

‘The Nightwatchers’ a novel
and
‘Breaking English’ an exegesis on ‘The Nightwatchers’

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ABSTRACT

The creative work 'The Nightwatchers' is a novel with gothic undertones, written for a young adult audience. Twelve-year-old Mattie Russo and her best friend Harry are the 'nightwatchers', who entertain themselves by watching the comings and goings of the residents of their apartment block. When five-year-old Sammy goes missing, they play detective, discovering his corpse by the local river. Mattie and Harry realise the murderer is someone from the apartments who's been watching where the local children play; this puts them in danger. Mattie cannot turn to her illiterate Italian grandmother (Nonna), or her depressed father for help; nor can Harry turn to his drunken, violent parents. When another boy disappears, Mattie and Harry return to the river in search of him, terrified that their silence has cost the boy his life.

The plot of the novel is a device to engage the young adult reader; the novel is most importantly a 'multicultural' work, drawing attention to the need for cross-cultural communication in Australia. The relationship between Mattie and her Italian migrant grandmother is crucial to the novel. Their struggles to communicate (Nonna's broken English and Mattie's inability to speak Italian) mean they must each 'culturally negotiate' two cultures.

Although the contemporary relevance of the concept of multiculturalism has been contested, I use the arguments of Wenche Ommundsen to support my claim that recognition of cultural difference and representation of minority groups is still important to Australian society and literature. My exegesis, 'Breaking English', analyses contemporary sites of 'cultural negotiation', including my own experiences of negotiation, both as a 'writer' and a supporter of 'multiculturalism'. I examine multiculturalism in a social and political context, in relation to contemporary literature and to my own novel. I compare my novel to Melina

Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* and other multicultural young adult narratives. Finally, I consider the process of writing a novel with my illiterate grandmother Esterina as a muse.

DECLARATION

I, Melanie Kinsman, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma 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.

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No 1/ Dead Things

‘He’s dead.’

Harry stands in the shallows of the river and pokes the body with a stick. He frowns as the stick twists, bending like a broken arm until it snaps and drifts on the current.

‘What do you mean *he?*’ I say. ‘Could be a girl dog.’

‘I saw his balls. Hey, look at this!’ The body dislodges from the riverbed and rolls over. ‘Look, it’s Panzo—see his spotty white ear and red collar? It’s him!’

Panzo’s body is carried by the current for a metre or so until it bumps up against a rock and starts sinking.

‘I’m gonna turn it over again to make sure,’ Harry says. ‘I’m comin’ out to get another stick.’

‘Careful,’ I warn. ‘The river’s moving pretty fast.’

Harry struggles against the current. I reach out for his hand and pull him onto the bank.

‘Ouch! I think I stepped on a rock.’ He releases my hand, wincing as the fronds of a willow tree brush against his face. ‘These trees are useless for sticks.’

‘Try a gum.’

Last night, during the storm, the trees gave up their branches and leaves; the gums look armless against the sky. The river’s flowing with these broken branches and torn willow fronds and poor dead Panzo. Water rats swim among the muck, wriggling like tiny seals.

‘Harry, there are sticks everywhere.’

He looks at me like I’m stupid. ‘I need the *right one*, Mattie.’ He searches through piles of sticks burnt black from last summer’s bushfires.

‘Seems like a lot of dead stuff’s turning up around here,’ I say, looking at the houses on the hills around us. The city’s crowding into the valley, creeping down the hills like the river, spilling over from the streets above.

‘Don’t reckon he drowned though.’ Harry frowns. ‘Panzo was a good swimmer. I reckon someone got pissed off with his barking and poisoned him, then dumped him here. Maybe it was Mrs Firske in number fourteen. Panzo was always hassling her cat.’

Harry and I live in apartments on Clifton Street. Panzo belonged to Old Ishmael, one of the neighbourhood drunks. Panzo never had a leash or got taken for walks or anything like that. He’d just wander around the streets, barking all day and licking people’s hands.

‘Batshit-Crazy Firkse? Not a chance,’ I say. ‘She never leaves her flat.’

‘What about Mr Dray in number twelve?’ Harry suggests. ‘He hates Panzo.’

‘Maybe. He’s pretty weird.’

‘Yeah, but he lets us watch cool stuff on his TV.’

‘Maybe it was Old Ishmael! He could’ve poisoned Panzo by accident. Maybe he gave him whisky instead of water.’ The dog’s body reappears on the surface of the river and bobs against the rock again. I can’t see his face but the flash of red collar is proof enough for me; I don’t want to look at the dead eyes again.

‘Harry, let him go.’

Harry shrugs and stops looking for a stick. We watch the body bob against the rock one more time before it’s carried away by the current. A train hums as it passes over the concrete bridge above the river.

‘We should go home,’ I say. The sky is grey and the warm summer air is turning; this is the beginning of night. A cricket-song has begun in the reeds.

‘You go. I’ll follow later.’

I look at Harry reluctantly. There's something in his voice that makes me want to stay, something that makes me fear leaving him. But I can't stay, because I fear my grandmother more. I'll be as dead as Panzo if I'm late for dinner, even if it is school holidays and she's cutting me a bit more slack than usual. I'm twelve years old, but Nonna still thinks I'm a little kid.

'Come on. You can have dinner at my place. Your parents won't care.'

'You're right,' he says, aiming a rock at a water rat that he's never going to hit. 'They won't.'

Away from the river the street is quiet. Harry and I can hear the hum of the main road traffic, but Clifton Street is empty. We walk towards the flats. I turn back, gazing into the distance. City lights are blinking on in the dusk. I think of the ocean, the horizon, the end of the world fading away. Harry walks ahead. He never sees this. When he leaves the river he doesn't look back. I turn towards him and watch him loping along, his wet shorts slapping against his bony, freckled thighs.

I wonder what his parents are doing now.

It's eight o'clock. They're probably in their flat, heating up baked beans from a tin can. I've never eaten anything from a tin can in my life.

'I think Nonna's cooking *cotoletta* tonight,' I say.

Harry shrugs. He walks ahead, stooping to pick up gum nuts. He practises his aim by hitting letterboxes.

'Is your grandma gonna make me eat *fud*...er, those bean things again?'

'*Fagioli*? Yeah, I'll make sure you get extra.'

He doesn't smile at my joke, but I don't mind. Harry's a moody guy.

Our flat block seems out of place among the little houses of Clifton Street. It's an enormous U-shaped building with a courtyard in the middle and a car park at the front.

Balconies run around each floor and there are stairs outside to access the second and third storey apartments.

Harry and I wander through the car park. We walk around the courtyard, which no one ever uses. It's a mess of gum trees and bushes, beer bottles and bark. The gums rise from the bark like giant weeds growing out of cracks.

We climb three flights of stairs to my place. It's a double storey apartment, twice the size of Harry's pokey flat. The top floor is my grandmother's kitchen, which rises like a castle turret above the other flats.

It's nearly dark by the time we've finished climbing. I like to hang off the stair rails and look at the city. From here it rises above the suburbs like a row of fairytale towers. Beyond the city are the lights of the coast, then the ocean and total darkness.

Harry's not one for staring at stuff. He skittles up and down the stairs, two or three at a time, and leaps out into the air. His knees buckle but he manages to land in a pool of light on the second balcony.

'Bloody hell, Harry,' I say without thinking.

'You think that was good?' He leaps up the last set of stairs to the top balcony. 'Watch this.'

He shimmies up the pipe outside number fifteen. I watch as one hand grips the roof gutter; then, like an insect wriggling out of a cocoon, he twists his body and with jerking movements pulls himself onto the roof.

'*Harry.*' I feel nauseous.

Harry is no longer skipping about; he's concentrating on balancing. I glance at the city in the distance, then back at him. I want to scream out *stop Harry stop* but there's no point. Nobody can stop Harry from doing anything.

He raises his leg like a dancer.

One leg. He's standing on one leg.

The wind moves around us and I shiver. Harry's neck jerks. He's trying to look back at me, but he's lost his nerve. His face contorts in anger and he puts one foot up on a metal chimney.

Stop, Harry. Please stop.

I feel hot. My hands are wet. I look at the light shining from Nonna's kitchen window. I can hear *Radio Italia* and the clanging of pans. Nonna's cooking dinner. I want to be with her, tasting soups and sauces, not standing out here watching steam drift into the night.

'Harry, come on. If we keep mucking around we're gonna be really late.'

'Just a minute.' His voice comes out from between clenched teeth. He's standing proudly on the chimney, his arms stretched wide.

'Harry...'

He squats on the chimney and slides off carefully. His eyes flicker with fear but he doesn't stop; he crouches down and moves slowly back to the edge of the roof. He grips the gutter and dangles from it, landing on the balcony like one of the neighbourhood's mangy cats.

'Were you scared?' He challenges me.

'Shut up! Of course I was. Don't tell me you weren't.'

'So what? I still did it.'

I put my hand on his arm. My palm's wet so I take it away, wiping it on my jeans in embarrassment.

'Don't do it again, Haz. It scared me, okay?'

He looks at me, defiant.

'Harry! Don't!'

'Can't promise,' he says.

I feel a desperate fear I can't explain. I'm sure he'll fall if he does it again. 'You've got to promise. Promise you won't do it without me.'

'Okay.'

'*Harry.*'

'I said *okay.*' He runs along the third balcony to my bedroom window. 'Hell, Matttie, you didn't leave your window open! Now we're gonna have to go round to the door.'

'Nonna goes crazy when I leave it open. *Chiuda la finestra!* She reckons we're gonna get robbed.' I look up at the tower, where the steam's drifting out of the kitchen window. 'Come on, she's gonna go mental *now.* We're late.'

The first floor of my apartment is dark and quiet when we slip inside.

'It's okay,' I say to Harry in relief. 'My dad's not even home yet. Nonna won't be too pissed off.'

Upstairs the smells of the kitchen are dizzying. Nonna is the best cook in the world. I know everybody thinks that about their grandmother, but Nonna really is. Harry agrees it's a fact.

Nonna's pretty annoyed right now. She's standing over a boiling pot and giving me a dirty look. Her hair's gone curly from the steam and her blue eyes are bloodshot, because she's leaning so far over the pot she's practically cooking herself. The gold cross dangling from her neck is about to sink into the sauce.

There's no point in telling her to back off from the food and relax. Nonna is obsessed with making every meal perfect, even though she's never cooked anything bad in her life. I don't know why she sweats it out so much, since my dad and I aren't fussy eaters, and compared to the tin can diet of Harry's family, our dinners are top notch.

'Where you be?' she demands.

'Playing. Sorry we're late.'

‘Oh sure. Sure,’ she answers sarcastically. ‘You neva listen to me when I say come home. Maybe one day you neva eat. Maybe you die.’

Harry bursts out laughing. Everything is life or death to Nonna. To say she exaggerates is an understatement.

‘Where’s Dad?’ I ask, trying to ignore Harry. He’s grinning like a demon. He finds Nonna’s lectures hilarious and encourages her.

‘She still at work, I think.’ Nonna shrugs.

‘Not *she*, Nonna, *he*.’ I correct her half-heartedly. I’m feeling pretty bummed because I haven’t seen much of my dad for weeks. He owns a café and works all kinds of crazy hours, but lately he’s been working more than ever.

‘Your fardder, he worse than you. He not eat enough, he too schkinny.’

I roll my eyes. While it’s true that my dad is skinny, he’s not near death by any means, even by Italian standards. We’re all pretty thin, even Nonna, who’s all wrinkly and soft and droopy because she’s old.

Nonna’s also got a long mane of wild hair. I wish she’d cut it short and look respectable like the other grandmas in our neighbourhood, but she won’t do it. She reckons God gives Italians thick curly hair for a reason, and only balding Australian women need to cut it short. I said her hairstyle was as ridiculous as a seventy-year-old in pigtails, or a Grey Power president in a miniskirt, but she didn’t care. She’s pretty stubborn really—stubborn as a stone that takes a million years to grind.

Since there’s no changing Nonna’s mind about her hair, I’ve given up the fight. I try to ignore people staring at her wild mane, golden crosses, woggy headscarves and forty year old dresses. That’s the other thing: Nonna never wears pants, and sometimes she leaves the house with her apron on. It’s pretty embarrassing, even if she is just taking out the bins.

What's even worse, though, are the comments she makes about 'Australians'. I'm really glad Harry doesn't mind when she says stuff like *Australian women are bald*.

'Nonna, we'll set the table for you,' Harry (the suck-up) volunteers, waving a spoon at her. He dips it into one of her steaming pots.

'Harry! You like fly!' she says, raising her arm to slap him.

He ducks out of her way, laughing, and winks at me. 'No, I'm not! I'm helping you!'

'Harry, you very charm,' Nonna answers, 'but you very pest.'

I burst into laughter. Harry looks taken aback for a second, unsure whether he's being insulted or not.

'You love me, Nonna,' he says. 'You love me.'

'Sure, sure,' she says dismissively, pulling a dish out of the oven. 'I think I make the veal too chilli. Maybe it need more *pomodoro*.'

I shake my head. 'Nonna, I'm sure it's fine.'

'I make a little too chilli.'

'No, no, it won't be too hot,' I assure her. 'And don't stress, Dad will be home soon.'

Harry's flicking a fork between his fingers and staring out the window.

'Hey Harry, can you see him?' I ask.

'What?'

'Can you see my dad?'

'Nah.'

I walk over to the window. Harry's looking down at the next level, where a light's shining from his flat. It's like a searchlight, beaming out over the courtyard and reflecting on the gum trees. His dad's favourite record, *Led Zeppelin II*, is blaring into the night. I hear his mother's laugh on the wind.

Harry gets up and shuts the window.

‘You eat. *Mangia.*’ Nonna brings the pots to the table. She serves us as the kitchen clock ticks loudly in the silence.

Harry guzzles his dinner down like a dog with a bowl full of Pal, but I stir my food around the plate and don’t really eat anything. After a while Harry notices me picking at my food and looking worried.

‘Hey, check this out, Mattie.’ He crosses his eyes and sticks his tongue out. His tongue is covered in a paste of veal and tomato sauce.

‘Thanks, Harry—that’s just *beautiful,*’ I say sarcastically, poking him with my fork.

‘*Basta!* Don’t be silly,’ Nonna says, standing up and pushing her chair back. ‘Your farrder, he very late. Maybe we call café.’

A door bangs downstairs.

Nonna sits down again and picks up her fork. ‘Eat everybody and no say nuting,’ she warns.

Nonna and I are always doing crazy things like this. Dad’s been quiet and kind of stressed lately, so we’re trying to put a brave face on for him, and pretend everything’s fine. I don’t know if it’s working but it doesn’t matter, because Dad doesn’t really notice much going on around here anyway.

‘Hello, Mamma.’ Dad bends down and kisses Nonna on the cheek.

‘You eat,’ she says automatically, spooning sauce and veal onto his plate.

Dad looks over at me and smiles. He looks tired, thin, almost transparent; he’s wearing a dirty white shirt you can see his skin through.

‘You eat *fagioli* too, it very nice,’ Nonna says.

Dad nods hello to Harry and sits down. He puts his elbows on the table and runs a hand through his hair. When he looks up I see blue rings under his eyes.

I'm reminded that I don't have olive skin or black hair. My skin is white, almost as white as Harry's, but without the freckles. My hair is the colour of dirty sand. I'm much fairer than my dad and my grandmother. I should have their black hair and olive skin, but I don't.

'Eat, Davide,' Nonna insists, nudging Dad. He looks at the food tiredly, as if he's repelled. He picks up his fork and trails it along the edge of his plate.

'Eat, Dad,' I say softly.

He looks up at me in surprise. Then he smiles quickly and starts buttering his *pane*.

'What have you been doing today, *bella*?'

'Playing by the river.'

'We found Panzo floating in it,' Harry pipes up. 'He was dead.'

'I'll bet all the rats are still alive,' Dad says.

'I tried to kill one,' Harry answers, 'but it was too fast.'

Dad smiles. 'It wouldn't make a difference. There are millions of them.'

'*Disgraziato*. You no play there,' Nonna scolds, frowning at Harry and me. 'It very danger.'

'Nonna, the river isn't dangerous. Panzo didn't drown. We reckon someone got pissed off with his barking so they poisoned him and dumped him there,' I say.

'Just be careful and don't go down there alone, huh?' Dad looks at me intently.

'Sure, sure, Dad.' I try to brush it off.

'You'll stay with her Harry, won't you? Don't leave her alone.'

Harry nods, shoving more bread his mouth. 'Yeah, okay.'

Dad doesn't look satisfied. 'Actually, it would be better if you didn't go down there at all, okay?'

'Okay, Dad.'

Like me, Harry can't figure out why this has got my dad so spooked. Weird things like dead dogs turn up around here all the time.

What's up with him? Harry asks me with his eyes.

Dunno. I shrug. *Dunno.*

Nonna stands up, hands on hips, and looks at Dad. 'I think maybe you no feel like *cotoletta*, tonight, hey?'

Dad waves a hand at her. 'Ma, sit down. The *cotoletta* is fine—I'm just not hungry tonight.'

No kidding. He hasn't even been pretending to eat, which is what I usually do when I'm not in the mood for one of Nonna's dinners. I've got some good tricks going, like chewing a small mouthful for ages, and pushing food around my plate so it looks like I've eaten more than I really have.

'I make something else for you. The Special.'

I raise my eyebrows at Harry. 'The Special' is one of three things: lasagne, a whole baked fish, or *tiramisu*.

'Awesome,' Harry whispers to me, shoving more food in his mouth. He's expecting *tiramisu*, which is his favourite.

Nonna goes over to the oven and comes back with a fish. Harry looks at me and shrugs in disappointment.

'Ma, I don't want any fish,' Dad says, but Nonna ignores him and plonks it down on the table.

This is a stand-off. I feel a bit embarrassed for Dad. He's being treated like a three-year-old who refuses to eat his vegetables. Nonna's going to stare at him with her arms crossed until he puts some fish on his plate.

‘All right, all right,’ Dad sighs. It sounds like he’s wimping out, but he’s not. He doesn’t give in because she’s threatening him. He gives in because she’ll start having hysterics about him not eating, and then she’ll have to go and lie down because she’s stressed herself out.

The guilt doesn’t stop there. Nonna’s spent a lot of time making this fish just for Dad. He can’t really refuse to eat something she spent two days cooking up.

My grandmother is my favourite person in the world, but she can be hard work sometimes.

Harry nudges me. ‘Look at the fish,’ he whispers.

Harry hasn’t been paying much attention to the stand-off. He’s been staring at the fish the whole time.

The fish looks the same as it always does; it’s slightly shrivelled but whole, lying on one side in a bed of lettuce. What’s freaking Harry out is the eye still sitting in the socket. Nonna always leaves the eyes in, but tonight this is more disturbing than ever. The dull, glazed ball looks like the eye of a dead dog called Panzo.

*

I’m lying in bed with the lights out, waiting for sleep, but it’s not coming easy. I can hear my dad’s TV through the wall. It’s the familiar sound of carnival music; Dad’s playing an old movie he’s been playing for weeks.

I get out of bed and go down the hall. Nonna’s lamp is out but her tabernacle light is on, casting a weird red glow over her room. She says the light represents Jesus, and it’s a sign that he’s always with us.

Yeah, right. Whatever.

It doesn’t reassure me. It creeps me out.

Nonna is old and Italian and that means she’s Catholic. Her room looks like a church with all its religious paintings and statues of the Virgin Mary. It’s also full of old things like

the bedspread she got as a wedding present, and rosary beads she brought with her from Italy. Italy, the Virgin Mary and Jesus are Nonna's great loves, second only to my dad and me. I don't think she rates my now-dead grandfather much. There's only one picture of him on the wall, but there's ten of Jesus.

Nonna's not having any trouble sleeping tonight. She's lying under her bedspread snoring her head off. She's pretty old, I guess, so she falls asleep all the time, despite the sounds of my dad's TV blaring.

Dad's room is lit by the moon and the light of his TV. I can see the outline of his curled-up body on the bed. He's taken off his work shirt and he's wearing a singlet over boxer shorts. He looks like a little boy.

'Hey Dad,' I whisper.

He doesn't answer. I sit down on the edge of his bed.

'Dad, are you okay?'

I switch his TV off and put my hand on Dad's chest to check if he's breathing. He is. His chest is moving up and down like an ocean.

I move my hand to his hair. It's damp like his singlet, warm and sticky against his skin. He doesn't talk or move or change his breathing. I try to shake him awake gently.

'Hey Dad, *come on.*'

'Mattie? What are you doing here?' he asks, sounding sleepy and dazed.

'I couldn't sleep with the TV noise, so I came in here to turn it off. I've been trying to wake you up—what's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong. It's all right.' He rolls away from me, cradling his pillow. 'Go back to bed and let me sleep.'

'Okay. Sorry.'

In the hallway I knock my shoulder against a shelf and a photo frame falls onto the carpet. I pick it up and stare at it in the red light. It's my favourite picture of Dad. He looks really young, about ten years old, and he's doing a handstand. There's a big goofy upside-down grin on his face.

Nothing's wrong. It's all right.

I wish I could believe him.

No 2/ Everything is Such a Big Deal with Italians

I don't have a mother. She died in a car crash when I was little.

I remember standing under some trees, holding her hand as a strong wind fluttered through the leaves with a noise that rolled like the roar of ocean waves. I remember her fingers touching my hair.

That's *it*.

That's all I remember.

A few years ago I asked Dad about her. He stared at me for a long time without saying anything; he looked wounded, as if I'd hurt him just by asking.

I didn't ask again, but he answered in his own way, by leaving photos of her on my pillow. I discovered a tall skinny woman with freckles; a red-haired teenager who rollerskated with a cherry in her mouth.

I don't miss a mother I barely remember, so Dad hasn't tried his hand at remarrying to get me another one. Honestly, it's the last thing I need. Nonna's enough for any kid. She's really bossy and demanding, always ordering me to 'come home early!' and 'wash the dishes!' and stuff like that. She's not like normal grannies, who complain about the 'good old days' and drink cups of tea and knit jumpers from rocking chairs. Nonna's skinny and tough and loud, and she hates sitting still. The only old person thing she does is nap in the afternoon, but that's because she gets up at three a.m. to make pizza. I've told Nonna to act her age and take it easy, but she's too stubborn to listen.

The idea of Nonna taking it easy is an absolute joke. Everything is such a big deal with Italians, even going to the shops.

Going shopping with Nonna is something I dread every week. It's no gentle hand holding, helping-granny-across-the-road kind of trip. In fact, it's usually Nonna who's

charging along ahead of me, telling me to hurry up because if Mrs Corso gets to the fruit and veg shop before her, there'll be no good zucchini left. She storms into the local like she's James Bond on an important mission to take out all rival agents. After she's haggled with the grocer and pressed and prodded every one of his two thousand zucchinis, tomatoes and carrots, I have to carry them all home for her. Lucky me.

Scenes like the zucchini stand-off are, unfortunately, just the beginning of the Nonna shopping experience. My dad says that taking her shopping is like tagging along with Odysseus in *The Odyssey*. *The Odyssey* is a really long book about a guy who leaves his family to fight in a war and piss fart around with monsters and witches. It takes him twenty years to get back to his wife and son, because he keeps getting involved in stuff he shouldn't. This is exactly what Nonna decides to do today, before we even walk into the supermarket.

