's single light winked on like the first evening star. He wondered if making a wish on that light counted.

George lived with his dad down in South Albury, where the land rolled gently down toward the river, not far from where it snaked its way around the southern edge of town. Gravity would drag him toward home if he drifted off into his thoughts; George liked to meander, but the late summer light was already fading so he took the direct route. He was definitely already pushing his bedtime.

George's dad, Rodney Bramble, was unpredictable. He loved George, and since Linda had died it was just the two of them, which was why George spent so much time with his grandparents. Except for his build, George looked exactly like his dad had at 12. It wasn't the only way they were similar. Rodney, like George had also spent most of his spare time buried in books. Like George, Rodney had also kept his nose clean and always got good grades (but never exceptional ones). They both liked to sit on rooftops and watch the horizon. But neither of them knew the other had secrets. The first was that they both intentionally underperformed at school. If they never fully committed then they could never fail, and they would never be the top either, never be singled out, never be the

centre of attention. The second secret George would discover in time, and it was a secret the Brambles had carried since settlement.

For Rodney it had started in high school. He had begun to call himself Rod. He'd become competitive. His mind grew sharper, his reactions quicker. He could focus on a task for days at a time. People who couldn't keep up with him became irritating and whatever he embarked upon he committed to with an unrelenting intensity. In contrast, his melancholies became deeper, and a self-loathing began to haunt him, like a daemon always poised behind him, waiting to strike if he ever flew too high.

The drinking started through his cricket club. Rod was infamous by the time he turned eighteen. His lanky frame lent itself to fast-bowling and he shared the action and temperament of a young Dennis Lillee. His approach to partying mirrored his approach to bowling, charging in full steam with unpredictable pace and bounce. The first drink wouldn't even touch the sides of the glass, and the second only survived long enough to suck down a gasper. And at two drinks, he reached a tipping point, a point which revealed one of two Rods. The first was the Rod who took control of the stereo, pulled the bargirls up to dance on the bar, who surfed Thommo's ute as the V8 cut up the lawn on the opposition's oval, the Rod who blew his week's wage buying everyone drinks and invited everyone back to his house for 'MORE PARTY!', who'd wrap you up in a bear-hug and tell you how much he loved you, who lit up the whole room.

Then there was the other Rod, the Rod who retired into himself, stared quietly into his glass, who said very little, whose eyes were like tunnels diving kilometres back into dark and gloomy depths. And both of these Rods would be the last guy at the bar, charming the bartender into letting him buy some cheeky takeaways for the walk home. Both of these Rods could turn. They could flip into a rage; the smallest injustice would explode into catastrophic proportions as he eloquently and efficiently cut the offender into

emotional shreds, and, if he was really gone, he'd use his fists to hammer the point home. But the guys turned a blind eye to the rage because the first Rod was just such god-damn fun. What the guys at East Albury Cricket Club didn't know was that Rod didn't reserve his unpredictability for drinking, and that when he came back home it got worse, and those closest copped it hardest.

George trudged toward the house. South Albury was low enough to be hit by the occasional flood when the Murray broke its banks. The river was only a few hours' flowing time from the snow, so when there were heavy spring rains—or even an early melt and late winter rains—and when weir was full, the Murray sometimes simply couldn't hold the sheer volume of water. The Bramble house backed onto a lagoon, and on summer evenings the air was thick with mosquitoes. George slapped one on his arm, rubbing the smear of blood off with his thumb. He hopped over the gate, which came up to the lower thigh of an adult, and made his way up the path to the front door. The long grass swayed in the wind and he stepped over the rolls of catalogues and newspapers scattered across the footpath.

His hand paused on the handle of the flyscreen. The mesh flapped loosely where it had torn from the chipped timber frame that had once been painted white. He peered down the hallway through the mesh. He wasn't sure he could take his dad after yesterday. Like a ghost, the memory of Stevie's wide eyes stared at George; the water splashed and popped as Stevie jerked in the water, and then his eyes changed, from big shocked lenses to the crinkled pinholes of fear and resignation; his mouth contorted in a grimace: the face of someone who knew what was coming but didn't want it to arrive.

George had tried to tell his dad about Stevie's death last night when he'd got home, but he hadn't been able to wake Rod from his drunken slumber. George desperately wanted to talk to someone, just to tell them what had happened. He felt that by telling someone, Stevie's death would be real and not some nightmare he couldn't wake from. But, except for his sleeping father, he'd been alone since leaving the pool. His dad *could* be awesome about this stuff. When Rod was good, he was the best dad a boy could have; he'd drop everything just to hang out with George. He'd taught him to fish in the lagoon behind their house, and he'd built hot air balloons from garbage bags, wire, kerosene, and jam lids. But most importantly, he listened. He also believed. Most adults either didn't listen to kids, or didn't believe them. George had seen the Adlers and the Birches in action. He'd seen Adler's mum and dad just completely ignore him, and Mrs Birch, she just assumed Tim and Mike were lying from the outset. He remembered when the PE teacher at their school, Mr Willcock ('pronounced Wilco'), had made the boys lives hard for a bit.

Mr Willcock (Wilco) had been a local basketball hero in his youth but he'd never made the jump from regional to national. The story varied depending on who you heard it from: some said he just never put the training in, some said he trained hard but just didn't have that spark that separated the pros from the joes. Another rumour said he'd torn an ACL and never recovered properly, and because he'd never worked hard enough on his jump-shot it ended his career. Whichever had been true, he'd become an embittered primary school PE teacher who felt threatened by any kid smarter than him, and jealous of any kid who showed any raw talent. Tim was the former, and Mike the latter, which meant that Mr Willcock (Wilco) rode those two harder than anyone else. The boys all knew it. Shit, the other teachers probably knew it, but power, pride, and politics stop a lot of good people from doing anything about injustice. Instead, Tim and Mike took

detention slips from Mr Willcock home on a weekly basis and their parents never believed their version of events. It didn't help the boys that amongst the false detentions a couple were well deserved. But most adults don't listen to kids, they'd rather believe another adult.

But Rodney, when he was good, wasn't like that. No matter how ludicrous the story sounded, he'd listen. When George had been younger and seen the monsters (the ones that most adults immediately palmed off as being shadows cast by furniture and curtains), Rodney would listen to George, asking insightful questions. He'd talk through George's options with him. Could George fight the monster? What would he use to fight with? The lamp? One night, Rod had shown him where to tear the power cord so George could electrocute the monster. He'd let George sleep with his cricket bat within reach so he could break the window if he needed. If a monster ever came, George had permission to do *anything* to defend himself. Rod had narrowed his eyes and George remembered being slightly scared by how distant they looked when he talked. He'd even told George where to meet him if *anything* ever happened: they were to meet at the foot of the Monument. He explained to George that the Monument was special, like magic. It was a safe a place, no one could hurt you there, the light protected you.

They'd talked about what kind of monster it could be. What if the monster wasn't a violent one and it was more scared of George than George was of it? Or what if the monster had come to protect him? George would usually come to the conclusion that it was probably nothing. Maybe he reached that conclusion because he wasn't ready to face *something*. Because there couldn't be a strange man and his dog standing out by the lagoon watching him sleep, right? He'd never told anyone about the man, it felt more foolish than the monster behind the chair in his room. He hadn't even told Rodney about

the man. Why not? He always listened, and after he listened he talked. When he was good.

George shuddered as he fought off another memory of Stevie's body jerking in the water. Then he saw his and Mike's fingers clutching at the grate and heard the way the strange humming had receded. The last twenty-four hours had been hell. George wasn't sure what he felt about it. He was just kind of numb. It was a heavy numbness. He desperately wanted to talk to someone. He wanted to sit next to Rodney on the couch, and tell his dad all about it, while his dad's sure hands folded sculptures from the empty beer cans on the table. But if Rodney was Rod, well, George would be better off leaving it until the morning.

He carefully turned the handle and pulled the screen-door open and stepped lightly into the passage, guiding the door closed behind him. If Rod was asleep, then George didn't want to wake him. The flickering light from the television spilled into the hall, accompanied by the faint chatter of a news presenter. George crept down the passage, hoping his dad didn't hear his soft padding footsteps. For a kid of his girth George was surprisingly light on his feet. In fact, George was a natural athlete like his dad, his metabolism was just a bit out of whack and he wasn't very active; things that would all change with puberty. George had even learnt to carefully tie his shoes so that there was no chance of the tips of the laces tapping on the floor. When Rod was bad, he could hear like a bat. George crept into his room, and into bed. He didn't even bother to take his shoes off.

2.

He lay there restlessly, unable to sleep. His stomach rumbled. He was hungry. It had crept up on him. He hadn't noticed while he was walking, but here lying still, it hurt,

it ached. He curled up into a ball and put his hands between his legs. He could hear his dad's snore reverberating down the hallway. It reminded him of the dragon Smaug, the rumble of a beast he didn't want to wake. He opened *The Two Towers* and tried to take his mind off the hunger, but it wasn't long before he was wondering if the hunger that Sam and Frodo felt as they trudged along was anything like the ache he now felt. He tried to imagine he was full; he thought of the Lost Boys in *Hook* and the way they imagined their dinner into existence. He imagined he was full of roast chicken with buttered potatoes, like his grandma made every Saturday night when he stayed at their house. Where he would be now, if he hadn't missed that bus. If his dad hadn't blown the bus fare at the pub last night.

The hunger stalked up behind him and drove its sharp needled fingers through his back and into the ball of his stomach. He tucked his legs up tighter to ease the pain but it didn't help. He was never going to sleep like this. He glanced at the clock: nine twenty-three. He weighed up the options. His dad was working the dayshift this weekend so he would be gone at seven thirty, roughly ten hours from now. Could he sit out this sleepless hunger for ten hours? Already he could feel the wired edginess that hunger brought on inching into his nervous system, the restlessness that would make sleep impossible, and being awake unbearable. He'd become so restless he couldn't focus. He wouldn't even be able to read, and he'd be stuck with himself for company. It would be ten hours of lying here holding his gut. On the clock the three flicked over to a four: nine twenty-four. He did the maths: ten hours, sixty minutes per hour, six hundred minutes. He stared at the alarm-clock, waiting for the four to flick over to a five. He began counting in his head, he got to sixty and the band didn't flick over. He started counting again, but it just wouldn't flick over. He picked the clock up and inspected it; he'd found it at an op-shop, he remembered the old lady who volunteered there had given him two fifty-cent pieces as

change for his golden dollar. She'd winked at him as he looked up at her in surprise at his change. Hunger wrapped his stomach in its grip, the needle-points of its talons pressing harder and harder. He wondered if they would eventually pierce his gut, would he end up peeing and shitting blood from hunger? Could that happen? The band clicked over to a five. He tensed and relaxed his toes; he tried stretching out straight, he tried lying still and calm, emptying his mind. He tried not to think about the last thing he ate, about the vegemite and butter on toast. He tried not to think about the round saltiness, and the soft crunch of lightly toasted white bread. The needles clawed harder, hunger's grip tightening like a vice. *Flick*. Six. Only Six-hundred and four minutes to go.

Or, did he tempt fate? Did he tempt the beast? Did he creep out into the kitchen and raid the fridge? His dad's snore had settled into a regular rumble. In his mind's eye he could see his dad reclining in his armchair, his hand still wrapped around a tinny, his mouth open, head tilted back to one side, the rise and fall of his bony chest. The needles pinched George's stomach and his feet found the floor. He took a deep breath, stood up, and crept toward his bedroom door. He still had his shoes on. He considered taking them off for the sake of stealth but opted against it in case he needed to make a hasty exit. In sneakers he had to place his heel first and roll the sole to the floor with each step; no sudden movements. Walk like water. He tested each floorboard tentatively, avoiding any potential creaks.

His hand wrapped around the doorframe, and he slipped into the hallway. The light of the television was still flickering, but the newsreader's voice had been replaced by American accents and the sound of gunfire. The kitchen light was on and through the door at the end of the hall he could clearly see the fridge's steel handle. The badge, *Kelvinator*, made it look like some kind of robot: the giver and the taker. He scoured the relative darkness of the passageway for potential obstacles: nothing obvious. The snores

rumbled rhythmically. George started down the hallway, matching each footfall to the in-breath of the snore. He hoped the resonance inside his dad's thick skull would mask any noise or squeaks that George's sneakers made (his dad had once ran head first into a solid timber bar fridge whilst imitating David Campese, a story that had earned him the nickname 'the Wombat' down at East Albury Cricket Club). He reached the doorway to the living room. The moment of truth. He could see his dad's arms draped on the arms of the chair, the token empty tinny loosely gripped in his right hand, the remote on the floor where it had slipped from the left. Rod's shoulder rose and fell with each heavy breath. George stepped across the doorway in one swift ninja-like leap. As his feet planted, his un-ninja-like physique caused the floorboards to creak. He pressed himself against the wall like a lizard and froze: Rod's snore had skipped a beat. George held his breath. With start, and a snort, Rod's snore erupted back to life and found its rhythmic rumble. George exhaled slowly. *Pull it together.* He opened and closed his fists to work off the stress.

The Kelvinator hummed quietly. At least, as quietly as a fridge from the 70s could. He started down the hall again. One snore, one step. The tiles of the kitchen felt like sweet relief beneath his feet. With a few quick steps he was standing in front of the Kelvinator. He wrapped his hand around the chrome handle. The handle worked like a lever. *What if Rod caught him? Which Rod would he get?* George paused with his thumb on the lever's button. Hunger's talons gave his gut another squeeze. *Nothing could be worse than the hunger.* With a surgeon's precision he pressed the button and released the handle past its catching point. There was a soft squelch as the rubber seals released from the door.

His shoulders slumped. Empty. It was empty. A few beers, a nearly empty jam jar, and some rollmops. He slid the veggie crisper open: a handful of limp browning carrots and a wet soggy mess that might once have been lettuce or spinach, it was hard to tell. His

hand paused on the ice chest; it was his last hope. He tugged on the small door, ready to catch the release when it gave. The ice had grown in from the edges like the mouth of a cave. He reached in and found something wrapped in foil: an ice cream. He carefully separated the foil along the fold and revealed the chocolate coating from inside. His teeth cracked through the chocolate shell, and the vanilla centre melted in his mouth. He almost didn't chew as he wolfed it down. He felt his stomach warm despite the coldness of the ice cream. A small hit of energy spread as the sugars started to break down in his stomach. He pulled the last bits of chocolate off the small wooden paddle with his teeth and paused. Something was wrong. He listened.

Nothing.

The snoring had stopped.

3.

George turned slowly, hoping like hell this wouldn't end the way he thought it would. But it did. Of course it did. Rod's lanky frame filled the doorway, his puffed, blood-shot eyes narrowed on the ice cream paddle in George's hand.

'What are the rules, George?'

George couldn't move, he could feel the colour draining from his usually red cheeks. Which way would this go? Which Rodney would he get? He quickly clocked the room. The back door was locked and Rod blocked the only other exit. George managed to shuffle the concrete blocks he seemingly now had for feet and reached the edge of the table that filled the centre of the kitchen; once there, he steadied himself by gripping the aluminium siding.

‘Up after bedtime?’ Rod’s face was pulled tight around his cheekbones, and around his eyes the skin was pinched and dark. ‘Raiding the fridge?’ His mouth had pulled into a snarl. Complete contempt oozed at George. ‘This is why you’re fat, George, ice cream after bedtime.’

‘I, I, I couldn’t sleep,’ George stammered.

‘Maybe if you exercised a bit you could sleep.’ Rod’s eyes traced the bulges where George’s body chose to deposit fat. It wasn’t fair. George often went a whole day without eating. Sometimes by choice, sometimes because there was no food. How could his dad hold such different standards? It wasn’t right. You can’t not provide food, and then accuse... But that was Rodney. Things weren’t consistent.

‘You know what *my* dad did to me when I broke the rules, George?’

George did know, but he shook his head. Being a know-it-all would only piss Rod off more.

‘We had a shed, George. At the place on the Weir. You know about the shed. It was corrugated iron. Hot in summer.’

George felt the tears starting to burn. He hated his dad when he was like this. It wasn’t fair. He choked them down and just nodded like he understood.

‘You have no idea how lucky you are, George. You *have to learn*.’

As he spat the word *learn*, Rodney rocked back on one leg and thrust the other booted foot hard into the table, which jammed into George’s diaphragm, knocking the wind from him. Clutching his gut, George rolled under the safety of the table. Wheezing for breath, he ducked and dodged the thick leather of Rod’s Blundstones. Every third or fourth kick landed with a dull thud, and George thanked God for the layer of fat he

usually cursed. It soaked up the worst of the impact, leaving only a dull pain that would no doubt get worse later. He rolled with the kicks, taking as many as possible in his thighs and bum. The last thing he needed was a broken rib, or a bruised kidney.

‘Come out, George. Only cowards hide. You’re not a coward are you, George?’ Rod’s voice rasped from too much booze and too many ciggies (gaspers, he called them).

George tried to suck in air but his lungs wouldn’t co-operate. He fought off the panic that he would never breathe again and started sucking in what shallow breaths he could. The boots kept landing; a particularly bad one hit his coccyx and sent a sharp stabbing pain up his back. He caught half a breath but his diaphragm still ached like hell.

As Rod’s hands clutched the rim of the table George saw his opportunity. When Rod heaved the old table up and over, George dove between his legs and tumbled into a run down the passageway. The sudden exertion forced pressure onto his lungs that they weren’t ready for and he felt light-headed as he tumbled out the front door. Jumping the front fence he heard the old wooden frame bang a few times as it closed. Turning down the street he tripped and caught his balance with one hand, the asphalt taking a chunk out of his palm along the way. He got his feet back under him and sprinted down the lane beside the house and made for the lagoon.

The moon was fighting its way out from behind a cloud. Shadows splintered from the red gums and coobas that reached up from the water’s edge. Across the water on the far bank there was a thick patch of reeds. George heard the back door of the house slam. Rodney must have seen him make for the alley. Setting his sight for the reeds, he ran as fast as his chubby legs could carry him. If he didn’t stop soon his diaphragm would explode, or at least his lungs would collapse. He dived into the reeds, ignoring the scratches from the small scrubs that littered the fronds. Rod’s bark echoed across the

water, and George wondered what the neighbours thought of it all? Maybe they just thought he was a drunk talking to himself. George's heart beat so loud he was worried it would betray him. Rod started a slow lap around the lagoon, his feet kicking shrubs as he went. George could hear Rod's heavy breathing from here, and worried about his own gasps for oxygen. He closed his eyes and prayed that Rod's drunken stupor would play saviour tonight. Just out of sight he could hear Rod's heavy footfalls pacing back and forth. He didn't dare move in case a rustle of leaves caught his attention.

The water and mud had seeped into his shoe and he could feel it oozing between his toes. The reeds rustled in the soft breeze. He concentrated on his breath. Everything felt heightened, the mud and reeds that had broken under his feet combined into a fresh earthy smell. The dry summer air reminded him of lying in his bed at his grandparents' house with his window open and the fan on. He wished he was there now. He noticed that the contrast of the light was more marked, that the shadows seemed harder, and the moonlight brighter. Overhead the clouds floated past the moon. The changing moonlight made it look like the giant eucalypts were living breathing creatures, it was almost beautiful. Except for Rod, who strolling back and forth barking. George crouched lower, burying his hands in the mud to support his weight as his thighs got tired. Why couldn't Rod just be Rodney tonight? After *Stevie*, after missing the bus, and the hunger, George could really do with his dad. He could feel the sweat collecting where the fat of his stomach was folding while he crouched. Rod's barking became more sporadic and his pacing slowed.

'I know you're out there George. You have to come home eventually.'

Against his better judgement George took a peek. His dad was scanning the lagoon.

‘Argh.’ Rod turned on his heel and trudged back to the house, muttering to himself.

George waited, crouching in the reeds. He saw the flickering of the television and knew that Rod was back on the couch. He waited for what felt like hours but might have only been minutes. The earthy smell of the mud under his feet crept into his nostrils, but there was a second smell mixed in with it, an acrid sour smell. The smell the old men at the pub his dad took him to sometimes had. George peered over the tops of the reeds. On the opposite bank of the lagoon stood a lone figure, tall and thin, a figure he’d seen in his dreams, a figure that used to watch him sleep.

George felt the chill of the night air on his skin. There was something strange about the man: it was like he was waiting for George. Like George should go to him, yes that was a good idea, he should go to him. Then George noticed the dog sitting at the man’s heel; the dog didn’t feel nice, George didn’t want to go near the dog. On the horizon, a cloud drifted revealing the Monument casting its faint glow up on the hill. George stared at it; he couldn’t look away. The lone light on top of a single white pillar: it was beautiful; beautiful because it made him feel safe, just like Rodney’s speeches about fighting the monsters had made him feel safe. There was a loud crack as a branch broke, and George looked back at the man, but he was gone. George turned on the spot but couldn’t see him anywhere. The acrid smell was gone too, replaced by the scent of broken eucalypt leaves and wet earth. He must have imagined it. His stomach rumbled loudly. Yeah, he just imagined it. Taking another glance at the Monument, he turned and set off for Eastern Hill. Home didn’t seem like a safe place on nights like tonight.

THE BOWL

For the sake of the word count this chapter has been removed from the PhD version of the text.

Chapter Synopsis:

In this chapter Adler, racked with shame, returns to the bowl on Eastern Hill. He remembers how he, George, Tim, and Mike had dug the bowl with Stevie to do BMX tricks in. It becomes clear the bowl is their special place. The memory of the monumental effort of digging the bowl reinforces how close the boys are, but also asserts some of their roles in the group: Stevie as the leader; Adler the wise-arse, George the quiet stoic one, and Tim and Mike as the instigators (especially of the fart competition).

George joins Adler at the bowl, as he is compelled to go there in search of company. Leaderless without Stevie, they sit by the fire making small talk, telling half-truths to explain what had happened to them without revealing the complete shame or terror. Adler explains his sighting of the bald man in the library who will later become known as Bert. We also see George trying to protect his father, even though he is terrified of him sometimes, because the alternative would be not having him at all.

The chapter closes with Adler, after hearing what had happened with Rod, inviting George to stay the night at his house.

A BORROWING SLIP

Adler had never seen his mum worried before. He didn't like it. It made him feel guilty. He felt guilty that she was upset, or that he'd made her worry. When they'd walked through the front gate, she'd been standing in the doorway with her arms crossed. At first he'd thought he was going to be in trouble but instead she'd hugged him. It was a little embarrassing in front of George because it got awkwardly long. It made him a little angry though; how come she got to ignore him most of the time and then got to act all worried and concerned now?

'Steven, what were you doing out so late?' Her voice carried a mix of relief and frustration. 'It's way past dinner time, let alone bedtime.'

Adler felt the ghost of Ram's meaty hand on his neck and heard Donny's squeaky laugh; he could feel the Doberman's gaze boring into him. 'I just lost track of time.'

'After...yesterday,' Helen Adler couldn't quite bring herself to say Stevie, or *river*, or even *incident*, 'you had me worried sick. I called around, but no one knew where you were. I hope Tim and Mike have gone home as well, the Birches were furious.'

A faint shiver ran up Adler's spine. Tim and Mike weren't home yet? That wasn't right. Mr Birch was a hard arse, everyone knew that, and he'd tear them a new one if they weren't home for dinner. Adler thought about the number of times he'd had to call and fake his mum's voice to cover for them. He tried to ignore the uneasiness that was settling in like sediment.

'Did they head home when you did?' Helen probed.

Adler's mind raced through his options. He could tell the truth and have his mum panic and call the Birches and tell them the boys were still out. If something *had*

happened to them, then at least people would be looking for them. But if he did that and they boys were fine, then it meant he couldn't cover for them tomorrow. If he lied to his mum now, he could call Mr and Mrs Birch first thing in the morning, bung on his mum's voice, and tell them how the boys had been over here and *she'd* said *she'd* call their parents for them and let them know the boys were all staying here, but then how the soup had started to burn and it had slipped her mind. But that wouldn't work because she really had already called earlier. Maybe he could spin some story about how they came in late, and *she* hadn't wanted to wake them. Or maybe he could rope Rod into the story... 'Yeah, they went home when we did. Sorry we're so late.' It bought him time to come up with something at least.

It was at that moment that Helen realised, or remembered, George standing over Adler's shoulder, his chubby arms hanging awkwardly at his side.

'Hi George,' she said.

'Hi Mrs Adler,' he said politely and looked at his toes as he shuffled his feet on the stones that peppered the concrete porch.

'I said George could stay at ours tonight, Rod was fine with it,' Adler explained.

'That would explain why he didn't answer when I called.'

George imagined Rod snoring on the couch as the phone rang.

Helen looked at her watch, 'What time do your grandparents go to bed, George?'

'Ah, nine o'clock most nights, Mrs Adler.'

The watch strap was slightly too loose and she had to flick it around to check the time. 'I might have just missed them, but I'll give them a call just in case. They were

worried when they heard I couldn't get through to Rod, but that makes sense of that, as they say.'

Who said that? George thought to himself, but that thought was quickly bumped out of the way by the next one. His grandparents would be so pissed off with Rod if they found out that George had been out wandering the town at night. That relationship was strained enough as it was. George didn't really know why, but his grandparents were always prickly with Rod, at changeover they were always cold and he felt like they were constantly judging him. He loved Nan and Pop but he didn't like the way they would say these little *things* about his dad. It wasn't even what they said it was *how* they said it, the implication. Like it was abnormal when Rod did something nice or good. But they didn't know Rod like he did. No one did. No one could really understand.

'Oh,' he tried to fill the awkward silence he'd left hanging, 'it's ok, Mrs Adler, I'll call them in the morning. A phone call this late—they'll probably think someone's died.'

Helen tilted her head to one side and laughed. 'They're not that old yet, I'll give them a call.'

George's heart sunk but he knew she only meant well. As if to remind him he hadn't eaten since breakfast, George's stomach rumbled loudly.

Helen looked despairingly at Adler. 'You haven't eaten, have you?'

They both shook their heads from side to side.

'Well let's fix that.' She ushered them in the door and into the kitchen. George and Adler plonked themselves down at the dining table and while Helen fossicked through the fridge the boys whispered to each other.

'What do you think Mike and Tim have done this time?' George asked.

‘I know,’ Adler hissed, ‘it’s not like them to not have themselves covered.’

‘I hope they’re OK.’

‘They’ll be fine, mate.’ Adler gestured to his mum. ‘I’ll get ‘Mum’ to give the Birches *a call* in the morning and smooth everything over.’

He shot George a wink and George stifled a laugh as he thought about Adler standing in the stairwell of the library, the bright orange phone cradled on one ear, pinching his nose. ‘I’m sorry Mrs Birch, I meant to call but I flicked the channel over to this fascinating documentary about rhinoplasty and I must have just completely forgotten.’ He could see Mrs Birch rolling her eyes on the other end of the phone. Mrs Birch would never admit it but she thought she was better than most of the people in the town, and she definitely thought Helen Adler was a flighty, vacuous excuse for a person. Adler’s cover-calls hadn’t helped with this assumption.

In the kitchen, Helen slid some frozen pasta sauce in the microwave and boiled up some fresh pasta. She brought them both a glass of Coke and George swore the sugar and bubbles were more refreshing than usual, it tasted just like the very first time he’d ever drunk it. The hunger had masked his thirst and it dawned on him that he hadn’t had drink since the bubbler on his way home. It felt like hours ago—it *had* been hours ago.