'Look here the man!' she says, pointing at Old Ishmael, who's stumbling along in the shopping centre car park. He trips over his feet and falls backwards onto his bottom, swaying unsteadily in a sitting position until he slumps to one side and sinks down to the asphalt.

'Don't worry about it,' I say stepping around him. 'It's only Old Ishmael.'

Old Ishmael always passes out when he drinks. It's practically his job; he's in business as the local drunk, proudly established since 1996.

Nonna hurries over to him. He's lying on the footpath with his eyes shut. His skin is pale and there are rosy, clown-like patches on his cheeks. He's breathing really loudly, so there's no chance of him being dead. There never is.

When Panzo was alive he'd usually let the entire neighbourhood know that something was wrong with his master. He'd bark like crazy and run around Old Ishmael in circles until someone came to help. Then he'd quit barking and just whine and whimper as Old Ishmael got put into a stretcher and carted away by paramedics.

Poor Panzo. Harry and I would play with him for a while if we saw an ambulance turn up. He usually calmed down after a few rounds of fetch.

‘*Disgraziato!*’ Nonna cries, pointing towards Old Ishmael, who’s still lying motionless in the shopping centre car park.

‘You’re not gonna wake him up by shaming him.’ I roll my eyes. ‘I told you, don’t worry about it. You know it happens all the time.’

She ignores me. ‘Maybe we call *dottore*.’

‘Nonna, come on. We’ve gotta go into the post office before it shuts. It’s nearly five o’clock.’

‘*Che ora?*’

‘Five o’clock!’

Nonna doesn’t budge. She stands there, hands clasped, as if she’s praying.

‘Nonna!’

‘Shoosh, I thinking! Orright...you go into post office and tell lady to call *dottore*, okay? I wait here with him.’

In the post office I stand in the queue and wonder how I’m going to ask the lady behind the counter to call an ambulance. I’m embarrassed to make a big deal of this in front of lots of people. So what if Old Ishmael’s passed out again? He always turns up again later, as if nothing’s happened. It’s your lucky day if he *doesn’t* pass out in your stretch of the street.

Nonna always overreacts to things and makes me do her dirty work. In fact, she uses me like a personal message service. I have to speak for her at the supermarket and the post office and everywhere we go. She says that Australians don’t understand her, and I guess it’s true that most of them don’t. As soon as they hear her broken English they look confused and turn to me.

‘When I talk, they no hear nuting,’ she says. ‘Still I talk English, but they no understand.’

At the post office I pass our phone bill and some money to a bushy-haired woman.

‘I need an ambulance,’ I blurt out.

‘I’m sorry? What did you say?’ she asks, looking startled.

I realise everyone in the office is listening but I take a deep breath and blurt it out again.

‘I need an ambulance.’

‘You need an *ambulance*?’

‘Uh, I’m not sure. Maybe not. It’s just the local drunk up to the usual. He’s collapsed outside.’

‘Oh. Oh, right.’ The bushy-haired woman gawks at me. ‘Is anyone with him right now?’

‘Yeah, my grandma, but like I said, it’s only—’

‘Does anyone know first aid?’ she calls out. ‘A man’s collapsed outside.’

A tall skinny guy breaks out of the queue and heads for the door.

‘Tell the ambos it’s Old Ishmael,’ I say to the bushy-haired woman. ‘I think they might know him.’ I follow the rest of the queue outside, who are gathering around Old Ishmael and the skinny guy. Old Ishmael’s been rolled over onto his side.

‘It’s okay—don’t panic!’ I shout. ‘He passes out a lot.’

‘This is a dangerous situation,’ the skinny guy answers, shaking his arm aggressively. ‘He could choke on his own vomit before the ambulance gets here.’

‘He never has before,’ I mutter.

The skinny lifesaver takes no notice of this and jams his fingers into Old Ishmael’s mouth.

‘Don’t do that,’ I shriek. ‘God knows what’s been poured down there!’

‘Look, young lady,’ he retorts, ‘stay out of this. This man’s life is as important as yours.’

Nonna reaches out and puts her hand on my arm. ‘The *Australiani*, they worry about him now,’ she whispers. ‘Come on. We go into Wool-the-worths.’

‘What?’ I whisper back, shocked. ‘We cause all this fuss and then we don’t stay around for the ambulance?’

‘We no need to. He be taken care of by the *Australiani*. They call *dottore*—they put their *mane* in his mouth.’

‘Nonna! You knew about this! You knew that someone had to roll him over and put their fingers in there!’

‘Yes, you not the only one to see Mr Drunky Drunk before. When you see him, you always run away—you *laugh* when you see him. You no wait for the *Australiani* to help or the *dottore* to come.’ She wags her finger at me accusingly. ‘But I wait and see, so I know what to do, but I not stupid—I no want to put my *mane* in his dirty *bocca!* Do you want to do?’

‘Of course not!’

‘Then no worry,’ she says, taking my arm. ‘*Australiani* will do. What’s wrong with you?’

Nonna, I wish—like I’ve wished a million times before—that you could speak English properly. I wish that I never have to deal with stuff like this again.

‘*Niente,*’ I tell her, annoyed. ‘Come on, let’s go into the *supermercato.*’

Nonna can’t go shopping by herself in Woolworths because she gets confused about what’s in their tins and boxes and packets. She can read some numbers, but no words, not even in Italian. She went to school in Italy until she was six, and I guess that’s all she can remember.

Shopping without reading is harder than it seems. Nonna once bought ten tins of deluxe cat food thinking it was tuna because there were no cat pictures on the tins. When Knox’s laundry powder changed its box design she didn’t buy it for weeks because she thought they’d stopped making it. After a few episodes like this, my dad sentenced me to a lifetime of shopping with her.

‘How mucha this?’ she asks me in the toiletry aisle, pointing to the soaps. ‘Three-dollar-sixty?’

‘Yeah,’ I say, bored.

‘It’s very expensive, isn’t it?’ a well-dressed lady comments, smiling sympathetically at Nonna.

‘Oh yeah. Very fucking dear, I think,’ Nonna says.

The well-dressed lady stares at her, aghast. ‘Well, I...’ she looks over to me for an explanation.

I take Nonna’s arm and pull her along the aisle. I feel embarrassed and angry but I don’t say anything to her. There’s no point. Nonna’s never understood how offensive the word *fuck* is. I’ve tried to explain it before, but she just doesn’t get it.

I load up the shopping trolley with Nonna’s crap as fast as I can and march over to the checkout. Nonna thinks I’m bored and impatient and gives me a dirty look.

‘How do ya wanna pay?’ asks the guy at the cash register. He’s so young he looks like he should be in a school uniform.

‘Cheque,’ I say.

The guy gives me a puzzled look as I write out the cheque. I guess he doesn’t get a lot of cheques these days. This is the computer age, after all.

Nonna has a cheque book because her bank isn’t within walking distance. Dad tried to convince her to get an ATM card, but she refused.

‘What’s that?’ Nonna had said, waving her hand in annoyance. ‘That no money! The bank, I don’t trust! I must *see* what I pay. If no cash, must write for the proof. Mattie, she can write the checkers for me, okay?’

Dad smiled at me. ‘You wanna write some cheques?’

‘No, that’s so *prehistoric!* Nobody writes cheques anymore. Besides, I don’t think kids are allowed to.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Dad answered. ‘There’s a way around that. But there’s no way around Nonna, is there?’

Dad was right. Italians don’t trust banks. They’d rather their houses burned down with all their money in the floorboards than get ripped off one dollar by them. Technology’s not very impressive to them either, which is why I’m here, writing out a cheque in a supermarket. The young guy is still staring at us.

‘Here, Nonna,’ I say, handing her the pen.

Nonna signs the cheque with an X.

No 3/ The Little Buddha in the Laundry

It's night and I'm lying on the floor of Harry's bedroom. He's spitting mandarine pips at me from his bed. It's too dark for him to aim properly and none of them have hit me.

'Come on, I bet that one gotcha!' Harry exclaims triumphantly, as a wet, sticky pip lands on my cheek.

'You totally missed, loser.'

'So what? I'll just have to try again.'

'*Harry!* I'm never sleeping at your—' I'm cut off by the sound of laughter echoing from the living room. Harry's parents and their friends are having a party. Number eighteen is a tiny place, a flat much smaller than mine. The walls are thin and you can hear everything through them, especially *Led Zeppelin II* blaring from the stereo.

'Good. I'm never sleeping here again either,' Harry says. I hear him push the sheets off his bed and roll over. 'I can't sleep through this racket. I wish they'd shut up.'

'Harry, don't go out there!' I fumble about in the dark and switch a lamp on. 'Don't do it.'

Harry doesn't listen. He's as stubborn as Nonna once he's pissed off, and there's nothing I can do to stop him, even though I know nothing good will come of this. I follow him into the kitchen.

Harry's parents are sitting at the dining table, their faces yellow under fluorescent lights. Harry's dad is dealing cards, scratching his bony chin. His mum, who has black hair and a freckled face like Harry, is smoking a cigarette. There's a grotty, badly-shaven man in a singlet at one end of the table, drinking beer and watching the cards being dealt. I've never seen him before but he looks like a thug. Next to him sits Uncle Rufus, a big, bearded bikie who isn't really an uncle at all.

The kitchen looks even worse than the people sitting in it. Black and white lino is peeling away from the floor, and the stove has dirty pots sitting on every hob. Empty beer bottles lie over the benches like fallen bowling pins. The room stinks of dirty sneakers, cigarettes and fried eggs.

I think about Nonna's kitchen, with its smells of hot bread and pizza and *cotoletta*. She'd have a fit if she ever saw this place.

'Is this the kid?' the thug asks. 'Looks like a chip off the old block, doesn't he?'

Nobody answers him, not even Harry. Harry's busy glaring at his mother. She glares back at him with identical blue eyes, the crows feet around them creasing in anger.

'Don't start,' she warns.

I wait for Harry to yell back at her, but he doesn't say anything. He walks over to the fridge, swings it open and takes a swig of milk.

Maybe, just maybe, he's listened to me for once. Maybe he can actually see his mum's pissed off expression and his dad gearing up for a fight. Maybe this silent protest is enough.

Harry walks over to the stereo and switches it off.

So much for wishful thinking.

'Turn the music back on,' his dad snarls.

'I can't sleep with that shit blasting!'

'Turn it back on or you'll cop it.' Harry's dad stands up. He's thin and tall like my dad, but he's got wild grey hair that hasn't been cut in a long time. It looks like the straw mop of a scarecrow. His nose and cheeks are covered in broken veins, and purple squiggles stretch across his red-stained face. I don't know how they got there, because I've never dared ask. Harry doesn't like talking about his dad.

'I told you, I can't sleep,' Harry says through gritted teeth.

Harry, you idiot, what are you doing? You're gonna lose. There's no point fighting.

Harry's dad storms over to the stereo and switches it back on. 'Don't fucking touch it,' he says, walking up to Harry and jabbing him in the chest with his finger.

I've never seen Harry's dad touch him before, but this is no handshake or hug. I feel really scared, even though it's just a threat and I doubt Harry will get hit.

I've never been scared of my dad, not even once. I can't imagine him raising his voice, let alone shoving a finger in my chest.

'Give the kid a joint,' the thug pipes up. 'That'll put him to sleep.'

'Yeah, and screw up my brain, like yours,' Harry shoots back.

This is a bad move, a move even worse than switching off the stereo. Harry's mum looks really pissed off now. She hates it when Harry talks back. This is going to end in a huge screaming argument if I don't do something.

'He doesn't mean it, he's just really tired,' I blurt out.

'Don't apologise for me,' Harry retorts. 'I'm not sorry.'

'You will be, you friggin' little pest,' his mum says. She puts her cards down.

'I need to sleep! Why can't you just shut up and let me go to bed? Why are these stupid derros always here? It's *Monday* night, for fuck's sake!'

'You're really pushing your luck now,' his dad says. He isn't yelling but he's close. His mouth and his eyes are getting meaner and his body is trembling with anger.

Harry comes to his senses and backs off by stepping away from the stereo, but he's not the only one who gets spooked.

Harry's mum has always been tough and kinda pissed off and sarcastic. Her look of fear really rattles me. If she's scared then there's something to be scared about.

'Come on, Harry, you can sleep at my place,' I say, grabbing him by the arm. I'm shaking to bits but I manage to yank him forwards; to my surprise he doesn't protest but

follows me out of the kitchen. Half way across the living room I realise we're running even though Harry's dad isn't coming after us.

Harry and I race down the stairs to the courtyard. We stand under its gum trees, in the shadows of giants having a midnight meeting, panting and trying to catch our breath. I lie down in the dirt and the bark and wonder what to say to him.

It'll be all right. Your old man will get over it when he sobers up.

I can't think of anything good that's true so I don't say anything.

*

'Hey look! Little Sammy's in there,' Harry says after a long time. I stand up. Most of the flats surrounding us are shut or completely dark. Only the laundry is open and flooded with light.

The laundry is a naked place: white floor, white washing machines, dirty white walls. There are no chairs to sit on because they've been broken or stolen. In the middle of this white space we can see a child sitting on the floor like a tiny Buddha. He's pushing some pebbles around the floor with a stick.

'Don't bother going in,' Harry says. 'His dad should be looking after him anyway.'

'Sammy probably ran off! You know what he's like.'

'So what?'

'He's five years old!'

'He's a scammer.'

'I think I can live with a five-year-old scamming me.' I walk out of the courtyard, push open the laundry door and go in. Harry follows.

'Hi, Sammy,' I say.

'Hi!' He looks up at me through his dirty blond hair and reaches out for a hug. I kneel down and put my arms around him. He's wearing a green t-shirt and some underwear, but he's got no pants or shoes on.

Harry screws up his face. 'What are you doing here? Why aren't you at home?'

'Um...' Sammy thinks about it. 'Dad's busy.'

'Did he tell you to leave?' Harry asks.

'No way!' I shriek. 'Reefe wouldn't do that!'

Harry ignores me and stares at Sammy. 'Did he tell you to leave?' he asks again.

'No,' says Sammy cheerfully, unaware he's being interrogated. 'He told me to go to bed.'

I take Sammy by the hand and lead him home. Harry follows sulkily, but he hangs back at a distance.

Number two looks pretty dark. There are no loud voices or lights shining from the windows.

'We'll have to knock on the door,' I say, glancing over my shoulder at Harry. I'm losing my nerve. Reefe is a cool guy but I don't know how cool he is about kids knocking on the door late at night.

Harry looks at me. 'No way.'

'We have to! Maybe Reefe isn't here...maybe he's out looking for Sammy.'

'As if.'

'Don't worry, I can get in.' Sammy climbs on the window ledge.

'Eww. He's using the window like a cat flap,' Harry whispers in disgust.

I ignore him. 'Unlock the door and let us in,' I tell Sammy.

He opens the door. 'I can get in, see?'

I draw back. From the doorway a smell like a hundred unwashed nappies hits me in the face.

'Gross!' Harry hisses.

'Come on,' I say softly, taking his arm.

Inside the flat we see a faint light glowing, and shadows dancing on a wall from a television. Reefer is sitting on a sofa in the lounge room. He's half-naked; his muscled chest is bare, and a pair of jeans are falling off his hips. With his blond, shaggy hair and the stubble on his jaw, he looks like a catalogue model.

'Sam, go to bed,' he says without looking up.

'He was in the laundry,' I say. 'We brought him back.'

'Little brat,' Reefer answers, his eyes still on the TV. 'You kids having a good night?'

'It's all right.' I realise Harry's caught me staring at Reefer. I look away quickly.

'Um...I'll put Sammy to bed if you want.'

'He can go himself. Sammy! Get goin'!'

'But his feet—they're all black! He should have a bath,' I say.

'I'm not giving him a bath now,' Reefer shrugs. 'You wouldn't mind, would you?'

I know Harry's getting pissed off. I don't have to look at him to see it. 'No, I don't mind,' I say.

The bathroom is dirty and there are scabs of soap clinging to the tub like fish scales. I try to wash them away but the gunk is stuck hard, so I give up and decide to use the bathroom jug to rinse Sammy off.

'Stand up in the bath, Sammy,' I say. 'I'll pour warm water on you.'

Sammy doesn't argue. He pulls off his t-shirt and lifts up his arms. Something about this obedience is scary; the way he says nothing and opens his arms seems strange to me. Other little kids don't like this stuff. They want to play, not to be cuddled and washed. I guess Sammy's a weird kind of kid.

Maybe having a bath is a novelty for Sammy. He sure looks dirty enough. There are tomato sauce stains around his mouth and sticky food bits on his chest. His blond hair is a matted mess that's grown so long it's falling into his eyes.

Harry's disgusted. 'This is really feral,' he says. 'I can't believe you're giving this little rat a bath because you got a crush on his lazy-arse dad.'

'Shhh,' I warn him. I don't want Sammy repeating anything.

'Who cares if Reefer knows? It's not like anything can happen. He's like *ten years* older than you.'

'Go home if you don't want to help,' I say crossly, watching Sammy's feet turning the water black. Then I realise what I've said. 'Shit. Sorry.'

Harry shrugs. 'I'm not the one trying to impress Reefer.'

'Keep your voice down! I'm not trying to impress him.'

'Then why are you doing this?'

'Because Sammy needs a bath.'

Sammy doesn't seem to mind us arguing. He's busy spitting goobers into the tub.

'Hey, guys,' Reefer calls out. 'Keep it down, will ya? I'm trying to watch something.'

Harry gives me a look but I ignore it. I pick up a sliver of soap and dunk it into the water jug. The soap's hard and grey but it's better than nothing.

'Are you gonna wash my hair? Don't get water in my eyes,' Sammy says, squeezing them shut.

'I won't. Just keep them closed.' I push his fringe back so the water won't drip into his eyes, but I stop suddenly and put the jug down. There's a huge bruise on his forehead. It looks like a green and yellow egg.

'Bloody hell,' Harry says. His eyes meet mine in amazement. 'That's a real shiner. You don't think Reefer—'

'Of course not,' I interrupt quickly, tipping the water over Sammy's head so he won't hear. 'Sammy's just a clumsy little kid.'

'He's got another one on his knee!' Harry protests.

‘So what? He probably fell over,’ I say, but I’m feeling suspicious now. Maybe Reefer really is a bad father. ‘Hey Sammy, how did you get that bruise? Did you fall over?’

‘Yeah, I fell over.’ He opens his eyes. ‘Can I get out now?’

‘Sure.’ I pick Sammy up under the arms. He grins at me. His teeth are small, crooked and dirty.

‘So kiddo, you got any toothpaste?’ I ask.

‘Over there. I eat it sometimes. It makes my mouth taste cold and funny.’ He puts his arm around my shoulder and I carry him to the sink. With his free hand he points to a small brush.

‘It’s a Scooby Doo one,’ he says proudly.

The cartoon characters on it are so grey and faded that I can’t see Scooby Doo at all. I rinse the bristles and squeeze some paste out of the tube. It looks dry but it smells all right and I figure it’s better than nothing.

‘Brush for me?’ Sammy asks.

Harry rolls his eyes. ‘Pathetic.’

I put the brush in Sammy’s mouth and move it around. He scrunches up his face.

‘Okay, now spit.’

‘Tashtes like shand,’ Sammy says, spraying toothpaste all over my face.

I look over at Harry with my toothpaste-sprayed face. He’s fighting to restrain himself; his mouth is twitching.

‘You’re gonna laugh, Harry, I know it.’

‘No, I’m not,’ he answers through clenched teeth.

One second...two seconds...

Harry cracks up.

Our bodies shake as laughter echoes around the dusty pink bathroom. Sammy gives us a huge toothpasty grin. Harry and I erupt again. I try to rub my dirty face against Harry but he pushes me away.

‘Hey guys! Shut up, will ya?’ Reeve yells from the living room.

‘Shut up yourself!’ Harry and I yell back together.

After I’ve washed my face I take Sammy to his bedroom. He runs over to his bed and wriggles about on the sheets. His penis looks like a peanut as it bobs up and down.

‘Where are your pyjamas?’ I ask.

He stops wriggling and looks at me seriously for a moment, thinking. Then he stands up and walks over to a pile of clothes on the floor. I see his tiny naked bottom as he kneels down.

‘Nice arse,’ Harry comments sarcastically, coming in.

‘It’s cuter than yours,’ I shoot back.

‘You think so? Let’s see if it really is!’

‘Harry! No!’

He turns around and whips down his pants.

I look at his skinny naked arse and laugh. ‘Sammy’s is definitely cuter.’

‘Wanna closer look?’ Harry challenges.

Sammy runs over to Harry and wiggles his bottom at him. Harry shrugs his shoulders and wiggles his arse too.

‘Stop it! My ribs hurt!’ I fall helplessly on the bed.

‘Let’s see your bum!’ Sammy shouts, running over to me and jumping on my chest.

‘Let’s see your bum!’

‘No way!’ I answer, scooping him into my arms. He wriggles his naked little body joyously against me.

‘Okay, okay,’ I gasp, rolling off the bed and trying to catch my breath, ‘Sammy, where are your pyjamas?’

He runs over to the pile and comes back with a pair of red overalls. ‘Here.’

‘These aren’t pyjamas.’

He frowns at me. ‘Yes, they are.’

I look over at Harry, who shrugs. He’s no help as usual. ‘Sammy, maybe you should sleep naked.’

‘Okay.’ Sammy throws the overalls on the floor and crawls into bed. He rolls over onto his back and lifts his arms up for a hug. ‘Can I’ve a story?’

‘A quick one.’ I know Harry’s patience is running out.

‘Daddy always says he’ll tell me a story,’ Sammy prattles away happily, ‘He says: *once there was a father who said: son, go to bed. So he fucking did.*’

Harry and I glance at each other like we do when we’re going to laugh but we don’t say anything. In Harry’s eyes I see the same weird confused thing I’m feeling. It’s like we feel empty or really sad, but not sad like boo-hoo-hoo crying. I don’t know what you call it. It’s not anything that has a name—well, not one that I know about anyway.

‘Let’s go home,’ Harry says.

‘Okay. Goodnight, Sammy.’

‘I thought you were going to tell me a story,’ he whines.

‘I can’t. Not now.’

Sammy shuts up and accepts his hug. Then he rolls over and cradles his pillow with his skinny little arms.

In the living room we pass Reefer and the flickering shadows of the TV. Reefer says goodbye and I want to say it back but strangely the words don’t come out. I keep walking. Harry doesn’t even look at him.

*

‘Sorry about my dad’s music.’

Carnival music, the sound of Dad’s favourite movie, is seeping through the walls again. It’s better than listening to *Led Zeppelin II* on full volume, but Harry and I still can’t sleep.

‘Why won’t you ask him to turn it off?’ Harry mumbles into a pillow. He’s lying on my floor among a pile of blankets. ‘Your dad’s cool, he won’t crack the shits.’

‘I can’t. It helps him sleep.’

‘Lucky him.’