Helen had prepared the mattress on Adler’s floor. It leaned permanently against Adler’s wall because the boys slept over at his house so often. As they got ready for bed Helen noticed Adler’s feet and legs. ‘Adler, what happened?’

Adler looked down at the drying scabs. The last thing he needed was his mum dobbing Donny’s crew into the school or, even worse, the police. If it went to the police it

would probably just get lumped on that younger cop, McGuinness. He was alright, McGuinness, he got it, but he'd still have to say *something*, and then not only would Adler be facing the humiliation of the flush, but of being a massive dobber as well. 'I just stacked it bad on my bike a couple times,' he offered.

Helen's exasperation with her son started to edge its way in front of the worry. 'Well, let's get you cleaned up.'

While George waited for Adler to get his cuts and scrapes bandaged he lay down on the bed. Adler's place felt as much like home as his grandparents' or his dad's. He even had his own set of bedding here. Helen had bought it on special for him, it was *Star Wars* themed. He traced the little Luke Skywalkers with his finger and thought about how he didn't envy Adler getting his wounds cleaned out with Dettol in the next room. The worst bit always was cleaning the bits of dirt and rock out of the wound itself. He winced at the thought and rolled onto his side.

He reached for the battered copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* that Adler had accidentally stolen from the library. The thought of Adler strolling through the stacks made him laugh a little; he could just see him trying to work out how the hell he was meant to find anything. George had already read this one and his favourite part was when Boromir sacrificed himself for the hobbits. He let the pages flick through his fingers as he skimmed to the right chapter. One page opened neatly, and jammed into the join was an old black and white photo. It wasn't even black and white, it was more like brown and white. The photo was of an old fair. The frame captured a row of stalls with men in suits and hats peddling assorted wares. A young boy's blurred arm tossed a horseshoe to join those already hanging from the pegs along the back wall of another stall. In the

background he could make out the lower reaches of a Ferris wheel. George knew that Ferris wheel, it was the one from the Albury Show, a much younger version but it was definitely the one from the show.

George looked at the people in the photo more clearly. One man stood out, almost like he didn't belong in the frame. Not because of his clothes, though. He wore a three piece suit, with a bow-tie, and his hand rested on a long black cane. He stood out like a sore thumb, or a bad smell. His hat was pulled down tight so the shadow hid his eyes, and his small uneven teeth smiled from a pointed jaw that jutted out like a rocky crag. The jaw was covered in stubble. Something about him seemed really familiar. Like the man in his dreams, the one with the dog, the one who watched from the lagoon. Then George noticed the dog in the photo, sitting at heel next to the man's feet; a black Doberman, with light patches on his shoulder, his ears jutting forward. It stared out of the photo, right at George. George slammed the book shut and threw it across the room just as Adler walked in the door.

'Whoah, what the shit, man? Hasn't that thing got enough love today?'

George grunted.

Adler tip-toed over the action figures, bits of Lego, and comics that littered his floor and crawled into bed. George rolled over and looked at the battered novel lying on the floor. The book started humming quietly. At first George hardly noticed the hum over Adler's twitching and fidgeting as he tried to get comfortable.

The humming grew in intensity and George didn't even realise his hand was reaching out to pick it up. He felt heat radiating from it as he snapped his hand closed around the spine. The humming ceased immediately and the book was suddenly cold to the touch. George realised he was sitting upright with the book in his hands. The book

was creeping him out, but he felt drawn to look at the man's face again. Who *was* he? He flipped through the pages until he could feel the photo through the paper. Taking a measured breath to calm himself, he turned the page. He was expecting the photo to have come to life, for the Doberman to jump out at him, those jaws closing around his neck, for the man's cane to come swinging around in a sweeping arc, or for the photo to have changed and shown the man at a train strike, or standing out the front of Sodden's Hotel. But it was just the same photo. The same man, standing in front of the same stalls, the same Ferris wheel in the background, the same Ferris wheel that still stood at the showgrounds.

But something still didn't feel right, George flicked through the pages looking for more photos, maybe a note, something. *Anything*. He opened the frontispiece and studied the publication details. It was a second edition paperback from nineteen sixty-five. Most of the pages were dog-eared from years of readers marking their progress. The book was littered with coffee stains, and even a couple of smears that George didn't want to think too much about, especially knowing his own proclivity to read enthroned. He flicked to the back cover and pulled the borrowing card from the yellow cardboard slip. The writing of many hands recorded the succession of readers that had shared this particular experience. One name popped out on the card.

Rodney Bramble, December 1961.

George's heart skipped a beat. It was just a coincidence, but he'd never experienced this kind of living history. Also someone had messed up the date. This book hadn't even been published in 1961. He traced his dad's name with his finger. He imagined his father out at the old Bramble place on the Weir, reading *The Lord of the Rings* on his summer holidays just like George recently had. He'd seen photos of his dad as a kid at his grandparent's place. They'd been Rod's neighbours when he was growing

up. Rod and George's mum, Linda, had grown up childhood friends, and become teenage sweethearts. The old place was abandoned now. Rod was the first Bramble man not to live there, and George was the first Bramble boy not to have grown up there. George's grandparents forbid him from exploring the old Bramble property, they said the house had fallen into such bad disrepair that it was 'structurally unsound.' Sometimes George would go play at the western fence of his grandparents' place and try and look through the gnarled gum trees. But all he could ever see were glimpses of the corrugated iron shed, the one his dad talked about. It made him feel cold when he looked at it. There was something wrong with that place. He wanted to look inside, but was scared of what he'd find.

He looked at the other names on the list in the back of the book, going back through time as he read further up the card. Another name jumped off.

Harry Bramble, January 3rd, 1926.

It didn't make any sense, *1926*, the book hadn't even been *written* yet. He looked back at the date next Rod's name, 1961: maybe that hadn't been a mistake after all. But then...what did *that* mean?

'Adler,' George whispered, not wanting to wake Helen.

Adler rolled over. 'Mmmm?'

'Adler, wake up!'

Adler propped himself up on his elbow, 'What is it?'

'Adler, look at this.'

Adler looked at the cover of the book George was holding up. ‘Yeah, I read it this afternoon. Dwarf has a party.’ He rolled back over.

‘Adler seriously, look!’

Adler rolled back over. George looked all tense and on edge. Adler hopped down onto the mattress beside him. George’s thick finger was pointing at the names on the borrowing card. The list Adler’s name was conspicuously missing from. ‘Yeah, I know. I stole it. Well, I didn’t steal it, I borrowed it. Just not the way you’re meant to. I told you about this before.’

‘No, look.’ George tapped on one name repeatedly.

Adler squinted at the curled handwriting. Why did people even bother with cursive? Cursive was dumb.

Rodney Bramble.

‘That’s weird, man. That guy’s got your dad’s name.’

George’s unimpressed expression helped Adler make the connection. ‘Ah, right.’

George pointed at his granddad’s name, the dead one, his dad’s dad. His finger moved across to the dates. Adler raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment. George flicked to the frontispiece and pointed at the date. Adler didn’t want to look at the book anymore, it didn’t make sense and he didn’t like how that made him feel. George flipped the card over in his hand. The names went back to settlement, and every couple of decades a Bramble’s name popped up, and then Adler noticed something (he felt a surge of pride, he never noticed things first).

‘George, look, they’re all men.’ It was getting really weird, Adler thought.

‘I know,’ George said with mounting excitement. It was like he was Indiana Jones uncovering mysteries of the past. Adler knew George didn’t mean anything by it, but he couldn’t help but feel he’d arrived late to the party once again.

‘And there’s this,’ George said, flicking through the pages to the photo. He showed it to Adler.

Adler instantly recognised the Doberman. It was the same one from the river. He could feel it staring at him from the photo. But it couldn’t be. The photo was all brown and white and everyone looked like they were from the old days. Then he noticed the man standing next to the dog. He might have been wearing different clothes, but it was him. The same grin, the same small teeth. The same whiskered jaw. But it *couldn’t* be. He looked exactly the same. It was like he hadn’t aged in all those decades that had passed. How could he still be alive if he was an old man then? Adler started to get the same feeling the words in the toilet block had given him. In the background of the photo Adler noticed the Ferris wheel, but it wasn’t all rusted and broken down like it was now. It was brightly painted and the fabric covering the cages was all fresh and new.

‘George, what’s going on?’ Adler asked. George understood books. He’d be able to explain it.

But George was shaking his head. ‘I don’t know.’

Adler took the book from George’s hands. ‘Well, let’s find out.’

He tried to pull the photo from the book but it wouldn’t budge. It was stuck, like it was glued to the spine. The pages flicked over and the text warped into messy cursive,

[paddywhack, paddywhack, paddywhack, paddywhack, paddywhack,
paddywhack, paddywhack, paddywhack]

Adler turned the page, but it was the same. What was going on? This was getting way too weird.

[paddywhack paddywhack paddywhack, paddywhack,]

He closed it and opened it randomly, but it was the same scrawled handwriting

[paddywhack paddywhack, paddywhack]

The same text in the same hand that had been scrawled across the toilet door. The taste of bile starting creeping up the back of Adler's throat and he tried to slam the book closed but it wouldn't shut. The low hum began resonating more loudly from the pages. His discomfort had turned to sheer terror and he wrestled with the book.

Adler turned to George. 'I don't like this, man. I can't close it!'

The voice Adler had heard when his face was pressed into the porcelain toilet bowl beckoned him.

[Don't go, stay and play Adler]

Adler gripped the edges of the cover and pushed with everything he had. The book closed an inch. A second voice joined the first, it was an octave higher and sounded soft and broken: Stevie's voice. Adler froze for a second at the sound of Stevie's voice. How could this be happening?

[Stay and play]

The voices sang in unison. George's thick fingers joined Adler's and the covers started inching together. The voices kept singing.

'George, can you hear that?'

George nodded, his eyes worried and large.

[Stay and play. With a knick-knack paddywhack give a dog a bone.

Knick knack paddywhack]

Adler stared at the words in the book as they warped and jumbled: verses that weren't quite verses, and phrases that didn't quite land. The bile burned in his throat, He just wanted it to stop. He wanted it all to stop.

[He played three, on my knee, old man, this on one, on my thumb, played his knack-knee paddywhack on my spine, he played ten, once again, he played seven, no things in heaven, with six of sticks, his gate made eight, this old man came rolling home, give a dog a bone, give a dog a bone, give a dog a bone]

The voices kept singing, repeating over themselves like a broken record.

[With a knick knack paddywhack, with a knick knack paddywhack, with a knick knack paddywhack]

The pause between the verses was awkward and jarred in Adler's ears.

'Together. Now!' he shouted, and he and George pushed the covers together as hard as possible, and then slammed them closed. They both went tumbling across the room with the force of it and the book landed with a light thud on the quilt. On the cover the stubbled jaw laughed through gritted uneven teeth. It started whispering but Adler couldn't make out the words. The face smiled as it faded away, and was replaced by the painting of the Wizard and the Hobbit looking at the castle.

Adler and George stared at the book, now sitting silently on the bed. It looked harmless. Just a battered old paperback. Adler stared at the book, waiting for it to erupt

back into the horrible words and song, but it just sat there. George tentatively reached out and picked up the borrowing card that had landed on the other end of the mattress. He looked across at Adler with a grim expression of concern as he passed the card to Adler. Adler felt his stomach drop as he read the five new names scrawled on the bottom of the card.

George Bramble, Borrowed: 20/12/1996

Steven Adler, Borrowed: 20/12/1996

Timothy Birch,

Michael Birch,

Stephen Roy, Borrowed 14/12/1996 Returned 19/12/1996

The door burst open and Helen Adler did her best to fill its frame, ‘What ARE you boys up to in here? Adler?’

Adler went to start explaining, but as the first few words fell out of his lips he saw the look on his mum’s face. He realised how insane it all sounded. Instead he fell into old habits and mirrored her posture and imitated her voice ‘What were YOU doing OUT there?’

‘Adler, don’t be a smartarse. No one thinks it’s funny.’

Adler tried not to think about the words in the book, he tried to think of the wise-arse heroes in his favourite films. ‘Smart-arse, man that would make cheating so much easier, I could just fart my way through a test.’

‘Adler! What’s going on?’ Her hands had formed fists and were resting firmly on her hips.

Adler saw the line approaching fast. He felt his toe wavering over it and then remembered George was there. He didn’t want any trouble spilling on to him, especially because it was easier when the other boys could stay over. ‘Sorry Mum, it was me. I got hyper, you know how I get, and I started wrestling George. He tried to stop me.’

Helen, pulled a severe face but was silently proud of her son. He always stuck up for George. It was blatantly clear from George’s face he was involved in whatever they’d been up to. That boy was a terrible liar. ‘Well, no more. It’s already really late.’

She closed the door behind her as she left the room. As the door closed Adler and George jumped and scurried backwards across the floor in terror. Scrawled across the back of the door in thick black letters was the word:

PADDYWHACK

Adler’s neck tingled and the hairs began prickling. The letters loomed over the boys saying, *you didn’t imagine it all. I’m still here.* The letters dripped like they’d been freshly painted. Adler panicked and spun around, searching the room, but it was empty. How the hell had they gotten there...and then he remembered the grin sprawled across the cover of the book. But how? As the terror rushed over him, Adler reacted the only way he knew how. He grabbed George’s arm and stepped toward the door.

‘Bugger this, let’s get out of here.’

He took another step and

[STAY AND PLAY]

a strong wind sucked out through the window behind them. The letters melted dripping down the door, leaving no puddle. But Adler had a feeling that opening the door wasn't a good idea.

George turned to Adler. 'Why didn't you tell your mum?' George had forgotten most adults weren't like his dad.

'She wouldn't get it, man. She'd blame it on me. She would *never* believe us.' Adler got up to check the window. 'This is insane George. You saw it as well, right? I'm not imagining it.'

George nodded and Adler turned to the window. 'I swear this was closed.' He had to raise the blind to check, and he was scared of what he'd see outside the glass. He was scared of The Farmer's uneven smile pressed against the windowpane, or the cold eyes of the Doberman as its breath fogged the glass.

'What do you reckon is going on? Should we find McGuinness tomorrow?' Adler asked.

George tried to think. He tried to think slowly and rationally. But all he could see was his dad's name on the slip, and the words scattered across the pages of the book. What had Adler just asked him? McGuinness? McGuinness was better than any of the other cops that had ever told them off for playing bike chasey around the empty schools during holidays. But these words. That face.

'I think whatever's happening has been happening for a long time.'

Adler remembered the old photo in the book and agreed with George. Just thinking about that photo made his skin crawl. 'What are we going to do with the book?' Adler asked, still looking at the blind as he sucked up the courage to open it.

‘We should show it to Tim and Mike? I mean their names are in it too.’ George said, although he wondered why their names hadn’t been accompanied by borrowed dates.

Adler looked at the book resting in the corner of the room. ‘I meant right now. I can’t sleep with it in here.’

George disagreed. ‘I think I feel better when I know where it is and can see that it’s not doing anything.’

Adler saw George’s logic. ‘Let’s put it over in the corner, though. And maybe we can tie it up or something.’

Adler faced the blind. He feared what would be staring through the glass on the other side. ‘George, this might sound dumb, but do you reckon you could stand over my shoulder when I open the blind.’

He felt George’s warmth behind him and pulled the blind up quickly. The window was closed, the latch tight, and through the clear glass they could see out into the dark front yard: at *nothing*. No dog, no man. *Nothing*. From up here on top of the hill they could see the lights twinkling across the town, and the lone beacon of the Monument winking at them. Adler went to pull the blind closed and then stopped. The light from the Monument felt comforting and the expression on George’s face led him to think that he felt much the same. ‘Let’s get some sleep, man.’

‘Let’s tie it up first,’ George said.

They cut a length of string from one of Adler’s old toys and set to tying the covers of the book together.

Adler looked at the back of the door, which was now just like it always had been, and then at the regular looking cover of the book. ‘Hey, if Tim and Mike *don’t* know what’s going on, what should we do then?’

George thought about his dad’s name on the card, and his dad’s dad’s, and *his* dad before. ‘Then we look for skeletons.’

Remembering digging the bowl, Adler rocked his head back in mock exhaustion. ‘I’m so sick of digging. We did enough of that last summer.’

George sighed. ‘It was a metaphor, Adler, a metaphor. Like, “in the closet”.’

‘Right.’ Adler sat for a moment. ‘Still don’t get it.’

‘We need to do some research,’ George explained.

Adler rolled his eyes. ‘Why does interesting stuff have to be so boring? Where do we start?’

‘I don’t know, we need to find someone who knows some town history. But who isn’t, you know, *normal*.’

Adler thought of the bald liver-spotted guy with the eyepatch. ‘I think I know where we can find one,’ Adler said. He thought about the hunched shoulders turning to him, and the scowl that split across the man’s face. Maybe finding him wasn’t their best idea.

The boys lay back and tried to find sleep in the maze of troubled thoughts.

Adler farted. ‘One.’

George managed a single ‘ha’ and Adler laughed. ‘Give that guy a hat.’

Adler turned to George with a very serious expression on his face. ‘Hey George, do you think Chewie farted, or do you think he had one of those special stomachs like a Kangaroo?’

As they talked about the what-ifs of *Star Wars*, the events of the last couple of days faded into the backs of their minds. They wouldn’t have rested so easy if they had of seen the Doberman sitting in the bushes across the street, or if they had of heard The Farmer whistle sharply, and the Dog scurry after him, as his boots clicked down the bitumen, in time to his whistling of a familiar tune.

This old man, he played six;
He played knick-knack with some sticks.
With a knick-knack, paddywhack,
Give a dog a bone;
This old man came rolling home.

THE BOXING DAY FLOOD

Dec 26th, 1996.

1.

The Boxing Day flood wasn't exceptional, but it was unseasonable. The river broke its banks from time to time. When the weir was full and there had been a particularly big snow season in the Victorian Alps, or when there had been a sudden thaw and a wet early spring, the ingredients were just right for a flood. There was simply too much water for the course, and the river overflowed. In '96 the weir *was* full, there *had* been a decent snow season, and it *had* been a wet spring, but the river had held. By summer it was dry, so dry that that the stormwater canals that snaked through the town were completely empty.

It had been nearly a week since Stevie had died. Between Stevie's death, the Paschal candle, the toilet block, the book, the Dog, The Farmer, Stevie's funeral, and general Christmas madness, the boys were aching for things to get back to some semblance of normality. They'd hoped Christmas might bring that normality. The Farmer had other plans.

Synopsis of Removed Material: The rest of this section has been removed for the sake of the word count. In this section we hear about the varied traditions the boys have over Christmas, from Adler's secular Christmas through to Tim and Mike's marathon of church services. On Boxing Day, Mike and Tim traditionally play a game of cricket before the test starts, but this Boxing Day they ride to Stevie's house to meet Adler and George. Along the way they race their bikes along the canal where they see a tunnel that sends a shudder down Tim's spine before he nearly collides with Detective McGuiness's squad car. Meeting up in front of Stevie's house, the boys catch each other up on bits of

what happened to them leading up to Christmas. Still grieving, the boys try to take their mind off it by heading to Albury High to play bike chasey.

2.

Detective Shannon McGuinness had his feet propped up on the dash and one of Mrs Roberts' ham and cheese sandwiches resting on his lap. When the radio crackled he was enjoying the simple pleasure of two pieces of white bread, a perfectly square piece of cheese, trimmed ham, and a slather of butter that understood fat wasn't bad for you—the kind of sandwich only old country women could make. He stopped at Mrs Roberts' shop every day for one of her magic sandwiches. He thought about the McDonalds on the highway, the new Hungry Jacks that had just opened, and the talk of the bypass redevelopment, and wondered whether he was enjoying a dying art. These musings were interrupted by the voice of Constable Harris doing his best Chuck Yeager voice over the radio.

‘Any units, we’ve had another call from Mrs Calvin: kids at the school again.’

Shannon leant back in his seat and took a deep breath. Mrs Calvin was a nosy old bint who lived next to the local Public High School. When she had married a Calvin, she started thinking of herself as old family, and old money, and took delight in surveilling what she considered *her* neighbourhood. Unfortunately for the local police, *Mr* Calvin was on the town council, and on nearly every board and committee. Which meant to keep their bosses happy, guys like Shannon had to keep Mrs Calvin happy.

He knew exactly who the kids were, he'd seen one of them not two hours ago barrelling across Wyse Street, and nearly over his cruiser's bonnet. Shannon looked at the

half eaten sandwich in his lap, and then thought about the boys on their bikes, and about Constables Walker and Davis. Not everyone in the police force was in the game to make the town a better place. For most of them it was just a job, and like any workplace there were a couple of people who didn't have much going on outside work and felt the need to compensate through what limited power they had. For the Albury police constabulary these people were Walker and Davis. They weren't stupid, they were just incompetent, and they were angry at the world that they couldn't climb a single rung. Instead of finding a different career, one that would suit them better, they took pleasure—like Mrs Calvin—in getting in other people's way. Shannon thought about the boys on their bikes, and their friend who he'd fished out of the river just a couple of weeks back, and wrapped the sandwich back up in its Glad-wrap. Folding his legs back under the steering wheel he reached for the radio. 'Heard you, Harris. McGuinness responding.'

The boys saw Shannon long before he reached them. They'd already spent themselves tearing around the corridors of Albury High. Bike chasey was nearly as straightforward as dead arm. Someone was *it*, and to get someone else *it*, you had to ride your bike into theirs. The best way to do this was to kiss your front tyre into their rear, but as the game got more desperate the tactics got less precise, and more and more skin was shed. Tim and Mike had come down hard on the steps, and the boys were comparing scabs and grazes from different falls, when Shannon approached them. He didn't sneak up like Walker or Davis, he just strolled over. They knew the drill by now. And he knew they knew.

'Adler, Tim, Mike, George,' Shannon said, tipping his hat.

'Detective,' Adler said, tipping his cap satirically.

Shannon liked Adler the best. He'd end up famous or in jail. Maybe both. 'You all know what's happening. *She* called and you've all got to roll on.'

'Lady Calvin has called, boys,' Adler said curtsying. 'We must now depart, post-haste.'

George was dripping in sweat, his round body stretching through the wet cotton of his t-shirt. 'Give him a break, Adler, he's just doing his job.'

'George, you're absolutely right. Moving kids on for riding bikes is a valuable use of police resources,' Adler said, straightening an invisible tie, 'the unsupervised, unsanctioned, and unsightly riding of bikes is out of control in this town.'

Shannon sat down on the steps next to Adler. 'You're right, kid.'

Adler's eyebrows twitched, and his mouth made shapes as he tried to find some words. This wasn't how the script was meant to play out. 'Well, of course I am, of course, if I turn around,' he pirouetted on the spot, 'then, I'm left.'

Shannon looked at the BMXs lying scattered on the ground and the cuts and scrapes covering the boys. 'You guys really go hard, don't you. Do you race here?'

Tim and Mike instinctively buttoned their lips. Never tell authority anything, you never know when it would bite you on the arse. Adler pulled his cheeks in and squinted like he'd just bitten into a grapefruit thinking it was an orange. But George had a strange urge to trust Shannon. He didn't know why, he just did. Before he knew it he was saying, 'Yeah, sometimes. Sometimes we just play bike-chasey.'

'Chasey?' Shannon chuckled, 'That would explain all the scabs.'

He looked at George. The kid's chubby cheeks were all red, and his big eyes shone blue, contrasting against his sun-bleached hair. Maybe it was the sun-bleached hair, but for some reason the face of the boy he'd fished out of the river popped into Shannon's head. The state of that body just hadn't seemed right so he'd bumped the case up the chain to the regional homicide guys, who'd probably just bump it back down as a drowning. But Shannon was still their local guy, and he couldn't stop thinking about the body, the criss-crossed scars, the bruising around the back of the neck, the eyelids.

'I'm sorry about your friend.' The words spilled out of Shannon's mouth before he could stop them.

Adler reached up and bent the peak of his cap, while George sat silently, staring straight ahead, and Mike's eyes darted to his toes. But Tim stared straight into Shannon's eyes. They'd both seen the body. Shannon remembered the way the boy had sprinted off down the river. He looked at the others. 'I was first on scene when they found his body.'

The other three look shocked, confirming Shannon's suspicions the younger Birch boy hadn't told anyone what he'd seen. If he hadn't told *these* three boys, he hadn't told *anyone*. A kid shouldn't be carrying that.

Another question came tapping Shannon on the shoulder: how *much* had the boy seen? Had he seen the scars? Had he seen the eyelids? Had he seen the bruising around the back of the neck? He remembered how the Roy boy had been reported missing at the pool; had these other boys been there as well? Had they told the pool guards? Had the boy really gone missing in the pool... no, *drowned*... you don't go missing in a pool. Had something gone wrong? Had someone fished him out and dumped him in the river? Despite every sensible thought in Shannon's mind, he couldn't shake the awful comparison between the scars criss-crossing the boy's body and the criss-crossed grill of

the pool drain. Maybe it was an overactive imagination, the kind of imagination that made a good detective, but Shannon still sidestepped manhole covers, avoided storm water grates, and became hyper-aware near the canal and the old water tanks up on Eastern Hill. And so he wondered just how much Tim had seen, and how much had he suspected there was more to his friend's death than just drowning in the river? Kids saw the world in a way that adults didn't, and Shannon felt like these boys were seeing the world in a way that Shannon only caught glimpses of. Shannon remembered he just left the poor kids hanging, waiting for the cop to say something.

He tried to remember what he'd just said. The scene, he'd been at the scene. They all looked so vulnerable. Not weak though. That Adler boy didn't know what back down meant, and those Birch boys were fiercely stubborn, but he wanted to protect them. But from what? A menace he'd built in his own head. And if he went putting stories in the boys heads and it got back to their parents who knew what kind of shit-storm would ensue. 'If you guys need to talk to someone about your mate, you find me. You can reach me through the police station, alright?'

They all nodded and Adler sniffed and bent the peak of his cap. Tim was still staring right at him, his eyes looked troubled, like too many things were invading his thoughts at the same time. Shannon raised his eyebrows and nodded his head forward: *you let me know if you need.* 'Alright, now do me a favour and play somewhere else.'

The boys pulled themselves up and collected their bikes. As they turned and rolled them toward the southern gates they cut a stark image. They had such different bodies, but each of them slung their bike the exact same way. A shiver ran along Shannon's back, a shiver that said something was wrong, a shiver he'd learned to trust. 'Wait!' He jogged over to them. 'I don't know if your parents told you or not, but we're treating Stephen's

death as suspicious. You be careful. Don't go anywhere alone. And stay *away from the drains, away from the water*, safe.' It felt dumb, but better safe than sorry.

Tim and Mike both nodded, Adler bent the peak of his hat, and George's big eyes blinked.

'Alright, and I don't think I'd even notice if you rattled Mrs Calvin's fence.' Shannon winked and they pedalled off toward the canal that ran along the back of the school to head back toward town, banging Mrs Calvin's fence as they went, her sharp eyes peering out her back window as Shannon shook his head in fake disapproval.

3.

It might have been Shannon's warning that planted the thought in his head, but it was Adler's idea to ride in the canal. After they left the school, they followed the path that ran along it. Pedalling along, pulling monos, and doing bunny-hops, he'd seen the small metal rungs that looped out of the canal walls to form service ladders. He'd instantly had the urge to climb down. He'd never been in the canal, and he'd never climbed the rungs. He'd pointed them out to the other guys, and it wasn't long before Adler, Mike, and Tim were standing down the bottom looking up as George peered over the edge.