I ignore Harry’s sarcasm. There’s no way I’m going into my dad’s room. I can’t face seeing him curled up on the bed, looking like Harry does now: small and thin and white-boned, like the skeleton of a baby bird that’s fallen out of a nest.

Harry thumps his pillow in frustration and rolls over. After a while I realise he’s crying.

‘Hey Haz,’ I whisper.

‘What?’ he chokes back angrily.

I can’t say *don’t cry*. Saying it will only piss him off. He’s embarrassed about crying in front of me.

‘You can stay here until your dad chills out. Don’t worry about it.’

This doesn’t make him feel any better. ‘My dad is such a dickhead! So is Reefe...all the parents are fucked around here. All of them except yours.’

Can’t argue with that.

Harry sits up and stops crying. ‘I swear,’ he says, in a determined whisper, ‘I swear that when I grow up I’m not going to be like Dad. I’m not going to drink and hang around with losers like he does.’

‘Of course you’re not,’ I say softly. ‘You’re gonna be a professional soccer player like Pelé. You’ll kick arse.’

Harry's silent for a long time. I know he's imagining playing soccer with Pele. Harry is soccer crazy.

'I won't be like Pelé, I'll never be that good,' he says finally. 'But I'm definitely not going to be a dickhead like Dad and Mum.'

'You could be *better* than Pelé. Why not?' I say.

'I think you gotta be born special or something,' Harry says. 'I don't think I was.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I reckon you gotta be born like that. You have to be really good from the start, like you've always been with science. You're definitely gonna be a rich scientist.'

'Harry, you can be—'

'No,' he says, in a voice that seems so certain, so sure of what he's saying that I'm taken aback. He sits up and moonlight falls on him, lighting up his face.

'You gotta be born that way, good from the start,' he says. His face is solemn, like a saint in one of Nonna's religious paintings. Suddenly he seems wise and older and I can't believe he was crying before. 'You gotta be born that way, and I wasn't.'

No 4/ Dishpig

It's eight o'clock and traffic is streaming by in the dusk. I smell spicy sausage and exhaust fumes in the air. Lights are shining from my dad's café; customers are sitting on the patio out front, drinking wine and smoking skinny Italian cigarettes.

Inside the restaurant it's a full house. There's a blend of Italian and Australian voices: big families around tables, *paesani* in the corner, *Australiani* at the jukebox playing cheesy tunes. The kitchen is a mad place. The chefs and the waiters move around in circles like ballerinas in a chaotic dance. I'm surprised my dad isn't out on the floor, directing things and making sure everything is running smoothly like he usually does.

'Ah, Mattie! Hello. Are you hungry? Shall I see what I can do for you?'

Charlie the chef, who's standing at a stove, waves the spatula in his hand at me. Charlie's cooking sausages in red wine with vegetables. Dad says this is 'peasant food' and thinks it's funny the customers consider it gourmet.

'I'll do you a pizza, Mattie,' Charlie offers. 'Do you want olives and *salciccia* and pineapple—the usual?'

'Yes thanks. Can you put some anchovies on it too?'

'No problem.'

'Where's my dad? Shouldn't he be out here?'

Charlie's smile disappears. He shrugs. 'I suppose so, but he's out the back. He hasn't been around much today—he didn't turn up until three o'clock.'

Three o'clock? Dad left the house at eight this morning!

I can't tell if Charlie's worried about my dad or pissed off, but the look on his face is enough to get me spooked. I hurry through the loud fluorescent kitchen to a little poky room at the back of the restaurant. This is my dad's office, and it's a huge mess, which isn't

surprising—his desk is covered in the usual litter of papers and receipts and pizza boxes. The walls are the only tidy things in the room. They're covered with framed formula one racing posters and signed pictures of Italian soccer teams.

'Dad?' I call out. 'Dad, you around?'

'I'm in here!' comes a voice from another room.

In the dish room steam gushes against Dad's face as he pulls plates out of the washer. There are no windows and fluorescent lights reflect in pools of water on the floor. Large fans moving overhead don't seem to shift the air, and the room's thick and swampy with the steam. Dad's shirtsleeves are pulled up and there's a slick of sweat on his arms.

'Hi.' I sit on the bench next to the dishwasher.

'Hello, *bella*.' He smiles at me. I'm shocked. A smile is the last thing I expect after the strange expression on Charlie's face. I reach over and kiss Dad on the cheek.

'Lovely. *Baci* from my *principessa*.'

'Dad! Don't tease!'

He grins at me. 'A kiss from my girl who thinks she's a boy, then.'

'You're worse than Nonna! She always says I should wear dresses and dumb stuff like that.'

'I'm thirty-seven and your grandmother still tells me what to do.' Dad laughs and hands me a tea towel to wipe some cutlery.

Dishwashing is the crappiest job in any café or restaurant, and it's ranked lowest on the ladder, while proprietor is the highest. My dad's the owner and manager, but he's never been a person to pull rank. He doesn't spend all his time bossing people around and sitting on his arse like most managers. It's not unusual to see him acting as a waiter or tending the bar when someone's called in sick, but he always keeps an eye on the floor, making sure that the customers are happy and the kitchen is running on time. Giving himself the worst job of

dishpig and shutting himself away in here is crazy, and not turning up to work until three o'clock is even crazier. I desperately want to know where he's been but I don't ask. I can still see him lying on his bed, curled up like a little boy, hugging his pillow and telling me to go back to my room.

Nothing's wrong. It's all right.

Whatever's going on, he doesn't want me to know.

'Dad,' I say softly. 'Why are you being the dishpig?' I can't let it go altogether.

'I don't feel like talking to people today.' He bends down to reload the dishwasher as I wipe some forks. 'All the noise, all the chaos out there does my head in. Anyway, Terry's keeping an eye on things. It's good for him to get some experience.'

'But Terry's not on the floor! I didn't see him when I came in. You should go out there.'

'He's taking care of things, don't worry. He probably nipped outside to check on the deliveries.'

It seems strange that Dad isn't more worried about this, but maybe I'm overreacting. Charlie's probably pissed off because he doesn't like Terry telling him what to do. Terry's the second-in-command around here and he's a nice guy, but he's new to the job.

'Dad, let's have some music.'

He leans over and switches on the radio. 'What station do you want? *Radio Italia?*'

'No way! That's so *Nonna!*'

Dad flicks the knob over and turns up the music. The station is playing Frank Sinatra's *New York New York*. He whips the tea towel out of my hand and tosses it into the air, singing along with the chorus.

'Dad! This station doesn't play anything but stupid wog music like Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra!'

'Don't forget the Italian disco hour,' he says gleefully. 'I think that's coming up.'

‘Nooo!’ I squeal and reach over for the radio. ‘Do you know how much Harry pays me out about that? When Nonna has it on he runs around the living room laughing and tries to make her dance with him.’

‘Harry’s one to talk! Look at what his parents listen to—horrible rock music at all hours of the night.’ Dad drops the towel and grabs my hand. ‘Do do da da da...’

‘Dad, you are such a dag.’

He kisses me loudly on the cheek and stands back, snapping his fingers to the beat. The fans whip uselessly over our heads. The dishwasher crunches its gears and a rush of hot water churns in its gut. I pull my legs up onto the bench and start drying the cutlery again. Dad goes to the fridge and takes out some eggs.

‘I might be a dag, but I can still juggle,’ he says, tossing them into the air.

‘Don’t be crazy, you’ll drop them!’

‘I won’t drop them. Juggling’s like bike riding.’

‘Yeah, except it’s a lot harder.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Dad grins, but he doesn’t look at me, because he’s watching the eggs. ‘It’s easier than you think. It’s just a bit of practice, same as anything else. It’s all in the eyes, you see. It’s all in the eyes.’

‘Dad, I don’t know anyone else who can juggle, but I know a lot of people who can ride bikes.’

‘It’s not so hard to learn.’

‘Tell me about the circus,’ I say. It’s been a long time since he’s sang and juggled and mucked around like this; I don’t want him to go back to being sad and quiet again.

‘Matilda, I’ve told you about the circus a million times.’

Dad was in a children's circus when he was a kid, but he didn't ride horses or elephants or anything like that. He was an acrobat and a juggler in a troupe which performed shows at schools and fairs.

'Sometimes I think I should've kept at it, and run away with an adult circus when I grew up,' he sighs. 'There's something wonderful about them, Mattie. Maybe it's the accordion music, the smell of hot doughnuts, the crowds—who knows? I'm not sure what it is.' He shrugs. 'Maybe I'm just a silly old man who loves fairs. A silly old man who can juggle an egg better than a café.'

Maybe my dad is a silly old man who loves fairs, but I like it that way. He makes me laugh when he's acting like a clown or a total dag.

'Here's your order. Special delivery!' Charlie the chef walks in with my pizza. He grins at me, and I grin back, relieved. He's not tense or upset anymore, and the weird expression is gone.

Charlie has dark spiky hair and big chocolate eyes and all the girls who come into the restaurant love him. Sometimes when I hang around the restaurant I run into the kitchen and give him reports on the girls. 'Girl on table six is really hot,' I'll say, and then I'll tell him what colour her hair is and how big her boobs are.

'Have some pizza, Dad,' I urge, taking the box from Charlie. 'I got anchovies for you.'

Charlie wipes his hands on my tea towel, winks at me and goes out. Dad stops dancing and takes the box from my hands. He stares at me for a long time. I wipe the cutlery and stare back, wondering what he's thinking.

'Thank you,' he says. 'But you should eat this.'

'I will. I just thought you should have a piece.'

'*Bella*, you're not fooling anyone. I know you hate anchovies. Don't worry so much, okay? I'm fine. I've already eaten.'

There's a sudden silence as a song on the radio ends. The slow whirring of the fans in the steamy air can be heard, the dishwasher grinds on, and a tap drips *plink plink* against the stainless steel sink.

'You're so much like her, Matilda. That's a wonderful thing. I'm proud of you.'

There's no need to ask who *her* is.

'Dad, give me a break! I love Nonna, but I don't want to be like her. God, I can't think of anything worse. Can we change the station?' I ask, as a Dean Martin song begins.

'No, no, this is the song of the night!' Dad suddenly smiles and starts dancing again. As he turns around and snaps his fingers he steps into one of the puddles on the floor. He looks at me and we can't hold our laughter back; it breaks like a wave over us.

No 5/ Silenzio

Today I'm playing in the courtyard with Harry. We're up in the fig tree looking at the blueness of the sky and aiming half-ripe figs at targets. Our prime target is Mr Stephenson's bathroom window, and it's a matter of revenge. Mr Stephenson from number nine is a grumpy old goat who never fails to tell Harry and me off, no matter what we're doing. The figs aren't actually hard enough to break the window, so we're making a mess rather than causing any real trouble. There's a few splats on the walls around the bathroom window, but we haven't hit the glass yet.

Throwing figs at windows is helping Harry feel a bit better. He's been quiet and moody since he woke up this morning. At breakfast he ate like a robot, chewing his way through his toast silently and glumly, eyes fixed on the plastic tablecloth. Nonna gave me a funny look: *what's wrong with him?*

I shrugged to say *I don't know*, but Nonna didn't buy it. She's not stupid, and she doesn't miss much when she's awake. If she wasn't old and napped all the time I'd never get away with anything, especially lying.

Harry's got a good bullshit factor. He can charm almost anyone, and he can make up excuses on the spot. The problem is that this doesn't work at home, the place where he needs it most. Harry's parents have him sussed.

'We're running out of ripe figs,' I tell him, swinging my legs from the branches. The tree is really tall, and even though I'm almost at the top I'm not scared. I'm being held in its wooden arms.

'I'm bored of this anyhow. Let's do something else.' Harry shimmies down the branches like a pale monkey.

'Mr Dray's got that new dirt bike movie you wanted to see. Let's go watch it.'

Harry looks up at me, making a face as he squints in the sunlight. ‘I dunno, Mattie. I don’t really like going there.’

‘He’s a bit weird, but so what? There’s nothing else to do.’

The truth is that I don’t really want to go there either, but I don’t want Harry sitting around getting bored and moping.

Mr Dray lives on the top level of the apartment block’s left side. His small unit sticks out of the main building. It looks strangely tacked on, like a hand reaching out for the city.

Corey answers the door. He’s eleven years old and has black hair and no front teeth. A flying swing in a playground knocked them out. His mum (who lives with him downstairs in number fifteen) say she’ll buy Corey a new set of teeth when he stops swinging from rails and jumping off skateboards.

‘Hey Corey, whatcha doin’?’ I ask.

‘Watching the new bike movie. Did Mr Dray tell you about it?’

‘Yeah. We heard.’ Harry doesn’t look happy.

Corey thinks Mr Dray’s weird too, but he comes here all the time, because Mr Dray has cool stuff. Corey’s mum doesn’t care what he does, so he’s allowed to do whatever he wants. I hate rules but at least I know Nonna cares if I’m missing. Even Harry’s parents have some rules, and one of them is not to go to Mr Dray’s or hang around at Reefer’s.

‘They’re both weirdos,’ Harry’s mum once warned us. ‘If I catch you two going around to their flats I’ll have you by the neck.’

There’s one thing I can say for number twelve—it’s clean and it sure smells better than Reefer’s wee-smelling flat.

‘Where’s Mr Dray?’ Harry whispers to Corey.

‘Dunno. In his bedroom, I think. Check out this jump!’ Corey leads us into the flat and runs right up to the TV screen. Harry and I look at each other. We like Corey but he’s kind of hyperactive and crazy.

‘Hello, Harry.’ Mr Dray appears in the doorway. He’s tall, almost six and a half feet, and he’s so skinny that his cheekbones stick out of his face. ‘Hello, Mattie.’

‘Hi,’ I say. Harry doesn’t answer directly. He nods and hits the rewind button on the remote control.

Corey, oblivious to Mr Dray, shouts, ‘That was a crap jump! Don’t rewind it! Wait for the next one, it’s heaps better!’

‘You kids like the movie? You should come around next week. I’m getting the sequel,’ Mr Dray says. He sits down at the table behind us and picks up a newspaper.

‘Cool,’ Corey says, taking the remote control away from Harry and hurling himself on the couch again.

Corey is really into the motorbike jumps and so super-enthusiastic about it that he rewinds them over and over until I’m bored out of my skin. Harry’s more interested than me, but even he senses that something’s off—Mr Dray isn’t really reading the newspaper. He’s looking at us without looking at us, if you know what I mean.

I tell myself I’m being stupid because Mr Dray is totally harmless. He’s far less crazy than Harry’s dad or Reefer, who can get drunk and crazy too (I’ve seen Reefer in a punchup with Colin from number seven over who got to drink the last beer, for pete’s sake). Even Mrs Firske in number fourteen is crazier; in fact she’s so crazy she deserves her nickname of ‘Batshit-Crazy-Firske’. You couldn’t pay me to get anywhere near Mrs Firske or her precious cat, which she is always accusing everyone else of poisoning.

Maybe she’s not being paranoid for once. Look what happened to Panzo.

Mattie, get a grip!

I'm being stupid. Panzo's dead, Harry's dad's getting meaner, my dad's keeping a big secret and I'm overreacting and getting spooked about everything. I take a deep breath and pretend to watch the bike movie for a while. When I've calmed down I sneak a glance over my shoulder.

Mr Dray isn't staring at us. His eyes are moving back and forth. He's actually reading the newspaper.

Harry looks at me and stands up. 'This is getting boring. Let's go.'

'Before you do that,' interrupts Mr Dray, 'take the movie.'

'What?' Corey exclaims in indignation. 'Why does he get to keep it?'

'You can have the next one, Corey,' Mr Dray says. 'Take it, Harry.'

'I don't want it,' Harry answers sullenly.

Yes, you do, I think. You love this bike stuff. But then I look at him and see that he really doesn't want it. He looks fierce; almost angry.

I sigh. My attempts to distract Harry from brooding about his dad have failed miserably. Since Harry can't have it out with him, he's going to make everyone else around him suffer.

'Come on, lad, I want you to have it,' Mr Dray persists. He nods at the movie encouragingly.

Harry surprises me by shrugging and taking it.

Outside, in the sunlight, he walks ahead of me on the balcony. 'Watch this,' he says.

He raises his arm against the blueness of the sky and launches the DVD into the atmosphere. It plunges down into the bushes of the courtyard.

'Holy crap, Harry!' I shriek.

Harry turns to look at me. His expression is triumphant. 'I told him I didn't want it.'

*

At night I watch television with Nonna. We turn all the lights off apart from a lamp by Nonna's recliner and sit side by side. Dad used to sit with us but he rarely does now.

Harry went home tonight. He didn't want to, but he didn't have much choice. I didn't want Nonna to see his parents storming over here to fetch him. Nonna knows Harry's parents are loud and piss him off, but she doesn't know they smoke dope and get drunk all the time. Nonna's never been to their flat and she doesn't go out at night, so what she gets is the best possible version of Harry's folks. She doesn't see them playing cards or having an argument outside the laundry at one a.m. because they're crazy drunk. She sees the daytime version, in which they're both sober and polite, doing normal things like hanging out the washing.

Harry and I have never talked about keeping their partying and drinking a secret from Nonna. We've done it without needing to. We both know what would happen if she found out the truth.

I try to concentrate on the TV and stop thinking about Harry. This is hard to do because Nonna's favourite TV shows are cheesy soapies that bore me. I have to spend the ad breaks explaining all the stuff that she doesn't understand, even though I'm not interested in the first place. *Neighbours* is Nonna's favourite. I guess it's my favourite too, because it's the easiest to translate into simple English. Harry and I were going to ring up Channel Ten and ask them to add Italian subtitles until I remembered she can't read.

Now that it's summer holidays we're stuck watching horrible summer TV, which is even worse than the usual soapie crap. There's no *Neighbours* to watch—only our real life neighbours, who I can't stop thinking about anyway. Harry's not the only one on my mind.

'Guess what, Nonna. Little Sammy's got some really bad bruises. I think his dad hit him.'

Sammy's bruises have been bothering me. I can't bear the thought of Reefer bashing him up. Sammy's a pretty annoying little kid, but he's kind of sweet and I figure someone should

help him. I can't do anything about Harry's problems, but maybe I can do something about Sammy's.

'Where he have bruise?' Nonna asks.

'He had one on his forehead, like an egg.' I point to my fringe. 'And he had another one on his knee.'

'Sammy's father very bad man. He no treat his son very nice. I feel sorry.'

'What should we do? Should we tell the police?'

Nonna sits up in her recliner so fast it scares me. Usually she huffs and puffs and takes ages to get up. 'No! Don't you say nuting!' she cries. 'Not to nobody!'

'Why not? You just said you feel sorry for Sammy.'

'Sammy's father find out we tell police, maybe he come after us! Maybe he come here and make trouble. Maybe he hurt you. I want no trouble for you, no trouble!'

'But Nonna, we can't just let—'

'No, we must not say nuting! Sammy's father too danger, you hear? We do little thing for Sammy, like give him food for lunch when he hungry. But we no interfere and tell police.'

I look at Nonna miserably. She's probably right. Reefer doesn't have the greatest reputation in the neighbourhood.

'You no go his place,' Nonna adds as a warning. 'I tole you, you no go there.'

'I didn't go there,' I lie. 'Sammy showed me his bruises in the car park.'

This lie isn't so bad. I've already decided to stay away from Reefer's flat, because I can't bear to watch how he treats Sammy.

'You promise never to say nuting.' Nonna points her finger at me.

I sigh. Lies are one thing, but Nonna's promises are deadly. She gives promises the gravity of marriage vows or blood oaths, and she'd never forgive me if I broke one. I wasn't kidding when I said everything is such a big deal with Italians.

‘Okay, okay,’ I promise.

‘I go to the *gabinetto*, then we find show to watch.’ Nonna declares our discussion over and stands up. She’s going to the toilet, even though she went twice during dinner. Old people are always in the toilet.

I flick through the TV channels with the remote control, feeling frustrated.

‘Nonna, get out of the *gabs!*’ I shout. ‘There’s a movie on!’

Nonna comes out of the toilet and whacks me with the TV guide. I laugh and throw a pillow at her.

‘Don’t you throw pillow at old lady,’ she chuckles, sitting down in the recliner and leaning back. She folds her hands in her lap and puts her feet up. ‘What this movie about?’

‘It’s *The Castle*, a movie about a guy who fights to keep his house because the government wants to take it.’

‘I think the Australian Government just like mafia. The mafia try to take land away from poor people in Calabria.’

‘Nonna! It’s only a movie!’

‘*Si, si*, but land stealing is true,’ she says. ‘The government take land away from black people too. I see on the TV.’

‘Yeah, but this movie isn’t a true story! It’s meant to be *funny*. Anyway, we’ve seen it before. The guy has a pool room and he puts all those silly things in it, remember?’

‘I like the things he put in pool room. I no see why they silly.’

I roll my eyes. ‘What about the food they eat? Remember those meat things they have for tea—the rissoles? You thought they were hilarious.’

‘Oh yeah, I remember,’ Nonna says, sitting up. ‘I always knew *Australiani* eat rubbish. That funny, I see.’

The TV flicks over to commercials again. Nonna looks at me and purses her lip in a way that makes Harry and I laugh, even though we know she's thinking about something important.

Oh great. Super-bloody-fantastic. I've already dodged one bullet tonight and now I'm in for another one.

'I wish your father eat,' she sighs, picking up the TV remote and turning the volume down. 'He not get rubbage for dinner, no rissole thing! He get pasta and *cotoletta*, very nice thing, but he neva eat.'

I've got no choice now. I have to risk another lie.

'Nonna, he probably eats at work a lot, so he's too full to eat dinner when he gets home.'

'Heh, I don't think so. He very *schkinny*.' She shrugs. 'Oh Mattie, I wish it was like old days. You remember old days? When your fardder, he take us places? He take us to the beach, and to the fair. You remember that time when he juggle the fire?'

'Yeah, course I remember.' I sigh and stand up. The last thing I feel like doing now is talking about Dad. 'Nonna, I'm tired. I'm gonna go to my room.'

'Okay, okay. *Buona notte*.'

'*Buona notte*.'

Downstairs I listen to my dad's movie through the walls. It sounds old and sad and lost, like it doesn't belong to this time. The carnival music's spinning like a merry-go-round, like a lonely dancer. I close my eyes. I'm almost dreaming when I see batons of fire going around in the dark.

No 6/ Writing Letters to my Nonna

It's an hour past dawn and I'm risking Nonna's wrath. If she wakes up and realises I'm not in my bed, there'll be hell to pay.

I'm following my dad. He's standing on a traffic island between rushing cars, waiting for a chance to cross the road. He's walking towards the restaurant, but I can't assume he's actually going to work.

Dad's work clothes are no guarantee either. It's too early for a shift at the café; even though it's daylight the neon sign of the Dragon Diner restaurant is still on, and all the shops are shut. There's hardly any pedestrians around, so there's no crowds for me to hide in. It's fortunate that Dad hasn't looked back. He's walked all the way here with his head down and his hands in his pockets, smoking a cigarette.

I've never seen my dad smoke before. If Nonna finds out she'll flush all his cigarettes down the toilet and yell at him. (She'll pray for him too, but later, when she's calmed down a bit.)

When I woke up an hour ago the apartment was quiet, except for the sound of running water in the bathroom. I heard the water being switched off and footsteps on the bathroom tiles. The footsteps were Dad's. His footsteps sound louder and faster than Nonna's.

I got out of bed and pulled some clean clothes on, having already decided that I was going to follow him and see where he was going. Before I left I ran up to the kitchen and scrawled Nonna a note.

Leaving a note seems like a stupid thing to do because she can't read, but Nonna and I have invented our own note-writing system.

When I was seven I went out to play with Harry and left Nonna a note. By the time I got back she was in hysterics because she couldn't read it and thought something terrible had

happened (once Nonna latches onto her idea of the worst it's only a few minutes before she believes it to be the absolute truth).

After that Nonna and I worked out a simple system. Now I write *M* and *O-U-T* which translates to her as *Nonna, I have gone out. Back later. Don't worry.* Nonna writes the same thing, except in her case the *M* means *I have gone to visit Maria and we are making pasta. Don't get into any trouble. Don't make a mess.* She even writes *O-U-T* on the end because she's memorised the letters from my notes.

Today's note might buy me some time, but not much. It will stop Nonna from completely freaking out, but she's still going to panic because I've done something unusual and left the house early.

As soon as I've seen where Dad's been going I'll leg it home and go into damage control. If Nonna's still in bed all I'll have to do is rip up the note. If she's awake, I'll have to lie to her again, and tell her that I walked Dad to work. There's no way I can tell Nonna that a) I'm spying on Dad because he pretended to go to work yesterday and went somewhere else until three o'clock and b) he's definitely not having dinner at the restaurant.

Whatever's wrong with Dad is so bad that he's not sleeping or eating much. Nonna knows this, but proof of it is going to make her worry even more. The last thing she needs to know is that he's missing work as well. Nonna's devoted her entire life to looking after me and my dad; she'd be devastated if she knew that he's playing hooky and has hit absolute rock bottom.

Dad loves the restaurant. It's always been his life.

Dad is now standing on the traffic island, but he's not really paying too much attention to the cars. He's just staring at his feet while puffing away on the cancer stick.

The cars slow to a stop at the traffic lights ahead and Dad finally shuffles off the island, weaving in and out of the cars to the other side. I make a mad dash from behind because I

don't want to lose him, but it's pretty hairy thing to do and it inspires a whole lot of angry beeps.

Dad ignores the beeps and doesn't bother to turn around. He walks past the restaurant without even looking at it.

Shit.

He stops at a bin, flicks his cigarette butt in, and lights up another one. The realisation that he has a whole packet of cigarettes shocks me. He barely eats, so why does he bother to buy cigarettes and smoke them? I think about lungs full of tar and holes in necks that I've seen in anti-smoking commercials. I'm watching Dad do something terrible, something as deadly as a shot of heroin into the arm.

Geez. Maybe Nonna's not the only one who exaggerates.

I tell myself I'm being stupid but I can't help feeling bad about this. I follow Dad with the growing fear that maybe I should turn around and go home. Maybe I'll feel worse when I find out where he's been going instead of work.

I'm absolutely stunned when I see him stop, put out the cigarette and walk into a church.

*

Nonna's still asleep when I get home. I feel lucky as hell. I screw up the note and climb into bed, my mind racing.

Dad's never been religious like Nonna. I've been christened as a Catholic, but only because Nonna managed to wear Dad down by fighting for it. She believes baptised kids go to heaven but all the rest get sent to limbo. I think that's probably rubbish but there's no talking Nonna out of anything when it comes to religion.

The funny thing is, Nonna wouldn't be happy to hear Dad went to church. He's refused to go for years, and he's never let her take me to church on Sundays, even though she's begged him to.

I don't want religion forced on her, Mamma. I got her baptised for you, that's enough,
he'd said.

A year ago Nonna was pushing for me to take communion. She was really angry when I refused to do it. We had the biggest fight we've ever had, and I had to walk away from her and go cry in my room, because she wouldn't back off with the hell and limbo crap.

Dad had supported my decision and comforted me.

Religion makes Nonna happy, he'd said. It makes her feel safe. But for some people, religion's scary, because it's not all about love: it's about fear and death. The way I deal with it is to be an atheist. That's hard sometimes, because religion can't comfort you about life after death if you don't think it's real, but the thing is, it can't scare you in life either.

I roll around in my sheets, feeling anxious and confused. I still don't know whether God is real or not. What I do know is that it's crazy that my dad has changed his mind. Until I figure out why he's going to church I can't tell Nonna anything.

I close my eyes. Despite my jumpy nerves, I'm starting to feel really tired. I'm almost asleep before I realise this is the first silence I've heard in weeks; there's no carnival music seeping through the walls. No wonder I'm drifting away.

*

By lunchtime Harry's back again. Things must have gone okay with his parents because he's not upset or moody, and he hasn't mentioned them at all. In fact, he's being really cheerful and really annoying.

'Let's have a fight,' he shouts, tossing a pillow at my head.

'No, not again!'

'Yes, again!' He lobs another pillow at me.

'What you two do?' Nonna asks, coming into the room.

Sometimes I think Nonna's a hundred years old. Okay, maybe not that old, but she's *old*. She's been wearing an apron and a hair net all day. (I've never seen anyone but Nonna and Maria-down-the-street wear a hair net, and Maria-down-the-street's just as old and woggy as Nonna so she doesn't count.)

'Nonna, you are *bellissima*,' Harry says graciously, picking up the pillows and giving me a stern look. 'Sorry, Nonna. Mattie was being really loud and making too much noise.' He runs behind her and sticks his tongue out at me.

'Harry, you very charm,' Nonna says. 'But *silenzio*.'

Harry glances at me, looking confused. 'Okay, sorry,' he mumbles.

Nonna usually plays along with Harry, calling him 'the cheeky bugger'. Today she is serious. She passes a shaking hand over her eyes.

'Nonna? Are you okay?' I ask.

'Yes, I just tire.'

There's a knock at the door. Nonna shrugs and throws up her hands. 'It's the cat,' she says. 'Mattie, *aprire la porta*. I make the sangwidge.'

'The cat?' Harry asks with great interest.

'The boy who live down the stair,' Nonna answers. 'His name Sammy. He come here for food, only at lunch time, like cat.'

Harry rolls his eyes. 'Not Sammy! What is it about that little turd? Why doesn't he ever stay home?'

I sigh and go downstairs to answer the door. I can't be bothered arguing with Harry. If this is all Nonna and I can do for Sammy, then we're going to do it no matter what Harry thinks.

'Hi, Sammy, how are ya?'

'Hi! I'm hungry,' he says, scratching his bottom.

‘We’re having eggplant sandwiches,’ I say, teasing him. Eggplant sandwiches are the most disgusting thing I can think of.

‘Okay,’ Sammy says agreeably, stepping inside. With a pang I realise that he’d eat anything—and I mean *anything*—because there’s nothing else for him to eat.

‘I was only joking. It’s not eggplant sandwiches,’ I say guiltily, closing the door.

Sammy runs towards the stairs but I grab his waist to stop him. There’s something off-key about the sudden silence in the house; something that makes me hold his quivering body back. It’s quiet upstairs.

Very, very quiet.

In the kitchen Harry’s hand is on Nonna’s shoulder; his small, freckled palm is pressed against her dress. She’s standing over the sink with her head bent. Her legs are shaking.

‘Nonna! What’s wrong?’

‘Nuting! I orright,’ she answers, but her voice is rough, and she’s panting heavily.

‘You’re not all right!’

‘What’s wrong with her?’ Sammy shouts. ‘Is she drunk?’

‘No, no, she’s all right,’ Harry says unconvincingly, trying to calm me.

I push him out of the way and jerk Nonna’s head up. She looks at me with milky, unseeing blue eyes.

‘*Mani, mani,*’ she cries, waving her hands about.

‘What’s wrong?’ I ask, grabbing hold of them. She winces and pulls away. Harry gives me a puzzled look.

‘It’s her hands,’ I explain. ‘There’s something wrong with her hands.’

Nonna repeats her mad dance with the waving hands.

‘Nonna, what’s wrong with them?’

‘Itch! Itch!’ She kicks her leg out and points her toe at me. ‘I feel in *piede* too!’

'I think she's drunk like my dad,' Sammy says.

'Shoosh, Sammy.' I calm myself enough to try translating *itch*. 'It's pins and needles, Harry! She's got pins and needles!'

Harry pulls a chair out, and we guide Nonna into it gently. She sits there for a while, trembling and holding her face in her hands. I stroke her hair.

'I'm orright,' she says, looking up. 'I'm orright.'

'Can you see?' I ask.

'Oh yeah. Orright. Just very tire.'

'Can I have a sandwich now?' Sammy interrupts.

'No, go home,' Harry says.

'No, no, give him the sangwidge. It's on bench dere. I orright, I tole you. I just very tire.'

Sammy takes the sandwich from the bench and stuffs it in his mouth.

'Come on, Nonna, come lie down.' I tug at her arm and she stands up slowly. Harry takes her other arm. Slowly, in what feels like an inch an hour, we guide her downstairs to her room.

'*Dorme.*' I say. '*Dorme, Nonna.*'

'I no sleep. No now. Too early.'

I sigh in frustration. Nonna's eyes keep fluttering; it's an effort for her to keep them open, but she's resisting just like she always does when something isn't the way she wants. Most Italians are stubborn, but Nonna takes the cake.

'Come on, you've got to rest. Don't worry about anything else, I'll finish making the pizza...you've got to take it easy, okay?'

Nonna mutters *dio mio* under her breath but I can tell that this suggestion is helping her calm down.

‘Harry, go home. I’ll look after her.’ I help Nonna take off her shoes. She lies down on the bed.

‘Um, all right.’ Harry lingers, unsure, in the doorway.

‘We’ll be fine. You go. Take Sammy home.’

‘You reckon she’s gonna be okay?’

‘I guess so.’ I wave him away.

‘Mattie, you no stay here, you go with Harry,’ Nonna urges from behind her closed eyes and her wrinkled, tired face.

‘No,’ I say. ‘No.’

Harry nods and takes Sammy out.

Nonna starts to breathe deeply. It sounds like the steady breathing of sleep. The clock above the window ticks in the quiet. I listen to it and Nonna’s rhythmic breathing. I watch the gum trees in the sunshine. I sit on her bed, very still, thinking of nothing, until she touches my hand.

‘This kind of thing, it just happen when you are old,’ Nonna says. ‘It mean nuting at all. I am just old.’

‘Yeah, it’s nothing, Nonna. You’re just old,’ I agree.

I’m a terrible liar, but so is Nonna. We don’t know what’s really happened to her and we’re both pretty scared.

We hold hands as we lie to each other. If we do this for long enough we’ll believe it. Nonna keeps her eyes squeezed shut and I keep staring out the window.

No 7/ The River

Sometimes when I'm asleep I dream of the ocean. I dream of water underneath a grey sky; of a storm that's moving through the waves. I see lightning on the horizon. White birds calling in the wind.

When I wake, gum trees ripple in the dark, and the lights of the city outshine the stars. There's a shape of a boy at the window. He's waving his arms up and down, gesturing for me to come out.

'Haz, what is it?' I ask grumpily, opening the window. 'I don't want to go wandering tonight.'

'Sammy's missing.'

'What do you mean?'

'Reefe can't find him.'

'So? Reefe lets him wander around all the time.'

'Yeah, but Sammy's been missing for *hours*.'

'Why do you care if Sammy's missing? You hate him.'

Harry shrugs. 'I don't *hate* him, I just think he's annoying. I don't have anything better to do anyway—Dad's drunk and Mum's tearing strips off him, so I can't sleep. We should help look for Sammy, shouldn't we? It's not like Reefe's gonna find him by himself. He doesn't know all the places Sammy plays in, all the hidey holes and stuff.'

'The bins,' I say, inspired. 'That's where he might be. Sometimes he plays near the bins. He looks for stuff to play with that people have thrown out.'

Harry looks at me in horror. 'That's really *gross*.'

'I guess he gets bored with sticks and rocks.'

*

Harry and I smell the bin lane from across the car park. There's an old mattress lying on the concrete next to the cans. A lopsided card table with bendy legs stands beside it, as if it's struggling to stay on its feet. A shadow moves against the fence. It's the shape of a bent-over man, wobbling like the table. Harry and I jump in fright.

'Is that you, Old Ishmael?' Harry calls. It's so quiet out here it seems like his voice will shatter all the windows in the street.

'Eh? Hey? Yeh, it's Ishmael.' He emerges from the bin lane, holding what looks like a pair of pants. 'I'm taking this with me.'

'Bloody hell! You scared us,' Harry says. He looks at me and we laugh shakily. It's not like us to be spooked so easily; we've gone on thousands of midnight jaunts around the neighbourhood. I don't have the guts to run around by myself, but Harry makes me feel brave. He never seems scared of anything.

'Look here at these pair of pants,' Old Ishmael blathers on. 'I got 'em, 'cos I found 'em. Look here, they're mine. You're not taking them from me.'

'Don't think they'll fit me,' Harry answers cheekily. 'They're pretty small. You can keep 'em.'

Old Ishmael shambles off, clutching the ragged pants.

'I heard he's a weirdo junk collector, like those people who store stuff all over their house and can't get through their doors,' Harry whispers.

'You *think*?' I reply sarcastically, elbowing him.

'Come on, let's go down to the river,' he says. 'We'll find Sammy down there.'

As soon as he says it, I know it's true. Adrenalin moves our legs and wind pummels down our lungs and we fly through the streets, our arms thrown back and our chests pushed forwards. I feel strong and fast and invincible, like a superhero who can run across the entire world and still get home by dawn.

Harry and I run down the path into the river valley. A train rumbles past us, shooting over the bridge towards the city. We wade through the water to a box we keep in a niche of the bridge. Sammy knows about it and we've caught him taking things from it before.

'The tennis ball's missing,' Harry says, jamming the box back in the bridge. 'He's been here all right.'

'Oh my God.'

'Don't worry,' Harry says reassuringly. 'We'll find him. He's probably just fallen asleep.'

It's the biggest lie in the world and I know it, but I feel better anyway. 'Where are we gonna look? The river goes on for miles, to the sea or something.'

Harry snorts. 'He can't have gone that far, he's only a little kid. Maybe we're on the wrong track anyway, maybe he's not here anymore. Maybe Social Services took him and didn't tell Reefer.'

'They'd do that?'

'Take Sammy away? For sure.'

'No, no, I know they'd take Sammy away, but they'd tell Reefer, wouldn't they?'

'Dunno. Wish they would take me away from my parents though.' Harry winks at me.

I look at him and I want to laugh but I'm still a little scared. It might seem stupid to think Sammy is here, but the tennis ball *is* missing. The stash in the bridge is a secret. No one else knows.

Harry jerks his head back towards the riverbank. 'Come on, let's go look.'

I follow him, glad he's taking charge. The river seems eerie and abandoned. Gum trees rustle in the dark, and frogs croak along with the singing of crickets. An eerie feeling passes through me. It's so lonely and strange out here; it's like Harry and I are the only people in the world.

‘I’m scared, Haz.’

‘Don’t be scared. Nothing’s gonna happen.’ He pushes his way through the reeds lining the bank.

It’s hard work moving through this jungle, even in Harry’s wake; near the waterline the reeds are thick and whip up against my face and arms. I stop to take a deep breath and hear the *plink plink* of water rats on the river’s edge.

‘Harry, I want to get out.’

‘Don’t be silly, Matts. I wanna see if Sammy’s on this side of the river. Maybe he fell asleep in that hollow gum tree he plays in.’

The reeds reach up from the marshy riverbank and surround the trunk of the tree. Harry and I get down on our knees and crawl into the bowels of the tree. It’s stuffy and dark inside. Harry scrabbles around with a hand, touching the tree’s inner skin, the smooth, cold flesh, moving his fingers through the dirt.

‘It’s here,’ he whispers.

‘What?’

‘The tennis ball. It’s here. Sammy’s been here.’

‘Are you sure?’

I feel Harry’s fingers touch mine. The tennis ball rolls over the palm of my hand.

‘No one,’ he whispers quietly, as the ball falls away into the darkness, ‘no one but a stupid little kid would play with a tennis ball in here.’

And now softly, just softly, it seems as if the river creeps into the hollow gum tree, filling up my eyes with water and a pain as cold and terrible as the river itself. My father’s misery and the sounds of his lonely, haunting carnival music has never scared me quite like this.

I think of the day after the storm, when the gums gave up all their branches and leaves; the day the trees were armless against the sky and the river flowed with branches and torn

willow fronds and rats. The day Harry and I talked about Panzo floating downstream. The day it didn't seem so bad that things died.

I realise I'm listening to strange breathing in the dark. Harry's panting and sniffing furiously. I'm shaking beside him, covered in sweat.

'He's here,' Harry says. 'He's here.'

*

Harry and I trawl through the forest of reeds, listening to the river and the crickets, trying to listen above the rhythms for human noise. I stumble over rocks I can't see. Logs rotting into the ground dissolve under my feet. I crook my leg away from a sharp reed and slip in a small, marshy puddle. My foot slides against a rock. I fall down in a mess of mud and reeds.

Lying in the mud I realise that the rock is white. White and small with tiny feet. I feel a small, cold nose against my palm; hard little eyelashes that don't blink when I put my hand over the eyes.

Harry carries him. Under a lamp on Clifton Street we see the mud smeared on his t-shirt. The blood caked under his little nose. The places where his blond hair has been torn out.

'Close his eyes, Harry,' I gasp. I turn away as he passes his hand over Sammy's face.

'It's okay, they're closed now. Come on.'

I watch Harry carry the body down the street. I follow in procession, crying as Harry cries, crying as the river moves on towards the ocean, carrying its own procession of dead rats and dogs and children.

*

Harry and I stand on the edges of the car park. The flats are dark now; only the laundry is buzzing a dull fluorescence across the courtyard. Even Reefer's light is out.

'We can't just knock on his door.' The words shake through Harry's teeth. 'What are we gonna say? Good evening Reefer, your kid is dead?'

‘He won’t think we did it,’ I whisper back.

‘So what? He’ll go psycho anyway.’

We stand there in a miserable silence until a thought strikes me so violently that I grab Harry’s arm.

The bruises!

‘The park across the street,’ I whisper. ‘Come on! We can hide behind the bottlebrushes.’

‘What? Why do we have to—?’

‘Shut up.’ I’m trying to hold back a wave of fear. ‘Let’s go.’

Harry follows me into the park, stumbling as he tries to keep his grip on Sammy. We hurry past the empty swing set and the play area to the bushes. Harry falls awkwardly to the ground, cradling the little body in his arms.

‘Mattie, I’m scared.’

Harry’s breathing too quickly. I can hear wheezing and rasping, like wind coiling up inside his chest, unable to get out; the noise of an ocean inside a shell.

‘Calm down, stop breathing so fast. You’ll have an asthma attack.’

‘Okay.’ Harry gasps the words out in an ugly strangled choke. He breathes in with a shudder. I watch his body steady as his lungs unfold like insect wings. He sits up, nestling Sammy in his lap.

‘What are we gonna do, Harry?’ I whisper.

‘Let’s take him to Reefer’s,’ he rasps.

‘But Harry, *we can’t*,’ I answer miserably. ‘We can’t. You saw the bruises on Sammy. Reefer did this.’

Harry squirms and his hold on Sammy tightens. His eyes are big frightened orbs in the shadows.

We fall back into silence, our hearts banging in the darkness; two hearts moving against a still one. A passing car throws light on the park, and we hunch over, closer to the ground, hiding even though the bushes are already screening us.

Alone again in the dark, Harry raises his head. ‘What about your family, Mattie? Maybe they can help us.’

No! Don't you say nuting! Not to nobody!

I see Nonna looking at me: blue eyes fearful, bloodshot whites radiating.

Sammy's father find out we tell police, maybe he come after us. Maybe he come here and make trouble. Maybe he hurt you. I want no trouble for you...no trouble...Sammy father too danger, you hear? You promise to never say nuting...

‘Nonna can't help. She's scared of Reefer, just like us.’ My voice is flat, crushing Harry's hopes. ‘She couldn't help Sammy with his *bruises*, let alone this. She made me promise not to tell the cops about them, 'cos she didn't want Reefer chasing after me with a grudge. I reckon Nonna's onto something—if Reefer finds out we brought Sammy here, he'll come after us. It'll be even worse if he finds out we went to the cops and doxed him in.’

‘What about your dad, Mattie?’ Harry persists. He's too scared to listen to me properly. He looks ready to faint, Sammy and all. I grab his elbow.

‘My dad can't help us,’ I say.

I think about Dad lying upstairs in his room, listening to sounds of carnival music and drowning in the song. Dad will want to help, but that won't make any difference. He can't make himself do anything these days. If he's not in control of the restaurant, he's not in control of himself.

‘We can't ask my mum or dad.’ Harry's voice is hollow; an empty whisper.

There is no one left.

No one can help Sammy but us.

I look at his little body, lying limp in Harry's lap. Sammy has called us, like a bird calling to another from the trees at sunset; he's called the nightwatchers, the children who don't sleep in their homes after dark.

Come find me. You and Harry know where to look. I know you'll find me...if you bring me back, I won't bother you anymore. I won't ask for a sandwich again, not ever. Just bring me back.

*

'We're not going to the river,' I tell Harry, as I carry Sammy up the street. I'm crying and holding his little body against my chest. 'We're not going there. We can't put him back.'

'Okay,' Harry's voice cracks in relief. 'Okay.'

'Let's walk in the dark parts of the street, so no one can see us. Stay away from the lamps.'

Harry and I creep up the hill like two little cats. It's the dead of night and no cars drive by. The police station at the end of it is almost dark; lines of light shine through a lonely window blind on the second storey.

I go down on my knees by a bush under this window and lie Sammy on his back. I know this is the right place and my arms ache, but I can't just run away and leave him here. It's not his dirty t-shirt that looks odd, or the fact that he's wearing no pants. Even the stillness of his body doesn't bother me.

'Mattie?' Harry asks.

I reach down and move Sammy onto his side. I think about putting his thumb in his mouth and a sob rolls out of my throat.

'We should have left him the tennis ball.'

Harry moves closer to me. I'm startled by how close he is. As we stand there in front of Sammy, he reaches out and holds my hand.

‘Mattie, I just thought of something.’

‘What?’

‘Remember when we saw Old Ishmael near the bins, and he had that little pair of pants in his hands? Maybe it wasn’t Reefer. Maybe it was him.’

‘I don’t know.’ I let out a huge sob. ‘I don’t know who it was.’

I can’t talk about it. I’m not even wondering who did it. Sammy’s dead. He’s *dead*. Five years old, and he’s dead.

Harry’s hand tightens in mine.

‘Come on,’ he whispers. ‘We have to go.’

We hold hands all the way home. Harry drops my hand near the courtyard. He turns away without saying goodbye, or asking me to follow.

My apartment is dark and quiet. I can hear Nonna snoring in her room. She’s sleeping under her red light in the glass covering. She says it’s the eternal light of Jesus and it will never go out.