'I don't think I can guys,' George called down to them.

Adler sensed the fear of rejection in George's voice. 'You'll be fine, mate, as soon as you're over the lip the butterflies go. Isn't that right, guys?' Adler turned to Tim and Mike and opened his eyes wide, letting them know to play along. Tim and Mike climbed

stuff like this all the time, he'd seen them doing backflips off the cricket nets into the long-jump pit only a couple of weeks earlier; there was no way it had freaked them out.

Tim joined in first. 'Yeah, George, Adler's right, man, just swing your leg over and you'll be fine.'

George looked at the handlebars of the bike he was still clutching, and at their bikes down in the canal. 'What about the bike?'

They'd all just pulled theirs over in their spare hand once they had their feet firmly in place. It had been easy enough from there just to hop one hand down, one rung at a time. Maybe because George was bigger he couldn't hold that much weight, maybe he wasn't as strong, maybe he just wasn't as sure footed, but Mike saw from the look in George's eye that they'd be lucky to get *him* down let alone with his bike.

'I'll come up and grab it.'

As Mike leapt up the rungs and pulled the bike down, George peered over the lip again. It was at least a twelve foot drop down a near vertical cliff of concrete. At the base of the wall, the cement cambered down to the middle of a trench that was as wide as it was deep. A moist strip trickling down the middle of the trench betrayed the water that flowed in autumn, winter, and spring. An old rhyme rang in George's head:

Don't go near the drain, one last refrain, Francis Francis, dances dances...

A wave of vertigo rolled through George. 'I can't.'

'Yeah, you can.' An idea popped into Adler's head and he thrust his hands in his pockets and turned to Mike and Tim. 'Ah shit, I must have dropped my wallet up there.'

Scurrying up the rungs Adler climbed over the edge and turned to George. Pulling the wallet from his pocket and showed it to him. ‘If you don’t want to, man, I can pretend I lost it back at the school, and we can go.’

It was enough to calm George down and, looking into Adler’s sympathetic face hidden under the peak of his cap, George found the courage to swing one leg over the lip.

‘Go George!’ Tim called up.

George’s foot wiggled around in the air looking for the first rung, which was set into the wall for an adult.

‘I can’t find the rung,’ he hissed at Adler.

‘You have to swing both legs over and lower yourself down, it’s easier if you roll onto your stomach.’

George rolled over and begun shuffling himself backward, his wide bottom creeping toward the edge. As George’s hips popped over the edge, Adler glanced down the lane and saw the familiar outline of Donny, Arnie, and Ram making their way toward him. They still hadn’t noticed him yet and were busy slurping on Slush Puppies from the servo.

‘George, hurry up,’ he whispered, ‘Donny’s coming.’

George’s eyes opened wide and he froze. ‘What?!’

‘Donny and Co., they’re coming. You have to get down, now!’

George breathed heavily. ‘I can’t, I can’t find the rung.’

His big eyes searched Adler’s: *HELP! I’m scared. I can’t do it.*

‘Just ease backwards, trust me, you’ll find them,’ Adler said. Donny and his gang were getting closer. Five metres down the path a steel utility box, five feet tall and three feet across, was temporarily hiding them from sight.

‘George, NOW, you have to go.’ Adler could hear Donny’s voice clearly now.

‘Did you see his face as we walked out the door, too scared to say anything?’ Donny slurped his drink loudly. ‘What a chump.’

Arnie and Ram laughed on cue. George’s bum wiggled as his legs kicked. Adler peered over the edge. George’s feet were only a couple of inches from the rung.

‘Just a tiny bit further, mate,’ Adler urged.

George’s cheeks were bright red, and his eyes were squinting. ‘I can’t, I can’t, I can’t do it.’

‘Yes, you can,’ Adler whispered harshly. ‘George?’

George looked up and Adler looked him in the eye.

‘Trust me.’

George got his bum over just as Donny’s face appeared around the edge of the box. His feet found the rung and started shuffling down. Donny’s eyebrows rose as he recognised Adler, and he smiled when he saw him kneeling over the edge of the canal only a few metres away.

‘Jew-boy,’ he said.

‘Adler, I’m nearly down,’ George called up.

‘...and Generous George, is that you I hear down there?’

Adler and Donny stared at each other like cowboys at high noon. Adler thought about the rungs, but he'd never make it, and he was never going to outrun Donny and Arnie, especially with his bike down in the canal. Donny grinned, his lips curling back to reveal his slightly too perfect teeth. Adler remembered the porcelain, the shit stain, and the cold on his cheek. For a second the shame came crashing down on him, but it was almost instantly replaced by a rage that shot through him like an electric current. 'Hey Donny?' he taunted.

Donny's grin was wiped by surprise. How dare this little shit taunt him? Hadn't he learned anything?

Adler held his hand up and slowly raised his middle finger. A vein popped in Donny's temple and he lurched toward Adler, who leapt deftly into the canal.

4.

Adler's landing wasn't quite as deft as his jump and the concrete jarred badly as he hit the deck. Pain splintered through his heels and up his shins, he was lucky not to break his tibia or his ankle as he landed, but he did lose some more skin from his already raw elbows and knees. He came to a stop resting on his side and rolled over to find Tim and Mike already leaning over him.

'You alright?' they said.

Adler did a quick mental scan of his body. Surprisingly nothing was hurting too bad. 'Think so.'

The next thing he knew Mike had grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. ‘Good thing, ‘cause I think we gotta move.’

As if to punctuate Mike’s understatement, Donny’s Slush Puppy exploded on the ground next to them, spraying them with frozen cola.

‘You’re so fucked, Adler! You think the other day was bad, you just wait.’ Donny was standing on the lip of the canal, Arnie and Ram looming behind him. ‘All of you, you’re all...’

He was so mad he’d become like a toddler, like the caricature of a despot. He picked up a rock and threw it down. Tim elegantly sidestepped the missile. Arnie and Ram were looking at Donny, waiting for a sign. It was the moment of decision, of escalation or diffusion, and sadly for all seven of those boys, Donny’s father had never modelled restraint. Donny grabbed another rock and flung it as hard as he could. Ram and Arnie reached down in unison, scouring the gravel path and rough grass that lined it for ammunition.

‘RUN!’ Mike ordered. His voice sounded strange. Once it would have been Stevie’s order. But he would have had something cleverer to say.

The boys all rushed for their bikes. Like fighter-pilots jumping into their planes as their squadron scrambled under fire, the boys had their bikes moving as they mounted them. Rocks cracked loudly off the concrete, the noise echoing down the empty cement trench. Mike took point, with Adler and George behind him, while Tim stayed back a few feet, weaving back and forth, trying to distract the gang’s aim. He felt his back wheel whip sideways as a rock zinged through the spokes. Tim glanced over his shoulder, but his view of the canal jolted around as he rocked back and forth on the bike. Donny’s gang weren’t coming down the rungs, he could see that much, but he couldn’t see the bank

properly, partly because of the jolting, partly because of the steepness of the canal wall. A wet spray flicked up from his back wheel onto his arse as he veered through the small trickle of water that ran down the middle of the canal. He glanced ahead to correct his line and check that he hadn't fallen behind. George's big behind wiggling back and forth in front of him told him he was close enough. Taking another glance over his shoulder, he risked not pedalling for a better view. This time, with his vision stable, he could make out the heads and shoulders of the gang bouncing as they ran down the path. Tim mashed the pedals to get back up to speed and called out to the boys between breaths, 'They're chasing. Uhh. Up Top. Uhh. On the. Uhh. Bank.'

'We need to get clear enough to climb out,' Mike shouted back.

'How long will it take to get up?' George stammered, thinking of trying to climb the rungs with his bike. He couldn't have one of them go twice this time. Surely going up was going to be harder than going down, especially carrying a bike. He could feel his lungs failing him already; there was no way he was keeping up with the rest of them at this pace anyway.

'Where does it end up?' Adler asked.

Tim rode through the water that trickled down the middle of the canal, dodging some suspicious muck on the canal floor. Was it his imagination or was the water actually moving at a steady rate, instead of the tiny trickle back up near the school? George answered Adler's question between deep laboured breaths. He was struggling. 'The, huh, river. Huh, It rings, huh, the Botanic, huh, Gardens, huh, goes behind, huh, the, huh, footy-ground, huh, then, huh, then, huh, past, the, huh, pool, and, huh, into the, huh, river.'

The pool and the river. Tim thought of Stevie's body, and the scars. Of rhymes about drains, of the pool water spilling into the canal, of Stevie's scarred body slapping into the wet concrete of the storm water canal. If there was no water, how had he ended up in the river?

Adler saw the tunnel looming in front of them. The tunnel was essentially a giant concrete pipe that funnelled the stormwater under the road overhead. It was the same tunnel Tim had seen earlier in the day, and the same road where he'd nearly put a dent in Detective McGuinness's car. Adler had the same uneasy feeling Tim had had, but the pipe was long enough to protect them from any projectiles, and he had an idea.

'What if we wait them out in the tunnel?'

Tim looked at the tunnel and his earlier sense of foreboding welled up inside him.

'No way.'

George agreed with Tim, the tunnel was evil. He had no evidence, it just didn't *feel* right.

Francis, Francis, dances, dances.

He would have preferred to turn around and face the rocks than head into that concrete tube. But he didn't want to look scared, especially after getting the jitters back at the ladder.

'Think about it,' Adler said. 'In it, we're safe. If Donny, Ram, and Arnie climb down we can see them coming, and then outrun them on the bikes and get out, and we don't end up trapped by the water getting deeper down by the river.'

Tim didn't like it, but it made sense. 'Mike?'

‘Yeah, let’s wait it out.’

This might have been a good idea on a normal summer’s day. But the boys weren’t to know that upstream, despite having all twenty-nine spillways wide open, the Hume dam was overflowing. The tributaries that fed into the canal had turned almost instantly from babbling brooks to rushing streams as a wall of water fought for somewhere to lie. How were the boys to know? No adult would have expected it. It was no natural flood.

They came sliding to a halt in the tunnel. The contrast of light to darkness left them blind. Tim looked at the canal stretching away from each end of the tunnel; now he was sure that the stream of water was flowing faster.

Mike’s voice echoed. ‘You sure pissed them off Adler, what the shit did you do?’

‘You do have a way with people’ Tim observed.

Tim could almost see Adler winking and flexing his arms as he stretched his neck forward. ‘I am what I am, and that’s all that I am.’

With hysteria brought on by stress, they all lost it at Adler’s Popeye voice, and fought to catch their breath between laughs.

Donny’s voice echoed from outside. ‘Now you’re done. You little...you’re so...’ A rock chinked harmlessly at the end of the tunnel.

Now that they were safe in the pipe, and after a laugh, Donny just seemed like a fool, and the boys lost it again.

They could hear Donny shuffling back and forth, and the bangs as he kicked the corrugated iron fences of people's back yards. Rocks periodically ricocheted off the cement near the ends of the tunnel.

'How long till he gets bored, do you reckon?' Mike asked.

There was another bang, and the sound of one foot hopping on gravel. 'Ow, ah...shit.'

'Not long,' Tim said. His eyes were starting to adjust to the dark and he could make out the silhouettes of the others. They were all propped up against the curved walls, trying to keep out of the water.

'It's kind of appropriate you all being down in the canal. Just more sewage!' Donny yelled.

Now that they were out of immediate danger, Adler was starting to get bored. How long would they have to wait down here? Tim was having similar thoughts when he felt his feet getting cold. He slid them up and felt his socks squelch. They were completely waterlogged. He looked out the ends of the tunnel. The water had definitely risen. 'Guys, I think we have a problem.'

'Yeah, I think you're right,' Mike's voice said grimly.

Tim could make out their faces now. George was pale even in the darkness, his knees tucked up. Mike had gotten up and was standing astride the growing stream. He could even see the outlines of the graffiti that covered the inside of the tunnel. Some of it was cool, experiments in colours and shape, some was interesting tags, some was just, well, bad.

Adler raised a trembling hand his finger slowly extending, pointing out of the tunnel and up the canal. 'That's not good.'

Tim followed Adler's finger and the hairs up his neck started to prickle. Standing in the middle of the canal, a couple hundred metres away, the black Doberman stared at them. Its ears jutted forward, its legs extended so it perched on its toes, its powerful chest ready to explode forward at any moment.

George breathed in sharply. 'I've seen that dog before.' Or had he? Had he just dreamt it?

'Yeah,' Adler said, pacing backwards in the stream so he was abreast with Tim and no longer standing out in front. 'That was the one near the water tanks... And the river.' Adler hadn't told Tim and Mike about any of that yet.

Mike remembered the Dog watching him on Eastern Hill after he and Tim had put the golf ball through the window, but he didn't say anything.

But the same word went through each of the boy's heads.

[PADDYWHACK]

The graffiti on the walls began to coil and snake and the word appeared again and again,

[PADDYWHACK, PADDYWHACK]

Adler knew what would happen next. But it didn't stop his balls, which had only recently started hanging, from tucking slowly back up. A man's whistle reverberated down the concrete walls of the canal and into the tunnel. It was a tune they all knew: a tune they'd known from childhood; one they'd chanted to scare each other at sleepovers;

an innocent chant to children the world over, but not for the children of the Riverina; a taboo amongst the young boys of Albury. In their heads they heard the words, and the voices of the lost boys.

[This old man, he played one;

He played knick-knack on my thumb.

With a knick-knack, paddywhack,

Give a dog a bone]

A deep voice rasped in their heads.

[This old man came rolling home]

Behind the Doberman, the man walked toward them. Tall and thin, his heeled boots echoed off the cement. Despite the afternoon heat he wore a long, brown, waxed, weather-proof coat, which flapped open with each slow stride, revealing a glint from his belt. His dust-coloured hat was pulled down hard. He walked with his head down, hiding his face from the sun or maybe the world, and his lithe swagger betrayed the fact that the cane slung across his shoulder was not made for walking.

5.

Up on the bank, Donny stood still as a statue, mesmerised by the man walking down the canal. He could feel the power. It pulsed through his veins, it made him feel like the time he ‘played’ with the cat. The receptors in Donny’s nostrils opened, the cilia reaching out. He could smell everything: the dust from the gravel; the dry scrub on the

side of the path; the water flowing down the canal; the cut grass from a nearby lawn. He could smell Arnie's and Ram's sweat, he could even smell the stale fear seeping from the boys down in the tunnel. He could feel the blood swelling into his dick, the silk of his boxers slipping as it twitched against the crotch of his shorts.

Donny flinched as Arnie's hand grabbed his shoulder. He suddenly felt ashamed of the swelling in his pants and the shame quickly turned to anger. He wanted to hurt something, to break something, to make something beautiful ugly. 'What the fuck do you want?' he said, wheeling around on Arnie.

Arnie's eyes were wide with fear. 'Let's go, Donny, something's not right with that guy. Let's go.'

Behind him, Ram's head bobbed up and down, his usually impressive frame suddenly bent and curled, his toes pointed slightly together and shoulders pulled in. Donny turned and looked back at the man. He wanted to stay. He wanted to be there for whatever was about to happen. His chest expanded as he watched. The power pulsed through him again, as did the swelling in his pants.

Arnie grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. Donny's hand lashed out, his fingernails cutting across his friend's face. 'Don't fucking touch me!' he screamed.

Arnie jumped back and stared at Donny like he was mental, 'we're outta here.' Together, he and Ram turned and ran.

Donny watched them go. He could feel Arnie's skin under his nails, and he caught himself wondering what it would taste like. He looked at his hand like it wasn't part of him. *What the fuck had he just done?* Arnie hadn't meant anything by it, he was just scared, and had wanted out. The blood drained from Donny's crotch and the shame returned. He turned back to the man walking down the canal. The power felt dirty now.

A shiver ran down his spine. He resented the boys in the tunnel for making him feel what he felt. As he turned, he took one last look at the man. He felt the pull and was drawn to him despite the sick feeling in his bowels. It was like eating a wet chocolate cake when you were too full, or like when your mate left his toys right next to your backpack when you were packing up, or like when you found your dad's open wallet in the fruit bowl. He felt his balls ease back down as the erection faded. He turned and ran after Arnie and Ram, maybe he could assert himself back on *them*.

The boys in the tunnel would have heard Donny's feet crunching on the gravel as he left if they weren't so mesmerised by the wiry frame swaggering toward them down the cement trench. The Doberman trotted at his heel, its lips pulled back, its head bowed in submission. The steady echo of the man's boots bounced off the walls. Tim urged himself to turn, to grab his bike, and run; it was his first response to anything, the only defence he knew, but he couldn't make himself do it. His feet were frozen as though the concrete had set around them. His shoes became obstacles creating rapids in the slowly rising water. There was something in the man's song, a sound in that whistle, that prevented him from turning away. The man was closing in on them. The waxed brown coat flapped open again and Tim could make out the checked flannel shirt. The light glinted off his hip as the coat flapped the other way, and Tim's numbed mind noticed the handle of a hunting knife jutting out the top of a leather sheath hooked onto his belt.

He felt like he was dreaming. It was like he was in water, everything felt sluggish, time slowed. He had the thoughts, but couldn't act. He saw the blade and the Dog. *I'm in danger*, his mind said. *We're all in danger. We have to leave. We have to RUN. It's time to go. Whatever Paddywhack means, he's going to show us.* But his body refused to act. Behind the man, a thin film of water flowed toward them down the canal, it seeped

steadily along the width of the concrete floor like a tide rolling in. Except it wasn't glassy like the ocean, it was clouded, like the water in the depths of the river. Water that had surged through the mud, pulling the sediment up from the bottom. Violent water, that grabbed, pulled, pushed, and shoved. The tide swept under the man, his boots now sending a wet smack echoing through the tunnel. Tim smelt the earth in the water as it swept under his feet. The man paused as he reached the entrance, the sunlight behind, casting him in silhouette, his limbs lengthened by the light. The Doberman paced behind him, softly growling. Tim could see Adler, standing closest, shrinking before the man. The water splashed as George shuffled past Tim into the middle of the tunnel. Tim somehow managed to pull his gaze from the man long enough to push his glasses back up over the bridge of his nose and look across at George. His friend was standing as if in a trance, his mouth slightly open, his arms hanging uselessly by his sides.

The man took a step into the tunnel and, as he crossed the line separating light from dark, Tim saw his face for the first time. His stubbled jaw jutted out from the shadow cast by the hat; a tight grin pulled back, revealing small stained teeth, like a picket-fence that had fallen into disrepair.

[George. Boys]

He nodded his head and tipped his hat. His voice was flat like the men who worked the land, but deep, and somehow *dry*. None of the boys were sure if they'd heard his voice rasp, or whether they'd thought it... or dreamt it.

The man clicked his fingers and the Doberman pounced forward past George, so it stood between him, and Tim and Mike. The Dog's body hunched, its head stretched forward, growling at the Birches, the fur along the back of its neck bristling, slobber dripping from the its yellow teeth, the pink flesh of its lips pulled back, revealing its

gums. The man sidestepped Adler, and stood over George whose large eyes looked back up at the man.

[George]

The man reached out and caressed George's cheek with the back of his hand.

In Tim's mind the man had a smell like *age*. Like an old person's house, or a church. But up close, his nostrils were filled by an acrid musk as the man's sour stench wafted through the tunnel. The smell of years of sweat: sweat from work, sweat from drinking, sweat from sex; the smell of a working man, the smell of all that sweat soaked into cotton and flannel, gone stale, and mixed with decades of smoke and booze. It was pungent and powerful. Overwhelming.

[It's not for you to understand, George. Not yet.]

The man's caress ran over George's cheek and through his hair. It made Tim's stomach turn but still he couldn't move. He just watched. The man gestured outside the tunnel.

[Did those boys hurt you? Did they hurt you, George?]

His voice lilted. Tim couldn't tell which answer the man wanted.

[Don't worry George, I won't hurt you. Much. I don't want to hurt you, George. It's just the way it is. It will only hurt a little bit. Don't worry, *this* I know.]

He continued to run his hand through George's hair and George's glazed eyes just looked up at the man.

Tim's nostrils burned with the acrid stench; the smell came in strong surges that made him want to throw up. George's wide eyes stared blankly past the man's stubbled jaw and into the shadow of his hat.

Tim felt something bad coming. There was pain coming. There were sights he couldn't un-see. A rebellious urge bubbled up inside him. An image of Colin standing over the Paschal candle popped into his head. The injustice of it, the shattered plastic, and broken benches, the cane connecting with Mike's ribs: the feeling surged and he felt his body lurch forward. He wasn't going down without a fight, not this time.

But as Tim launched himself at The Farmer, the Doberman leapt, thumping heavily into his chest, sending him flying backward into the hard cement of the tunnel wall. He saw a flash of white as his head smacked hard into the concrete and his glasses tumbled into the water. Specks of light flickered and danced in his blurred vision as he slid down the curvature of the wall. He felt the weight of the Dog land on him as he slipped into the water.

The water had risen significantly and he fought against the weight of the dog, so he could hold his head up high enough to breathe. In the dim light of the tunnel, with his blurred vision, he could only just make out the colours of the dog's face, but he could feel the hot breath on his skin and the wet slobber dribbling on him. Some fell into his open mouth. The dog snarled as Tim choked and gagged on the slobber; the dog lashed out and Tim was sure it was going to tear his throat out. But the man's cane came smashing down into the dog's head.

[No!]

Tim froze. If he hit his *dog* like that, what would he do to *them*? But Tim knew, he'd seen Stevie's body on the bank of the river. The dog yelped but kept snarling.

George shuddered and looked worried. The man was quick to caress his hair.

[Shhh, it's OK]

A smile crept across the man's face.

[Don't worry, it won't hurt much]

'It won't hurt much,' George echoed. 'We'll just play knick-knack...'

The man nodded,

[We'll just play knick-knack]

His hand grabbed George hard by the neck and shoved him down onto the floor of the tunnel. He dropped the cane, and whipped the knife from his belt.

In Tim's blurred vision he could just see the outline of Adler leaping forward, hands clutching at the man's face. One of the man's hands let go of George and swung around, sending Adler flying like an empty sack into the concrete wall. The sound of Adler's diaphragm collapsing was crisp. Tim's own gut bounced in sympathy as the air was knocked from Adler's lungs.

The violence of the moment brought Mike snapping back to reality. No one got to lay their hands on his mates, not if Mike could do anything about it. He charged forward, head bowed, shoulder first, into the man. George rolled over, his eyes staring blankly up at the surface of the water running over his face, water that was moving quickly. *Too quickly.*

The dog snarled and went for Tim's throat. He punched and kicked against the bucking dog, wrestling its jaws away from his throat with every inch of strength he had. He could feel his grip on the beast's chest slipping when the canal thundered. In the

distance the first wave of the flood crashed toward them, a wall of brown water the height of the canal. The dog yelped and ran. The Farmer pulled himself up, leering at the boys, who huddled together. The water rumbled, smashing off the walls of the canal, the vibrations shaking the earth around them. Tim was reminded of Sunday School pictures of the Red Sea crashing down on the Egyptians, their chariots being shattered by the power of the waves.

‘Bikes,’ Mike yelled, taking control again.

They all dove for their machines as the water thundered toward them. But as the wave hit, there was simply too much water for the entrance, which was significantly smaller than the canal. The water that fought its way into the pipe was angry and it picked the boys up in its rage. Up became down, and in became out, and all Tim could do was to hold his breath and try not to let water into his mouth. As the water beat him from every direction, Tim felt like a rag-doll.

For the first time in his life he wasn't sure he'd make it out alive. He had a surreal memory of going to visit his cousins who lived on the coast south of Adelaide. He remembered the stern lecture from Uncle Alfred about ‘the rip.’ He could see his dad standing over the man's shoulder, nodding grimly. Uncle Alfred, or Alfie as everyone called him, was his dad's older brother. Broad shouldered and gentle, he'd dropped out in the sixties, and had the brown leathery skin of man who'd spent his life in the surf. A man who lit up every time he saw his family, and who didn't care what anyone thought of him. A man who was nothing like Colin. Alfie's gentle nature meant his stern words stuck with Tim. Alfie was waxing his surfboard as he talked to them. ‘The water's fun boys, it's not something to fear.’ He'd paused, rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, ‘but it is something to respect.’ He spoke about the water with reverence, the way Tim's dad talked about God when Church people were listening. Alfie started rubbing the wax in small

circles again and sniffed. 'Like anything fun, she's got risks. Like the sharks...' He threw them a wink and grinned as he said it, quickly disarming the scare he'd put in them.

But then he'd gotten really serious, the blue of his eyes had deepened, his eyebrows had crinkled, and his bottom lip had pulled over his teeth. Because Alfie was Alfie, when he got serious it carried more weight. 'But if she gets you in a rip, you take her seriously. She doesn't feel like she could hurt you when the sun's shining, and she's lapping against your skin, but when she gets her current up, it's like a bad temper.' Tim could have sworn he saw a flicker of guilt cross Alfie's face as his eyes darted sideways at Colin. 'And when she's got her temper up, there's no fighting her, just let her do her thing, and keep your senses open for an out. Fighting back will only wear you out. Just flow with her. Here,' he nodded towards the waves rolling in outside the window, 'we get rips, undertows some people call them; it's a strong one that pulls you out to sea. You boys are strong swimmers, if she grabs you, you go with her, and you swim for the sides not for the sand. You'll find it easier to slip out the side and around than fight back. *Path of least resistance.*'

The water spat Tim from the tunnel and he smacked hard into the shallow water on the other side of the tunnel. As he tried to get his bearings, the wave of water that had been forced over the bridge came crashing down from above and, along with a fresh surge from the tunnel, he was picked up and dragged further down the canal. As he fought to keep his place near the surface, he looked around. His vision was blurred without his glasses, and he could just make out the other guys collecting themselves as the water level quickly rose around them. His chest eased slightly when he couldn't see the man's brown coat or the dog, but only slightly. The water had been momentarily slowed by the bridge but it was picking up pace again and taking them with it. Alfie's advice popped into his head. *Path of least resistance.*

‘That current’s going to pick up pretty quick,’ he shouted over the rushing water.
‘Swim for the edges, not against it.’

His mind raced through his mental map of the town. There was a storm water grate down near the garden, before the pool; it stopped the bigger junk from flowing into the river. He had an unpleasant thought about what would happen if the current picked back up and rolled them into the grate. ‘We’ve got to get out before the gardens!’

‘Aim for the rungs,’ Mike yelled as he fought the current.

The water had already risen half way up the walls of the canal and was climbing fast. The current tugged at them, trying to pull them under. The water that had thundered from the pipe was still spewing forth, but the noise had changed to a powerful churning sound that was slowly fading into the distance as they whipped away from it.

‘Let’s beat the worst of it,’ Mike said, breaking into an awkward freestyle in the rough water.

‘What about our bikes?’ Adler yelled.

‘Forget the bikes,’ Mike yelled back.

The current was picking up, and whipping them along faster than the river ever had. Tim focussed on staying near the surface. As he gathered his thoughts he realised he couldn’t see the detail on the walls of the canal, he couldn’t see the rungs. How was he going to get out if he couldn’t see the rungs? His heart began to race and he found it hard to control his breathing. Keeping to the left of the canal, he tried to stay near the big shape he assumed was Mike.

He could hear the water rolling over itself, folding back and forth as powerful surges fought for position. A big one folded down, pulling him, tugging him into the

water. Tim instinctively kicked, *don't fight it, just ease out*. It pulled him harder and sucked him under. Underwater, it didn't sound like the pool. The water rumbled as it fought with itself and he was thrown around like a discarded toy. Through the cloudy mud he briefly saw his feet. Without his glasses, he couldn't see which way was up. His chest ached and he felt his eyes starting to bulge. His muscles were getting weaker and lights started to dance in front of his eyes. His mouth rebelled, and some water slipped in. He felt the current around him and he went with it. His lungs felt like someone was driving their nails through them, the pressure squeezed so hard. He prayed, he begged, he assured himself that what he'd heard was true, and that drowning was a peaceful death. The last few weeks raced. He saw Stevie and the broken candle. The lights had grown, and their dance intensified. Defeated, his mouth opened and the vacuum in his lungs and diaphragm sucked the water in. It wasn't peaceful; it hurt like hell. Each molecule of water was like a polio needle sticking into him, a million needles peppering his lungs.

A sharp tug took him by surprise and he felt his body jerk in his t-shirt; he felt it tear a bit, but it held. As he was pulled up he choked on water, air rushed over his wet skin, and water poured from his hair. He coughed and spluttered and the tug on his shirt pulled him up, a big meaty arm gripped under his shoulder pulling him up. He felt himself heaved over the lip of the concrete and dumped on the grass. His lungs burned and he couldn't breathe. He wanted to vomit. He coughed and choked, his chest tearing itself to shreds, and he half expected to see blood on his hands. The water punched him in the back of the throat and nose as it spluttered up. His lungs burned as they heaved in air, but they also sucked in some of the water remaining in the tissue—more needles. He writhed and bucked and kicked and rolled on his side. As he struggled a familiar blurred silhouette stood over him.

'Can you breathe?' Mike said between heavy breaths. 'Lift your hand if you can.'

Tim lifted his hand slightly and coughed and spluttered as he choked down vomit.

‘Don’t worry, mate, I’ve always got you.’ Mike collapsed on his haunches. ‘And I never thought I’d say it, but we’re lucky these guys showed up.’ He gestured over his shoulder and Tim could see the huge blurry outline of Ram, and the smaller but still formidable Arnie. There was something different in their posture though. They were still big, like bulls, but somehow taller, or straighter.

Tim pointed at his eyes, and more importantly his missing glasses. ‘I couldn’t see.’

‘You popped up just in time’ Mike said.

Ram had been helping Mike up the rungs when he’d seen Tim popping up out of the water, which was surging higher, and higher. Mike had just managed to grab his brother’s collar. His heart had lurched in his chest as the t-shirt had ripped, but it held, and he pulled him up high enough for Ram to get his arms under Tim’s shoulders and haul him up onto the dirt. The seconds staring at Tim’s pale face before he coughed and spluttered up the water had been the longest Mike had ever known. He listened to the water rushing past, folding over on itself; he’d only just got one hand on the rusted iron rung himself. The water battered him back and forth like he was a piece of meat and he’d been struggling to pull himself up and out of the current. If Ram and Arnie hadn’t have been walking down the path, if they hadn’t have stopped, if they’d have been with Donny... He’d never thought Ram’s thick arm capable of bringing relief. The colour was coming back to Tim’s face but he still grimaced with every breath.

‘Where are your friends, the fat one and the Jew one with the hat?’ Ram said, his voice still blunted by the damage Adler had done.

Mike went to jump to his friends' defence, but stopped... where were they? He looked at the rushing water. *How would they get out? Even Mike had needed Ram's help.* Ram, whose voice right now hadn't sounded like he was being mean. If Mike was Tim, he might have wondered if the boy's prejudice was just a bad mix of naivety and stupidity. But he wasn't Tim, he just heard Ram not being cruel; if anything Ram was showing concern and asking the right question. Where *were* George and Adler? Mike looked further down the canal, he could just make out the next block where it connected with the gardens. There wasn't much canal left before the grate, he realised. He was getting more and more scared that they'd find them mashed against the steel grating. But he couldn't leave Tim. He looked at Arnie, who was shuffling his feet on the ground.

'Arnie, can you sit with Tim? Ram and I will go find Adler and George.'

Tim looked like he was going to be sick, but was pulling himself up. He hunched forward, head between his knees. 'Not without me, you don't.'

Arnie remembered throwing rocks at the boys as they rode away and started to feel guilty. He had to help make this right. Mike and Ram were stronger than him, though. 'You and Ram go ahead, I'll help Tim and we'll catch you up.'

Mike's eyes were wide like a panicked animal and he blinked as he bounced on the balls of his feet. 'Alright. We'll just follow the canal.' He noticed the water sloshing over the edges. 'This gets any higher, you guys get clear.'

Fat chance, Arnie thought, he wouldn't bail without Ram. But he nodded obediently.

Tim gave one curt nod. 'OK.'

Mike turned and ran. 'C'mon' he said to Ram who was never going to keep up.

6.

Ram ran as fast as he could, but he was never going to keep up with Mike. Ram wasn't a smart boy, he was as slow a thinker as he was a runner. He didn't know that other boys had thoughts all of the time, not just sometimes. And he was feeling very confused. Usually scaring these guys felt good. Usually he did it, and Arnie laughed, and Donny told him later how good he was. It was the same feeling as when he pushed a defender hard enough for one of the backs to slip through for a try. They all slapped him on the back and told him he'd done well, and then he lined up to do it again. But earlier, when he'd seen Mike hanging onto that rung in the river, it hadn't seemed right to taunt him, or to step on his knuckles. He'd looked at Arnie for instruction, but Arnie hadn't said anything. What Ram didn't know was that Arnie was frozen with panic. Arnie knew they *should* fish Mike out, he was going to die if they left him in, and that was a line Arnie wasn't ready to cross. But something had snapped in him, and he'd frozen. Ram had looked back at the boy hanging onto the rung, and heard him screaming for help, his voice choking whenever a curl of water fought over the top of him. Ram thought that Donny would probably have trodden on the boy's fingers. Donny could do anything. He reminded Ram a lot of his dad.

Ram was glad Donny wasn't there, because he didn't think that would be the right thing to do. Donny scared him sometimes, like the time he'd shown him the cat. That hadn't been right. He remembered looking into that cat's dead eyes... at least he'd left its eyes. That was enough to make Ram step down a couple of rungs and help pull Mike up. It was then he'd noticed the other boy, Tim. He'd seen Tim coming toward them like a dead weight in the water, bobbing like a wet log, just below the surface. He'd pointed him out for Mike, who'd reached down and grabbed him just in time. It had made Ram feel good, but in a different way.

And now they were going after the friends. The Jew one and the fat one. Ram didn't really understand what a Jew was, it was a bit like a Christian, but not, and he wasn't sure why Donny didn't like that. It *was* different, but he didn't really see why that was bad. Ahead of him Mike had stopped and jumped the fence that ran along the canal near the gardens. The canal made a right hand turn here and he could see where the first wave had kept going, straight into the Botanic Gardens. By the look of it the wave had knocked over a couple of trees and made a mess of the entrance to the gardens. Further down the canal, Ram could see water exploding over a grated storm water tunnel. The excess water swept down the street in shallow waves as local residents watched on in panic.

Navigating bits of trees and junk that had been washed over the sides by the floodwater, he made his way to where Mike was madly beckoning. As he got closer he could see Mike's other hand was hanging on to a vine that had been torn from one of the trees that hung over the fence of the Botanic Gardens. On the end of vine, in the water, hanging on for dear life, was the Jew and the fat one. Ram climbed over the fence. The floodwater was getting more violent and waves were sloshing over the sides. Mike's arms trembled as he pulled with all the strength he had. Ram grabbed a section of vine from behind Mike and pulled with his hands as the thorns dug into his palms.

'Ow.'

'It's bougainvillea,' Mike shouted. 'C'mon. Pull!'

Ram grabbed the stuff in his large palms and gripped it. The thorns stung but he managed to keep his grip and pull. He leaned into it, using everything he had, but his feet began to slip in the mud, and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't will his hands to

hang onto the thorns. He watched as a log narrowly missed the boys and disintegrated as it exploded into the grate. He felt the vine slip and inch.

Mike shouted back over his shoulder. ‘This is never going to work.’

Ram followed the vine with his eyes; it joined a bunch of others that were wrapped up in the tree behind him. Looking around he saw a steel pole that was reinforced into the earth by concrete. He walked over to it and grabbed the pole in one thick hand. It was much easier to hang on to than the thorns of the bougainvillea. Taking a deep breath he pulled on the vine with his other hand and began to turn slowly on the spot, supporting himself on the pole with his other hand. As he turned the vine wrapped around his gut, the thorns digging slowly into his fat, which stung, but at least he could keep working, unlike when they dug into his hands. With each spin he pulled another length in from the canal, dragging Adler and George closer to the bank, one foot at a time.

‘That’s it!’ Mike yelled.

Ram closed his eyes and tried to ignore the stinging in his gut. With a sudden jerk, the pressure on his gut eased.

‘That’s one out. Keep it up!’ Mike’s voice was getting hoarse.

Ram kept turning. He heard footsteps and then Arnie’s voice. ‘Go Ram, go mate.’

Tim, who’d arrived during the fray, called out, ‘Arnie, we need you as well!’

Ram opened his eyes. Tim and Mike were holding onto George’s thick arms but they couldn’t pull him out. Behind them Adler shivered as the water dripped from his clothes. His hair was hanging around his ears. Arnie joined them and all three heaved, but they couldn’t pull the fat boy from the water.

‘Have you got him?’ Ram yelled.

‘Kind of,’ Mike yelled back.

Ram started spinning the other way and cursed as the thorns ripped out of his gut. He walked over and bent down. Reaching under George’s shoulder he heaved him over the bank.

Adler bit back tears. Too many things assaulted his brain at once. It was like the carpet had been torn from under him, but there was no floor, only more sky. Everywhere he looked he saw The Farmer and the dog. The events in the tunnel were singed into his memory, like he’d been branded. As the boys pulled George to his feet his t-shirt clung to his belly. Adler took stock: they were all alive. Saved by Ram. Ram, who’d broken Adler only days ago. Ram, whose saving hands had held Adler’s neck down a toilet. Where Adler had seen those words. *Paddywhack*. The same words he’d seen in the tunnel today. The same words from the book. Ram’s shirt was turning red around his gut where the vine had punched a hundred little holes in him and he was turning pale. His nose was still swollen and bruised from where Adler had landed a blow at the toilet-block. Two emotions battled inside Adler, the first thanking the hulk of a boy for saving his life, the other remembering the shame of the shit-stained porcelain. His throat started to burn as he thought about it and the tears started to sting. The water had broken the banks of the canal and was seeping into his shoes.

The boys looked around at the carnage and the debris in the rising water. Without saying a word, they knew they had to get to higher ground. Like a pack of wounded animals, they walked away from the raging water. No one spoke. They were each too lost in their own thoughts. Trying to get their heads around what they’d just seen. The further

away they got from the floodwater, the slightly more in control they each felt. Eventually Arnie managed to get a handle on some words.

‘Who was that guy?’

Tim went to talk and then looked like he was going to be ill. George, thinking of the book, the lagoon, and his nightmares stammered, ‘he’s been around.’

‘D’you reckon he’s coming back?’ Ram asked nervously.

Tim looked around. Everywhere, adults were running madly about, trying to deal with the flood damage. The further they got from the canal, the calmer he felt.

‘Not for now.’

The boys reached Dean Street and stood around awkwardly, hands thrust into their wet pockets. They stood like that for a few minutes, and one by one they realised that whatever they’d gone through was over. At least for now.

George shuffled his feet awkwardly on the ground. ‘Thanks.’

‘Yeah, thanks,’ the Birches said in unison.

‘S’OK,’ Ram said. He wasn’t really sure how to answer gratitude. Arnie’s eyes squinted as if he was wrestling with a difficult concept, but he nodded.

Adler’s skin crawled. He was standing behind George’s shoulder and he could feel the gaping hole his silence had left. But how could he apologise after what they’d done to him? One good act didn’t make it OK. Luckily Arnie was wrestling with a similar thought. The sooner everything went back to normal, the better it was for everyone.

‘Alright fags,’ Arnie said as he thrust his hands into his pockets and nodded, beckoning Ram to follow him. Ram cocked his head menacingly, ‘See ya ‘round.’

But something had changed, they could all feel it.

‘Whatever,’ Adler mumbled.

‘Fuck, I think I need to go to the doctor,’ Ram muttered as he trudged away.

THE BEST LAID PLANS

After fishing their bikes from where they'd collected against the grating at the end of the canal, the boys trudged up the hill in silence. The silence hung as they cleaned the muck from their bikes in the fading evening light.

It was too hot to build a fire so they just sat around the blackened dirt in a small circle. George was the first to speak up, and he recounted what he'd seen at the lagoon, skirting exactly why he'd been in the reeds in the first place. Already the details were getting harder to hang onto, and the memory attached more to how he'd felt, than what he'd actually seen. What was real and what was dream was becoming harder to separate. He could feel the coldness, the emptiness. The way the Doberman had stared at him. It wasn't just some wild dog, the threat wasn't a moment of uncontained savagery. George had felt hunted. No, *stalked*, that was the word. The dog was just watching him, and George knew deep down in his gut that it had been watching him for that man. When Rod had disappeared into the house and *that man* had stepped from the shadows, the Doberman's ears had dropped, it had rested back onto the pads of its feet, and uncurled its lips from those teeth.

The man had brought the cold. Hope had fled and George had been mesmerised by him. He'd felt drawn to him. The hairs had risen on the back of his neck and a tingle had trickled down his spine. If the gum hadn't cracked, if that branch hadn't fallen and broken his concentration... As he recounted the story he felt the emotions he'd felt at the lagoon rising up like a wave.

Tim and Mike started telling their story, the one about the golf ball, Nail Can Hill, and the words painted on the walls of the shed. The cane was left out, the sick pleasure on their dad's face skipped, and the destruction of their benches and model kits struck from

the record. They explained the words on the wall though, the same words they'd all seen in the tunnel. The ones that sent the hairs on their necks shooting straight up, and their balls into hasty retreat.

[PADDYWHACK]

As Tim finished explaining how they slept overnight on Nail Can, Mike slapped his hands on his thighs like he was doing a roll on a snare drum before revealing something he hadn't even told Tim. 'I saw the dog.'

Tim glanced at Mike. They never kept secrets from each other.

'While I was checking where we were. He just stared at me, watching. So I did as Uncle Alfie always said and walked back slowly, not turning my back on him.'

Tim felt an uncomfortable knot in his gut, like the knot you got when you were on the way home from cricket training and you couldn't remember packing your gloves in your kit-bag.

Adler butted in and told them about the Doberman and the man down by the toilet block and the words that appeared on the toilet door.

[PADDYWHACK]

The burning rose in Adler's throat, the stinging in his eyes, the resentment; he could almost feel the cold porcelain pressing into his face, and Ram's meaty fist forcing him down; Ram, who'd pulled Mike and Tim out of the canal today. But he left all of that out.

‘It’s *him* isn’t it?’ Adler asked, and they all knew who he was talking about. At least they’d heard of who he was talking about. No one knew who *he* really was, but everyone in the town grew up with the tales.

In Europe they have folktales and myths, and in parts of Melanesia they have ancestral spirits, but there is no formal word for it in the quiet streets of the Riverina. Kids sing the rhymes and repeat the warnings, to scare each other, but no one writes them down, and when the kids grow up they tell themselves they were just silly kids’ stories. But without recognition the stories just became nightmares. *He* was the Riverina’s nightmare. George and Adler hadn’t told Stevie *why* you didn’t go near the drain, because it was made up, it *had* to be made up. Because there was no such thing as The Farmer. It was such an innocuous name: The Farmer. He could be anyone. Anything. They knew nothing about him, except the tales they told as kids: the nightmares. You didn’t go near the drains, you never swam alone, because the old man and his dog would find you. No matter how far you ran, how well you hid, or how big the walls you built were, the old man and his dog would find you.

And with a nick-knack paddywhack...

‘Isn’t it?’ Adler repeated.

Tim pushed his glasses back up his nose. The spares they’d grabbed fit even worse than his normal pair. ‘Yeah, I think so.’

‘I don’t underst...Why is he...Why us?’ Adler said as he pulled his knees up under his chin and hugged them.

Tim picked up a fistful of dust and let it dribble through his fingers. The blurry shape of the man in the tunnel and the memory of the dog’s drool on his face felt both

distant and present. The memory felt like a dream, it was like he was watching himself, a character in his own mind.

‘Me,’ George said quietly. ‘I think he wanted me.’

The tunnel came flooding back to them, the man standing over George, his big hands caressing George’s cheek, and his rage at the interruption.

‘Why?’ Tim asked.

George’s shoulders slumped and his mouth squished sideways into his pudgy cheek. ‘I don’t know. But I don’t think he’s going anywhere soon. You all saw him.’

Mike ran his thumbnail under the tip of the opposing fingernails, the same fingernails that had clawed at the drain in the base of the pool. He’d beat himself up every day since. It had just been a laugh. They were just *stories*. It had just been a bit of fun, he’d only been messing with Stevie. *Kind of*—he remembered the water lapping against the lane ropes as he’d hung the waterslide ticket in front of Stevie. It had been cruel and he knew it. He’d been showing off to his friends. He’d been putting Stevie in his place. Stevie Roy, who was good at everything. Who’d come to town and shown Mike all the things that he wasn’t. Who’d walked in and taken over the group. The guy who’d had all the good ideas, and who always had something wise to say; who wouldn’t be held down by anything, who wore the club’s old battered equipment, and let the jokes roll off his back; who picked up his poverty and wore it like a badge of honour, who wasn’t the brightest kid in the class but who worked his arse off. Stevie Roy whose crooked teeth and thick square glasses didn’t stop him from charming all the girls, and who was completely naïve to all of this.

Mike was jealous. He was jealous of the way Tim, George, and Adler had...had...fallen in *love* with Stevie. Not romantic love, but love. Shit, even Mike had

fallen in love with him. Who wouldn't? But that Friday, at the pool, Mike had just wanted to prove that Stevie wasn't *all that*. No one swam over the drain, no one. Mike wanted to see Stevie try, because he wanted to see him fail. Tim would never have let Mike do it, but Tim wasn't there. Mike had wanted them all to see Stevie fail. He'd wanted to see Stevie falter, turn, and give up. But of course he hadn't, and by the time he was halfway across Mike was cheering louder than anyone else. Then Stevie had jerked in the water. Mike still felt sick at the way the body struggled, the way Stevie had paused for a second, like he was confirming it had just happened, how the second jerk had come and he'd bucked into a determined stroke that became more panicked as the water tugged at him again... and again, and then how he just hadn't been there anymore. How the agitated water had settled, leaving no trace of him. Mike flicked his fingernails and wondered what the others must think of him.

'He took Stevie, didn't he?'

They all looked at the blackened ashes where the fire usually lived. The silence confirmed that they all agreed. Tim thought about Stevie's pale scarred body lying on the banks of the river, with Detective McGuinness standing over him. He remembered the bruising on the back of the neck when the body had been rolled over. His imagination had played out over and over again what might have happened.

It hadn't been Mike's snores keeping him awake at night, but the thoughts of what might have happened to Stevie. It wasn't a stomach bug, or the big snack he'd eaten before dinner ruining his appetite, it was the thought of Stevie's pale scarred body. And now getting all mixed up in there was the blurred image of the man, *The Farmer*, standing over George, with one arm pushing him down into the ground. He wanted to tell them all how he'd seen Stevie's body, but he didn't want Mike feeling any more guilt than he already did. He'd seen Mike carrying it. He wasn't saying anything, but Tim knew.

In his mind's eye he could see The Farmer's big hand wrapped around Stevie's neck, pushing him down into the banks of the river; Stevie's lips, pale from the cold, the water contrasting with his tanned skin; the acrid smell of the man, his voice whispering in his ear.

With a knick-knack paddywhack

The glint of the blade being whipped from his belt.

'What now?' Mike asked as he stood up, squared his shoulders, sniffed and crossed his arms.

'Huh?' Tim answered.

'What now? What do we do now? He got Stevie. He's after us. What are we going to do?'

'Maybe we could tell someone?' Tim said. He thought about it. Who were they going to tell? Their parents? The police? He imagined telling Colin...He imagined Colin peering over his reading glasses as they tried to tell him and the thought was too much, and Tim laughed a little. Hysterically, Mike, who'd imagined a similar scenario, was set off by Tim and pretty soon they were all rolling around in stitches. Tim wheezed between laughs.

'This...guy...could...actually...kill...us...and...no...one...no...one...noonewouldbelieveus...'

A fresh burst of laughter rolled at the absurdity of it all.

Adler wiped a tear from his eye. 'So, we've got to do something.'

While they'd been laughing George had thought about his dad. He'd thought about Rod telling him to plan what he'd do if the monster was in the closet. He thought

about the way Rod had always helped him look for the gremlins in the shed, or how after George had read *Salem's Lot* they'd fashioned a crucifix with a sharp end and bought a bottle of holy water from the Catholic book shop for George to keep near his bed.

They could tell Rod... maybe *he* should tell Rod first though. Because it would depend on which Rod was waiting for them.

'I'll talk to Dad.'

The laughs fell flat and they all looked at George.

'He's alright. He might not believe me, but he'll listen.'

Mike felt a pang of jealousy at the thought of parents listening. Telling Rod was all well and good, but they needed to do more. 'Adler's right, but we still need to *do* something.'

'But we don't know anything,' George pointed out.

'Well, except that he has a dog, and stinks like a kit-bag that's been stored in a giant's armpit,' Tim said. It raised a smile, but not much more. 'George's right though, we don't even know what he actually looks like.'

Adler took his hat off and re-bent the bill into its peak. Tim was right, they didn't know anything. They didn't even know what he looked like... except... Adler started to get excited. They *did*. George and he had found that photo, the one from the Albury show. He'd completely forgotten about it. 'George, where did we leave that photo?'

George had been off in his own world and came snapping back to reality. 'What?'

'The photo, the one in the book?' Adler looked like he might jump out of his own skin.

George's big eyes opened wide. 'The photo.' He slapped his hands on the earth. 'It's in your room still, in the corner, near the wall.'

'Are you guys going to let us in on whatever's going on over there?' Tim asked.

George was almost unable to sit still, his brain was running so fast; he spoke so quickly that the words ran together into one. 'We found this photo in Adler's book. It was black and white, and really old; all the men wore hats, and the kids all wore shorts, button-up shirts, and leather shoes. The Ferris wheel from the showground was in the background, but it was freshly painted.'

Adler was shocked, he'd never seen George get this excited; he also hadn't noticed the details in the photo like George had.

George barreled on: 'And *he* was in it. The man, The Farmer, *he* was in it. Staring out. It was a different hat, and a different coat, but that face, that jaw, those teeth. And that dog, it was at his heel. It was *him*. Wasn't it Adler?'

Adler thought about the black and white jaw jutting out from the shadows of the hat, the uneven teeth grinning between the thin lips. A wry smile, a smile that said *I know something you don't*. 'Yeah, it was him. Definitely.'

Tim flicked his fringe out of his eyes and poked his glasses back up his nose. 'Was there anything else on the photo, anything written on the back, like where it from was originally?'

George shook his head from side to side. And then he remembered the words dripping down the back of Adler's door. 'After we looked at it, the words were on the door.' His shoulders slumped forward. 'They'd believe us if they saw the words,' he said quietly.

‘We have to get the book.’ Mike, who’d been sitting back listening, said firmly.

‘What do we do with it?’ Adler asked.

‘There has to be something in it we can use to start looking.’ George was starting to treat it like a puzzle, and faintly he remembered the creepy co-incidence with the borrowing dates.

‘Looking for what?’ Adler let go of his knees and let his legs fold crossed under him.

‘Anything,’ Tim said. ‘Anything that will help us find out more about the man. Maybe we can track him from where it was bought. Were there any price tags on it?’

‘Didn’t notice. George?’ Adler asked.

‘Didn’t see either,’ George said.

Tim’s nose wrinkled up in concentration. ‘Where’d you get it?’

Adler grinned. He knew stealing from the library wasn’t cool, but there was something funny about. ‘I, uh, borrowed it without... I accidentally stole it.’ He bent the peak of his cap between his hands as he remembered bolting out of the library with the book in one hand and his shoes in the other. And then he remembered the old man with the liver spots, no neck, and the eyepatch (who wore an eyepatch?). The man who was leafing through the old books and the old...*photos*. ‘I don’t know much about the book, but I think I know who we can ask.’

Adler explained the old man to them and how he’d been looking at old photos from the town.

‘Seriously?’ Tim said. ‘You reckon this guy will believe us? Why would he help us?’

Mike folded his arms across his chest and nodded in agreement. Their experience of adults hadn’t encouraged them to trust. In their experience, adults always assumed they were guilty, and it had been up to them to prove otherwise. Adler, on the other hand, had parents who were mostly absent, so he wasn’t so worried about consequences. ‘Can’t hurt, let’s find out. What’s the worst that could happen?’

‘That’s exactly what we’re worried about,’ George said.

Adler raised his hands, palms skyward. ‘C’mon. Trust me. Have I ever steered us wrong?’

Tim poked his glasses back up and imitated Adler’s voice. ‘Hey, let’s go explore the canal.’

‘Well, except for that.’ He winked at them. ‘You’re not still all knicker-twisted over that, are you?’

They knew he was right. It felt like they had to do something. But it didn’t make it feel like it was going to be easy. What the boys were feeling was something new: it was a sense of duty. To Stevie, or maybe something bigger. But as they kicked their bikes up the side of the bowl and over the lip, the boys had the feeling that they were picking a fight. As they headed back down into the town where people were frantically sandbagging and evacuating the rapidly flooding southern end, they knew it was a fight they couldn’t avoid, and a fight they’d rather have on their own terms. And each of the boys felt that as long as they had the guys next to them, it was a fight in which they might just go the distance.

BEFORE THE STORM (PART 1)

Bert was sitting at one of simple tables that lined the walls of library, surrounded by piles of books. He had sensed it coming. The flood was like an omen, except instead of a warning it was a confirmation. Bert had been preparing for it most of his life. The people in the town knew Bert, and they all thought he was mad. In all truth, when he thought about it, he probably was. But he didn't care, he'd rather be mad and see the world for what it was, than don some blinkers and trot the route he'd been told to. Some people in this world saw more than others; some saw too much. Often it's the ones who saw too much who became outcasts: veterans; victims of abuse; survivors; refugees.

Bert knew the world most people saw was a fiction. Like sport, it was a competition, with rules, and plays. You went to school, you got a job, you bought a house, you had kids, then you taught them the rules, you retired, and got bored with doing nothing all day, and went ahead and died. And like sport, some people were born with an advantage, they had a better skill set and happened to find the right niche for it; some people were born into a place where they had the money and time to pursue a better place in the competition. And some didn't.

But some people, people like Bert, had glimpsed the world outside the fiction. It was a vision of the world we'd had before we were 'civilized.' That's all civilization was, right, agreeing to a set of rules? Bert thought that people might one day evolve to see past the fiction. Occasionally science got there, and sometimes art, but people didn't want to listen. So mainly it was the outcasts, the crazies, the people on the fringes who saw it. And children. Children saw it before it was beaten out of them by reason-based learning, before they were told it was just their imagination. Had anyone stopped to think it might be their imagination that let them glimpse the world outside the rules?