Dad’s asleep on his side. His movie has finished playing and his room is quite dark. I move over to him, but I’m not afraid he’s dead this time. I have seen a real dead body now.

‘Dad, wake up,’ I whisper. ‘Wake up.’

He rolls onto his back. I can’t see his expression in the shadows but I know he’s looking at me. I can feel his gaze.

‘What’s wrong, Mattie?’ he asks.

‘Dad, I...’ My voice catches in my throat. I can’t tell him. He’s so fragile and sad already. I don’t want to listen to the sounds of his movie—the carnival music—knowing he can’t sleep because he’s worrying about me. I don’t want Nonna worrying and praying for me either. If I tell them the truth, they will live in fear of Reefer and suffer too. It’s not their fault that I was too stupid to stay out of trouble.

'I'm okay, Dad,' I manage to croak. 'I'm just tired.'

'Have a lie down.'

I lie next to him on the bed.

'Mattie, I'm sorry that I haven't been around,' he says. He doesn't notice that my hair is full of twigs. He doesn't notice the blood on my shirt or the scratches on my skin. 'You don't understand how much I worry about you. Even when it seems that I don't...look, I have troubles, such troubles you can't imagine. I'm sorry I can't always be a good father, but you know Mattie, you know I love you all the same...'

'Yes, Dad. I know.'

'Good girl.' He strokes my hair. 'You're such a good girl.'

Good girl. Now I'm absolutely sure that I'm not going to tell him.

'Stay here for a while,' he says.

As I lie next to him the words *worry about you* and *don't understand* roll around my head like his late night music, drifting on like a song.

Worry about you.

Don't understand.

Such troubles you can't imagine.

The funny thing is that I think I do.

No 8/ The Nightwatchers

I stay in my apartment and watch Nonna all day. She thinks it's strange that I don't go out. I help her fold clothes and cook *cotoletta*. I go downstairs and stare at her glassed-in red light. I lie on Dad's bed and listen to his record player.

'You drive me the craze,' Nonna says at four o'clock.

'I'm being good, aren't I?' I answer, flicking television channels distractedly. 'You always say I should stay home.'

'But why you stay home today?'

I shrug. 'Feel like it.'

Nonna clasps her hands together and holds them against her face. This is her thinking pose.

'Maybe you sick,' she says.

'Nonna.' I sigh. 'I'm not sick.'

'Then why you no eat? You no eat today. No lunch, nuting. And no little cat come to door! Nuting today.'

The little cat. I pull my shirt sleeves down to cover the scratches on my arms. *The little cat is under the bush, Nonna. Someone wrung his neck.*

'This your fardder's blame, maybe,' Nonna goes on. 'You tired and quiet. You worry about your fardder, this what happen to you. You little girl. You should no worry.'

'Nonna, not again, okay? I don't want to talk about it.'

'Your fardder, he not happy. I feel sorry for him, but now I see how much he upset you, I feel anger.'

'It doesn't matter how angry you get, Nonna. It won't make a difference to Dad. He can't stop being upset.'

‘I no understand you.’

‘Geez, Nonna! Sometimes you don’t understand anything. Dad won’t start acting happy just because *you* want him to. He can barely do anything *he* wants.’

Nonna looks at me blankly. It’s not Dad she doesn’t understand. She knows him as well as I do, but she can’t talk about what she knows. Dad’s too complicated for her to discuss in English, and my Italian’s not good enough for a detailed conversation. Sometimes Nonna and I can only understand each other by our faces and our hands.

‘Well, I hope he eat at café,’ Nonna says, brushing a palm over her forehead. It’s another one of her thinking actions. ‘He not eat nuting for breakfast.’

I roll my eyes and watch game show contestants pump their fists up and down. I try not to listen to Nonna rambling on about food. I try not to think about the little cat under the bush.

Nonna goes into the kitchen to make dinner, even though it’s only four o’clock and she’s already made *cotoletta*. It seems silly for her to bother. Nobody around here has much of an appetite, and all the hungry cats are gone: Harry’s at home and Sammy’s dead. Dad and I will be pretending to eat tonight.

The phone rings and a surge of adrenalin goes through my body. I run downstairs and pick it up before Nonna gets the chance.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello—is that you, Mattie? It’s Charlie.’

‘Hi.’ *Shit. Shit.* Cold realisation washes over me. Dad’s missing again. ‘You’re looking for Dad, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

I’m silent for a few seconds, unsure of what to say, listening with my other ear for Nonna’s feet on the stairs. I can’t risk her overhearing this conversation.

‘He’s not here,’ I blabber. ‘I thought he was at work.’

‘Well he’s not here, that’s for sure. Any idea where he could be? I need a hand at the café.’

‘No, sorry...’ My voice trails off. I pause, thinking hard. I decide to ask Charlie a question. It’s risky, but I’m desperate.

‘Charlie, do you think my dad’s okay?’

Silence. Charlie’s pausing to think just like I have.

‘Look, he’ll be right—he’ll turn up sooner or later. Don’t worry about him. I’m sure he’s fine.’

‘Yeah, okay. Bye.’ I hang up quickly. I’m shaking all over from nerves. What the hell is going on? Why has Dad gone to the church again? I’m lucky I got to the phone before Nonna did.

I go into my room and lie down on the bed, trying to calm down. I close my eyes, but it’s hard to relax when I can hear Nonna banging pots about in the kitchen.

I didn’t sleep much last night—not at all, really, so I’m exhausted, but I still can’t sleep. Dad had told me to leave his room and get some rest, but I left slowly, because I was afraid to be alone with dead little Sammy in my head.

‘Mattie, put my movie back on, will you?’ Dad had asked. ‘You don’t have to put it up loud. Sorry, I know it bothers you, but I just can’t...I can’t sleep without it tonight.’

At that moment I felt suddenly furious; I stood at his door without moving, wishing that he hadn’t asked. It wasn’t the noise that angered me, though. The movie itself seemed so silly, so babyish; a child’s comfort like a nightlight or a blanky for protection against the dark. I thought about Sammy lying under the bush at the police station alone and without his tennis ball.

I switched the movie back on and said goodnight to Dad. He answered back with a ‘goodnight’ that fell apart like broken glass. Suddenly I understood why he plays the movie all the time.

He plays the movie to cover up the sound of his crying.

I lay down in my room but I didn’t cry, even though Sammy was out of my arms and lying under a bush at the police station. My eyes stayed dry. The carnival music cried for me.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, but it wasn’t for long, because dawn had already broken before my eyes shut. When I opened them again I saw the blood and mud and scratches all over my arms in the full morning light. I ran into the bathroom and ripped off my stained and ruined t-shirt. I knew there was no explaining this to Nonna so I tossed it into the bin and took a shower.

I’ve spent the rest of the day wearing long sleeves to hide my arms even though it’s as hot as anything. Nonna’s no idiot and she’s suspicious of what’s going on, but there’s no way she’s going to guess the truth.

The truth is too unbelievable.

‘Mattie!’ Harry pops up at my window sill like a puppet in a Punch and Judy show. It seems strangely right, another absurd thing happening in an alternate, weird world, a world that seemed so safe yesterday. My window is nothing but a thin shield, a fragile membrane of skin that covers a terrible wound.

‘Mattie, come on, we gotta go,’ he says, jumping into my room.

‘We can’t go anywhere! What if Reefer finds us?’

‘The cops are here! They’re knockin’ on everyone’s doors asking for information. We gotta hide.’

‘Do they know anything yet?’

‘Dunno. Nothing about us, I reckon—would’ve been here already if they did. I think they’re just gonna ask everybody questions. They might overlook us ‘cos we’re kids, but I’m not sure.’ Harry gives me a pointed look.

He doesn’t have to say what he’s thinking. I’m more transparent than the window glass; I won’t be able to bullshit my way around tricky questions. I can barely keep Nonna at bay, let alone the cops. Harry’s not worried about himself.

‘Where are we gonna go?’

‘Bloody hell, Matts! I haven’t thought of that yet. Come on!’

I slip out of the window into the afternoon. It’s more terrifying than sneaking out at night has ever been. The sun feels like a huge police searchlight. Harry and I skitter along the balcony, running past white doors with numbers blurring into each other.

‘Harry, we’re *screwed*.’ I skid around the corner past number twenty-nine. ‘Those cops at sixteen are gonna turn around and see us any second.’

‘The fig tree,’ Harry pants. ‘We can hide in the branches. Come on.’

Harry’s right about the tree. There’s no way the cops are going to look up a tree. We dash across the courtyard and climb up the trunk.

The fig branches are smooth and comfortable. I sit in the V of two branches and Harry uses two branches to my right: one as a seat, and a higher one as a backrest. We’re shaded from the sun by big leaves.

‘They’re going to Reefer’s.’ Harry’s toe nudges me gently.

Some flats are out of sight from here but we can see the western face of the block, and number two is in range.

‘I hope the cops arrest him,’ Harry whispers. ‘Then he can’t come after us.’

‘Maybe it wasn’t him,’ I whisper back.

‘You said he did it! That’s why we didn’t take Sammy there last night!’

‘It was a guess, Harry! I remembered Sammy’s bruises and panicked—it was just a guess! You said yourself that it could have been Old Ishmael.’

Harry shrugs gloomily.

‘At least Reefer doesn’t know we found Sammy,’ I tell him. ‘That’s something, I suppose.’

‘He knows we usually find him. He might lead the cops back to us.’

‘I don’t think he will. He probably thinks we’re a pair of dumb kids who would’ve taken Sammy home if we’d found him.’

We watch the cops go into Reefer’s flat. I crush one of the fig leaves in my hand.

‘Harry, we can’t tell anyone, I mean *anyone*, about this.’

‘I’m not gonna say anything,’ he whispers.

We watch Reefer’s door for a long time. Eventually the police come out, followed by Reefer. There are no cuffs on his hands, but he walks with his head down and his shoulders slumped.

‘He’s crying,’ Harry says.

*

Harry and I sit in the tree for a long time. We don’t say anything. The sun goes down. I sweat in the cold night air.

‘We gotta go home,’ I say at last.

The tree is no longer safe. I want to run into my warm apartment where Nonna’s cooking dinner. I never want to wander around the neighbourhood like a cat again.

‘Mattie, don’t go,’ Harry urges.

‘What are you talking about? It’s dangerous out here.’

‘My parents had a huge fight this morning, and Dad punched a hole through the wall. He busted Mum’s favourite vase too. I don’t wanna go home, I really don’t. Mum’ll be sulking about it, and Dad will yell at me.’

‘So what? They fight all the time. Come to my place.’ I look up at the light in Nonna’s kitchen window.

‘I can’t. My parents will come looking for me at your place and then I’ll really be in for it.’

I look at Harry in confusion. ‘If you’re not in trouble, why will they come looking for you?’

‘My old man’s been really mad with me since we had that blow up over his friend.’ Harry’s voice is bitter. ‘Sometimes he’s okay, and sometimes he’s not, but he’s been pretty pissed since it happened. I don’t think he needs a reason to have a go at me anymore.’

‘Haz, you have to go home, okay? The tree isn’t safe.’

‘Of course it’s safe. No one’s going to look up a tree for me.’

‘You’re wrong.’ I put my head in my hands and take a deep breath. Now I’ve got to say something I really don’t want to say, something worse than anything else I’ve ever said. I take my hands away and face Harry. ‘Look, Haz, your parents and the cops won’t think to look up a tree, but the killer will.’

He stares at me, shocked. The look on his face makes me want to stop talking altogether, but I force myself to go on.

‘He found Sammy at the ghost gum, didn’t he?’ I prod.

Harry doesn’t say anything, but he turns away from me. I climb over to his branch and grab his arm.

‘The killer knows where we play.’

Harry shakes his head. ‘I can’t go home. Not tonight.’

‘But it’s safer for you there, even if it’s bad—’

‘I’m not going home. My dad will belt me one.’

‘He’ll *hit* you?’

‘He’s only done it a few times.’ Harry pulls up his t-shirt. There’s a bruise on his chest.

‘He punched me here this morning.’

The bruise is purple, but it reminds me of the yellow-green bruises on Sammy. I look down and feel dizzy, like I’m going to fall, and my arms and legs shake uncontrollably.

‘I can’t go home, Matts, you see? If I do, I’ll get belted for sure. At least out here I can avoid my dad. I’ll find somewhere new to hide, somewhere safe from everyone—’

I’m barely listening now. I’m too terrified to take much in. ‘Help me out of the tree,’ I interrupt. ‘Go down first.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Dunno, I’m all shaky. I need you to show me how to get down.’

‘Why? You’ve climbed this tree before.’

‘I know, I know...I’m just freaking out.’

He moves down the branches until we’re at eye level. ‘Okay. Just follow me.’

We climb down slowly, like two pale geckos. The trunk seems like a long dark stair that begins in the stars and ends in a courtyard with broken beer bottles and bushes.

‘You made it, see?’ Harry says gently, when we get down to the lower branches. ‘It’s all right, you can leave if you want. I’ll find somewhere to hide, and then I’ll come find you later.’

‘Okay.’ I hang from the last branch, ready to drop, but Harry reaches down suddenly and grabs my wrists.

‘Don’t let go,’ he hisses between his teeth. ‘Somebody’s down there in the bushes.’

A surge of adrenalin charges up my arms. I can't let go, but I can't hold on either. I'm dangling like a doll from the tree. I'm an easy target.

'I can't swing myself up,' I gasp. 'I'm not strong enough.'

'Yeah, you can. I'll help you,' Harry whispers encouragingly. 'Just lift up your legs, Mattie, just lift 'em up...'

I swing my legs up and Harry pulls my wrists. I don't know how we manage it, but somehow I scramble back into the arms of the tree. Harry, who has braced himself against a fork in the branches, pants quietly, listening hard. I can't hear anything but my own heartbeat. The adrenalin has spread to my brain and my eyes and my ears. I close my eyes and smell fig milk and leaves breathing green poison into the night.

I don't know how long this goes on. I know someone is coming but I don't yell for help. There is no help.

Dad is crying in his room...

Harry's parents are flinging furniture at each other...

Nonna is just an old woman who can't speak...

'I found something!' A voice shouts from below, rising above the roar in my head. 'Look you kids, look what I found!'

'It's only Old Ishmael,' Harry whispers, his mouth pressed to my ear. 'Don't worry. He's too old to climb up here, and I don't reckon he killed Sammy anyway. He's too slow to catch anyone.'

'So what? He might've done it. Tricking a little kid like Sammy isn't too hard.' I don't know what to think right now, but I'm not going along with Harry's hunch either. I can't count someone as loony as Old Ishmael out.

'I'm good at findin' things!' he shouts. 'Lookee here, I got this piece of tin from the car park, I'm gonna use it to make meself a little roof...'

‘Just piss off, will you?’ Harry yells. ‘Piss off, you stupid old bastard!’

‘What’s wrong with you, eh?’

‘I said: piss off!’

‘All right, all right, up yours too,’ Old Ishmael mutters, shambling off into the bushes.

We listen to the night for a long time, making sure he’s gone. Harry puts his arms around my wilting body. The adrenalin is draining out of my arms, dripping off my fingers and evaporating like sweat. My body is emptying itself, as if I’ve soaked up the river until it has burst and flooded. I feel empty. There is only a strange kind of grief left, that strange feeling I get when I look at Dad lying in his room.

*

It’s midnight.

I’m sitting by the window.

The glass is cold against my cheek.

I watch the waving forms of the gum trees in the courtyard, and lights flickering on and off: first one window, then another, sometimes two or three at a time. I see the shadow of Mr Dray in number twelve’s living room; Batshit-Crazy Firske standing outside number fourteen calling her cat; Mr Crabtree from number five trying to light up a cigarette because his lighter keeps blowing out.

The thing I’m really keeping an eye on is Harry’s flat. I can hear shouting and crashing noises, but I can’t make out what’s being said or who’s talking. It’s probably Harry’s parents having a go at each other, but I can’t be sure. Maybe Harry’s over there too, because he got too scared to stay out by himself and took my advice. That doesn’t seem likely though. He’s too tough and brave and crazy to chicken out. Maybe his dad caught him hiding in the fig tree and dragged him back.

Nobody knows that kids hide in trees, nobody but the killer!

I try to breathe deep and calm down. I stare out into the night but all I can see are images of bruises: the green and yellow egg on Sammy's forehead, and the purple blotch on Harry's chest.

It can't be Harry's dad!

I sit up and push my window open. If Harry's at the flat, he might need my help getting out. If he's not there, I have no choice but to go looking for him. I'm scared of what I'll find, but sitting by this window for another two hours will drive me mad.

I left him out there alone because I was scared. Now I have to face the fact that I'm one of only two people who can find him.

It has to be me.

I wait until Mr Crabtree's smoko is over and then I slip over the sill. I run down the stairs and along the second floor balcony, dropping to the ground before I reach Harry's flat. I crouch underneath his bedroom window sill and listen.

'Child abuse? You think this is *child abuse*?' his mother shouts in an angry, sobbing voice. 'You've done something wrong so you're gonna get what's comin' to ya! That's not bloody child abuse!'

'But Dad just *whacked* me one!' Harry shouts back. Relief floods through me. He's still up and fighting; he's not hurt or beyond help, and his dad is just having a go at him. It sounds bad, but it isn't as bad as Harry lying dead at the river, a victim of the anonymous murderer.

'Stop friggin' exaggerating! Your mother's right, you deserved that walloping! You're a pain in the arse and you always push your luck!' Harry's father yells back. 'You wanna piss off, go ahead! You'll be back when you see how good you have it here! Try living on the street for a night or two! I did it meself when I was a kid, and it was bloody awful! Go on, get the hell out, you little bugger!'

I lie low, breathing hard, listening to doors slamming. I hear feet stomping about Harry's bedroom, and a loud thumping noise on his floor. After a while the window above me is wrenched open, and a suitcase is thrown onto the landing. This suitcase hits me on the back.

'Ouch!' I try to duck again and keep quiet, but Harry's climbing over the sill, ready to fall on top of me like the suitcase. 'Geez Harry, take it easy!' I hiss. 'You already hit me with the suitcase!'

'Matts, get out of here,' he whispers back, looking surprised.

'Hey, where are you going?'

'Shhh! Just be quiet and go wait for me in the courtyard.'

'No! I don't want to leave you!'

'I'll be with you in a minute. Just get out of here, will ya?'

'All right.' I can't believe I'm agreeing to this, but I take off anyway. There's no time to hang around and think of a better plan.

In the courtyard I pant and heave, trying to get my breath. The shouting of Harry's parents dies away and I'm suddenly conscious of being vulnerable and completely alone. I'm a sitting duck, defenceless in the dark, but I can't run home this time. I'll become something worse if I leave—a gutless wonder with blood on my hands. I grab the trunk of the fig tree and force myself to stand still as a rustle of bark and a swish of the bushes convinces me that the game is up.

'Hey Mattie, catch this.' Harry appears through the bushes and tosses me his soccer ball.

'What's going on? You told me you couldn't go home!'

'Yeah I know, but after that I decided to run away for good, and I wanted some of my stuff. I tried to sneak back in and get it, but my folks caught me and bailed me up. Don't worry, it's okay now. They won't come looking for me anymore. Let's go back to your place.'

I take off towards the stairs and he hurries behind me, dragging the old suitcase up each step.

‘Gimme a hand with this,’ he says, heaving the case over my window sill. I help him push it into my room. It thumps against the floor and we both wince, but it isn’t really that loud and Nonna’s slept through worse.

‘Harry, this is crazy! You can’t run away! Where are you going to go? Nonna will get suspicious if you stay here too long. Besides, your dad thinks you’re bluffing. He’ll freak when he realises you’re serious, and so will your mum. She’ll come over here looking for you—I know it doesn’t seem like she cares, but you’ve never gone missing for more than a day, have you? What if she gets really worried and calls the cops? People will start asking me questions, and I won’t be able to cover for you. They’ll think you’re *really* missing, like Sammy.’

‘Call the cops? *My* parents? No way.’ Harry takes a pillow from my bed and stretches out on the floor. ‘My olds can’t call the cops. I’d rat them out as bad parents, and they know it. I’d dob Dad in for beating me up and taking drugs.’

‘He hit you again, didn’t he?’

Harry doesn’t answer the question. He doesn’t need to.

‘I don’t have to stay here, Mattie. I found somewhere else...well, Corey did. I snuck over to his flat when you left. He knows a good place I can hide in.’

‘*Corey*? What the *hell*? He’s a moron! Does he know—’

‘He knows about Sammy being dead, but everybody knows now. The cops went around asking questions yesterday, remember?’

‘Nonna doesn’t know! She probably looked through the window and hid from them, pretending nobody was home. She didn’t want to report Sammy’s bruises ‘cos she’s scared of Reefe.’

‘Well, I’m not gonna tell her Sammy’s dead, but she’s gonna find out,’ Harry says. ‘Look, Nonna finding out isn’t our biggest problem. Everyone’s talking about Sammy being the dead kid found at the *police station*. Maybe the killer is Reefer, maybe it isn’t, but it doesn’t really matter anymore, ‘cos we’re in real trouble now. Whoever did it knows that somebody moved Sammy’s body away from the river. It’s not gonna be impossible to figure out it was us.’

‘Harry, I know moving Sammy was stupid, but we can’t tell the cops about it! I told you what Nonna said about Sammy’s bruises. If Reefer’s the psycho and he finds out we doxed him in, he might hurt me, or hurt you, or my dad or—’ I can’t say *Nonna*. Nonna being hurt is the worst scenario of all. ‘Harry, you can’t tell Corey we found Sammy either. Promise me.’

‘All right, all right, I promise. I don’t think we should tell the cops anyway,’ Harry snorts. ‘We can’t rely on them to work this out and save us, they’re bloody useless! We know this neighbourhood better than they do. They didn’t find Sammy down at the river, did they? They only started investigating when we put him under their bush.’

I nod in agreement. There’s no arguing with this.

‘I’m not crazy, Matts. I know we can’t find out who it was and prove it to the cops. But we should just keep *watching*, you know? The worst thing is not knowing who to be afraid of.’ Harry’s voice shakes a little. ‘I’m scared of almost everyone.’

Even though he’s scared Harry sounds so brave and strong that I’m amazed. Sometimes I forget how smart he is because he’s always telling me he’s dumb. I take a deep breath and work up the courage to ask him something terrible; something I can’t avoid asking any longer.

‘Haz, I want to ask you a question, but don’t get mad, okay? I have to ask you ‘cos it’s been on my mind ever since you showed me your bruise.’

‘Okay. What is it?’

‘Sammy’s bruises looked like yours, and it made me wonder.’ My voice trembles. ‘Haz, did your dad kill Sammy?’

‘I don’t reckon it was him.’ Harry surprises me by answering softly. He’s not angry or offended. ‘Dad’s a stupid bastard drunk, but he’s not psycho enough to kill a little kid. Whoever did it is really, really crazy. Mattie, I’m bloody scared. I’m so bloody scared I can’t sleep.’

No 9/ Nonna's Cat

It's early morning and the sky is pale pink. In this weird twilight Corey from number fifteen is leading a procession down Clifton Street. He's got a blanket slung over his shoulder and a box in his hands, and he's strolling along merrily as if he's on a brisk morning walk.