Bert slid his finger up behind his eyepatch and scratched the scarred tissue where his eye used to be. He looked over his shoulder. The scar always itched when someone was looking for him. It had taken him years to put that together, at first it had itched like buggery as it healed. The surgeons had done their best, but he'd still been left with severe scarring and deformed tissue. The patch was only to stop people staring at the scar. He wasn't embarrassed by it, he didn't particularly care what anyone thought of him, he just didn't like being watched. And now the scar was itching, which meant someone was looking for him, maybe even watching him right now. People said he was paranoid, but he knew better. If they'd seen what he'd seen they'd be paranoid too. He looked around the room, his shoulder twisting to compensate for his short neck, but he couldn't see anyone suspicious. There was only Mrs Jenkins the librarian, standing behind her desk like Nurse Ratched watching over her hallowed hall.

'Shhh.' She shushed a toddler and glared at the child's mother.

Mrs Jenkins was in complete control of every facet of the library; Mrs Jenkins, who never had a hair out of place in her severe bob; who always had perfect creases in her pant-suits; who, Bert had discovered while peaking over people's back fences, liked to end the day by burning one down. She did a keep an *excellent* library, he thought.

He chuckled as he remembered the look on her face when that kid had run out the door, shoes in one hand and that book in the other. She was simultaneously horrified, frozen, and overwhelmed by the sight. Bert kept looking. Besides Mrs Jenkins there was just the usual summer crowd: retirees hunting through the non-fiction section for war histories, gardening books, and notes on carpentry; a handful of teenagers picking through the paperbacks; and a couple of kids playing on the stairs testing just how far they could push Mrs Jenkins.

He gave his scar a good scratch, adjusted his eyepatch, and turned back to the volume in front of him. The faces of young boys in football jerseys stared proudly off the page. *Albury Tigers, Premiers, 1957* read a small board at their feet. On the opposite page was a photograph of a newspaper clipping. The headline caught his attention: *Grand Final Celebrations Darkened by Missing Boy*. Underneath was a photo of a boy in his school uniform, holding a forced smile for the camera.

William Cartwright, a thirteen year old pupil at Albury High School, has been reported missing after wandering away from his friends at the Grand Final yesterday. His parents alerted local police when he did not return home for dinner. 'Billy,' as his friends knew him, was last seen heading for a 'nature break.' Police have declined to comment on whether his disappearance is being treated as suspicious, although they have asked the community to look out for a thirteen year old boy with brown wavy hair, last seen wearing a blue and white striped t-shirt, grey trousers, and possibly a black and yellow 'Tigers' jumper.

Bert thumbed the corner of the paper and leafed through the following pages. The history of the football club made no further mention of the boy. Bert scribbled the name *William Cartwright* in his notebook and looked at the photo and felt a familiar cold creeping over his skin. Every time he found one it started coming back. The hairs on his neck prickled, the tingling ran up his spine, and he could almost smell him. The rich musk of hard labour mixed with the acrid stench of too much booze and stale clothes. He could feel the cold of the steel against the scarred tissue where his eye used to be.

He'd been eleven, on his way home from school. It had been a winter's afternoon and he'd been off in his own world. He used to swing his bag in circles, from one hand to the other so it orbited him. His feet splashed the light film of water that rested across the uneven concrete slabs of the pavement. He was halfway through a book about a shipwrecked English Marine who was rescued by pirates. The hero, Robert, had just been discovered by the roguish Indian Scout who, for whatever reason, was crewing a pirate ship, and Bert had spent all day looking forward to finding out what happened. Rushing home, he'd decided to cut down the lane that ran past the deli near his house when it started to rain. He remembered because he had to stop and zip his bag up to prevent his books getting wet. Then he'd seen the run-off. A stream of water cascading from a leaking gutter out the back of the deli. He darted a quick glance down either end of the lane, no one was watching, nothing but the traffic whizzing past the far ends of the lane and the dog. Bert clenched his fist, all these years later he could still feel the resentment, and the shame, like it was yesterday. The dog... he hadn't even noticed it at first. At first he'd just been having too much damn fun jumping under the stream of water spilling from the gutters. And that's where it happened, right there, a stone's throw from his house.

Bert slammed the book shut. That short-cut had cost him an eye, but he was lucky to be alive. Unlike these kids, he thought, looking down at his notes.

That was enough for today. He'd go home and add them to the files, and then he'd go check out this flood; there was sure to be plenty to see.

Shuffling out the back door to evade anyone who might be watching, Bert missed Tim, Mike, Adler, and George bustling in the front door and very loudly sneaking around the library looking for him.

It was a pity it went like that. If Bert had stayed just five more minutes, then maybe things would have gone differently. George would have gone out to the weir knowing more than he did, and Mike and Tim might not have split up. But that's not what happened.

TIMOTHY BIRCH GOES FOR A SWIM

1.

After the boys left the library they split up and headed home. Mike had been in a hurry to get back to the shed, and Tim took the chance to head down to the river. He'd been sneaking down there every evening since Stevie had died. At least every evening he wasn't with the gang. Even Mike didn't know.

He'd just head out for 'a ride.' His parents were used to that, the boys often headed out after dinner for 'a ride.' In fact Colin and Liz were happy the boys burned off their excess energy away from the house. At first it had just been a compulsion, to be alone and clear his head, to feel the familiar whir of the tyres on the bitumen and the wind in his hair. Summer evenings on a bike were magic. The heat of the day eased off, and as the light lost the bite of the afternoon, the horizon started to yellow and the shadows grew longer. He would wind his way around the streets, and invariably end up at the bend in the river, the same bend where he'd seen Stevie's body laid out, Detective McGuinness standing over him, jotting in his notebook, drawing sketches, and muttering to himself. The detective and the ambulance guys had been too busy with the body to even see him watching as they put his friend on a gurney and slid him into the back of the truck.

Tim would sit there at the bend, draped over his bike, watching the darkening water flow past. He liked to watch it fold over the roots and hanging branches of the weeping willows. The leaves hung from the branches like bunches of grapes, gently pushed back and forth by the moving water. It was meditative to watch the water curl and fold, not betraying the powerful current that made it slide past so fast.

At first it was confusing visiting the bend, because it made him sad to be there. It made him think of Stevie, and it magnified his absence, which constantly lingered on the fringes of Tim's thoughts these days. But visiting the bend also brought a strange comfort. He knew it was stupid, but sometimes it almost felt like Stevie was there with him, watching the sun set over the water, watching the water become inkier as the light retreated. He could almost see Stevie's long arms comfortably resting on the handlebars of his old blue BMX.

It was a second hand bike that Stevie's dad, James, had found at a garage sale. It had needed a complete overhaul, so James had cleaned out and greased the bottom bracket, trued the wheels, tightened and trimmed the brake cables, and found some barely used second hand tyres that had been tossed in the bin behind the bike shop. He'd even bought some brand new brake pads and handlebar grips. 'Being able to brake and hold onto the bloody thing is important,' he'd said as he'd wrestled with the cabling. The grips had been on sale and were a pinkish purple that didn't match the bike, but somehow Stevie had made them cool.

Stevie made everything cool; he would just like something and it would be cool. There was no posturing, no pretending; he didn't try and make it exclusive, or use it to compete with the other boys. He just made it cool because *he* thought it was cool. And Stevie had thought Tim, Mike, George, and Adler were cool, and when they were around him, they felt like they were too. That was what he missed the most about Stevie, the way he made Tim feel like just being him was enough. He had that with Mike, but they were brothers and that was different. And Adler and George were awesome, but they didn't *see* him the way Stevie did. When Tim visited the riverbank *that* Stevie was still there. At least until the flood came and the river broke its banks, flooding the southern end of the town.

That evening Tim had made it as far the Hume Highway before he saw the water. The highway created an embankment along the western side of town, and as Tim rested his bike against a Stobie pole and looked down toward the river his mouth fell open like he'd just seen a dinosaur. The ovals where the juniors played cricket were completely submerged and the giant river gums' trunks disappeared into the murky water. Above the swampy water birds were flying around madly, unsettled by the dramatic changes to their home. Further south, where the flood was worse, Tim could see emergency crews setting up road blocks and people madly sandbagging houses and businesses.

In fact, all these people were so busy trying to maintain order in the face of chaos, not one of them noticed the boy with the sandy fringe kick of his shoes, peel his t-shirt off, and poke his glasses back up his nose before wading out into the water. Nor did anyone notice as he broke into a slow measured freestyle and swim toward where the river used to round the bend.

2.

Everything was fine, at first. The water was cold, but Tim was used to swimming in the river, and it was a nice relief after the heat of the day. As he swam across the ovals the water was only chest height and Tim periodically dropped his legs to test the depth. But as he reached the trees that signalled where the ovals ended and the parks began, he could no longer touch the ground with his feet. Instead, when he stopped, they just poked and kicked into the murky depths and his body bobbed down into the cold water. He looked up at the trees, searching for any sign of where exactly in the park he was, but they suddenly all looked the same. With the surface of the water up around his ears his perspective became warped; his eye-line was barely above the surface. As the water

became deeper, the horizon appeared more immediate and he felt dwarfed by the trees that towered over him. It dawned on him how little he could actually see. He poked his glasses up his nose again and bobbed in the water as he checked the trees. They were all still giant gums. He was looking for the willows that ran along the bank. He kept swimming, but it started to feel like he was going nowhere and that the thick grey eucalypt trunks were just floating past him. A chill shot through him as he passed through a pocket of colder water. He was starting to think this wasn't the best idea but then the need to see Stevie rose up and urged him on.

The splash of something breaking the surface made him whip around, but all he could see were the ripples of something already gone. He tried to look into the water, but it was thick with dirt and muck, like the water in the canal: flood water. There was another splash somewhere in the distance and another unpleasant thought came to him. *Snakes*. He felt a fear he'd never had in the water before, a fear that he *wasn't alone*. The river was full of other kinds of life, and here that meant water-snakes.

He spun around again; the false horizon created by the surface of the water made it hard to see. As Tim bobbed up and down, he couldn't see the surface ten feet in front of him. And it wasn't just the perspective, it was the light. The evening light was hitting the tops of the trees at an angle and splintering through the branches. The light fell in mottled patches, the patches morphing into one another as the leaves swept back and forth in the gentle breeze. Tim took another few strokes and the trunk of another gum floated past. The shadows were all starting to take the long thin form of water snakes, curling and slinking past him.

He hit another pocket of cold and started to feel for the first time that the water wasn't as still as he'd originally thought. Somewhere the river was still following its powerful course, and this water, the water that had broken the banks, was still being

pulled and pushed. The icy water in a cold pocket sent a shiver through his body and he realised how cold he was getting. He could feel the goose bumps puckering all over his arms, neck, and shoulders. There was another splash and Tim jumped in the water as another phantom snake uncurled into a shadow. He was starting to feel very exposed and terribly alone. He couldn't see the willows anywhere, and as his teeth started chattering his arms and legs were getting heavy with the cold. He imagined the warmth of lying in the sun on the cement next to the pool. Stevie would wait, he'd still be here tomorrow.

You're betraying him, a voice in his head said.

But he wasn't, was he? Stevie wasn't even really there. These visits were all just for him anyway, it was just 'the grieving' that his mum had said would happen. Yep, he thought, they were just for him. *It's not all about you*, the voice scolded. The shame stole over him like a pickpocket who'd stumbled into a morgue. The voice was right, since Stevie had died, he'd only thought about how it had affected *him*. It was all about *his* loss. He'd been so self-involved he hadn't talked to Stevie's parents at the funeral. He hadn't even talked to Mike, the only person in the world closer to him than Stevie had been.

Another shiver ran through him, and the cold shifted from unpleasant to unbearable. He'd come back tomorrow. Right now, he wanted to go home, find Mike, and just hang out. But as he turned he realised he didn't know which way home was. The trees all looked the same and between the evening light and the rising water he couldn't make out which way the town was. He kept turning on the spot but each horizon looked the same, just the thick trunks of gum trees rising from the darkening water. He felt the panic surge before his brain caught up. He was lost. The cold and fatigue in his arms and legs suddenly felt ten times worse, they ached for a rest. He swam toward the nearest tree and grappled for a hold. His soggy hands slipped over the smooth surface of the trunk, scratching off the occasional paper-thin sheet of bark; there was nothing he could get

purchase on; he wrapped his arms around the trunk but it was too wide and his hands just slipped.

Any other day he would have looked for the sun and swum in the opposite direction, as heading east would take him home. But that afternoon, after the stress of the canal, after cold and grief for Stevie had chilled him to the bone, he couldn't think straight. His fingers slipped on the bark and the weight of his body threatened to drag him under the water. Figuring any direction was better than none, he unknowingly set off south, which strangely enough led him to where Stevie had lain, but it also led him to The Farmer. Tim was so focussed on each laboured stroke, that he failed to notice the black Doberman gliding through the water behind him, its ears jutting forward, its tail sticking up from the water like an aerial.

3.

Tim started crying. How could he be so dumb? His muscles were screaming out in pain for him to stop. With each stroke, his biceps burned. He'd lost the strength to keep himself horizontal in the water and he was half treading, half kicking his way through the water. Every few strokes he'd run out of fuel and his head would bob under the water, he'd have to spit the murky water out as he gasped for air. He made his way from tree to tree, anchoring himself to whatever small imperfection in their trunk he could while he built up the strength to move on.

His thoughts were scattered, and he was barely aware of where he even was. The world drifted into his vision the way the view out the car window passed on a long drive, shapes stretching and colours fading in and out. He tried to stop crying but he just couldn't stop the tears from coming up. He was going to drown, he could feel it in his

freezing bones. He was such an idiot. Everyone told them: be careful in the river. He could see Mr Garrety from church standing at the Christmas BBQ, arms folded across his blue, white, and grey check shirt, his boy-scout's pocket knife tucked in a leather protector on his belt, his blond hair neatly combed: 'And it's not just the currint, it's the coald that giiits ya.'

He and Mike had laughed about that every day since. *It's the coald that giiits ya.* Adler had picked it up as one of his routines, anytime they broke some dumb rule. Thinking of Adler crossing his arms across his chest, squinting his eyes and cocking his head made Tim laugh through the tears. *It's the coald that giiits ya.* Between the laughter and the tears it was all Tim could do to fight to the next tree.

So busy focussing on the next tree ahead, Tim hadn't noticed the willows creep up. He felt a glimmer of hope as he saw the first one but then he felt the gentle pull of the current, a soft undertow from the river that not thirty feet away was still winding its way around the town. It was then the cramp in his leg started. It felt like his thigh was trying to tie itself in a knot, pulling at his muscles and tendons. He just wanted to curl up in ball and die. Each kick hurt like hell. His head dropped under and he swallowed a mouthful of filthy flood water; it tasted like mud and as he kicked back to the surface with his good leg he coughed it all up, spluttering some out of his nose. He couldn't get rid of the taste and it made him want to gag. He felt himself going under again and he kicked hard with both legs. The cramp tore at his thigh, pulling it tight, grabbing the calf and his hip flexor at the same time. He was battling to keep his head above the water when he came face to face with muzzle of the Doberman. It was the last thing he was expecting to see.

The Doberman circled, its ears curled, its ragged breath hissing hoarsely. Tim turned in the water following the dog with his gaze. What did it want? His stomach curled in on itself as the dog disappeared from view into a giant hole that had appeared in the

surface of the water not ten metres away. His shakes worsened. He'd never seen anything like it. It was like the flood water had parted. Around the edges of the hole the water fought for position, curling and breaking like rapids on the brink of a waterfall. Tim looked at the bare trunks of the gums, the fragile branches of the willows, and the wide expanse of water where the river was still powering past. His leg seared with pain as he battled the cramp with another kick. There was no way he was fighting the current of the river; he was empty, done, spent. The willows weren't strong enough to hold him—and hold him for what? No one knew he was here. The gums were a stopgap at best. He looked at the hole in the water. The sound of the water crashing around the edges reverberated off the trees. A voice called him. A familiar voice.

[Come and play, Tim]

It was *him*. Tim recognised the willows now, they were the ones from the corner where Stevie's body had been. The memory of Stevie's vacant eyes staring at the sky came knocking like an angry drunk who'd forgotten his keys, and Tim like an idiot let it in. Once invited, Stevie's voice sang in Tim's head.

This old man he played five;

He played knick-knack on my hive.

With a knick-knack paddywhack,

Give a dog a bone;

This old man cam rolling home.

Tim's leg cramped and the water pulled him down. He looked at the parted water. He knew in his gut what was waiting for him in that hole. He thought of Stevie's body, of the scars, the eyelids, the bruising. The water pulled him down again, and he swallowed

another mouthful of water. He let himself sink. The light disappeared as he sank deeper, and his toes hit the flood bed.

It was strange, it wasn't the soft mud he felt in the river or the weir, but soft grass. Tim's chest started to ache and every fibre in his body screamed for air. He thought about Stevie's body lying on the grass beneath his toes. Tim closed his eyes. He didn't want to go like this. This wasn't the way to end it, he wasn't going to go down quietly. He kicked off the grass and fought for the surface, the air flooded his lungs. He heaved in another breath as he fought with his arms to keep up. Turning, he started swimming for the only chance he had, his teeth gritted against the cramp in his leg. The rapids threw him around, and he flopped over the edge and tumbled into a twenty foot clearing, landing hard on his hands and knees, his fingers clutching the wet grass and soil. The clearing was surrounded by a ten foot wall of water that floated back and forth like it was contained by some invisible barrier. While Tim coughed up the water he'd swallowed, the occasional wave sloshed over the top splashing into the clearing.

4.

Tim smelt the man before the strong fingers wrapped around the back of his neck. The sour musk that oozed from the old man's pores burned Tim's nostrils. The hand shoved hard and Tim fell forward, his face mashing into the wet earth. The soggy grass had torn under his weight, and along with the wet earth, it smelt like Saturday morning footy. Except when your face got mashed into the earth playing footy the guy holding you down let you go after the whistle blew. Tim wished for a whistle to blow, but instead he felt the man's hot breath in his ear.

[You're mine now, boy]

The words echoed around Tim's head like they had in the canal, so he couldn't tell if he'd heard them, or thought them. The man's breath was long and measured, the wheeze of a heavy smoker. Tim was beginning to wish he'd just let the water take him.

[Little boys shouldn't be so curious]

As the man sniffed and spat a thick hock of phlegm across the clearing, Tim felt his grip loosen a fraction. He seized the opportunity and bucked hard, trying to break the man's hold. As Tim came up, the barking muzzle of the Doberman came gnashing at his face.

[Down Boy!]

Tim wasn't sure if the man's growl was for him or the dog, but as the man's grip clenched tight and forced him down, the Doberman backed down as well, ceasing to bark, but his lips still curled back showing off his yellow fangs. Tim felt a firm pressure in the middle of his back, forcing him hard into the earth, the heel of the man's boot digging into a nerve in his back. The nerve flared and then Tim fell limp. The man started whistling a familiar tune. The weight in Tim's back shifted and the man's coat flapped through the air before the oiled leather rumbled to the ground. His hand grabbed Tim's neck again and the weight shifted off his back as the man pinned Tim's arms to the ground with his knees. Tim gave up struggling. There was no point. His muscles were exhausted, his will gone.

The man sniffed again.

[You know, I did your friend—the poor one from the pool—just over there.]

He chuckled.

[Sorry, you probably can't see. Just in front of you there. Weird co-incidence, that one. Yep. Pretty. Bloody. Weird.]

Tim's face was pressed down, his cheek was digging into the earth. The scuffle had knocked his glasses askew. It had the effect that one eye was squinting through a small obscured window, but through that window he could see that the Doberman was sitting up expectantly, like a pet waiting for a treat. Tim stared at the wall of water and wished he'd never swum out here. Another wave sloshed over the top of the banks, exploding into a thousand little drops as it hit the grass.

[Neat trick, huh?]

Tim began to feel like he was being played with.

[Don't worry, Tim. Yes, I know your name. Just like I knew the poor one's; Stevie wasn't it? And don't worry, your friends won't be left out: George, Adler, and what's the other one?]

Tim had a vivid memory of Mike sitting next to him on Nail Can Hill after the golfing incident. 'We'll get out of here one day,' he'd said.

[Thanks Tim, Michael, Mike. That's it. The brother. But it's not really about you...]

The man's breath wheezed but he kept whistling the tune. With his spare hand for support, the man wriggled about, getting a better grip of Tim between his legs. The heat of the man's thighs radiated against Tim's skin. The other hand tightened its grip, and Tim felt a drop of sweat land on his bare neck. All he could think was: not like this. Tim shifted his head to try and get his glasses to move so he could get better view, maybe there was something he hadn't noticed? The small window moved enough for him to see

the man's spare hand, and the six-inch blade it gripped. Tim remembered the time he and Mike had kicked the footy into their neighbour's yard, and how they'd thought it would be quicker to jump the fence than go around the front. It was made of old corrugated iron sheets and Tim had slipped. He still felt a shudder run down his spine when he thought about the long flap of skin that had hung from the gash the fence had scored in his palm. The knife in the man's hand looked much sharper. Tim felt himself wanting to cry again. He should have just let the river take him. The man abandoned the whistle and started singing quietly, at least Tim heard singing.

[This old man]

The hand gripped tighter on his neck.

[He played four]

The warm thighs gripped tighter and the hand with the knife disappeared from view.

[He played knick-knack on the floor]

The sour acrid smell seemed to surge in the air and Tim felt the heat from the man pulse. It contrasted with the cold steel on the back of his neck. Tim felt his bowels loosen and worried he was going to shit himself. That was a strange thought to have when you were about to die. Surely you should be thinking about dying. In the books your life flashed in front of your eyes, but all he could think about was trying not to shit himself. Somehow that was the most important thing right now. To die with clean pants.

The denim of the man's jeans rubbed on the naked skin of Tim's shoulders. Tim felt like one of the sheep he'd seen being sheared at the Henty Field Day. The knife started pushing into his neck, and the man's grip tightened. He wasn't sure which was

more painful, the pinch of the man's hand or the blade. But as the pain increased he felt himself struggling to stay conscious.

[With a nick-knack paddywhack]

The pain wrapped itself around his spinal nerve and dug thousands of small hooks in him. The hooks burrowed in, shredding the nerve; pain seared up into his brain and his consciousness tried to run, and to escape this parasite attacking his nervous system. Tim felt imaginary hands clutching, white knuckled, desperately hanging on.

[Give a dog a bone]

The hand pinched harder, the warm thighs pressed into his ribs, and the blade pushed. Tim began fading out. Whites and blacks invaded his vision.

BOOM!

A tremendous thunderclap echoed across the clearing. The man released his grip, and the dog yelped as the wall of water came crashing down around them. The wave swept Tim and the man off the ground and the last thing Tim saw through his skewed glasses was a long blurred orange rectangle. He hardly felt the thick stubby arm wrap under his shoulder as he passed into unconsciousness.

BEFORE THE STORM (PART 2)

1.

Adler rode to George's home with him that night. It had been a real fizzer when the old bald guy with the eye patch hadn't been at the library. As they'd marched down the paved lane towards those sliding glass doors he'd felt different. The air had felt fresher, he'd felt as tall as the other guys, he'd felt strong. The memory of the toilet block, the book, and the canal had disappeared down some tunnel, as if afraid of the rag-tag bunch of rebels marching toward the library. They were like the heroes in one of his comic books, off to get revenge. And this guy, he was going to be the wise old man, he'd tell them how to win.

Avoiding Mrs Jenkin's severe glare, they'd ran into the library and up and down the stacks, eyes peeled for the bald scalp covered in liver spots, ready for him to tell them what was going on, who The Farmer was, and how they could defeat him. But as each aisle turned up empty, they'd gradually ran out of energy. The enthusiasm that had coursed through Adler's body when they first marched toward the library leached slowly from his limbs, and the memories started poking their heads out of their tunnels. Because that's how life was, no one was going to bail you out. You had to do it yourself. It was a bitter pill and Adler was trying to force it down.

He hadn't wanted to go home. He was afraid of what being alone was going to feel like. There wouldn't be anyone to distract him from thinking about the man, or the dog, or Ram helping them out of the canal. So he'd gone with George. They had followed their routine in an attempt to reinstate some kind of normality back into their day.

Their routine started by taking the long way home, past Herbie's sweet shop for a small cup of pic'n'mix. Adler paid before George had a chance to say anything. Then they strolled their bikes down Dean Street. By the time they reached Toyworld the doors were closed and the sign in the window had been flipped. So they stood in front of the window and pointed at the different action figures, ranking them in which order they'd buy them if they won the lottery. On the ride back to George's, Adler had dropped a coin in a payphone and left a message on his mum's machine saying he was coming home via the Brambles'.

When they reached the end of George's street they were met with a row of sandbags. On the other side of the sandbags, two feet of flood water submerged the entire street. The tops of low fences were barely peeking out of the murky water which reached all the way up to people's front doors.

'Woah,' was all Adler could say.

George thrust his hands in his pockets. It wasn't fair, Adler thought. It was like George carried a mark, one that drew only bad luck: his mother had died at childbirth and ill-fortune had followed him since. His dad was unpredictable and let George down regularly. Most kids at school seemed to take an instant dislike to him. This seemed like just another in a long list of punches the universe wanted to land on George. Even from here Adler could see how high the water was up George's front door.

'At least I haven't got much stuff to get damaged,' George said dryly.

Adler pushed George. 'Nothing to lose but an old pair of shoes.'

They leaned their bikes against a pole, took their shoes off and stepped over the sandbag embankment. The water was ice cold and Adler started shivering almost instantly. As they sloshed down the street Adler trod on something sharp, after that they took careful steps. The water was deeper as they got closer to George's house and by the time they reached his front gate they'd had to roll their shorts up. The low cyclone wire fence was completely submerged; they had to navigate it by feeling their hands through the murky water. As they reached the front door they noticed a sheet of paper rolled up and jammed through a tear in the flyscreen. George reached for the note and paused for a second before pulling it out. It was like he knew what it was going to say before he opened it. Adler watched as George's eyes swept over the paper a second and then a third time. He passed the note to Adler without looking at him.

Hey George,

I've had to leave. Nan and Pop will take care of you. I can't explain right now, and hopefully this means I never have to. Hopefully you never need to understand but if I'm wrong and this doesn't fix it you'll face it all yourself one day. If I'm right, me leaving means you never have to. But everything that's happening, Stevie, the Flood, the other boys, I think I can fix it—but I have to leave.

I'm sorry.

I love you,

Rodney.

P.S. Remember, do whatever it takes to beat the monster.

Adler re-read the note to double check he hadn't imagined the words. What did Rodney mean *leave*? Parents don't get to leave, surely that was against the rules. Adler looked up, George had turned away and his hands were thrust in his pockets. He didn't seem as surprised as Adler. They stood like that for a couple of minutes. Adler wrestled with what to say and realised that maybe George needed some time on this one. Eventually George's shoulders fell as he let out a small sigh.

Adler rested his hand on his friend's shoulder. 'C'mon mate, let's call your Grands from my place.'

2.

Mike was glad Tim had gone out for a ride. Increasingly he wanted to be alone. It's not that he didn't love his brother, but sometimes he just found it exhausting to be around other people. He looked at the door of the old asbestos shed. He hadn't been in there since the golfing incident. Cleaning it up had just seemed like too much work.

The door creaked as he opened it and a thin beam of light stretched across the floor. Mike flicked the switch and the single globe hanging from the ceiling blinked on. As he stepped into the shed, he picked up the remains of a plastic F-14 Tomcat off the floor. The tail had been sheared off and the nose was missing, but the sweep-wings still shifted back and forth. He sat on the floor in the middle of the shed and played with the wings, looking at the wreckage that surrounded him. The glass container from his spray gun had shattered into a thousand shards, and a small F1 car was smashed open with the engine block exposed. Mike sighed and looked down at the busted Tomcat in his hands. He'd spent hours layering the paint so it looked weathered near the intakes and engines, and the pilot's helmet even had glare on the visor. Whenever Tim went off on his rides,

Mike sat in the shed. He looked at the wreckage and at his broken bench. This was all his own fault. He was such a fuck-up. It was his fault Stevie was dead.

That afternoon kept running over and again in his head. Standing on the lane-rope trying to show off in front of Beck Roberts. Stevie looking up at him; that cheeky grin. The first few days after Stevie had died Mike had tried to find excuses. It was all just fun, fake rivals and all that. Mike had wanted to embarrass Stevie in front of everyone. It had all just come so easy to Stevie. He'd wanted to hurt him, and that afternoon, with Tim not there, he'd had his chance. And he'd just been mean. He should have known better. He'd fucked up.

Like with the golf-ball, he should have wound it down, but instead he'd got caught up competing with Tim, which wasn't even fair. Mike was older, stronger, he shouldn't have pushed his little brother like that. But he did. And then there was the canal, he should have stopped that too. He should have suggested something else. Stevie would have, Stevie would have made it cooler to not go down there. And when the man had them in the tunnel, Mike should have thrown himself at him. But he didn't, because he was a fuck up. That was what got to Mike the most when his dad berated him. His dad was right. Mike *was* a disappointment. In the last few weeks he'd let everyone down.

It wasn't a new thought. Mike'd had thoughts like these since he was old enough to have moments of introspection, which was a stage of development he'd reached long before any of his friends. It was what made him push himself so hard to achieve. Mike would never be good enough, not in Stevie's eyes, not in Tim's, not in the other kids', not in Beck's, not in his mum's, and not in his dad's. But it wasn't in any of these eyes that Mike wasn't actually good enough, it was in his own.

It was the same self-awareness that made him watch the older guys train at the cricket nets after junior training was finished, just to study their technique. It was what made him study his own technique in the mirror, and what had made him become aware of physical training at the age of eleven, adopting a routine of push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups, and running. It was what led him to spend extra time after school revising what he'd learnt, and reading ahead in his textbooks. And it was what led him to study the model-kit magazines in the hobby shop and learn how to apply superglue so not a single bead set outside the joints of the plastic. It was what had made him practice his painting technique on old packaging he'd rummaged from the recycling, before he applied it to the small plastic planes and cars that were the closest he felt he could ever reach to being a racing driver or pilot. If Mike had lived to see adulthood there was no reason he couldn't have realised those dreams. If he just could have accurately seen the boy looking back from the mirror. Instead all he saw was a fucking disappointment. And this was why he'd never installed a mirror on his model table.

Over the last couple of weeks the clouds had been brewing. School had wrapped up and junior cricket was on hold over the break, so there hadn't been much positive reinforcement. Then there'd been the golf fiasco, the canal, and Stevie. It was mostly Stevie. *If he'd just been able to swallow his jealousy and not push his friend.* In his mind's eye he saw Stevie's body jerk in the water, then his own fingers clawing at the small circular drain-grate, a grate impossibly small for a boy's body to disappear through.

He rotated the remains of the Tomcat around in his fingers. The cloud had descended over him and he felt claustrophobic. It stretched as far as he could see, and he felt so tired. He just wanted this feeling to end and no matter how hard he tried to ignore it, no matter how hard he worked on his technique, or how well he painted the Tomcat, it wouldn't lift.

Hanging on the wall in front of him was a rope. Once when they'd been on a school trip to Melbourne he'd visited the old Melbourne jail where they hanged Ned Kelly. He'd read an information board that had explained how they wound a noose.

Before Mike knew what he was doing he was winding the rope in his hands. The fibres were coarse over his fingers and the rope was stiff, as old low quality rope was. He watched as his hands cast the rope over a ceiling joist, and tethered the end to one of the studs running up the wall. He picked up his chair, which had been thrown across the room, and placed it under it. Once on the chair he slipped the noose over his head.

The cloud pushed down on him. He willed his legs to hop off the plastic brown seat. His toes poked over the edge. Just take the step and the weight will go away. He closed his eyes to make it easier. He felt the pain suffocating him, he felt the frustration pulling every fibre, he imagined how it would feel as he punched through to the other side of hurt. But Tim's face popped into his head.

It would gut him. He couldn't do this to him. Not like this, not found hanging in the shed. He hopped off the stool and the noose hung empty. Mike sat on the concrete floor and put his head between his knees, adding one more thing to the list of failures. He was a fucking disappointment.

3.

Tim could faintly feel something solid under his back as consciousness lapped in and out like a rising tide. At first he only caught glimpses, the leaves of river gums flapping in the wind, the wooden beams supporting his back, the fading evening light. Somewhere he could smell freshly cut grass. With one last roll, the waves dumped him

solidly back in reality. His neck hurt like hell, and his muscles ached. He tried stretching his arms and legs to ease the aching, but it was deep in the tissue. He turned his head to see where he was, and groaned as the pain fired through his neck and into the back of his skull.

‘Easy there,’ a voice croaked, ‘you’ve had a busy afternoon.’

Tim pulled himself up slowly, taking care not to move his neck too much. He was sitting on top of a picnic bench in a park he didn’t recognise. Sitting across from him on a neighbouring table was an old man with an eye patch. Only as Tim looked more closely he wasn’t as old as he looked, he could have been George’s dad’s age. His skin was weathered and what hair remained was white. As Tim noticed the liver spots he realised that in was the man Adler had described from the library.

He was short and squat and his neck hardly extended past his shoulders. His jaw was coated by a short beard of the same bleached-white hair that ringed his bald scalp. The man seemed to lean so that his good eye was always facing forward. He sat on the table, with his feet propped on the pine bench that ran along its side, his hands busy cutting an apple with a sturdy but mean looking pocketknife.

Lying next to him on the table was a shotgun; it looked like the one the boys had once found at George’s grandparents’ place. It had been at George’s birthday party, they’d found a cupboard under the stairs; it was Adler’s idea to try and pick the lock and, whether it had been a faulty lock or sheer luck, Adler had twisted a paperclip around in the hole and with a satisfying click the door had swung open. When they saw the cold blue steel of the twin barrels they’d immediately known they’d crossed a line. It filled Tim with anxious fear, he just didn’t want to be around the thing. He remembered

noticing how the stock was polished on one side from rubbing against someone's shoulder.

That thought had been interrupted by George's grandad appearing at the end of the hall. 'It's a twelve gauge, and don't even think about playing with it. Those things only put people in more danger. Not to mention, you'd probably blow your arm from its socket if you ever tried to use it.' The old man's eyes had drifted to the window and the bush that ran along the western fence of the property, 'I should have got rid of the bloody thing years ago.'

Tim's felt the cold grip of fear as he stared at the twin blue steel barrels sitting in front of him now on the park bench. The old man poked a finger under his eye patch and had a good scratch, keeping the blade clear from his face. The violent power of the gun lying next to the man shattered the image Tim had built of him earlier. The man suddenly felt dangerous. Tim began to feel very alone, and very afraid. The last thing he could remember was the wall of water crashing down around him. 'How'd I get here?'

The old man popped a piece of apple in his mouth and gestured over his shoulder at an orange canoe. The canoe had been dragged up from the floodwater and secured to a tree by a rope. The flooding wasn't as bad here, but the river was definitely still up.

'Where are we?' Tim asked.

'Doctor's Point is just behind us,' the man said through a mouthful of crunching apple.

Doctor's Point was a stretch of road that followed the river further upstream. Coincidentally, it was where most of the region's doctors had bought property, and their big houses and spacious grounds meant it was still relatively isolated from the rest of the town. Tim wasn't sure whether this new information helped him trust the man or not. On

the one hand, he seemed to have saved Tim's life. On the other, he'd then taken him to an isolated location, and was clearly armed. A memory surfaced of a blast echoing through the clearing moments before he'd passed out. The shotgun at least accounted for that, and the man *had* answered his questions so far. And if *he'd* fired the gun, and Tim was still alive, there were good odds he was firing at something else. No one else had been near except The Farmer and the dog. And surely his enemy's enemy was his friend, right?

Tim shifted his weight and the movement caused the burning on the back of his neck to flare again. He instinctively reached to touch it, and the old man spat his apple out. 'Be careful!'

Tim's hand froze in mid-air, and his fear must have been plastered across his face because the old man went on to explain. 'I've put a rough dressing made from eucalypt mulch on it. You don't want to knock it off. It's an old secret medicine around here.'

Tim looked at the mad not-so-old man. With his canoe, eye patch, shotgun, pocketknife, and eucalypt mulch dressings, he seemed like he'd just walked out of a book. Tim began questioning the man's sanity and whether it was wise to trust *him* to be administering 'medicine.' As if he knew what Tim was thinking, the man leant forward. 'He cut you.' He looked around like he was telling Tim a secret. 'He nearly got your paddywhack...' The man pointed to the back of his neck.

His paddywhack? Alarm bells started ringing in Tim's mind but he wanted to know more. If this guy could tell him anything about paddywhack...

'...I know it sounds...far-fetched,' the man continued.

Tim held his best poker face, still not completely trusting the man. 'First, I want some answers.'

The man nodded.

‘Who are you?’ Tim asked, trying not to let his voice waver or squeak as it had started to lately.

The man’s eye stared right into Tim’s. ‘My name is Albert, but my friends used to call me Bert.’

‘Used to?’ Tim butted in, his instinct to know more getting the better of him.

‘They’re all gone now. *He* took some. Some left. Some just gave up.’

Tim didn’t need to ask who *he* was. It seemed there was only one *he* now.

‘And you?’ The man asked.

Tim’s mind raced, *what* him? He hadn’t gone anywhere, he was right here.

‘What’s your name?’ Bert croaked.

A chorus of adult voices rang in his head. *Don’t trust strangers. Never give them your name.* ‘Tim,’ he found himself saying anyway.

‘Nice to meet you, Tim,’ he croaked. ‘It was lucky that I arrived when I did. Another minute and we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Another couple of hours and they’d be fishing your body out of a watercourse.’

Tim took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. This wasn’t happening. He was a kid. This stuff didn’t happen to kids.

‘He’s real, Tim, and he’s not going anywhere. It’s only just beginning. The water’s up. Same as last time.’

Tim started to panic. He didn't want it to be true. 'You're crazy.' A pain fired through his neck and Tim cringed.

The man nodded his head slowly from side to side. 'No, I'm not, and I think you know it. Feel your neck.'

Tim's neck burned as his hand reached up to feel the back of it. He removed the sticky mulch patty and tried not to think about how the man had made it. Under the crude dressing he felt a long cut. It stung to the touch and he could feel the two ridges of rough flesh where the knife had run. A shiver ran down his back into his stomach and wave of nausea rolled through him. He remembered a similar cut he'd got in his calf when he'd landed funny on the bike and the chain had slipped, letting the front sprocket make jelly of his leg. There had been so much blood. 'Why isn't it bleeding, it should be bleeding?' Tim started to panic.

Bert shrugged. 'They heal quick. It'll scar, worse than usual, but it'll heal quick.'

'I don't understand?'

Bert turned and revealed a long thin uneven scar that ran down the back of his neck. He turned back. 'Neither do I.'

Tim reached around and touched the wound on his neck again; he could swear the ridges were closer together already.

'You should put that back on,' Bert pointed at the mulch dressing and Tim did as he was told. 'Now listen. I'll try get you up to speed...' Bert looked up at the fading light '...but you probably need to be home soon, so I'll try and make it quick. It was lucky that I turned up when I did, but not just luck.'

He gestured at the shotgun and the canoe. 'I was patrolling. He's getting stronger, The Farmer.'

Tim turned toward Bert with a start.

'Yeah, The Farmer, he's real,' Bert croaked. 'And he's back. The flood, that's his doing. I was out hunting him when I found you. He was too close to risk hitting you, so I let a round off at that bloody dog. Missed by a country mile. Anyway, that seemed to scare him off. I don't think he recognised me, though.' Bert chuckled and smiled to himself. 'It's been a long time, I guess. Anyway, I couldn't leave you unconscious, and I couldn't take you in myself. After that kid at the river... not to mention a man like me bringing an unconscious boy in... Nah, that wouldn't have gone well.' Bert's eyes drifted off. Tim watched the water roll gently past in the distance. A bird warbled and Bert snapped back to reality. 'You have to get back, you're probably in enough trouble as it is,' he said, blinking his eye at Tim. It took Tim a second to work out it was a wink. 'You got some mates, right?' Bert asked.

Tim nodded.

'Do they trust you?'

Tim nodded again.

'Would they believe you?'

'They've seen him.' Tim said it like it was a confession.

It was Bert's turn to nod. 'Round them up and bring them to the library tomorrow. 2pm.'

Tim stood like a statue, weighing it all up. He nearly told him that that's exactly what they'd tried to do earlier that afternoon but then thought better of it. He *did* want to know more, but he still wasn't sure about this guy. To be fair, the guy was letting him go. But what if he was...what did they call it as school? Grooming, that was it. What if he was grooming him? He remembered the gang marching to the library to find Bert in the first place: he'd felt strong; *they'd* felt strong. As long as they stuck together it would all be fine.

'2pm,' he heard himself say.

Bert nodded and Tim turned and started the long walk back to fetch his bike, hoping it was still leaning against the pole. He pushed his glasses up his nose and considered how nuts this was all getting. He was just starting to talk himself into believing it couldn't be real when the cut on his neck flared with pain. Nervously reaching his hand over his shoulder to probe the cut with his fingers, he discovered the swollen ridges of the cut were already knitting together. The failure of his own body to play by the natural laws made him sick. Something very wrong was happening. It worried him enough that he resolved himself to getting the boys to meet the crazy old bastard at the library the next day.

4.

Adler shifted restlessly in his chair. It was the left-most one of three squeezed along the front edge of Bert's desk. The desk was too big for the tiny room, which was already cluttered with papers, photos, statues, old sports equipment, yo-yos, a board with a map of the region dotted with purple and yellow pins, slinkies, broken porcelain, and a thousand other bits of...well, crap, Adler thought. He looked around at all the broken

things and started wondering whether following the old man to his house was the best idea. It was the 101 of Stranger Danger, don't go alone with a stranger. But he wasn't alone, he was with Mike and Tim. But the three of them, *they* were alone. It had seemed like a good idea back at the library. He looked at Tim, who was sitting in the middle, meticulously cleaning his fingernails. Adler had to peer around him to see Mike, who was looking casual. Although Adler thought he looked a little too casual.

Tim had rung him earlier while Adler had been watching re-runs of *Biker Mice from Mars*. George's grandparents had come and picked George up from Adler's the night before which was why George wasn't with them now. Adler thought about George hanging out on his own out at the old place on the Weir. Hopefully Rod would be back soon; the Weir was a fifteen-minute drive, which was much longer on a bike, and there was still another four weeks of school break to go. Adler shifted in his seat again. The plastic moulding was contoured to the shape of someone's back, but it certainly wasn't any *someone* who'd ever had to *sit* in one. Adler rubbed his back and looked back at the rectangular hole that had been designed in the back of the chair. He contemplated whether this was for ventilation or to save money on plastic. From the way his sweat stained t-shirt clung to his back he figured it was probably the latter.

Bert shuffled through the door, which couldn't open fully because of the chairs occupied by the boys. The old man was breathing heavily, juggling a handful of mugs, a pot of coffee, and a two litre bottle of milk. Mike leaned into Tim, and Tim into Adler, as Bert squeezed past to get to his seat on the other side of the desk. The mugs clinked against the timber top as he placed them down.

'Coffee? People say coffee's bad for kids, but I grew up drinking coffee and there's nothing wrong with me,' he said, pouring some of the steaming coffee in a mug.

Adler stifled every instinct not to laugh. The image of a short, bald man with no neck, covered in liver spots, saying there was nothing wrong with him was too much. But he'd never tried coffee. 'Yep.'

The man passed Adler a steaming cup that smelt like body odour and nuts. Tim and Mike politely declined.

'Milk?' Bert offered them instead, looking at the bottle next to the coffee. 'Sorry, I don't have many guests.'

Tim rubbed the back of his neck, where the cut had completely scarred over. 'Sorry to rush you, Bert. But can you just tell us what's going on?'

Bert nodded thoughtfully and tugged at the longer hairs jutting from his white beard. 'Right, right, right...Right. As I told Tim, the old man, The Farmer... I...He...he's real. But I guess you already know that. But THEY,' he pointed around as if there were people hiding behind the walls, '*they* wouldn't believe you. They might have even seen him themselves. But people forget. The further away they get, the more they forget. But I haven't, and I do my bloody hardest not to. I think on it every day. I come here and look at all of this.' He looked around at all the bits and pieces. 'Maybe it's that. Or maybe it's that he marked me.' At this Bert scratched behind his eye patch. 'Anyway, he's real. I've been looking for him ever since. He surfaces from time to time—when the river's up, when the river's down, or when the fires hit the alps. I haven't seen him, but I know if he's been. The reports start popping up in the paper: bodies. Or stories get told at the pub, by dads whose boys have told some crazy tale to cover for whatever they were actually doing when they hurt themselves.' He took a long slow breath, and rested back in his chair, his belly stretching out in the threadbare polo he was wearing. 'Do you know what a paddywhack is?'

Adler remembered the dripping letters he'd seen splattered across walls of the toilet block, the same word that was sprawled along the inside of the canal tunnel, and on the back his bedroom door. He wanted to say he'd seen the word, but his own words jammed in his throat like trying to fit too many jellybeans through a funnel. Instead he just shook his head from side to side.

'It's a tendon that runs down the back of your neck, here.' Bert rubbed the short neck that he had. 'He got mine.'

Adler remembered the knife in The Farmer's hand as he held George down in the tunnel.

Bert chuckled, 'Not that I had a very long one to begin with.' He blew into his steaming cup and took a sip. 'It's the tendon that holds your head while you run. Without it you can't run.' Bert looked straight into Tim's eyes. 'That's what he was trying to do to you when I arrived.'

Tim had given Adler a hurried version of events on their way to the library, and just the thought of it made Adler's bones cold. He didn't know how Tim wasn't throwing up, or lying in a ball crying right now. Adler watched the Birch boys. Tim was nodding ever so slightly, trying to digest the future he'd just escaped. But Mike... Adler couldn't get a read on him. Mike wasn't the most animated guy to begin with, but right now he was more distant than ever. His eyes were completely flat, like frosted windows separating his thoughts from the world outside. The only thing that betrayed Mike was even conscious was the way his eyes occasionally darted across at his brother and then quickly down. Tim leaned forward on his elbows and hung his head in his lap; along the back of his neck were twin red lines glued together by the silver bead of a scar. It made

Adler's own neck tingle. Adler's curiosity leapt the fence and was off. 'Why?' he blurted out, before he could throw a lasso around its neck.

Suddenly they were all looking at him. 'Why? Why...?' Adler clicked his tongue as he searched his memory for the man's name.

'Bert,' the man grunted.

'Yeah, Bert. You're here now. You've got one of these scars, and not one of these tendons. Paddywhacks, you call them.' The stares didn't waver. 'Well there's a whole bunch of why. But first, why the tendon?' It was so fucked up. Some gross old man cutting out tendons. But it *was* exciting. Just talking about it had Adler all worked up, his mind racing. 'Does he eat it? Does he paint it silver and hang it in his house? Does he dry it and make a dreamcatcher from it?'

Tim shoved him. 'Adler, shut up! Stop being gross.'

Bert shrugged and put his cup down. 'I don't know. And I'd put money on a one-legged nag I'm the closest to an expert there is on this.' A long breath whistled through Bert's nose. 'I've spent the best part of fifty years hunting this prick.'

Had George been there, he would have been the only one of the boys not to flinch at an adult using the word prick so casually. It was enough to make Adler like the old guy though; nah, the old bugger, he thought...that's what Bert would have said. Bert clicked his neck and kept talking. 'No one believed me after, and I made the mistake of not listening to people telling me to put a lid on it. That's how the 'mad' thing started.'

Adler felt his face freeze like he'd been caught stealing.

'Don't worry, I know the stories. And I guess I must look...odd,' Bert admitted. 'All I had to go on was his face. So that's where I started. I started trawling school

yearbooks, sport clubs, and the like. After none of the Albury schools or clubs turned anything up, I started heading out to other towns: Beechworth, Howlong. I'd covered most of the Riverina when I found him. Well, kind of found him. I was at an old school house in Tallangatta that had been converted into a home. The owners had hung onto to some of the old papers. I was going through them when I noticed a picture hanging on the wall. It was an outdoor portrait of two men and a woman. I think it was still in its original frame, which looked like it had been hand crafted in someone's back shed. The photo was old enough that they had to pose for the shutter to work. It was outdoors, in front of this weatherboard place with a return veranda. The woman and one man were sitting at a table setting. She had this smile; even in that faded black and white, it glowed. The man sitting at the table had one leg stretched out in front of him, with a walking stick rested across his lap. But it was the other man that grabbed my attention. He stood with one hand resting on the woman's shoulder, his hat tugged down so the shade from the brim hid his eyes. But I knew that smile. I'd seen that smile when I was boy, when that prick caught me in the lane.'

The boys knew the smile too. It was the smile none of them could shake from their dreams, dreams that became nightmares, nightmares that all ended with the old man in the canal, bent over George, whispering in his ear; his lips pulled back around those uneven teeth.

Bert held his coffee in two hands and peered into the cup. 'The thing about the photo was the smile wasn't mean, you know? Not like it was when I saw it, at least.' He seemed to get stuck on this thought because he stopped talking for a bit. After a minute or so he realised the boys were all staring at him. 'Anyway, I told the couple I was a collector and asked if I could buy the photo, saying it was a real find. But they just

glanced at each other like I was crazy and then hurried me out of their house. But it did give me a place. Tallangatta.'

Adler knew the town. It was on the weir, but the opposite way out of town from George's. Adler's dad had bought a boat after the divorce and he took Adler and George out fishing and water-skiing near Tallangatta. Bert scratched his scalp, leaving a tuft of hair sticking out sideways from his head. 'Figuring the photo had surfaced there, that's where I started. After a search of the township didn't turn the house from the photo up, I widened my circle. It was high summer, either '82 or '83. Either way it was a hot one.'

He chuckled to himself. 'Betsy has never liked the heat, and she was patient with me that year. I must have taken her up and down damn near every bloody road within twenty kilometres. I'm talking dirt tracks and trails that led to nowhere. But do you think I found that bloody house? I don't know if it was the heat or not, but one day I started to think I was going mad. I'd heard this thing in the pub one time about memory. They'd done a study where they got people to periodically write their version of an orchestrated robbery. Then they'd asked the person to identify the robber in a line-up. The study revealed that each time a person had a memory, he or she was only remembering the last time that they remembered the event, not the original event itself. But, he or she would be adamant that they were telling the truth. I guess they were, as best they knew. It *was* what they remembered, it's just it wasn't what had actually happened. Anyway I started to think the house I had in my head wasn't the one I was actually looking for. You know what I mean?

But then I thought about it a bit and figured the house had probably just been demolished, or hadn't even been there. Hell, just because you find an old photo in an old building doesn't mean they're necessarily connected. Anyway, I gave up on that thread for a few years and instead hunted for that face. And you know what? Nothing. For years

nothing. I spent days, weeks, months in libraries all around the Riverina. I was on a first name basis with the old guys at all the RSLs, and secretaries at the town councils went scurrying when they saw me and Betsy pull up out the front. In the ten years after I saw that photo I must have leafed through every town history, yearbook, newspaper, microfilm, every...everything.' He shook his head in exasperation. 'And none of those faces, none of them were the one I was looking for.' He lowered his voice solemnly. 'What I did start to find, though, was bodies.'

Adler sat forward in his chair. Bodies were definitely cool, even if they were heaps gross and a bit scary.

Tim thought of Stevie lying on the bank of the river; Mike imagined his own hanging in the shed.

Bert seemed to pick up on Adler's excitement and was quick to quash it. 'Not actual bodies.' Adler slumped. 'I mean bodies the way the police use the word. Missing people and murders. At first they weren't obvious, most of them were chalked up to real enough events: boating accidents; dam-drownings; water tank accidents; misadventures; falls; and plain old horsing around that went wrong.' And at first I bought the excuses but, after years of research, co-incidences became too recognisable, and the unusual became suspicious. There were just too many. The Riverina sees too many boys not make it past early puberty. So I started collecting them.'

He picked up a battered A4 binder that had once been green. The corners of the spine's plastic covering had pulled back and the cardboard bubbled through. He passed it over. It was so heavy, Tim had to take it with both hands. The boys all leaned in as Tim leafed through the pages contained in the plastic sleeves. They were mainly newspaper articles, but some were clearly copies of police reports, or notes written in journo's

shorthand, or the messy hand of a doctor. Bert had underlined and highlighted sections. Adler started to notice the number of references in the notes about scarring and bruising. Notes that didn't appear in any of the newspaper articles or public statements. He read the details about the bodies, the short biographies that squeezed whole lives into five hundred words. As Adler looked into the faces of all the lost boys he felt sick with himself for thinking that bodies were cool.

Tim looked up from the folder. 'Bert, what are these dots?' Tim pointed to a small circular purple sticker on the corner of the sleeve and a yellow one on the next.

Adler hadn't even noticed the dots, but as soon as he did he knew where else he'd seen them before, and he was looking at the map of the Riverina on the wall before Bert even pointed to it. It was just a bog-standard servo map stuck to some old pin-board, but it was peppered with little purple and yellow tacks. The spray of pins formed a cloud. The cloud was roughly circular and the concentration of pins became denser as they neared the centre, the centre being a green pin stuck in the middle of a small lane off Smollett Street. This left Albury smack-bang right in the middle of the map. Slap-bang in the middle of the cloud of bodies.

'A purple pin is a dead body, yellow is missing.' Bert explained.

'And green?' Adler asked.

Bert glanced at Tim. 'Survivor.'

Tim looked up and saw a second green pin jammed right next to a purple one on the bend of the river at Hovell Tree Park. Tim kept running his fingernails under each other despite having cleaned them ten minutes ago. If not for this mad old bastard across the table, an orange canoe, and a shotgun, he'd be a purple tack stuck in a pin-board. Then a more troubling thought stumbled in: what if he'd been a yellow tack? What happened to

those bodies? Why didn't *they* ever turn up? Was it just that no one ever found them or was it... Tim preferred not to let his imagination chase that thought. He was just about to think how strange it was that no one else had put it together when Adler asked the very question.

'Bert, how come no one else has worked this all out? Cops, reporters, surely someone would have by now?'

Bert pulled a pouch of tobacco from his pocket and removed a small clump of the dried shredded leaves. He carefully rolled the clump between his hands. 'It's a good question. And one for which I've never found satisfaction...'