I'm following behind him, carrying plastic bags full of food and pillows. Harry's coming last, dragging his old suitcase, which is squealing and screeching and bumping against the footpath.

'Geez, Harry, that thing's making a racket,' I say. 'Can't you pick it up for a bit? I know it's early but there's plenty of old noseyparkers around here.'

'Too heavy,' he grunts, and continues his strange shuffle-limp down the street. His eyes are bloodshot, his hair is standing up in wild shoots and his face is pale and freckly in the morning light. He's so skinny that I can see the profile of his bony chest under his t-shirt. No wonder Nonna tries to feed him all the time.

'I'll give you a hand,' Corey says cheerfully, throwing the blanket over the case and picking up a ragged leather strap that's been trailing along the ground. 'You should've said something.'

I've always considered Corey to be immature and annoying, so right now I feel pretty bad about making fun of him. He might bounce around like Tigger from *Winnie-the-Pooh*, but he's not really the show-off he seems to be. Harry has been trying to convince me for months that he's clever and mature. A hyperactive twelve-year-old with no front teeth is pretty hard to take seriously, but Corey's proven himself to be handy in a crisis. He's found a place for Harry to live in, a time to smuggle him out of the flats and a plan for getting him food. Now I understand why Harry climbed out of the fig tree and knocked on Corey's window. I can't help feeling a bit jealous though.

Corey's plans were already underway when I'd snuck out to find Harry last night. Corey had instructed Harry to go home and get his things. Harry's parents catching him at it was a slight hitch, but no major disaster. The plan was for Harry to stay at my house until dawn, giving Corey time to gather some stuff from his own flat. Harry and I were supposed to be ready and waiting for him at six a.m.

At six a.m. I was having a bad dream. I was standing in the river, watching a giant water rat swallow water and a huge lump that looked like Sammy's body. I felt the current pulling my legs towards the rat's mouth and I tried to scream.

Then I was awake and a hand was over my mouth, trying to muffle the sounds of my screaming. I bit down desperately. Harry jerked his hand back but it was too late; there was blood coming out already. He cursed and gritted his teeth and tried not to yell out.

Corey leaned in from the window and said: 'Keep it down, dudes! Look, I managed to sneak out the air mattress and the blanket, but there wasn't much for eats at my house. Mattie, go upstairs and get some food, all right? You okay, Harry?'

Harry muttered 'yeah' and jammed his hand in his pocket. I whispered 'sorry' and slunk upstairs.

I feel terrible about stealing from Nonna's kitchen, but I've got a pretty good alibi if she notices. I'm going to tell her that Dad got stuck into some food. It sounds unbelievable 'cos he hasn't eaten much for weeks, but Nonna wants it to be true so badly that she won't need much convincing.

This food loot is knocking against my shins. I've got dry *biscotti*, salami, a loaf of Italian bread (the kind that's really hard and tastes stale from the get-go, but never goes mouldy), a slab of parmesan, and some bottles of *chinotto* (an Italian drink that tastes a bit like liquorice but isn't as gross). I'm also carrying a bag of oranges and apples that Maria-down-the-street

gave Nonna. The Dad alibi won't work for the fruit because he hates it, but it doesn't matter. Nonna's got so much fruit that she won't notice a bit missing.

What I'm really worrying about is the fact that Nonna might wake up soon and realise I'm missing.

'Hey guys, we gotta hurry up,' I urge. 'I know that case is heavy, but we gotta go faster. If I'm not home at breakfast time Nonna will go crazy. She'll lock me up for life.'

Harry already looks like he's straining pretty hard, but he pushes forward with the case and makes Corey walk faster. I don't have to ask why he doesn't want me locked up.

'Hey, we didn't bring any candles,' I say. 'Don't worry Harry. I'll bring you some tonight.'

He looks relieved and I feel a bit better. I want to hug him but I can't. Not in front of Corey, no way.

'Okay, this is it.' Corey kicks open the gate of a brushwood fence. It swings open on rusty hinges and we drag our stuff into a front yard.

The yard is hidden from the street, and it almost hides the house itself. Weeds and bushes and ivy have knotted together, making a wild green mess that resembles a giant bird's nest, and old newspapers are scattered all through it. It seems creepy that the delivery boy has thrown so many papers over the fence, because there hasn't been anyone living here for a long time. Maybe the owner was an old man who died and no one knew, so his subscription was never cancelled.

It looks like the place Corey's found for Harry is a total dump. It doesn't help matters that the front door's jammed shut and the windows have no glass.

'It's not so bad inside,' Corey says, ignoring our gloomy faces. 'I brought some stuff along to make it nicer.'

‘Like what?’ I ask. ‘A proper roof? Some glass?’ Maybe I was right about Corey being a total nitwit.

‘*Mattie.*’ Harry nudges me.

‘Hey, it was short notice! At least it’s easy to get in.’ Corey tosses the deflated air mattress through the window frame and climbs over the sill.

The house smells stale, even though it’s not boarded up. Its best feature is the wooden floorboards, because it has little else. There’s no rubbish or old furniture lying about, just dirty white walls and empty rooms. Corey leads us through to the last one, which is attached to a rickety back porch. It has an old fireplace and a shattered window.

‘I reckon this is the best room to hide in, ‘cos it’s the furthest from the street. If you have candles or a torch or whatever, no one’s going to see.’ He pulls a texta out of his pocket.

‘Anyway, I brought this along to make the room better.’

‘You’re going to vandalise the wall? That’s how you’re going to make it better? That’s just *stupid*,’ I say. Harry thinks it’s pretty stupid too, because he doesn’t nudge me to shut up this time.

‘I’m not gonna vandalise it, I’m gonna make it Harry’s.’ Corey uncaps the texta and starts to scrawl on the wall. At first it looks like a random pattern of circles and lines, but within a minute he’s drawn an impressive outline of Hobbes from *Calvin and Hobbes*.

Harry looks at me and grins. *I tried to tell you.*

‘That’s pretty awesome,’ I admit. ‘Okay, I’m going. Catch you guys later.’

‘Don’t go yet, Matts. You don’t have to rush off, it’s only six-thirty!’ Harry’s real message is pretty clear. He wants me around more than Corey.

‘Okay, but I’m only staying another ten minutes.’

Corey grins and throws a texta at me. ‘Start colouring in.’

*

When I get home at seven Nonna's still in bed, and I get away with sneaking out. At eight-thirty Dad leaves the house in his waiter's uniform. This is a good sign that he's actually going to work, but I can't take it for granted. At nine I unplug the upstairs and downstairs telephones so Charlie won't be able to call. I'm too tired to stay up and man the phones against Nonna, and I don't want to know if Dad's missing anyway. At nine-thirty I crawl into bed and fall asleep for a few hours. When I wake at twelve the sun has lit up the room and I'm looking at a plate of macaroni that Nonna's holding out in front of me. At three o'clock Nonna forces me to eat some fruit because I vetoed the macaroni and she's getting suspicious. I eat an orange and try not to think about Harry doing the same thing in the crazy old house. At six o'clock Nonna watches the news and sees a picture of Sammy's face.

That's when the shit hits the fan.

'*Morte!*' she screams at Dad. 'Sammy *il gatto piccolo—morte!*'

Dad stares at Nonna, barely reacting, a tired expression on his face.

'I no like this place,' Nonna shrieks. 'It no safe here, you hear me? We must go. Someone kill Sammy! We cannot stay!'

'Where are we gonna go, Mamma?' Dad says. He turns to look at me. 'I think you should stay inside for a while, Mattie.'

'Inside? You think *inside* protect her? Only if she never go out door again!' Nonna screams.

'Calm down, Mamma. Mattie will be okay. She's not one of the feral kids who run wild around here.'

Nonna ignores him. 'You know about Sammy?' she asks me accusingly. 'This why you stay home today?'

'Don't be stupid, of course I didn't know!'

‘I saw it on the news at the café,’ Dad says. ‘I wasn’t too worried about it. I just assumed Sammy wandered off somewhere.’

It seems incredible that Dad can be so blasé about a kid going missing, but somehow he is resistant to the world, as if nothing really matters.

‘I am very shame of you!’ Nonna screams at him. ‘Your job is to take care of your family! You is not good son, not good fardder to your daughter! Someone kill child here, and you let your daughter stay in this place. It very danger! Look at TV! You hear what it say? Maniac killing person is on the street!’ She shakes her finger at him, angry tears spilling out of her eyes. ‘I not care where we go! I will sleep in dog’s house if have to! My granddaughter will not stay here!’

Nonna storms off into the kitchen. I stand in the lounge, looking helplessly at Dad, listening to the banging and clashing sounds Nonna’s making. Dad flicks the TV channel over to the cricket and stares at the screen.

I go into the kitchen. ‘Nonna, what are you doing?’

In three minutes she has turned her perfectly neat kitchen into a steel mound of pots and pans.

‘I am packing,’ she says, yanking pizza trays out of a cupboard. ‘We cannot stay here!’

‘Calm down, all right? Nobody’s hurt me! I’m fine.’

‘Your daddy,’ she says, patting my arm and sniffing hard, ‘Your daddy, I am so shame, Mattie. He is not good fardder, he is not good son.’

‘Nonna, you know he cares about—’

‘I care for my granddaughter!’ she shouts, as if I’m not here. ‘I care for my granddaughter! I no like this neighbourhood, I never do, not for a long time, with the drunks and the fighting and the dirty flats! Now there is a bad person who kill Sammy! *Basta!* This a bad place, a bad place for my granddaughter to grow up!’

‘Okay, Nonna.’ I grab her arm and shake it, trying to make her look at me, but she stares out the window with her bloodshot eyes. ‘I’ll talk to Dad. Okay?’

‘You make him see?’ She looks at me so hopefully that I wish she was still looking out the window. She looks just like a little girl; a little girl clinging to me with small hands and staring at me with sad blue eyes. ‘You make him see?’ she says. ‘He see nothing.’

‘Yes. I’ll make him see.’

She turns away and starts banging her pots and pans around again, sobbing loudly.

I leave the kitchen to find Dad. He’s gone downstairs, but he’s left the television on.

‘Dad,’ I say, going into his room, ‘You have to do something.’

He looks up at me from his bed. ‘She’ll calm down,’ he says vaguely. ‘She’s overreacting.’

Now I’m really stumped. What’s wrong with him? How can he be so calm, when Nonna’s crying like this? Why can’t he come back to life, instead of being comatose in a dark room? How can he do nothing?

‘Nonna’s not overreacting,’ I tell him. ‘Sammy’s dead.’

Dad looks at me for a long time. He brushes his hand over his face, as if he’s swatting a fly away.

‘Matilda, your grandmother can stomp around and throw pots and make a lot of noise, but it won’t change anything. We live in this neighbourhood, and the café is right here too. We can’t just run away from our lives. I’m sorry Nonna’s upset, but she’ll get over it.’

She’ll get over it? How do you get over a five-year-old being murdered? I never will. Years and years might go by and maybe Nonna will forget, but I won’t. I won’t forget Sammy lying by the river, his eyes blank and white and dead, his pudgy arms streaked with mud, hands open, fingers uncurled.

Help me. Bring me back.

Sammy's voice tears through me. I hear his voice in the middle of conversations now. It's a ghost voice, a voice that isn't real, but never seems to shut up. He's not with me anymore, but I can still feel him.

I don't know if there is heaven or hell for Sammy to go to, but what scares me most is that he could be in limbo. I'm pretty sure Sammy wasn't baptised. Reefer didn't bother to feed him half the time, let alone bother with something like a religious rite. If Sammy's trapped in limbo, he's lost forever, and bringing him back from the river will never be enough.

I'm sorry, Sammy. I brought you back, but it was too late, you were already dead. I can't help you anymore. I can't bring you back from where you are, whether it's heaven or hell or limbo.

I hold my breath, waiting for an answer, but the ghost voice is silent. No matter how hard I try to imagine it, I can't hear Sammy say *that's okay, you tried.*

Daddy always says he'll tell me a story, he says instead. Sam, this is your story. Once there was a father who said: son, go to bed. So he fucking did.

Oh Sammy. I didn't tell you a story when you asked me for one, did I?

No. You went away.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry you won't hear a bedtime story ever again.

I force myself to stop listening to the ghost voice. I look at Dad again. He hasn't noticed my silence, or the pain on my face. He's still talking.

'...all I can do is ask you to stay home from now on. Don't go out there until it's safe. I know you don't like being cooped up, but I don't want anything to happen to you. I've got enough to worry about.'

Like what, Dad? What's so bad that it's worse than this? Why are you pretending to go to work? Don't use the café as an excuse for staying here! I know where you really go. I find everyone.

‘Don’t look at me like that, Matilda,’ he says. ‘I don’t have much choice. Until this maniac is stopped you can’t run about the neighbourhood. It’s too dangerous.’

*

I’m standing in the kitchen with Nonna. We’re silent, packing away pots and pans as night falls over the flats. From the window I can see the trees of the courtyard, leaves waving in the breeze; it’s summer still, and the smell of frying sausages drifts in. Someone’s having a party in their flat. I can hear music and laughing.

Yesterday the whole neighbourhood was on edge. Today people laugh and play music as if Sammy never died at all.

Nonna’s still upset. Her eyes are all red and bloodshot from crying, but she’s not crying anymore. She’s not even angry. She’s a sad, empty shell, who can’t do anything but put up with it and keep quiet, just like me; just like Harry, who is trapped in his own silent house, listening to the same sounds of partying and music drifting on the breeze.

I walk away from the window and put my face in my hands and start crying. It’s finally quiet enough for me to cry: Dad’s movie isn’t playing, Nonna isn’t stomping about with her pots and pans, Harry isn’t jumping out of windows to flee his parents, and the cops are long gone.

Nonna puts her arms around me and guides my head into the space under her neck. Her skin is all soft and wrinkly and her golden cross pushes against my face. It hurts a bit but I don’t move. I breathe in her smell of tomato and oregano and basil.

‘I cry for the cat too,’ she whispers, patting my hair. ‘But no worry. I never let bad things happen to you.’

She doesn’t know why I cry even harder when she says this. I don’t explain that she can’t make such a promise. It isn’t going to help, and I don’t want her to feel worse. What a silly old lady. I love her.

*

It's eleven p.m. and I'm running down Clifton Street with my backpack on and a kitchen knife in my hand. It's pouring with rain but there's no wind, and the day's heat is steaming up from the road. There's no one in sight but I'm running as fast as I can, because I don't want to be caught by the psycho, or be seen holding a knife.

It's taken an hour of false starts for me to get this far. Nonna was restless and kept getting out of bed to go to the toilet, so I couldn't sneak out. I had to wait by the window until I could hear her snoring over Dad's carnival music.

I stop in front of the abandoned house and push the gate open. It screeches loudly, but the rain is coming down so hard it's probably disguising the noise. The front yard is now a black mess instead of a green one. It looks like a giant spiderweb, full of soggy newspapers and glittering rain. Long eel-like weeds slap against my legs.

'Hey Haz, you here?' I call, climbing over a window sill.

The house is damp and cool because it's been raining since the stars came out, and the stale odour has gone. It smells of wet grass, mud and timber.

'Harry?' I grip the knife in one hand and feel my way in the dark with the other. I follow a small corridor through the lonely kitchen to the back room. There are shadowy forms of Harry's stuff all over the floor but there's no real sign of him actually being here and I'm starting to get really creeped out. I swing the rusty back door open and go out into the backyard.

A figure moves across the lawn and I thrust the knife towards it.

'Geez, Mattie, take it easy!' Harry's trying to muck around but there's a tense edge to his voice.

'What are you doing out here? It's pouring!'

'I'm taking a shower.'

‘What?’

‘I’m taking a shower, can’t you see? I’m dirty from sitting around in this poxy house all day.’

I stand looking at Harry’s shadowy form until some clouds shift and the moon breaks out, casting more light. He’s naked except for his shorts, and his scrawny body looks almost blue. Waves of ribs give way to a thin waist and the little round ‘o’ of his bellybutton. Water drips from his hair into his eyes.

‘You’re an idiot! Come inside, I brought you some more stuff.’

Harry lopez over the grass but instead of following me he stops dead and puts his arms around me. I hug him back, feeling his bony spine against my arms. He doesn’t say anything. He just stands there trembling.

‘Hey, we’re getting wet out here.’ I break away and lead him inside.

Harry’s hung a towel over the back room window to stop the rain coming in, so it’s dry in here compared to the rest of the house. I open my backpack and light up the candles I’ve brought. Harry takes one over to the wall.

‘Check this out! Corey finished my wall today.’

‘That must have taken him hours!’ The entire panel is full of perfectly drawn and coloured comic book characters.

‘Yeah, he stayed the whole day, but he had to go home for dinner.’

‘Great,’ I say flatly.

Harry sits down on the floor next to me. We hold the candles as they begin to drip wax. When enough wax has melted we mould them to the floorboards.

‘Where’d you get this weird one?’ he asks, pointing to the biggest candle. ‘Did you pinch it from a church or something?’

‘It’s my first communion candle. Nonna will kill me if she ever finds out I actually used it.’

‘What’s the point of a candle you can’t burn?’ Harry snorts, reaching for my backpack. ‘Did you bring me some more food?’

‘Of course I did.’

‘Cool.’ He pulls out a package of alfoil out of my bag. ‘Yum, ravioli.’

‘How can you be so hungry? I gave you heaps of food this morning. What happened to it?’

Harry shrugs. ‘Me and Corey ate most of it, but there’s only so many apples you can eat, y’know? It’s not really dinner.’ He lies back on his pile of pillows and starts eating his cold ravioli.

‘Why do you always eat lying down, Harry? It’s weird.’

‘Cos I like spitting mandarine pips at you...what do you reckon? Gimme a break, Matts, there’s not exactly a dinner table here.’

‘Sorry.’ I’m surprised that I have to apologise, because Harry isn’t usually so sensitive.

‘It’s all right. Don’t worry about it.’ He wolfs down the food and sits up. ‘Hey, has the rain stopped?’

The rain’s been thundering down on the old tin roof above us, making a loud, continuous background noise. Now it’s stopped and the air is full of the high-pitched whine of insects. Harry pulls the towel hanging over the window down and we look out.

Fat drops are dripping from the old crusty veranda *plonk plonk* and a cool wind is blowing. Harry is jumpy, restless from staying inside all day. I’m restless from being caged up all day too. The endless hours of sitting in my apartment, ignoring Nonna’s rampages and listening to Dad’s carnival music have depressed me. I need to *breathe*, not drown, because

tomorrow I'll be back in the apartment and Harry will be trapped in this big empty house, and we will be bored and scared and waiting for the next disaster to happen.

Harry and I run through the house and climb out of the front window. The mud and weeds are squelchy and thick and suck against our thongs, so we slip them off and run down Clifton Street in our bare feet. Loose pebbles, gumnuts and bits of stone cut into our heels but we ignore it and run on.

'We're too close to the river,' I gasp after a while. 'I don't want to go on.'

'No, let's keep going—I've got something to show you! Come on, we won't go all the way down there, okay?'

Harry leads me towards an old dirt lane that's overgrown with ivy. The lane runs along the backs of houses, and willow trees hang overhead, like tall girls stooping over with their hair trailing down. Reed-like weeds, tall and thick and tough, grow in patches around us.

Harry stops before an old wooden gate, gives me a look that means *don't make any noise* and scales the fence. He perches on top of it, like a pigeon on a telephone wire.

'Giddy up!' he whispers, leaning down. I grab his hand and hoist myself onto the fence. I can't see much at first, just cracks of light behind curtained windows, but then I realise I'm looking at the strangest garden I've ever seen.

There's a rabbit hutch and a row of tomatoes growing on bamboo poles, but it's all wacky and crazy otherwise: gigantic garden gnomes, fruit trees strung with nets to keep birds out, scarecrows with wool hair and alfoil eyes, life-size statues of Greek gods and animals, bushes cut into the shapes of chickens and dogs, piles of wood, sheets of tin, and hundreds of glass bottles. It's a zoo of frozen, still-life animals and a scrap yard at the same time.

'Get down!' Harry leaps off the fence into the lane and I follow clumsily, landing on my side in the dirt.

'You okay?' he whispers.

‘Yeah. What was all that about?’

He stands up on his tiptoes and peeks over the fence again. ‘An old lady came out, but she’s gone now.’

‘What old lady? Who lives here?’

‘Can’t you tell by the junk collection? It’s Old Ishmael’s house.’

‘Old Ishmael has a *wife*?’

Harry grins. ‘Who’d have thought, eh? Did you get a good look at her? I’ve seen her a few times and *whew!* She’s the ugliest person I’ve ever seen.’

I hold back a giggle. ‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘She looks crazy! She’s got missing teeth and spaghetti hair. It’s all clumpy and dread-locked like her weird scarecrows.’

‘Those scarecrows look like freaky dolls. They’re too small to look like real people.’

Harry turns around to look at me. He’s stopped smiling, and there’s an alarmed expression on his face. ‘Come have another look, Mattie. What you just said is freaking me out.’

‘Why?’

‘Just have a look.’ He sounds panicky now.

I stick my head over the fence. ‘They look the same as before. I can’t see any difference.’

‘Look what they’re wearing.’

‘They’re wearing kid’s clothes. So what?’

‘Look at that one on the orange tree! It’s wearing Sammy’s *my dad is cool* t-shirt.’

‘Holy shit!’ I crumple against the fence, like someone has just winded me. Harry grabs my hand and suddenly we are running: sweating and gasping and heaving along Clifton Street, crashing through the black octopus weed of the abandoned house, leaping over the rotten window sill and throwing ourselves down on the pillows.

We lie there for a long time without saying anything. There's not even much to say. We've learnt to hide and hope and keep watch in silence. Pointing fingers is an endless game that leaves us standing with nothing but suspicion and confusion and our own fear. Harry and I aren't out to solve a mystery or prove anything. We're just trying to stay alive.

'Don't go home, Mattie,' Harry says. 'Stay here until first light.'

He's dry and calm again, but something about him has changed forever. The thin, strange blue boy in the garden is still clinging to his skin. My food-gobbling, pip-spitting, wise-cracking best friend is now a runaway who hides by day and lives alone.

'Okay,' I tell him.

I don't really want to leave anyway. My apartment isn't safe anymore. It's a place where my dad shuts his door and listens to carnival music; a place where Nonna shouts and cries and argues.

Harry throws half his blanket on top of me and rolls over. I feel the slight touch of his spine resting against mine. The wind and the rain and the house rattles about us but I don't feel afraid. For the first time since we found Sammy I feel safe.

Harry and I should be together.

We are best friends after all.

No 10/ Limbo

‘Hello little miss.’

Harry’s mother is standing on the doorstep. She’s puffing away on a cigarette, looking skinny and pissed off and rough. She’s got the same knobbly knees and freckled face as Harry.

‘Hello,’ I say nervously.

‘Where’s the kid?’ she asks.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Bullshit. I know he’s here.’ She raises her voice. ‘Look, enough is enough. He needs to come home.’