Adler wrinkled his nose and squinted at Bert like he didn't understand.

'I don't know,' Bert clarified. 'But I think it's probably that they don't *want* to know. I have this theory that we all just live the fiction we know. When you think about things too much, the fiction unravels. Most people don't like that. I think maybe we're all born with eyes wide open, able to see everything. You hear those stories about a young family moving into a house, and the baby won't stop staring at the corner of the room, and then the parents discover the last owner died violently. Or there's the way children get a bad feeling about a place and it becomes folklore, then years later a body's discovered under the apple tree in the backyard. Maybe those kids, maybe they're seeing the world for what it really is. Or the mad people, it's always the mad ones or the addicts who see the aliens, the big-foots, the monsters, or it's the children. But I think...'

Bert rested the rolled tobacco in the fold of a paper and was running his tongue along the glue, 'I think maybe it's the other way around and it's the mad, the drugged, the children; maybe they're the ones who see the truth, and it's all the rest of us who are

agreeing to the fiction. So when the bodies show up with the scars and the bruises, we don't want to believe, so we don't, and we make up stories to make sense of it all.

‘When I first started tripping over the bodies, I had a chat with the local police Sergeant, Neil Cochrane. Neil drank at the pub so I showed him some of this one night,’ Bert gestured toward the binder. ‘I didn’t have as much back then, but it was still enough to need a filing system. Neil told me I was crazy. It didn’t help that I’d said what happened when I was kid. They didn’t believe me then, and I shouldn’t have been surprised when they didn’t fifteen years later. It’s not that Neil wasn’t a nice enough guy. He just told me to put it away, that people already thought I was mad and this wasn’t going to help. See, I showed it to him, I showed him the reports, the photos, the maps, but he didn’t *see* it. He either couldn’t, or didn’t want to.’

Bert lit the cigarette and took a drag. Smoke spilled from his mouth as he spoke. ‘I nearly gave up then, it’d been fifteen years since the fucker cut me, and ten years since I’d vowed I’d find him. If I did nothing else, I’d find him. But I was tired. I’d spent every second I wasn’t working at the Abattoir traipsing back and forth across the Riverina for a hint of his trail. Just me and Betsy. I was done. So I took Betsy out to the Hume Dam. My dad used to take me out there to watch the overflow. After one of Mrs Roberts’ sandwiches I took a tour of the hydro plant and there was this potted history of the dam on the walls, and there was this photo of a community meeting about building the dam, dated 1915. The meeting was with the people of Tallangatta. The proposed dam would flood the town.

‘It was like any other photo you see on those information boards, damaged and faded from wear and tear. It focussed on two men shaking hands for the camera, a crowd of people surrounding them. Most of the faces were blurred, common people not used to cameras who didn’t hold their pose long enough for the shutter to catch their likeness. But

there was one face I recognised, obscured by a hat, with a smile of uneven teeth, and it wasn't the nice smile from Tallangatta, it was the one from my nightmare in the lane. And then it hit me, I hadn't been looking in the wrong places, I'd been focussing on the wrong parts. I'd been looking for him in the foreground, as the focus. I'd been in such a rush I hadn't taken time to see the whole picture. And when I started again, he was everywhere: newspapers, yearbooks, microfilms, but always in the background. Never found that bloody house though.' He took a long drag on his cigarette.

'What happened to the town?' Mike asked.

Bert raised the eyebrow above his good eye.

'Tallangatta. What happened with the dam?' Mike said.

'Flooded,' Bert exhaled a thick stream of smoke. 'They moved the whole town downstream and uphill. Best bet is that house got drowned by the flood.'

Tim was flipping through the pages when Adler's hand planted itself in the binder. 'Hang on, go back.' Tim flipped the binder back open to the page Adler's hand was jammed in. 'What's this?' Adler asked, looking at the rough pen etchings of an old weatherboard looking house.

Bert stubbed his cigarette out in an empty tobacco tin he'd been using as a makeshift ashtray. 'That's the house, at least it's the best I can remember it.'

Adler looked up to find Mike staring at him as he tucked his hair behind his ears, and over his shoulder Tim peered through his glasses as he pushed them up his nose. 'What?' they said in unison.

Adler's stomach tightened as the realisations started to weave together. 'I know this house, it's out at the weir, next to George's grandparents' place.'

This old man, he played seven;
He played knick-knack up in heaven.
With a knick-knack, paddywhack,
Give a dog a bone;
This old man came rolling home.

THE STORM

1.

George's toes sank into the mud as the water lapped up against the bank of the weir. Did you call it a bank? It was more like a beach, but instead of sand it had dirt. The dirt was reddish in colour and turned slimy to the touch when wet. George pulled his foot out of the mud and felt the mud suck back. It was a strange sensation, and he didn't know if it felt good or bad. He'd had an early dinner with his grandparents, which was a normal dinner time for them, but they were old, and old people ate early. Why did old people eat early? And get up early? Maybe it was making sure they got it all done, just in case they died early. After dinner he'd helped with the dishes, then Nan had given him an ice-cream and said he could go out and play.

Another small wave lapped over his toes. He wondered where the waves came from. It wasn't like the ocean, it was a lake. He hadn't seen a speedboat, so the waves weren't caused by a wake. He looked out; the weir was full, and the twilight bounced off the water, reflecting the oranges and purples of the setting sun. The water was framed by the hills that had turned from green to gold as summer had dried the grass. It looked like a painting. He stared out over the surface of the water. You'd never know what lay beneath. When the weir got lower, the tips of submerged trees emerged. Some kids at school said friends of theirs had been out water-skiing and seen the bottom of a boat torn open by one of those branches. One year it had been so low whole trunks jutted out, their branches reaching for the sky.

George thought about the trees. Once it hadn't been a lake, but a valley. He imagined swimming amongst them. Would there be snakes? How deep could you see? It

must be fairly deep if whole trees were submerged. He dragged his feet through the water as he trudged further along the bank.

A bird warbled behind him somewhere. The light was fading and he had an enormous sense of longing he often got at this time of day. Like after cricket training, when they were mucking around, waiting to be picked up, or just before Christmas when the evenings were getting longer, when the insects started making their noises, and people had their sprinklers on. The smells all got stronger: the smell of cut lawn was fresher, and turned earth thicker. It was the moment where everything was beautiful, the way cyclone wire crisscrossed a sunset, or how a chipped and broken wall caught the light. *That* feeling. *That* longing. That this moment was going. That it was gone. That every moment was gone. That you could never catch it. That time would run out, and this summer, this night, this second, and this moment was gone, gone before it even began.

He took a couple more paces into the water. The waves had calmed, and the water turned to glass. The twilight sky reflected perfectly off the water; the hills disappeared into themselves, surrounded by that endless sky. The weir was cold, colder when it was full because of the water fresh from the alps, instead of water that had just been sitting in a giant pond. Further down the weir he could just make out the top of the dam wall.

He kept moving, rolling his shorts up so he could walk deep enough that his fingers dragged through the water. He followed the bank, and before he knew it he'd passed the old barbed wire fence that marked the boundary between his grandparents' place and the old abandoned Bramble place next door. It was strange how he felt connected to a place he'd never set foot in. He thought about Rodney. It wasn't the first time his dad had left abruptly, but the notes had always said he'd be back soon. This time felt different. He looked out across the water, and thought about his friends back in town. He imagined Adler tugging on his hat, getting Tim and Mike in trouble somehow, and of

Tim talking his way out of it as Mike tried not to laugh. George realised he felt very alone. Not just because he didn't have friends nearby, or because he missed his dad, or because he missed the mum he'd never known, but because he was alone in the world. Alone because he would only ever experience this one existence, he'd never truly know how someone else saw the world.

Another bird warbled and he turned toward the bank. The old property was overgrown and wild; the trees looked like they'd never been pruned, the grass was high and rough and it didn't look like it had been cleared for fires in a long time. Small trees had sprung up between the larger more established gums, and he wondered if he was looking at what the place would have looked like before settlement. Well, except for the house. As he peered between the trees he imagined his grandparents' faces, forbidding him to ever cross the fence. And he hadn't really... there was no fence out in the water. From their place you could hardly see the house, you could just make out enough to know it was there, but not enough to see any detail. But from down here on the bank, despite the grass and the scattered trees, he could see the whole house for the first time.

It sat farther up the hill than his grandparents', and he imagined that before the dam was built it would have had a commanding view of the valley. There was something besides the disrepair that was *different* about the house, but he couldn't put his finger on it. It was set up on small wooden stilts that countered the gentle incline of the hill. A veranda ran around the perimeter of the house, and a crude lattice covered the gap between the veranda and the ground. A red single-peaked roof of corrugated iron protected the house from the elements. Some of the weatherboards had come loose, and hung from the walls. Wooden steps rose up in front of the veranda, leading to a single central door. To either side were small portrait shaped windows. The windows had two

panels, and George imagined them slid open in the high summer to let in the evening breeze off the water.

He felt grass under his feet and realised he'd left the water and was walking up the hill toward the building. A small voice that sounded like it was coming from an old radio in another room was saying: *George, stop! Turn around, go back.* But it was drowned out by his deep desire to peer through the windows. As he got closer he realised the roof wasn't painted red but rusted over; whatever colour it had once been was long since gone. The weatherboards looked much rougher up close, the once white walls were worn heavily back to the timber. As he reached the first step he realised what was *different* about the house. It didn't have finishings. All the little details you saw on most houses were absent. There was no lacework on the veranda, no railing for the steps, no trim panelling. It looked like it had been built by hand.

The wooden steps creaked and bowed as he ascended the five steps. Not trusting the boards of the veranda to be any stronger, he tentatively tested his first footstep. The boards gave a little but held. Despite the house clearly having been abandoned for some time, he still felt like he was trespassing. He tiptoed across to the window; in the fading light it was hard to see, so he pressed his face closer to the glass, and saw nothing. Whether from years of dirt and dust, or whether the glass had been poorly made in the first place, he could only make out patches of light and dark. He followed the veranda and tried the first window down the side of the house. It was no better. He walked around the length of the veranda, discovering nothing other than that all the windows were clouded, and that the house had a second door on the back that mirrored the front. The little voice called out again: *alright, you've had a look, and you couldn't see anything. Go home now, well, not home, but go back to your grandparents'. But his hand didn't listen to the voice, it tried the doorknob instead. But it wouldn't turn in his hand. He gave the door a shove*

and yanked the knob at the same time. Still nothing happened. He tried again, but this time he put his shoulder into it. The door didn't budge, and now he had a sore shoulder. *Go home, please George, go home.* But there was *something* inside. There was *something important* inside, he knew it. He walked around the veranda again and the old floorboards groaned under his feet. The back door was as stubborn as the front. Maybe the little voice was right? Maybe he should just go home and curl up with *The Two Towers*. Yeah, that's what he *should* do.

The Doberman sat in the grass watching, ears jutting forward. This boy, he was the one. This boy had the smell. The smell that came along once every generation. He watched, as the boy reached the bottom step and paused. The boy's smell wafted in waves. His emotions were getting stronger. He was bigger than the other ones, fatter. The boy turned and climbed back up the stairs, approaching one of the windows. Placing both palms on the glass he tried to force the window, but the latch held. He walked across to the other window and tried again. The Doberman could hear the boy's heart pound and he had an urge to launch himself at his throat, but it was squashed quickly by the fear of *the stick*. He could almost feel *the stick* thwacking against his side. No, he couldn't touch the boy, only watch.

The boy tried the other window and then walked around the side of the house. There was an urge to follow and use his eyes, but his sense of smell and hearing were even keener and the boy was just trying all the windows.

What if the boy disappeared while he was out of sight? Then he would definitely feel the stick. He was about to scout around the side when the boy reappeared, red-faced and breathing heavily. Raising his hand to his hips he looked at the house for a few

seconds and then turned and walked back down the steps. As his foot struck the last step he paused again. This time he bent down and picked up a rock that was lying on the earth. He turned and looked at the house and, his knees quivering with each step, he approached the glass and paused once again, testing the weight of the rock in his hand. His shoulders rose and fell and, with a speed that the Doberman hadn't been expecting, the boy smashed the top panel of glass with the rock, leaving a hole the size of a football. The remaining glass converged on the hole in long dangerous shards. A sweet metallic smell crept through the air and into the Doberman's nostrils. It sent every nerve in his body wild. *Blood.* It took him every ounce of stick-instilled self-control not to rip the boy's throat open. *No. Just watch.*

The boy shook his hand and then stuck one of his fingers in his mouth. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around his hand. Once secure he raised himself on his tippy-toes and carefully pushed the remaining shards in as best he could and then reached in and fiddled with the latch. There was a click, and he rested back on his feet before taking a deep breath. With a coarse groan the window slid up. The boy tried hooking one leg over the window sill and sliding through, but he was too big. He hopped back down and tried again, this time headfirst. As his hefty cheeks disappeared over the sill and into the darkness there was a loud thump as he crumpled to the floor. Loud enough however to conceal a second sound, the sound of the backdoor clicking shut.

George picked himself up and patted the dust from his shorts and t-shirt. The ribs on the left side of his chest ached and he could feel a bruise developing on his right cheek where his head had struck the floor. His feet were still bare from walking in the shallows and he could feel the layer of dust that covered the floor between his toes. The fading

light from outside wasn't doing so well on the other side of the filthy windows, and it took his eyes a couple of minutes to adjust.

As the darkness started to take on shapes, he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. He'd expected the house to be empty, just empty floorboards. Instead he was standing in a lounge room, although the furniture evoked the words 'sitting room.' A couple of ornate winged armchairs sat on either side of where he lay, one with a much higher back. The fabric on the one with the taller back had almost worn through, but except for the dust, the second one looked brand new. The shattered remains of a small side table were scattered around him and the sharp pain in his ribs began to make more sense. Across the room a crude mantelpiece hung above a simple brick fireplace. George noticed it was littered with candlesticks and photo-frames.

The only door led to a dark hallway. George peered down the hall, but it was so dark he could barely make out the other doors that led off its sides. He looked at the candles standing on the fireplace. What were the chances? His hands traced the surface of the mantelpiece, and a smile came to his lips as his fingers stumbled across the soft cardboard of an old book of matches. He peeled a single match from the book, and mentally crossed his fingers the sulphur hadn't been tainted. He struck the match and the flash lit the room up like a flare. There was a painting of an old bullock track on the wall, a tall coat rack in the corner, and a stack of yellow newspapers next to the fire. A small TV with a twist-dial rested on a small table in the corner, and a portable radio rested on the end of the mantle. There were photos everywhere. The flare died into a soft glow and he brought the flame to the wick of a candle; soft light filled the room. He went to put the matches back on the mantle and then imagined the candle blowing out in the dark of the corridor, and tucked them into his pocket instead.

Stepping gingerly into the corridor, he nearly jumped out of his skin as the floorboard groaned under his weight. The corridor had five other doors, three on each side in total. The light travelled faintly down the hallway, flickering off the panes of photo frames. He tried the door across the hall. He twisted the knob, the door refused to budge. He leaned his weight into it gently, remembering his earlier attempt to use brute force. The door pressed back. He nearly jiggled the knob but thought better of it. Silence rested in the house like dust on the floor and he was scared of what would happen if he disturbed it.

He crept down the hall instead, one careful footfall after the other. The candlelight flickered off the faces in the photos on the walls. He reached the middle set of doors, which were both ajar. He poked the candle into the next room on the right. Under the window, a single mattress rested on a worn wooden frame. There was a hand-carved rocking horse in the opposite corner, and a standalone wardrobe pushed up against the wall. The dust was thick beneath his feet and the floorboard creaked as he stepped into the room. A stack of books teetered on a side table next to the bed and George felt the urge to read the titles.

He was reaching for the first book when the photo on the sideboard caught his attention. Not the photo so much as the faces looking out at him. Black and white, the photo showed a man standing next to a young boy on a tricycle. The man had a mop of hair and a moustache and a paisley shirt, the boy wore shorts and short sleeves. The man looked down the barrel of the lens and his eyes may as well have twinkled his smile ran so deep. His hand rested on the shoulder of the boy and there was no shadow of a doubt in George's mind that the man's smile stemmed from a deep love for the boy. There was no shadow of doubt in George's mind because he'd seen the smile before, plastered across his dad's face when they'd built a go-kart, or a kite, or a raft.

For a moment he'd thought it was his dad and, although the boy was a lot slimmer, he had the same eyes George saw in the mirror every day. But it couldn't be him and Rod, the photo was way too old. And then it hit him: the *kid* on the tricycle was his dad. A light thump echoed down the hall from the front of the house and George dropped the photo. He stuck his foot out just in time, and the frame bounced off his foot, and lightly to the floor. In the silence of the house the soft thud still sounded like Chuck Yeager hitting Mach 1 and adrenaline coursed through his body.

He stepped out into the hallway and froze. He could have sworn the door across the hall had been open when he'd entered the room, but now the door was shut. The candlelight flickered. He was such an idiot. If he hadn't already given himself away by dropping the photo, then the candle was like a flare; he may as well have been doing semaphore: LOOK! HERE I AM! He blew the flame out and the hallway disappeared. He couldn't see a foot in front of him; the light outside must have nearly gone.

He reached out with his hands and found the wall, pausing, to think it through. If the noise had been down the front, then he'd better head for the back. The floorboards creaked lightly under his feet, and each footfall became an ordeal as he waited for a cold hand to fall on his shoulder. After what seemed like minutes he reached the back of the house. Both doors off to the side rooms were closed. He reached out in the dark and found the knob for the back door. He gently turned the knob and his heart sank as it clicked and came off in his hand. On the other side of the door its twin fell to the ground with a loud *thunk*. Through the door to his right he heard a loud scrape, and any hopes that he was alone in the house were dashed. He turned on his heel and bolted down the hallway; the door flung open behind him and heavy footfalls beat against the floorboards. He knew exactly whose boots made that sound. He slid around the corner into the front room where he'd smashed the window and came to sudden halt.

Standing amongst the glass and scattered remains of the side table, was the Doberman. George stood frozen in the middle of the room. Through the window he saw the last fragments of light glinting off the still surface of the weir. Feet thumped in the hallway and a visceral urge to survive coursed through his body.

Fuck it.

He launched for the dog and as his first heavy footstep fell he crashed right through the rickety floorboard. There was a sickening crunch and he collapsed to the floor. The Doberman didn't move, but its ears perked up even further and its eyes widened. George looked down at his leg. It bent out of the floorboards at an angle it shouldn't. A white stick protruded through the skin and it took George a second before he realised it was his own tibia. The pain began swelling up as The Farmer stepped into the room, followed by his rank stink. George turned and launched for the window like a track sprinter off one leg, but collapsed to the floor with a scream. The broken leg was caught, the foot wedged under the floorboards. The pain was so intense his body didn't even bother with tears. His blood was pulsing from his leg at an alarming rate and he began to feel nauseous and faint. The Farmer lit an oil lamp and the soft glow filled the room. The words slathered across the walls flickered in the light.

[PADDYWHACK. PADDYWHACK. PADDYWHACK.]

The Farmer stepped over George and examined the bone protruding from the skin.

[You've got some pretty rotten luck, George]

The acrid stink filled George's nostrils as he looked up at the man. The pain was unbearable. George started drifting in and out of consciousness. In the land in between he saw his dad standing next to the go-kart they'd built, except he wasn't Rod now, he was his dad as a kid, with long hair that fell down past his shoulders. They were playing

together and then George said something, not even words, in the strange way dreams skip a beat, and Rod turned his back on him; George ran around in front of Rod, but he was still staring at the back of his head. No matter where he ran, Rod's back turned to face him. He ran forward and turned Rod around with his hands, but as he turned in George's hands he didn't change. George was just left standing in front of the child version of his dad's back. He reached out and lifted the hair and the shadowed face of The Farmer lurched at him, trying to bite with those uneven teeth. George lashed out and punched the face and Rod's body fell to the ground. It rolled onto its back, and it was just Rod again, but Rod now with his moustache, and the lines around the eyes. Except the skin was pinched, and he was too pale, and his cheeks were sunk deep into his skull.

The Farmer's gravelly voice brought George back to the land of the living.

[That bone's sheared straight through the artery...]

Pulling a knife from his belt The Farmer bent over George and ran his finger over George's cheek.

[let me help you with that]

2.

There had been no question in any of the boys' minds about what to do. They were running for their bikes before the binder Tim dropped had even landed on Bert's desk. They barely heard Bert's shout as the door banged behind them. 'Wait, it's too dangerous!'

Mike rode on the front. There was no thought about the trouble they'd be in, no thought for the beatings, or the groundings. It wasn't just that George was near the house, it was that they'd all seen the way *he* singled out George in the tunnel. As they rode they thoughts of the man's smiling face in front of the old weatherboards. They rode single file, with Mike and Tim taking turns on the front. They were stronger than Adler, and in the shelter of their slipstream he could just keep up. The tyres whirred on the asphalt. They'd never ridden past the city limits before, and Mike noticed how much prettier the rolling countryside was from a bike than a car window. A car roared past, blasting its horn at the boys. The wind from it pushed them away from the road, and then sucked them back in. They breathed hard and fought the burning in their legs as the road rose and fell in front of them.

Adler thought about the houses, the one in the photo and the one in his memory. He wanted his brain to have let him down. He wanted to suddenly remember the house he'd seen at George's hadn't had a veranda, or that it had a tiled roof instead of iron. But the memory felt as young as if it had been yesterday. It was last summer and he'd slept over at George's. After lunch the boys had been let out for a swim to help cope with the afternoon heat. They'd been paddling around in the shallows, throwing a tennis ball back and forth, when George had thrown it too far and it had plopped into the water past the neighbouring boundary. George had told him the rules, *you're not allowed to cross the fence, no ifs, not buts...* but Adler had pulled a face and swum across the imaginary boundary, marked by the rusting barbed wire that ran right down the beach and past the shifting water line. He fetched the ball and was turning to swim back when he saw the old house looking back down at him. He'd frozen in the water, his feet sinking into the mud under his feet. George called something out but Adler couldn't look away, something was

drawing him to climb those rickety steps. He'd heard a voice calling, a voice he now recognised:

[Come and play, it'll be fun]

But George had thrown a ball of mud that had exploded in the water in front of him. He'd swum back, thinking nothing of it as the memory slipped away. Until now. Like the closer he got to the place the realer it became.

Mike's voice interrupted the memory. 'Which way?'

'Huh?' Adler pedalled out from behind Tim to hear better.

'Which way?' Mike yelled back, pointing at the approaching T-junction.

Adler had forgotten that Tim and Mike didn't visit here often. A big sign with an arrow pointed right to The Hume Dam and left to the Bellbridge Bridge.

'Left,' Adler called into the wind. George's grandparents' place was roughly halfway between the dam and the bridge.

A gust of wind hit him hard and felt an invisible rubber band stretch between him and the Birches as they powered into it. Adler couldn't remember any wind earlier in the day, but it was starting to whip through the trees, and over his shoulder he could see a tall dark wall of clouds rolling toward them. Great, that was all they needed, a summer storm. Adler rode ahead and skidded onto the gravel drive that led down to George's grandparents' place.

George's grandmother opened the door. Her face was pale and her eyes were wide like George's. 'He's gone, Fred's out looking for him, and we've called the police.'

Mike reached out and held her arm. 'We'll help, he'll be OK.' Mike wanted to believe his own words, but doubt was poking more holes in his faith as each second passed.

'He just went for a swim.' She pleaded with them like they were his judges, come to take him away.

'Where's Fred?' Tim asked, He was still slightly afraid of George's grandfather after being caught in the gun cabinet that day, but this was one of those times you wanted a guy like Fred around. To take control.

'He's taken the boat out and he's looking in the water,' she said.

The boys exchanged glances. 'We'll check next door,' Mike said.

She nodded and rested her head against the doorframe. Since she'd realised George was missing, the outside world had been filtering through a mess of thoughts; they tumbled over each other like the waves of an angry sea. By the time she realised she'd let three kids run off into the bush at night, it was too late to stop them. Or maybe she didn't want to stop them, maybe they could save him. It was selfish, but there's a bond between grandparents and grandchildren, and careful anyone fool enough to fall between them.

The boys saw the broken window before they reached the house. The front door was wide open. It should have been daunting, Tim thought. They should have been afraid. But they weren't. The place felt like the wreck of a car crash. Whatever horror the house contained had passed, for now. The light was gone except for the reflection of the big

moon hanging above them. It was hard to see as they shuffled in the first door of the hallway and Mike's voice whispered in the dark. 'Tim, have you got your lighter?'

They'd found the lighter behind the school fence, along with a glass Oasis Iced Tea bottle that someone had melted a piece of garden hose into. Tim had grabbed it first, and brotherly rights had therefore determined it was his. The wheel clicked in his hand and the flame sparked to life. Despite the wind battering the trees outside, they could still hear the barely audible noise of the lighter gas; the room was that still. None of them were prepared for what light of the flame revealed. A few feet in front of them, George's leg jutted up from the floorboards. It had been severed at the thigh, and the bloody stub hung limply from the knee like a grotesque bendy straw.

Adler threw up.

'What the fuck?' Tim stepped toward the leg.

'Where—' Mike's question was cut off by a boy's scream in the distance. George's scream.

The boys sprinted out of the house. The scream cut through the air again, this time clearly bouncing across the water. They ran down to the beach and tried to make out shapes in the shadows. The wind had ramped up and clouds were starting to drift across the moon. Big black shapes, cast by the trees around them, swayed violently back and forth. The clouds were thickening, and the dark deepening. The scream echoed across the water again, and abruptly they knew exactly where it was coming from. The same way you know when someone's standing behind you, or whether someone's asleep or just faking it. A roll of thunder sounded on the horizon and, staring across the water at the lip of the dam wall, the boys knew exactly where their friend was. As the first drops of rain

peppered the surface of the Weir, they set off as fast as their young legs could carry them, toward the dam.

3.

Water thundered from the spillways that stretched across the top of the dam, as tens of thousands of litres fought to fit through twenty-nine small gaps in the concrete wall. The water was still rising, and the spillways were struggling to keep up despite every one of them being completely open. The water spewed out, plummeting the fifty metres into the stilling basin. At the base of the concrete wall, the outflow from the hydro turbines erupted in a giant rooster tail, betraying the enormous volumes of water making its way through the penstock and feeding the turbines. The stilling basin barely made an impact, as the tail-water joined the already swollen river, the same river that had broken its banks only kilometres downstream.

Between the deafening sound of the water battling through the concrete barrier, and the wind whipping through the torrents of rain, Tim had to yell to make himself heard. They'd made their way along the bank of the weir, which had turned from mud to shale as they approached the dam. Unbeknownst to the boys, they were already standing on the earthen barrier of the wall, which stretched out on either side of the concrete. Either because of the noise of the dam, or the noise of the storm, or because George had stopped, the boys could no longer hear George's screaming. Instead they started scouting with their eyes. So far all they knew was that the picnic ground was empty. Tim looked at his brother, Mike rubbed water from his eyes. His hair was plastered to his face in the rain. Suddenly he didn't look like a kid any more.

‘I don’t know how much time we have. If we split up we can cover more ground,’ Mike yelled, his voice getting hoarse. Tim didn’t like the idea, it also made them more vulnerable. Mike tucked his soaked hair behind his ears. ‘I’ll check the top of the dam wall.’ Mike pointed at himself and then at the dam wall, to make it absolutely clear. ‘You guys,’ he pointed at Adler and Tim and then down toward the service buildings, ‘check the turbine room, and see if you can see down into the basin and the lower viewing platform.’