I glance down at the ground, avoiding her angry and tired eyes. ‘Sorry. He’s not here.’

‘Look, kiddo, I just want to know if he’s all right. Bloody little shit, he is. Always gotta make things worse for himself; doesn’t know when to shut up, does he? Can’t back off, can’t take it easy. He’s gotta wind his old man up until he loses it. Did you hear that Harry?’ she shouts past my shoulder. ‘Stop playing up and come home! Your father’s calmed down now. He’s not gonna wallop you.’

‘Harry’s not here, he’s really not,’ I say desperately. ‘Can you please be quiet? My nonna’s asleep.’

Harry’s mother closes her eyes and puts a hand to her face. ‘Righto.’ She opens her eyes and looks at me. ‘Come on, kid. Just tell me if he’s all right or not. I’m worried about the little bastard. It’s not a good time to be running about.’

I look at her miserably, knowing there’s nothing I can tell her. Harry’s mother can’t be trusted with anything. I’ve seen enough fights at Harry’s flat to know that she swings between anger and sadness and laughter.

Staying silent is painful though, and I can't help feeling sorry for her. Her eyes are red from crying and she's puffing away on the cigarette because she's so upset. Her hand is shaking and her nails are bitten down to stubs. It looks like she hasn't slept or eaten much; her face is wrinkled and lined and her mouth is full of smoke and yellow teeth.

'Is he all right?' she pleads, waving her cigarette at me. 'You gotta tell me that at least. Come on, don't be a little bitch about it.'

Little bitch.

I've never been called this before. Dad or Nonna would never say something so horrible. I think about Harry, cold and lonely in the old house, hiding from his dad so he won't get hit, and hiding from his mum because she calls him names like this. No wonder he thinks he's stupid.

'I can't help you.' I say quietly. I'm not looking away now. I'm staring straight into her eyes.

'Don't bullshit me!' she cries. 'I'm his mother, for chrissakes! If something happens to him because he's on the streets I'm gonna blame you for it, you hear?'

'Why don't you call the cops if you're so worried?' I'm shaking all over, but I'm not backing down now. 'You can't, can you? You can't call the cops, and you can't make me tell you anything.'

'Oh, *excuse* me, princess! You think you're so bloody far above me, don't you? Your whole family is a bunch of snobs! Harry's got all uppity from hanging around with you! Thinks his own parents aren't good enough for him now!'

'Please go away.' My heart's banging like mad and I'm seconds away from crying. I try to push the door shut, but Harry's mother holds a skinny arm out and stops it from closing.

‘What the hell you do?’ Nonna shouts, charging up from behind me. She’s giving the evil eye to Harry’s mother, and her face is red with anger. ‘You get the lost away from my granddaughter!’

‘Oh, screw the lot of you!’ Harry’s mother yells, backing away from the door. She’s pissed off but she’s not crazy enough to mess with Nonna.

Nonna’s truly terrifying. I’ve never seen her so angry.

‘You like the mafia?’ Nonna threatens. ‘I call and tell them I have new friend!’

She slams the door shut and locks it. Then she puts her arms around me and holds me really tight. I close my eyes and breathe in the warm cooking smells of her body.

‘Do you really know people in the mafia?’ I ask.

‘No, *bella*, no,’ she says. ‘But *Australiani* think we are all mafia. Maybe it is not so bad a-thing this time.’

*

I wake to a furious knocking on my window.

I’m unhappy about waking up. I’ve been tired ever since Harry and I found Sammy. I’ve had snatches of sleep but I’ve been dreaming about the river and drowning and the murderer, and not really resting at all. Nonna’s cooking smells have worked like a magic spell and pushed this white noise of fear out of my head. I’ve been asleep in an exhausted, mouth-hanging-open, dribbling kind of way. My pillow is crumpled and wet.

‘Haz, what are you doing here?’ I ask irritably. ‘You’re gonna get caught!’

‘It’s midnight. I’ve been waiting for you for ages,’ he answers sulkily. ‘Do you know how bored and cold I’ve been in that old house?’

‘Okay, okay, I’m sorry. *Shhh*. Nonna’s been finding it hard to get to sleep at night.’ I pull on a jacket, pick up my backpack and climb over the sill. The air is very cool. ‘Listen, you can’t be seen around here. Your mum came looking for you today.’

‘What did she want?’

‘She screamed her head off when I told her I didn’t know where you were. She knew I was lying. Nonna had to step in to get rid of her, but now she’s on my case as well. She thinks I’m lying too and she doesn’t want me to hang around with you anymore. She said *poor Harry is very nice boy, but his family too much trouble, too danger.*’

‘You can’t leave me all alone out here,’ Harry says stiffly, jamming his hands in his pockets. He looks miserable, but he’s not going to plead and beg. It’s too humiliating.

I nudge him along the balcony. ‘Don’t worry, Nonna can’t watch me twenty-four hours a day. She’s too old and tired. I’d never get away with all this sneaking out and lying if she was feeling better.’ I sigh. ‘Bloody hell, she’s hard work sometimes.’

‘Wish I had a Nonna to feed me all day,’ Harry snorts. ‘All I’ve got is two dead-shit parents who hassle me.’

‘Harry, that’s not true. Your mum really misses you and wants you to come home,’ I say, leaving out the *little bastard* and *bloody little shit* and *thinks he’s too good for us now* parts.

‘No way. I’m not going home.’ Harry runs down the stairs, moving fast to get warm. ‘My dad can get effed! He’s gonna hit me soon as he gets drunk or has a fight with mum. I can’t go back, even if I want to.’

‘So what’s next? You can’t live in the old house forever,’ I say, catching up to him in the courtyard.

‘I dunno. Shit! Look who’s in the laundry.’ Harry skids to a stop and grabs my hand.

Reefe’s sitting on the laundry floor, staring out at the courtyard. He’s wearing jeans but has no shirt or shoes on. His blonde hair looks long and dirty, and a patchy beard covers his jaw. He looks no different than usual, but I see something I’ve always missed before. In his round eyes, thin body and brown feet are imprints of Sammy.

‘What are you guys doin’?’ he asks, taking a swig from the bottle of whisky. His voice turns on the white noise of fear in my head.

Harry reaches out and takes my hand. He calms me with the gentle pressure of his fingers.

Harry’s touch gives me the guts to say what I say next. My body floods with adrenalin as I open my mouth, knowing I’m going to risk everything.

‘Reefe, was Sammy baptised?’

He frowns at me, bottle dangling from his wrist. ‘What? Why the fuck do you want to know that?’

The words drain the adrenalin from my body—I’m frozen now, and I’ve got no more courage, no more guts left. I can’t answer him. Harry’s hand is the only thing stopping me from fleeing through the trees.

Reefe stands up. ‘Does it fuckin’ matter? He’s dead!’

‘Sorry mate, she’s confused and upset,’ Harry says softly. ‘Doesn’t know what she’s saying. See you later.’

He pulls on my hand and leads me across the courtyard in a quick march. He wants to make a run for it but doesn’t dare to in front of Reefe.

At the old house we huddle together by candlelight. Harry tears into one of Nonna’s pizzas and chews hungrily.

‘What the hell is wrong with you, Matts? Why did you ask Reefe that?’

I avoid his eyes and shrug, embarrassed. *Heaven, hell, limbo...* it’s just a bunch of religious crap that Nonna’s got into my system, but for some reason I can’t let go of it.

‘Mattie, it’s not a good idea to piss Reefe off! What’s going on?’

‘I had to ask.’ I look up as the candles flicker uncertainly, casting shadows against Harry’s face. ‘Nonna says only baptised kids go to heaven.’

‘You risked our lives for that?’ Harry shrieks. ‘Reefe could be the killer! Maybe we were wrong yesterday, maybe it wasn’t Old Ishmael! He scavenged Sammy’s pants from the bin lane, remember? He could’ve done the same with Sammy’s *my dad is cool* t-shirt.’

I lean back against the pillows and close my eyes. I can’t talk about this anymore. We’re falling into the same conversation over and over, even though we know it’s pointless, and doesn’t change anything.

‘Shut up, Harry,’ I say. ‘Shut up.’

I wait for him to shout back or fight, but he doesn’t. There’s silence for a long time. I open one eye and take a peek at him. He’s sitting next to me quietly, looking as defeated as I feel.

‘Sorry,’ I whisper.

Harry shrugs. Now he’s the one looking embarrassed.

‘Hey Haz, I need your help.’ I change the subject to rescue him. ‘Look, there’s no point trying to figure out who killed Sammy, but I reckon we can figure out what’s wrong with my dad. He’s worse off than I thought—he’s skipping work and going to church instead! I don’t know why, so I’m gonna get up early and follow him. Will you come?’

‘Why not.’ Harry’s voice is flat. ‘Hate sitting around this house anyway.’

‘Let’s go to sleep then. We have to be up by seven-thirty.’

Harry lies down obediently on the pillows.

‘Night, Matts.’

‘Night.’

I close my eyes and drift towards sleep, but I can’t shut off the world. The fluttering candles on the floor become the candles of a church. I find myself walking beside Nonna, listening to the rustle of her black dress. It’s moving to and fro as if we’re moving

through water. Our lungs are filling up with the heaviness of this place; this gravity of sadness.

Nonna drifts away from me. The church candles flicker out with a gust of wind, and I'm standing in the dark. I feel a hand reaching for mine and then Harry is with me, leading me down Clifton Street to the old house. As we pass the flats I spot Dad near the bin lane, lying on a dirty mattress and listening to his old movie. Harry's parents are visible in a window, screaming at each other, and Sammy's sleeping under an olive tree that's grown up through the road. Old Ishmael stumbles about, riding Panzo, his dead dog; Batshit-Crazy Firske from number fourteen puts a saucer of milk on the footpath for her cat. Corey waves goodbye, giving his toothless smile; Reefer lies across the lawn of someone's front yard, bathing in the flickering black and white shadows of a TV. Mr Dray from number twelve hands out multi-coloured icecreams and smiles at everyone; Nonna reappears and follows Harry and me, mopping the pavement behind our feet.

Harry and I step through the lush green ivy of the old house. We've stepped into the strange world around us by climbing through windows and walking down streets, following rivers to dark ends. We've climbed through so many broken windows that we can't trace our steps any more. The way back is getting harder and harder to see.

No 11/ Penance

Harry and I are hiding in a pew of the church, heads down on our arms, knees on the floor.

We're pretending to pray but we're doing a really bad job of it.

'Harry, stay down. My dad will spot you.'

He shrugs. 'Nah. He won't recognise me.' He runs his fingers through his hair and messes it up so it hangs in front of his face. 'See?'

It's been months since Harry's had a proper haircut, and his hair looks pretty wild. His dirty t-shirt and scuffed jeans don't do him any favours either. He looks like Old Ishmael in a demented fashion parade.

'You idiot.' I giggle. 'You look like a homeless derro.'

Whoops. Good one, Matilda.

'I'm really sorry, Haz. I didn't mean—'

'Don't worry about it. I am freakin' homeless.' He sighs and shifts his weight from knee to knee. 'What's going on here? Why isn't there a priest up the front?'

'What?'

'This isn't what I expected. I thought there would be a big crowd and people singing and a priest preaching and stuff, but everyone's praying quietly and going into that weird box.'

'This isn't a mass, you dork! It's *confession*. People are going in there to tell the priest their sins.'

'Well how am I supposed to know? My parents aren't exactly religious.'

I gape at Harry in amazement. 'Is this the first time you've been to a church?'

'Yeah. So what?' He looks angry and embarrassed.

Harry's so weird sometimes. I can't believe that pointing out he's never been to church before bothers him more than being called a 'homeless derro'.

'Don't be embarrassed,' I tell him. 'You haven't missed much. This religious stuff is pretty freaky.'

I look up at the life-sized Christ hanging on the cross above me. He's a man who hangs from nails in his hands and feet, limp and pale and defeated. A man whose face looks like my dad's.

There aren't many men in the church other than my dad. It's mostly full of old Italian women dressed in black. They look just like Nonna, who still dresses in mourning clothes even though my grandfather died years ago. She prays in her room just like this every day. When I hear her whispering *Hail Marys* in her broken English I wonder if God understands.

Dad stands up and shuffles by, ready for his turn to go into the confessional. I put my head down and peek through my arms to sneak a look at him. His blue eyes look troubled. He is a tired, hollow man; somehow he is not quite alive.

'Did he see us?' Harry whispers, nudging me.

'Nope. Come on, let's get out of here before he comes out.'

We hurry through the pews of black-clad Nonnas to the back of the church. Harry gives me a weird look as I dip my finger into the holy water bowl and draw the sign of the cross on my forehead.

'I know it's stupid, I just did it for insurance,' I tell him as we cross the street outside. 'It might ward off evil spirits.'

Harry shakes his head at me. 'You're right, this church stuff is pretty freaky. Mattie, what was your dad doing in there? What was he confessing to?'

I stop dead in the street and look at Harry in horror, amazed at what he's suggesting. Harry has always been fond of my dad. He's escaped to my room night after night, fleeing his

own father's bad tempers and shouting. He's lain on my floor and sworn over and over that he hates him. He's always wished for a dad like mine: a dad that never yells, fights or scares anyone, who can juggle and sing stupid Italian songs when he forgets to be sad.

'My dad didn't hurt Sammy,' I growl at Harry. '*No way.*'

It's impossible. I know it is. It's true that there's a lot I don't know about Dad, and I can't tell what he's thinking or feeling like I can with Nonna, but he's not Sammy's killer.

'Harry, my dad's really gentle. He's never hit me, not even once! Why would he go and *murder* someone?'

'My mum reckons quiet people are the craziest. They're nice and polite for years and years until one day they snap and do something terrible.'

'My dad's upset and missing work, but he hasn't snapped! He's not running around being a psycho.'

'Don't get all pissed off with me! I didn't crack the shits when you thought it was my dad, did I?'

'No, but your dad's a violent drunk!'

'So? Your dad's probably a quiet psycho! He's been acting weird for months!'

'There's no way he hurt Sammy! Take it back!'

'No!' Harry runs across the street, dodging oncoming traffic.

'*My dad didn't do it!*' I swallow a big swell of anger that's rising up in my throat. 'It wasn't my dad, and if you really think it is, then I'm going home. Stuff you!'

'Go home, then,' Harry spits. 'At least you have a home to go to. I'm just a homeless derro, aren't I?'

*

I've been sitting on my window ledge all afternoon. There isn't much to look at. It's warm and quiet and the only noise I can hear is the yowling and mewing of Batshit-Crazy Firske's

cat. There's no people around, no fights or music playing. The whole neighbourhood looks sleepy and calm and safe.

At times like this it seems crazy that a little boy died.

Batshit-Crazy Firske's cat struts along the balcony and rubs itself against my legs. I make a face at it but it's not such a bad cat really. It's quite handy even, because it's fat and spoilt and always happy to eat my lunch. Nonna's still trying to make me eat, and I'm getting pretty savvy at pretending I have.

'Hey ya!' Corey bounces up the stairs and gives me his idiotic gap-toothed smile.

'Whatcha doing?'

What does it look like, moron?

'Not much. What are you doing?'

'Goin' to Mr Dray's to watch a movie. You comin'?'

'Yeah, sure thing,' I reply sarcastically. 'Those movies rock my—*Harry!* What the hell are you doing here?'

He appears behind Corey, and walks across the landing like the cat: slowly, defiantly, *stupidly*.

'What are you doing? Your parents will see you!'

'So? They can't make me go home, can they?' He shrugs. 'I'm sick of hiding all the time.'

'You can't just wander around! You've got other reasons for hiding.'

'Screw it. It's daylight and no one's around! I'm sick of staying in that shit-hole all the time, and I'm sick of being scared.'

Corey looks at us, puzzled. I realise that he doesn't understand what's really going on. Harry's being stupid and reckless, but at least he hasn't told Corey the full story. He hasn't broken his vow of silence.

‘Haz, don’t go over to Mr Dray’s,’ I say. ‘It’s not safe.’

I stare at him hard, willing him to listen to my warning. He scowls at me and ignores it.

‘Corey, I gotta talk to Harry alone,’ I blurt out. It’s a desperate move and it’s going to make Corey curious, but I take the risk. Harry’s already walking away, heading for Mr Dray’s.

‘Sure, whatever.’ Corey shrugs, shoves his hands in his pockets and strolls on along the balcony.

‘You’re being really stupid, Mattie,’ Harry whispers, turning back towards me.

‘We’ve been going to Mr Dray’s forever. Nothing bad’s ever happened there.’

‘You can’t go there just because you think my dad’s the killer! That doesn’t make it safe. Look, you were right when you said we’re never going to figure this out. All we can do is watch and be careful. That means we have to be careful of *everyone*.’

‘We can’t just fear everyone, that’s being too paranoid! Who else should we be afraid of? *Corey? Batshit-Crazy Firske?* Geez, Mattie, maybe it’s too hard for you to believe it was your dad, but I reckon he’s our strongest bet.’

I look at Harry coldly. ‘If anyone’s dad did it, it’s yours.’ I turn away from him and slide over my sill, slamming the window shut.

*

It’s one a.m. and I’m alone.

I’ve been in a loop, asleep or awake, for what seems like forever: long days of waiting followed by short nights of sneaking out with Harry; dreams of Sammy and rivers and mud; blood caked on little t-shirts; and crazy scarecrows in trees.

I prefer the dreams. In the dreams Sammy’s asleep rather than dead.

My dad's carnival movie has been playing for hours. Nonna's been snoring along with it, so there's little risk in sneaking out tonight. I'm going to do it, even if all I can do is wake Harry up and see if he's all right. He'll probably tell me to piss off, but that's not going to stop me. He's the one thing that's made this last week bearable. I don't want to live with this secret alone, and I don't care if that makes me a miserable coward. I'm past caring about stuff like that.

The shadow of a boy flits past my window. It's too dark to see his face but the outline of his wild hair is so familiar that I need nothing else. I wrench the window open and he climbs in.

'I saved some food for you,' I tell him.

He sits down on the floor. I wait for him to speak but he says nothing, so I pull a plate of pasta out from under my bed and hand him a fork.

For the first time in days I'm hungry—really, desperately hungry. I shovel pasta into my mouth and Harry does the same. When the plate is finished he takes a pillow from my bed and lies on the floor with it.

'No, not there.' I roll over towards the wall so there's room for him in my bed. He slides in next to me and rolls over. We fall asleep against each other, spine against spine.

No 12/ The Car Park Council

It's early evening. I'm hiding in the bin lane, peering out into the car park. I'm watching a mob surrounded by cops and television cameras: Mr Stephenson from number nine, Harry's mum and dad, Batshit-Crazy Firske from number fourteen—all the usual crowd from the flats, some Clifton Street locals, and lots of people I've never seen. I'm not paying much attention to the crowd though, because my eyes are fixed on Corey's tiny mother. She's crying and her hands are clasped together like she's praying. In her blue dress and white scarf she looks like one of Nonna's *Madonna* statues. A tall police officer is listening to her, bowing his head down to hear what she's saying. I don't know whether he's questioning or comforting her, but it doesn't matter.

I know what's happened.

I stand there shaking and hear the *plink plink* of rats swimming and the singing of crickets in my head. My eyes are filling with water as the river flows, carrying its grim procession of dead rats and dogs and children.

I leap over the fence behind the bin lane and run like the devil down Clifton Street.

'Harry!' I scream, running through the old house. 'Harry!'

I find him lying on the lawn in the backyard, staring up at the sky. He frowns at me.

'Shhh, Mattie. I'm hiding, remember?'

'*So what!* There's cops and cameras and people all over the place! Corey's missing.'

Harry doesn't sit up and jump to his feet. He lies there still and quiet, barely breathing; his only visible movement is a flicker of his eyes. He's in shock. He's facing a world he tried so hard to ignore yesterday—a world that orbits around that strange, sad little place we normally live in; a world where little white hands lie between reeds and dead kids are carried in our arms. A place where fear has come again, closing over us like water.

‘What are we gonna do?’ I sob.

‘We gotta go get him,’ he whispers, turning his eyes away from the sky to me. He can’t say Corey’s name any more. He is dead now.

‘No way! We can’t go there.’

‘We have to, Mattie. No one else knows where he is.’

‘Maybe the killer put the body somewhere else this time.’

‘No,’ Harry argues. ‘He didn’t.’

‘You don’t know that!’

Harry shakes his head. He has a fierce expression in his eyes—a haunted, burning, wild look; a look I can’t name.

‘I’m not wrong,’ he says. ‘I know it.’

He puts his hands on his face and covers it for a long time. I watch him cry until he takes his hands away.

‘I was in a really bad mood yesterday,’ he begins. ‘I was sick of hiding and sitting around in this dump doing nothing. I wanted to go somewhere and have fun and forget about everything, so I asked Corey to come with me to Mr Dray’s. We played video games for ages, and everything was fine until Corey went to the toilet. When he was gone Mr Dray sat down next to me, and asked me a question.’

‘What question?’

‘He asked me to meet him at the river later.’ Harry turns his haunted eyes away from me. ‘I freaked out and ran back here. I didn’t even wait for Corey to get out of the toilet, I didn’t warn him—’ his voice cracks and he starts shaking again.

‘My God, Harry! Why didn’t you tell me last night?’

‘I thought you’d be angry—I thought you’d blame me for being so stupid! You *told* me not to go there, you *told* me to stay here! I ignored you ‘cos I thought you were being really

paranoid. I wasn't scared of Mr Dray, not at all! I knew he was a bit *weird*—that's why I didn't take that bike movie he tried to give me—but I didn't think he killed Sammy! I didn't know he was a *pervert*. He said he'd give me heaps of presents if I met him at the river, if I would be his *friend...*' Harry chokes up, but he fights through it to get his words out. 'I didn't warn Corey, Mattie. I was too embarrassed to talk about being with that pervert. I felt stupid, like *I* was a pervert just for going to his house.'

Harry starts shaking really hard.

'All right, all right, calm down,' I plead.

'We have to go to the river. It's my fault Corey's dead.'

'But Corey's so big.' My voice cracks. 'I don't know if we can carry him.'

*

In the cool evening dusk Harry and I run down Clifton Street. We pass under the watch of the bare-boned trees and the falling sun. It's almost dark now. Clifton Street's houses are being shut against the night: gates are closing, curtains are being drawn over windows. Inside them kids are eating lamb roast dinners with their mums and dads. They're watching TV and talking on the phone, surfing the net and playing with the family dog.

Harry and I are cut off from that world. We always have been. We belong out here. We're nightwatchers, racing towards the river, where everything is cold and haunted by birds.

The river seems quieter than usual tonight. The crickets are muted by the bitter weather; their song is a low, dull hum. The reeds have grown stronger and thicker with the rain, and weeds have sprouted everywhere. We'll have to push through this wet, lashing jungle to find the entrance to the hollow tree.

We stumble headfirst into the green darkness. The sharp edges of reeds scratch against our arms, legs, faces; I close my eyes and hold my arms out in front of me. Harry splashes into the river.

The water is waist deep now, and so cold it stings.

‘What if he’s here, Harry, and we just can’t find him? There’s too much water...’