Tim took his glasses off to wipe the water from the lenses, and adjusted the little plastic nose rests closer together so they didn’t slip so much in the wet. He could deal with the discomfort of them pinching the bridge of his nose if it meant he could see. ‘Mike I don’t think we should split up, it’s too dangerous!’

But as he put his glasses back on he saw Mike was already walking off towards the wall. Tim looked at Adler, who shrugged. Tim chewed on his lip so hard he bit through the skin. Mike would look after himself, he always did. Tim was about to set off for the turbine room when he had an idea. There was a toilet block near the corner of the picnic grounds only metres away. ‘Adler, jump up there, I’ll give you a boost.’

Adler felt a wave of panic wash over him. The memory of the words plastered on the back of the toilet door reared up in his mind. But the calm look in Tim’s eyes was enough to help him shut it down. He pulled his cap down tight and nodded. Tim wove his fingers together so his hands formed a stirrup and boosted Adler up onto the roof. Adler’s hands slipped on the wet metal, but he managed to hold the gutter and pull himself up.

Tim looked up, squinting through his wet lenses. ‘What can you see?’

The peak of Adler’s cap protected his eyes from the worst of the spray. He could make out most of the road that ran along the top of the wall. ‘Most of the wall.’

Tim cupped his hands around his mouth like a megaphone: ‘And the turbine room?’

Adler turned his head. He could see the top of the stairs that led down to the viewing glass of the turbine room. A section of the walkway was obscured by a shed, and there was another section which ducked around a corner, but reappeared along the side of the concrete cube that jutted out from the smooth dam wall. ‘Most of the walkways!’

Tim instinctively pushed his glasses up his nose, even though they hadn’t budged. ‘OK. If you see George, or The Farmer, or that dog,’ Tim pointed at himself and toward Mike who’d was still disappearing toward the dam wall, ‘fetch whoever is safest and THEN come and help.’ It was hard to accentuate THEN when he was already yelling, but he did his best.

Adler thought about it. Instinct told him to help who was in trouble, but Tim’s plan made a lot of sense.

‘Got it?’ Tim yelled over the wind.

Adler nodded, and Tim set off toward he steps.

4.

The steps were metal, and slippery in the wet. Tim thought it strange to have used slippery steps to access a dam, but maybe they had their reasons. The steps were interrupted by long walkways. Both the steps and the walkways were grated, and he could see the drop below him, as he followed the steel path down toward the turbine room. The wind whipped the spray from the dam around the corner of the giant concrete cube and,

despite it being high summer, the wind and the wet was making him cold to the bone. He hugged his arms around his waist to try and keep warm and shuffled into the wind. As he passed the shed he stopped. He'd better check. You never knew what might be useful. He paused and rested his hand on the small metal handle. It would probably be locked anyway. They wouldn't be dumb enough to leave it...

CLICK.

The handle squealed as it turned in his hand, but it opened. His heart beat hard in his chest as he stepped into the dark. It was pitch black in the shed and he reached into his pocket for the lighter. He held the plastic in his hand and rested his thumb on the little metal wheel. He crossed the fingers of his spare hand, hoping that the flint hadn't gotten wet, and then he found himself saying a quick prayer. It was instinct more than faith, but he'd reach for anything right now to stop the word *Paddywhack* from being scrawled across the walls, or his friend's limp corpse from being on the floor, covered in scars, one big one running down the length of his neck. A silver one like Stevie had, like the faint imitation Tim had on his own neck.

He struck the wheel of the lighter, and the flame lit in one go. The shed was empty. His shoulders relaxed and his stomach unclenched. Out of the wind and the rain it still felt like summer and a shiver ran through his body as he started to warm back up. It was just a maintenance shed, but he riffled through it. There were rolls of tape, rope, gardening equipment, power tools, oars, life vests, and a flare gun. He'd only ever seen one in the movies, but he recognised it instantly. He reached for it. It might be useful. At least it was better than nothing. It had a manual resting next to it and he quickly followed the instruction to load it. This process was harder than he expected, especially with one hand holding the lighter on. But after a lot of swearing and wriggling, he had the thing loaded and cocked. He kept looting through the shed and found a crude knife, which he

stuck in his pocket. Stepping back out into the rain, he closed the shed door carefully behind him, and put the lighter back in his pocket. He held the flare-gun in both hands and started creeping toward the turbine room.

He rounded the corner, unaware that he was now obscured from Adler's vision. The water in the basin had risen so much that it had curled around the side of the concrete cube and was smashing into the bank below him, sending waves of spray up over the walkway. He crept forward periodically, wiping the water from his glasses. As he reached the corner he pressed himself against wall. His fringe kept slicking over his glasses, the oils in his hair dirtying the lenses and obscuring his vision. Knowing that The Farmer might walk around the corner at any moment, he took the risk and placed the flare-gun on the metal platform beneath his feet. Taking his glasses off, he pushed his hair so it slicked back instead of falling forward. He polished the lenses as best he could with his soaking t-shirt and tucked them as firmly behind his ears as he could. Reaching down he carefully lifted the flare-gun and adjusted his grip, wrapping both hands securely around the rough metal of the stock. He pressed his back against the concrete and tried to still his shaking muscles. Remembering all the times they'd come out to the weir after Sunday lunch growing up, he visualised the platform around the corner and the bank of viewing windows into the turbine room. He visualised the tops of the turbines jutting up from the floor. Then he found himself visualising George's big eyes and Stevie's scarred body. He had to push on.

Swinging the gun up, Tim spun around the corner into the wide solid stance the cops on TV used. He traced the platform with the bead of the gun and breathed with relief at the empty wet steel that glistened in the light from the few security lights in the distance. The windows reflected the light as well, reflecting the shed and the steep bank behind him. He approached quickly and ducked down below the sill, the gun trembling in

his hands. What good would it do on this side of the glass, he thought? But it made him feel like he could defend himself, at least. He visualised the room again and took a deep breath to calm his nerves. With a quick lift of his neck he looked into the room. A face appeared right in front of him and he stumbled back. He managed a laugh as he realised it was his own reflection, and he peered back over the sill. The giant cone-like structures were only the tops of the massive turbines that thundered underneath. Banks of old computers and machines winked their blinking lights and Tim thought it looked like a Cold War era control room. An empty Cold War era control room, though. Relief spread through his trembling limbs, and his legs felt weak. And then guilt weighed in. George was still in danger, and here he was feeling relieved.

‘Tim?’

Tim spun around raising the gun and aiming it straight at Adler’s wide-eyed face.

Adler’s hands shot straight up. ‘IT’S ME!’

Tim collapsed against the wall with the gun resting between his thighs. Adler stepped from side to side like he needed to piss. ‘Tim, they’re on the bridge. *All* of them.’

5.

The cyclone-wire gate that blocked the service road running along top of the dam wall was little trouble for Mike to climb. Hopping down the other side was another matter. Mike landed awkwardly on his feet, and the hard bitumen sent a jarring pain through his ankles. The phosphorous lights cast swells of yellow light along the top of the dam, and the rain drifting through it looked softer than it felt. The road curved gently as it

followed the dam wall but in the rain it was hard to make out much detail. He glanced back through the cyclone wire and saw Tim marching toward the walkways.

Mike turned and started along the road, a voice talking in his head. It was his own voice, but it was also his father's. *You're alone, Michael. You didn't think. You're an idiot. You're all alone and you sent your brother and your friend out alone as well. If he catches you, if he catches them, it's your fault.* Fear's cold hands closed around his lungs. He wiped the water from his face and tucked his matted hair behind his ears. He was glad for the rain though, because it meant the tears weren't sticking to his face and the world couldn't see just how scared he was. His feet squelched in his wet socks. But his friend was still out here somewhere, and he needed help, and damned if he was going to give up. And what about Tim?

Tim would be alright, he was strong. Mike had watched his brother get stronger. Tim could even look after Adler.

The voice started arguing again. *But you're all alone Michael. Turn around. Go find Tim and Adler, it'll be safer, three is stronger than one.* The voice was right. He remembered the stench of The Farmer in the canal, and the flash of the blade as he held George down. He remembered the uneven teeth jutting from the taut grin. He was about to let the fear win and turn around, when he saw George propped up against the concrete barrier that ran along the lip of the wall. George's head hung forward, his chin resting on his chest. Without thinking, Mike ran forward and dropped to his knees beside him.

'George! George!' He grabbed George's shoulders and shook him. George's head just rocked from side to side, then rolled to rest on his shoulder. Then Mike looked down, and saw the stump of George's leg. Severed at the mid-thigh, the silver scar tissue folded in on itself like a bellybutton. A shudder ran through Mike's shoulders as he tried to

absorb what he was seeing. It didn't matter, he could think about it later. He just knew he had to get George off the dam wall. Something wasn't right with the place; it was the something that had made them all know that it was where they'd find George.

Hooking his hand under George's shoulders, he tried to pull his friend up, but the boy's hefty frame pulled back. Mike tried rolling him on his side and hooking him over his knee; he tried sliding him up the barrier and then over his shoulder, but he just couldn't lift him. Giving up, he lay George on his back. He looked up and down the dam wall. Nothing. No, there wasn't nothing. He shook his head. He could have sworn he saw the dog. He squinted, trying to see through the rain, but there was nothing there. If the dog was here, then The Farmer was too. It was time to move.

He pulled George up, and hooked his arms under his shoulders from behind. If he couldn't lift him, he'd drag him. As he heaved, he looked down at his friend's face and realised George's eyes were open. They stared vacantly up at the sky. Mike followed George's blank gaze and studied the sky. Black clouds blanketed the heavens and water fell through the street lights in large thick drops that hurt his eyes. Mike looked back into George's eyes. The pupils didn't change as Mike's shadow fell over them. He waved his hands in front of them. Nothing. Mike was too late. George was dead. The eyes looked up, witnessing Mike's failure. Mike felt the burning of tears at the back of his throat. At the very least he'd save his body. George wasn't going to be a yellow tag on Bert's map. He wrapped his arm back under George's shoulder and started dragging him down the wall, trying not to look into the empty eyes. George was heavy, and Mike's back started to ache, but he wasn't going to give up. Metre by metre he dragged the dead weight of his friend back along the dam wall. With each step his arms ached, his legs burned, and his back screamed, and George stared up at him vacantly.

[Give up Michael. You're weak]

He could see his father's face scowling at him. 'Fuck you!' he screamed and pulled harder. He moved faster. With each step he felt stronger. 'FUCK. YOU!' He was going to get his friend off this fucking dam wall.

CLINK!

His back struck the cyclone wire of the gate. The gate. The fucking gate. He was never going to get George over the gate. He deflated like a water-logged ball and collapsed to the ground. George's body collapsed with him, his head resting against Mike's chest. Mike held him in his arms and started to cry. He couldn't leave him. But he had to. He thought of George's vacant eyes staring up at him, and in his mind they changed into the big moon eyes staring at him across the small drain in the base of the Albury pool. It felt like so long ago, but it was what, a couple of weeks? Then he remembered the acrid smell of The Farmer in the canal. But he wasn't remembering it, it *was* burning in his nostrils. He looked up, and six feet in front of him, standing in a pair of worn leather boots, was The Farmer, the long stick hanging in his hand. His oilskin coat glistened in the rain and water dripped from the brim of his hat. As he walked toward Mike, the slap of his boots on the wet bitumen bounced off the walls. Mike looked up at the shadowed face, and the tight grin that split across the uneven teeth.

[Found you]

The stick whipped through the air and connected hard with Mike's head. As the blackness descended the last thing he felt was a cold hand gripping his collar and dragging him along the road. There was a numbing in his ear where the stick had struck him, but he could still hear George's body dragging beside his.

The first thing Mike knew as he came to was that his neck hurt. The other senses joined the pain one by one: the drops of rain falling on his skin; the sound of it as it splashed on the bitumen; the roar of the water thundering through the spillways; the throbbing ache through his skull. He could see the image of The Farmer standing over George with his knife, and then he remembered the scar on Tim's neck. He found himself reaching for his own neck, and was relieved to find the ache was just from the awkward position he'd been in, resting against the concrete siding.

He squinted his eyes open and saw George's limp body crumpled against the opposite siding. The Farmer was standing on the bank above George, staring out over the valley beyond the dam. Mike sat opposite, and behind him the water thrashed where the inlet sucked water from the weir down into the penstock toward the turbines. The Farmer, his back to Mike, cleaned his nails with the tip of the blade. The Doberman sat next to George, its hungry eyes boring in to Mike's. It leaned forward as if restrained by an invisible lead. Mike looked at George's body and the voice whispered in his ear: *This is all your fault, Michael; if you hadn't dared Stevie; if you hadn't let them jump in the canal; if you had stuck together.* He should have just left George's body, gone and found Tim and Adler, and left. Instead he'd tried to be a hero, and he was done. And he'd left his little brother in danger.

George's vacant eyes stared at him, reminding him that this wasn't a game. That death was coming and it would be as unpleasant as that man on the wall wanted to make it. Mike tested his arms and legs. He seemed to be OK. Maybe he could run, maybe he could find Tim and Adler. He pressed his back against the concrete siding that ran along the lip of the wall and pushed himself slowly up. The dog pulled against its invisible leash and bared its fangs. Mike pressed against the barrier and started shuffling sideways.

[I wouldn't do that]

The Farmer's coarse voice resonated in his mind. He froze. The Farmer turned, sheathed the knife, and hopped off the curb, his old thin limbs surprisingly lithe.

Anger burned deep in Mike's gut. An anger fuelled by every time his Dad had told him he was shit. Fuelled by every time he worked his arse off only to be beaten by some kid who was just smarter. The fire's fumes made their way up into his chest and the hot air filled his lungs. He stood forward from the wall and squared his shoulders. His mouth was dry but he got it working.

'Yeah,' he said, shuffling inch by inch toward the gate that was now only a hundred metres further along the wall. The anger flared. Fuelled by the shattered pieces of plastic scattered across the shed floor. Fuelled by the memory of bruises and welts on his chest; of the silver scar running down his friend's neck; of George's big eyes staring over the drain; and Stevie's casket being carried down the middle of the church.

'Yeah,' he heard his voice yell, but not his kid's voice; it was bigger, stronger. 'Or you're going to fucking what?' The wind whipped into him, the water stinging against his cheek.

The Farmer clicked his stick on the ground.

[It's not because of what I'll do, it's because you'll never make it]

Mike was quick over a hundred metres; there was only one other kid in the region quicker. 'You wanna bet?'

The Doberman growled. He'd forgotten the bloody dog. The anger burned. *You can do it. You can beat the dog over a hundred metres.* The Farmer lifted the stick as if to inspect it.

[I don't need to]

The stick flew from The Farmer's hand into Mike's knee. Pain tore through his patella tendon, and he definitely felt something tear as he collapsed to the ground. The Doberman paced to his left and The Farmer to his right. The Farmer pulled back his oiled coat and drew the blade. It glowed yellow in the phosphorous lamps. Mike's neck tingled at the sight of it. The Farmer grinned.

[Let's make sure you never run again]

The tingling shuddered through Mike and he felt sick. The man's acrid stink burned in his nostrils. George's vacant dead eyes stared at him. Shuffling back, Mike bounced into the concrete siding. The Farmer stepped forward and Mike saw under the peak, he glimpsed the old man's eyes, and he saw what the man wanted. He saw it all. He saw his eyelids cut so he had to watch. He saw his tendon being pulled slowly from his neck. He saw what The Farmer would do when he couldn't run any more. The fire, which had long left his stomach, was replaced with an emptiness, and the truth resonated through his empty body.

Michael Birch, a fucking disappointment. So grandiose he thought he could save his friend. Too weak. He couldn't.

And now looking at the corpse he'd dragged down the wall, he thought, *for what?* Too empty to fight anymore. The clouds that had followed Mike for too long caught up with him and he pulled his weight up against the concrete siding. Fucked if he was going to die that way.

He turned, and with his good leg he leapt onto the concrete barrier. If he was going to die he was going to die *his* way. He stepped off the edge and fell into the weir below. The water thrashed and sucked, and his body was thrown around like a sack. It was just like the beatings he got from his dad... at least Tim didn't have to watch this one.

Tim. He imagined Tim's face. What the fuck had he done... He accelerated down toward the inlet. As the pressure built, and the deep churning of the turbines grew, he wished he could change his mind. He wished he could turn back time and face The Farmer. He wished he could tell Tim why. He hit the side of the inlet hard and felt immense pain in his back and his legs go numb. In the pitch dark of the inlet he couldn't see anything, but the roaring turbines shook through the water. For some reason Mike felt the need to throw his hands up to protect his face. The turbines didn't skip a beat.

6.

Tim and Adler were only twenty metres down the wall when Mike's body hit the water. Tim's screams were whipped away on the wind. He was too late. Clutching the barrier he searched the turbulent water for his brother, but he knew it was futile. The orange safety buoys that marked where the suck began were fifty metres out in fair weather, and tonight the dam was sucking more water than it ever had before. He didn't really understand. Mike was... Mike couldn't...

He looked at The Farmer who had turned and was now staring straight at him. Rage rose in him, a rage that he'd only ever seen plastered on his father's face. Any grip on his thoughts was sucked away along with Mike's body, and he marched straight for the tall grinning figure in front of him. The grin on the man's face narrowed and turned into a sneer. Tim slung the gun up, and fired. The burning trail of the flare followed the blazing shell straight into The Farmer's face, and then bounced off into the sky. The burnt chemical smell filled the air as The Farmer stumbled back, dropping his knife and clutching his face. He walked back and forth in awkward long steps. The gun shook in Tim's hands as everything caught up with him.

‘Tim!’ Adler yelled from behind him ‘let’s go.’

But Tim couldn’t move, he just watched as the man stumbled back and forth. He couldn’t see. The flare had blinded The Farmer. ‘He can’t see, c’mon!’

They rushed forwards and ran at The Farmer, skidding to a halt as the Doberman came hurtling at them, its fangs gnashing with each ferocious bark. The boys froze in a standoff with the dog. The Farmer stopped stumbling. Adler noticed George’s body lying near them on the road. ‘Tim, look.’

Time stretched as they stood frozen like that, The Farmer hoping his blindness would fade. In the distance the wail of police sirens cut through the dying wind. Tim had forgotten the police, who had been en route to George’s grandparents’ place. They must have seen the flare. As the sirens grew, The Farmer, followed by the dog, began a slow retreat down the road toward the far side of the dam wall and into the wilderness. As The Farmer shrank into the distance Adler plucked Tim’s glasses from his nose, and held them under George’s nose... where they fogged up. ‘He’s alive.’

Adler sat down next to George and wrapped his arms around him. Staring at George, the chasm where his brother should have been came rising up to swallow Tim like a leviathan from the depths. He walked over to the edge and stared out over the spillways. *Where are you Mike? C’mon, pop up in the water. Clamber over the wall behind me like Indiana Jones.* But the water just sprayed down into the stilling basin. He leaned forward over the rail at the water smashing over the concrete. Mike’s hand would fall on his shoulder any second, or punch him in the arm, or give him a wedgie. Tim turned around, but Mike wasn’t there. He walked over to the other side of the wall and looked out over the lake. It had to be someone’s fault. Mike had to... he felt the burning at the back of his throat as he clutched the concrete ledge.

Mike was gone.

When Detective McGuinness arrived he found the short boy with the cap talking quietly to the fat boy's limp body, filling in both sides of the conversation. And the other boy, Tim, the one he'd seen at the river that day, he was gripping the rail that ran along the concrete lip and staring out at the weir. The paramedics arrived on McGuinness's heels, and wrapped the boys in blankets and started shining lights in their eyes and asking them questions. The short one with the hat didn't stop talking the whole time, and the continuous patter of the boy's voice shifting between his own and his friends in mimicry would haunt Shannon for the rest of his life, but not as much as Tim's vacant eyes, magnified by his glasses, staring blankly out into the oily black water of the weir.

PART 3

December of 2014

EXPLANATORY NOTE AND SYNOPSIS:

Part 3 follows Tim, Adler, George, and Polly, as the boys are re-united as adults and The Farmer returns to the town, stronger than before.

Leaving, Home

Adler arrives in Albury tired, frustrated and sober. His connection in Melbourne failed to get him the coke he needed and after an altercation with the rental car people he ended up on a train. After his unglamorous entrance his dignity takes an even bigger hit as he seeks out his old nemesis, Donny, for some cocaine. Donny only has cheap meth and Adler leaves feeling a failure, despite all his commercial success.

At Noel's wake, Tim opens up to Polly about losing his brother. He feels drawn home and she offers him her wheels if she can come with. In a drunken stupor the two set off together. Arriving in Albury, Tim convinces Polly to join in an old tradition and jump from the causeway into the Murray. As they float downstream they are nearly run down by the paddle-steamer Cumberoona. They are saved by a freakish emptying of the river that leaves them stranded in the middle of the riverbed next to the busted paddle-steamer.

The Departure (Part 1)

Sammy Betts runs the control room at the hydroelectric dam and witnesses the unbelievable as the dam drains, emptying the Hume Weir. Calls from local officials reveal that watercourses through the entire region have run dry,

Unions, Reunions and being Alone

Tim and Polly unknowingly book a room in the same hotel as Adler. As they debrief from the events at the river, Tim begins to remember fragments of his childhood. As they clean up, the sexual tension finally comes to a head and they make love. Afterwards Polly asks him to show her his childhood. Eastern Hill seems like the obvious first stop.

Meanwhile, George discovers that Beck is pregnant with his child and that her partner, Karl, has disappeared. Climbing Eastern Hill to contemplate this news, he finds Adler sitting near the bowl looking out over the town. Tim and Polly show up not long after and the three men fall straight into their old routines. When Tim asks about the water in the river disappearing, George brings up The Farmer. As they talk Adler becomes frustrated and leaves. Tim and Polly agree to meet George at the library the following day.

The Departure (Part 2)

Back at the hotel, Tim and Polly find their hotelier in tears having lost her boys. But she has worse news: it's not just her boys, but all the boys in the town who are missing. We witness Arnie, now a cop, as he takes reports of what would become known as 'The Departure.'

Adler, on a bender, passes out and has strange nightmares haunted by the words ‘you’ll never be Stephen.’

Back to the Books

As Adler returns to his hotel room he is ambushed by Tim and Polly, who guilt him into joining them at the library. The old library has been replaced by a modern structure and George takes them into a conference room.

George runs them through his research into The Farmer, beginning with Detective McGuinness’s reports. He then pulls out the battered copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* and the borrowing slip and photo. Adler starts remembering, but tries to convince himself they’d made it all up. George’s research explains how in every generation, the first-born Bramble’s mother dies in childbirth. Using old yearbooks and sports annuals, he’d also found many of the other names on the borrowing slip were friends of the Brambles.

As George unpacks the Bramble history the book begins to behave strangely, like it had when they were kids. Forcing it closed to silence the voices, the four of them are left to ask *what next?* Tim asks what Bert thought about it all. George, who wasn’t present when they met Bert, has never spoken to him before. Adler rejects everything he has seen, desperate for the next high, determined to catch the next train out. Tim and Polly decide to join George in finding Bert. Adler, who saw Bert near Donny’s house earlier, reluctantly agrees to take them there.

As they leave they are watched by a Doberman, who is fascinated by the addition of a girl to their group.

Bert and Betsy

Bert’s house is unlocked and no one answers when they knock. As they enter the house Adler leaves, but not before stopping at Donny’s place just down the road for

something to get him home, high. Donny sets Adler up and he is arrested by Arnie as he boards the train.

Inside the house, Tim, George, and Polly are attacked by Bert. After wrestling the shotgun from his hands, they sit him down and try to explain the situation. They soon realise that Bert is suffering from some kind of dementia. He slips in and out of coherence and believes that George is 'Rod'. He tells 'Rod' how this time it's different. He talks about how when Rod left after killing Stevie, The Farmer hadn't left with him but had chased some other boys instead. George struggles with learning that his father killed one of his best friends, but keeps listening. He learns that every generation the dominant male Bramble lets the evil in. But by leaving, Rodney had disrupted it. Instead it had entered someone else. If Bert was right, George was relieved, because it meant he had been spared. But if it didn't enter *him*, who had it entered? And then he remembers Beck's missing partner. It had entered Karl. And then he remembers the pregnancy: if the mother of the first-born Bramble died in childhood, then she was doomed. His only hope is that in killing The Farmer he might break the cycle all together. Bert brings up his theory about Tallangatta, and Tim remembers it's submerged under the lake, the lake which had just drained. Strapping the shotgun to his crutch, George invites Tim and Polly to help end it once and for all.

The Harvest

George, Tim, and Polly enter the valley of the empty lake, armed with what they could scrounge from Bert's house and Betsy's boot. Polly falls and Tim stops to help her. George, driven like a zealot, keeps walking alone. As he enters the town, he passes one of the giant dead gums that stick up from the valley floor. Hanging from its branches are the bodies of young boys. Looking around, he notices the trees surrounding the town are all

decorated with The Farmer's victims. The rotten buildings still stand and George finds the house he is looking for, one that he had seen in the photo at Bert's, and enters.

Tim and Polly are drawn (by Tim's childhood link to Christianity) to the church. Sneaking up onto the balcony, Tim falls through the rotten floorboards and is impaled on a stake jutting up from the broken floor. As Polly comes to his aid the Doberman enters. With a makeshift torch, she fends off the dog while trying to heave Tim off the stake.

Meanwhile, the real Rod returns to visit Bert. Bert mentions Rod had only just been there, only he'd been missing a leg. Rod, who'd watched his son from afar, pieces together what's happening and springs into action. Asking Bert where 'Rod' was going, he learns where George has headed. He also discovers that Adler is near. Remembering his son's best friend as a kid, Rod decides to get him out of jail and enlist his help.

Back in the empty lake, George finds The Farmer's abattoir attached to the back of the building. Inside, he confronts The Farmer (who has possessed Karl's body) and it comes to blows. Their fight brings them out on to the street, where Tim and Polly are fending off the Doberman. Tim joins George's struggle and comes close to killing The Farmer, only he sees under the brim of the man's hat to find that it's a different man to the one on the dam wall when he was kid. Tim's memory returns and he can see his own father's face looking down at George's crumpled body. He realises that back in '96, it was Colin that The Farmer had possessed. Tim hesitates and it's enough for The Farmer to fight him off. The Farmer steps toward George, who has fallen, and is about to cut him when a pair of headlights, accompanied by the loud rev of an engine, runs The Farmer down. Rod steps from the car and races to the body. He looks at George and demands that no matter what happens next, he be taken to the Monument. Rod then takes The Farmer's blade and drives it into the old man's heart. There is a thunderous crack and a flash and

water starts seeping up from the earth. Rod bucks and writhes as the spirit of The Farmer enters his body. He screams at them to take him to the Monument.

They wrestle him into the back of the car and drive his writhing body to the Monument, where he dies. As Rod passes, the light of the Monument flickers and the evil leaves.

Epilogue

Adler stays for the funeral but then returns to Hollywood; he invites George to join him, thinking there's a script they could write together—if Beck's OK with moving too. Tim and Polly decide to stay for a little longer. Tim quits his job, open for whatever adventure comes next. Looking at Polly, he feels he is building something for the first time since he was a kid.

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