‘Shut up,’ he answers. His voice is urgent. He’s holding onto his wits and doesn’t want me to unnerve him. ‘Be quiet.’

We scramble onto the marshy, water-logged bank, gasping for breath. I slip along the bank on my hands and knees, trying to move upwards. Harry is more confident and moves faster, pushing ahead of me. Suddenly he stops and slides down the bank on his rear, pulling me into the reeds on his way down.

I don’t ask him why. I lie next to him and listen to the sound of moaning. It’s coming from the hollow gum tree.

We cling to each other. Harry pushes his face so close to mine he’s breathing in my mouth. We don’t talk. I realise something Harry has known all along—if we’re caught here by Mr Dray, he will hurt us.

The strange breathing goes on and on, but there is no other noise or movement. Harry releases me and crawls over to the waterline. He crawls back with a big stone in his hand.

‘I can’t help,’ I mutter. ‘I can’t.’

Harry doesn’t respond. He stands up and moves off into the greenery carrying the rock. Bravely, crazily, he will end it.

I lie in the mud and wait.

‘Mattie!’ he calls softly.

I lift my face out of the mud.

‘Mattie!’ he calls again. ‘Come out.’ He doesn’t sound scared.

I scramble to my knees and crawl up the bank. There, by the tree, lies Corey. In the dim light I can see the whiteness of his naked body.

‘He’s alive,’ Harry says, amazed. This is a miracle neither of us has expected. ‘Come on, let’s lift him up.’

Harry takes Corey’s arms and I take his head. We fall half way down the bank and he slips out of our grasp. He rolls to the water’s edge.

‘Turn him over,’ Harry pants. ‘We’ve got to get away from the river. No one can help us here.’

Corey’s still breathing, but his face is smeared with a ghostly mask of mud. I wipe it from his eyes and mouth and nose.

‘I’m going to carry him through the water,’ Harry says.

‘You’ll drop him. He’ll *drown!*’

‘No, he won’t.’ Harry grits his teeth. ‘I’m not gonna drop him.’

It seems impossible, but I believe him.

‘Go ahead and push back the reeds so I can get him up on the other bank,’ he instructs.

I walk through the water again, back to the other side. It feels like a strange kind of baptism. I’m cold and muddy and terrified, but I feel saved. Corey isn’t dead. We have another chance.

*

In the end I’m not sure if we drag or carry Corey along Clifton Street. His face scrapes along the pavement once or twice; he moves for a moment, as if he’s having a spasm, then he’s still again. My hands slide on his scrawny, stick-like arms.

The car park is dimly lit by a streetlight and burning circles of cigarettes. Some of the residents have stayed outside to talk about Corey’s kidnapping. The flats are a strange little world of their own, and sometimes when the police have been around an informal council takes place in the car park.

‘Give us a hand,’ I call out to the group. My arms feel heavy. I’m too exhausted to care about anything but letting go.

‘Bloody hell!’ Harry’s dad yells. He runs over to us, followed by his big-bearded card player friend and Mr Stephenson from number nine.

‘It’s Corey,’ Harry pants. ‘We found him. He’s alive.’

Harry’s dad takes Corey into his arms. Corey hangs limply in his embrace without responding.

The car park council have seen bad things before: broken noses, blood, skinny young men blue from overdosing, Old Ishmael passing out. But this is not just another overdose, not just another screw-up from the flats—it’s a wounded, bloody kid, who might be dying.

‘Put him down, put him down,’ Mr Stephenson urges. ‘I know what to do.’

To my surprise Harry’s dad listens to him, and sets Corey down on the asphalt of parking bay seven. We huddle over the body in a strange, awkward gathering.

Mr Stephenson rolls Corey onto his side and pushes his fingers into Corey’s mouth. He clears his airways and checks his pulse.

‘Seems like his heart’s still going.’ Mr Stephenson takes his mobile phone out of his pocket. ‘I’ll ring for an ambulance.’

Harry’s dad motions to the big-bearded card player. ‘Bill, go get the kid’s mother. She’s in number fifteen.’

Bill takes off towards the courtyard and Harry’s dad turns back to us. Harry reaches out and takes my muddy, bloody hand. I realise he’s more afraid now than he was at the river. It amazes me that he can face the possibility of a murderer hiding in the trees, but can’t face his dad.

It’s my turn to be brave now. I’m ashamed of my cowardice at the river—I see myself lying in the mud and waiting to die, leaving Harry standing alone with a rock in his hand.

I squeeze Harry's hand and step forward towards his dad. Harry's dad is a sweating, heaving mess with bloodshot eyes and grog on his breath. He's pretty intimidating but I hold my nerve and stare him down.

'Where'd you find him?' he asks, leaning towards me threateningly. His voice is rough, like he's smoked a packet of cigarettes and coughed himself hoarse.

'The river,' Harry splutters, stepping forward and pushing me back. Scared as he is, there's no way he's going to let his dad take a swipe at me. 'We found Sammy there too.'

Harry's dad shakes his head. 'Sammy was found at the police station.'

'No he wasn't. We put him there.'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'We went looking for Sammy when we heard he was missing. We knew he liked to play by the river, so we went down there and found his body. We picked it up and left it under a bush at the police station.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' Harry's dad yells. His yelling scares me, but not because I'm afraid of him. It scares me because I've never heard him sound frightened.

'What was I gonna do? Come home and chat about it? You would've hit the roof!' Harry's losing his cool now. 'I didn't even know who did it until yesterday!'

'You know who did this?'

Harry stops cold, realising he's said too much. He looks at me for help.

We're in serious trouble now. We're going to have to tell someone, because an ambulance is probably on its way and the cops won't be far behind. I don't know how this is going to turn out, but I do know one thing. Telling Harry's dad is almost as stupid as going back to the river and waiting for Mr Dray to turn up.

'We're not going to tell you.' I square up to him again.

Mr Stephenson suddenly interrupts, walking over to us and hanging up his phone.

‘Ambos will be here in a few minutes,’ he says.

Mr Stephenson’s done nothing but piss Harry and I off for years, but right now he’s a godsend.

Harry’s dad pushes on, ignoring Mr Stephenson. ‘It doesn’t matter if you don’t tell me anyway. Everyone knows now.’

‘How?’ I rasp.

‘The cops arrested Dray from number twelve an hour ago. Don’t know how they found out, but apparently he’s a paedophile. It’s a good thing you kids never went around there.’

A weird howl comes out of Harry’s mouth. He jerks like an electrocuted rabbit.

‘What did he do to you?’ Harry’s dad grabs his arm.

‘Nothing!’ Harry breaks free of him and swings around on his feet. He starts running towards the courtyard.

Harry’s dad and I follow. Mr Stephenson stays behind to watch over Corey. I see Corey’s mother run past us, screaming, calling to her son. Harry doesn’t slow down to look at her. He runs along the fluorescent corridors of the ground level and crosses into the courtyard.

‘*Fuck you!*’ he yells at number twelve. He picks up a rock and throws it at the windows. Slivers of glass reflected in neon light tinkle down into the courtyard. I step back to avoid the falling shower, but Harry doesn’t seem to care. He doesn’t move. He stands there as the glass falls around him, completely fearless. Somehow, as if it’s justice for everything that’s happened, the glass doesn’t fall on him.

He yells and throws more rocks with strange cries.

‘Don’t move,’ I tell him. I’m scared that he’ll step on the glass. I imagine slivers slicing through his sneakers, blood oozing into his socks.

He ignores me.

‘Stop it!’ I reach out for him but he pushes me away. I fall back into the dirt, feeling no fear, only a strange sensation of slowed time, like stop motion film. I wait for the glass to cut my face, but nothing happens. I’ve fallen too far back into the courtyard bushes.

‘Calm down!’ Harry’s dad grunts, bear-tackling him. Harry writhes and yells but his dad manages to hold him down.

‘He tried to trap me!’ Harry screams. ‘I never said anything ‘cos I was too scared and now Corey’s gonna die!’

Harry’s dad releases him. They stand side by side, shaking. It’s as if the flats themselves are shaking with rage: glass falls from windows, the gum trees shake at their roots, fluorescent lights from the laundry flicker. Harry’s dad bends over and puts a rock in his son’s hand. With almighty yells they throw more rocks through the windows of number twelve. It’s a strange, ancient ritual. They stand there in the forest and hurl stones and sing out rage and fear and sorrow with broken voices. I lie in the dirt and watch the glass falling.

No 13/ Italians Don't Eat Hospital Food

I run upstairs, away from the falling glass and the crying and the car park council. I don't tell anyone I'm going. I just run.

My apartment is quiet. My bedroom window is still open, and my door is ajar. Nonna's tabernacle is the only light on. It shines from her window like a forgotten ghost.

'Nonna,' I call, running inside. 'Nonna!'

She's not in her bed. Panic floods through me. She's awake! Now she knows I've been missing. Maybe she thinks I've been taken away or killed. I imagine her kneeling, praying under the red light, silently moving her lips and rocking herself from side to side in her strange Italian way of grieving.

I run through the house, charging through empty rooms. In my dad's room I spot her shadow on the floor; the long shape of her nightie. I flick the light on and kneel down to touch her face.

'Nonna?' She's breathing roughly and her dress is wet between the legs. I wrench it up. Underneath her skirt and blouse are white singlets and petticoats—confusing, ancient masses of lace. When I pull them off I see that her body is fleshy and wrinkled and old. It's strange that she looks so old, when she smells like a child who has wet her pants. She smells like little Sammy.

'Nonna, what's wrong?'

She doesn't answer me. Well, not in English, as far as I can tell. She mutters something that might be Italian or just nonsense. There's something wrong with her face. It looks strangely lopsided. The right side of her mouth and her right eye are drooping downwards.

'Nonna, it's Mattie! I'm back.'

She's not looking at me but she's still muttering, so I put my ear to her mouth. Maybe I don't understand what she's saying because her mouth's gone all funny.

Nope. She's definitely speaking gibberish.

I've scared her. I've scared her so badly by sneaking out that she's had some kind of attack. She's an old lady trying her hardest to be my mother, and I've pushed her too far. I've broken her heart.

I wrench the hallway phone from its dock and run back to her. I dial the café and listen to it ring.

Pick up.

Pick up.

PICK UP!

'George's café. Charlie speaking.'

'Charlie, it's Mattie. Can you put my dad on?'

'No, sorry. He's not here.'

I pause for a second. 'Charlie, I need help. My nonna's on the floor and she's had some kind of attack. Her face looks all funny and she's talking gibberish. I don't know what to do!'

'I'm going to call 000 for you,' says Charlie. 'Just sit tight with her, okay?'

*

My head is full of blood and my heart is pounding in my ear.

Nonna's still lying on the floor, rambling and muttering in her strange gibberish. I'm holding her hand, but she's not paying any attention to me. Her cloudy blue eyes keep opening and closing. Maybe she's passing in and out of consciousness. Maybe she's dying. I drop her hand and put my ear against her chest. Her breathing's steady, and I can hear her heartbeat.

An ambulance siren comes screaming through the night.

I'm looking down at Nonna when the paramedics come through the door. She is so small, so white—a bundle of nightdress and pale skin, a tiny body, a body like a little boy I left under a bush once...

I feel water close over my face and the weight of the river dragging at me. I'm covered in mud and gunk, sodden and wet, pulling at another body found on the river bank...I can hear a perfect drop moving in each of my eardrums—*slosh slosh*—and then all the voices around me become muffled, far away on some strange alternate frequency...

A woman in a green jumpsuit kneels down and asks Nonna her name. Nonna rolls her dull blue eyes away, confused and lost, dribbling and murmuring something more broken than her English.

My heart rolls over and I say *her name is Ester*. The woman paramedic looks at me, just like every other stranger who's ever asked Nonna a question (*when I talk they no hear nothing, still I talk English but they no understand!*) and clamps a mask over Nonna's face.

How long has she been like this?

I don't know, I don't know, I got home and she was like this. What are you doing to her?

I'm just giving her some oxygen.

Is she going to be all right?

Not sure, Miss. I'm going to put these circles on her chest and see if her heart is okay.

Don't push down on her chest, she's old, you'll break her!

I'm sorry, we have to, says the other paramedic, a man with brown hair. Has this happened before?

She gets dizzy and she gets pins and needles sometimes, but nothing like this!

What medications does she take?

She doesn't take any tablets, but she drinks olive oil—what's wrong with her? Why is her face so wonky?

It looks like she's had a stroke. We have to take her to the hospital.

Can you take me? I don't want to let go of her!

All right, you can come with us.

I watch them lift Nonna onto a stretcher. Her dress flies up against her stomach and her bottom and knickers and tummy are exposed. I feel sick watching her so helpless and graceless, her naked body on show to strangers. I want to yank it down but there's no time because she's being carried down the stairs and across the car park into the ambulance. I turn away from the car park council around us—their voices and faces circling like birds looking down from the sky—and run beside the stretcher, trying to shield the sight of Nonna's naked legs and knickers from their eyes.

You can sit up front with the driver the lady paramedic says and I say *no I have to sit with her!* so she lets me get into the back of the van.

As the ambulance takes off I grab Nonna's hand and whisper *Nonna, don't worry I've come back to you.* I whisper it the whole way to the hospital as traffic lights and cars blur into a neon streak of red, orange and green. The woman paramedic looks into Nonna's eyes and squeezes her hand and hovers over her, doing strange things that I don't understand. I cling to Nonna's hand, even when I realise that it's a dead weight and she isn't holding on back.

*

I sit in the emergency room with my eyes closed and my head in my hands waiting for the doctors to come in and tell me Nonna's dead. I don't care about Harry and Corey or even little Sammy right now; the last few weeks of guilt and secrets are somehow meaningless. The white noise of fear inside my head is getting louder though, and when a lady walks over from the reception desk I must listen hard to hear her.

Your grandmother's had a stroke, my dear.

That's what the paramedics said. Is she going to die?

No, no, don't panic, pet. She's alive and being admitted for treatment.

I want to be with her. She's probably really scared!

You have to wait a little while, 'til the doctor says it's okay. Don't worry, she's being taken care of. I need your help with her paperwork.

She waves a bunch of forms that are in her hand and unclips a pen from her pocket. *Her birth date?*

8th September.

What year?

I don't know. My voice is shaking. She's sixty-seven though.

A nurse walks up to us and says *you can go sit with your relative now.*

She leads me into a hospital cubicle with two walls and a curtain for a door. Nonna looks asleep but she opens her eyes when we approach the bed. Her hair is a black mess with wild white roots, and her eyes are still bleary.

Nonna, are you okay? I ask her.

She answers slowly, clumsily; the left side of her face still looks strangely lopsided. She says something that sounds like soft, slurred Italian.

What's wrong with her? I ask the nurse. *She knows I can't speak proper Italian. What's she saying?*

Your grandmother's very confused. The stroke's affected her brain. There's a whole lot of stuff she doesn't remember right now.

She doesn't remember English?

It appears so, the nurse answers. She's very tired at the moment. Things will get clearer for her. Don't worry too much.

I sit down on a chair and put my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. I think about all the times I've been angry at Nonna for not being able to read or speak English

properly. I've had to explain everything to her, from TV ads to can labels, and I haven't always been nice about it. Now she can't speak any English, and she can't understand me at all.

But that isn't the worst of it. I know what the nurse is really telling me.

When I first walked in here Nonna opened her eyes, but they didn't light up the way they usually do when she sees me. I've never thought about that look before but now that it's gone I miss it. Nonna looked at me with happiness in her eyes because she loved me more than anyone in the world—because even though I didn't speak Italian and her English wasn't good, we understood each other better than we understood anyone else.

Nonna hasn't just forgotten English. She's forgotten me.

*

I'm dirty.

Nonna's asleep now. She's lying in a clean white gown on a clean white sheet in the clean white hospital cubicle. I'm still sitting in the plastic chair, keeping my distance because I'm still covered in mud and gunk and slime from the river. I can't put my head or my arms on her bed, but I've spit-cleaned my hand so I can reach out and hold one of hers.

The clean whiteness of the cubicle doesn't disguise the smell of piss and vomit, and its thin little walls and ragged curtain don't block out the yelling coming from the waiting room or the whine of the floor polisher. Shadows pass behind the curtain, a parade of demented strangers: drunks, crazies and hypochondriacs being escorted by security guards and nurses.

I've been holding Nonna's hand and hunching over in this chair, feeling wet and sore and miserable, for a long time. I'm not complaining though. It was worse when I was separated from her and stuck in the waiting room.

I'm staring off into space when the cubicle curtain is yanked aside and a group of doctors stand before us, saying words like *stabilised* and *blood glucose* and *aspirin* and *CT scan*. Not one of them says *hello*.

A young girl doesn't get much attention around here. After weeks of trying to be invisible and hiding from adults I have finally gotten my wish; I am nothing but a muddy girl that doesn't matter to anyone.

I don't want to be invisible any more.

'My grandmother doesn't remember English!' I shout at them. My ears pop and the sounds of the hospital, louder and more definite, come flooding in. 'What's going to happen to her? Is she going to remember me?'

A middle-aged male doctor looks at me, slightly stunned. 'We're just running a few tests to see the extent of the damage to her brain—she's been diagnosed with diabetes, which probably gave her high blood pressure and caused the stroke. Er, now what about you? Have you got a guardian, young lady? Did you come to the hospital with an adult?'

'No, but one of the nurses has been trying to call my dad for me.'

The group of doctors turn away and leave the cubicle. They've done their job and I am someone else's responsibility, so they don't give a damn. I hear a female doctor say 'transfer to the stroke unit in the morning' but then her voice is lost over the sounds of a shouting drunk.

I've never felt so alone in my life.

The doctors leave the curtain open but I don't bother closing it. This isn't a place concerned with dignity. The patients are animals kept in line by zoo keepers in white coats.

'Excuse me, miss.'

A lady dressed in a lavender-coloured uniform stops her trolley in front of Nonna's cubicle and peers in at me.

‘Are you all right, love?’ she asks. ‘Would you like a sandwich or an apple juice?’

‘No thanks.’

The lady has long grey hair pinned up in a bun and deep blue eyes. I have a good feeling about her. It’s easy to imagine that she is someone else’s grandmother, and that she cares and loves someone the way Nonna loved me.

‘What about a paper towel to clean up your face then?’ she offers.

I nod. I’m trembling. The lavender lady’s sudden kindness is overwhelming after all these hours of being ignored.

‘My grandmother doesn’t remember who I am,’ I say, bursting into tears. ‘She’s had a stroke, and she doesn’t know that she—that she—that she—’

The lavender lady leaves her trolley and comes over to me. She kneels down and starts wiping my face.

‘It’s all right, love. These things take time. There now. Cry it all out.’

*

Italians don’t eat hospital food.

I’m pretty sure that even if Nonna doesn’t remember the last thirty years she’s not going to eat *roast of the day* or *jelly* from the hospital menu, even if the kitchen liquefies it for spoon-feeding purposes. I tried to explain this to a nurse, but she waved me away and told me to pick something.

Nonna was moved to the stroke unit this morning, and it’s a lot better than her emergency cubicle. It’s quiet here, and there are no drunks or crazy people shouting and pissing and puking.

A doctor is examining Nonna now, doing weird things like putting a hammer against her chin to test her reflexes. I’m trying not to look and to concentrate on the menu. I’m

sure the hammer's hurt Nonna. The doctor doesn't seem concerned about it. He's treating her as if she's a big dumb sleepy doll.

'Can you follow my finger?' he asks, wiggling it from left to right.

Nonna answers by saying something in her soft, slurred Italian.

The doctor picks up her chart and rifles through the notes. 'Ah, I see. Patient of Italian origin, forgotten English after stroke, requires translator.' He looks over at me. 'Is this your grandmother? Can you translate for me?'

'No. I don't speak Italian.'

'Are there any English words that she might remember? Like *hello*, for example?'

'She knows *hello*. Her English isn't great, but she can speak some. Well, she could yesterday.'

'Okay.' He writes hello on a piece of paper and holds it up to her. 'Madam, can you read this for me?'

'She can't read, not even in Italian,' I say. 'There's only one word she might know.' I take his pad paper and write O-U-T on it.

Nonna gives it the same blank look as *hello* and shakes her head.

'Sorry, I can't help you,' I say, pushing the kitchen menu aside and rushing out into the hall.

Nonna doesn't remember anything yet. I'm still a stranger to her.

I hurry over to the nurse's station. 'Have you tried calling the café again?' I ask the harassed-looking matron.

'Yes, Matilda. I'm sorry, he hasn't turned up there.'

I look up at the station's clock. It's just past ten a.m. If Dad was going to work he'd be there by now.

I don't know where he spent the night or why he didn't come home, but I don't have the energy to freak out about it. Nonna's stroke has changed everything. No one else matters, not even Harry, who's probably in a lot of trouble with his dad right now, and my dad's disappearance is nothing but a dull pain in the back of my head. I have to find him, though, so I'm going to the one place he might be. I need someone who can speak Italian; someone who can tell Nonna who I am.

No 14/ Confession

A cold wind seeps under my skin. I pull my jumper closer but it rubs against my neck like a damp hand. It's still quite dark, even though it's mid-morning; the sky is a grey ceiling closing in on the world.

I run up the steps of the church and sprint down the pews, looking for my dad. There's no sign of him, only row after row of black-clad Nonnas praying for forgiveness.

The confessional door opens and another Nonna comes out. She goes into a pew and kneels down, clasping her hands in prayer and saying her penitence. No one else stands up to take her place, so I take my chance and walk straight in to the confessional.

I've never walked into a confessional by choice. Last year, when I was in Catholic school, my class had to sit in church and take turns going into it. I was really nervous when the priest asked me what my sins were. I made up some stuff about not cleaning my room and giving Nonna cheek, because I couldn't think of any real kind of sin to confess.

I wish I could say that now. Harry and I have kept terrible secrets, and people have been hurt by our silence. What if we'd told the police where Sammy was found? Maybe Mr Dray would've been caught earlier. What if we'd warned Corey, and he never went to the river? What if I'd told someone about how sick Nonna was, and her stroke never happened?

Have my choices been good, or have they been bad? It doesn't seem likely that they've been good: I have a vision of Corey on the river bank, and Nonna lying on the floor of Dad's room; I see Sammy's feet sticking up from underneath a bush, and Harry waiting in an old house full of dust.

Maybe if I confess to keeping dangerous secrets, God will forgive me. Maybe I can change something before it's too late, and Nonna's English will come back. I'll take

confession and then I'll kneel down in the church and recite the *Hail Mary* for her. I'll do my penance. I'll do it nine times over, a hundred even, if God will let her remember me.

I lose all hope when the confessional door closes. I feel trapped in a windowless box a million miles under the earth. I turn to face the priest, who's sitting on a stool. He's a bald man with a wrinkled face and white robes. He nods and gestures for me to sit.

'Bless me father, for I have sinned. It has been...er, many months since my last confession.'

The priest nods and recites a short reading, but I'm too nervous to really listen. I'm intimidated by this serious and solemn little man-god.

'Are you ready to confess your sins?' he asks.

'Yes, father,' I say. 'I...'

The priest looks at me expectantly, but I can't speak. I have the strange sensation of my mouth filling up with dry sand, sand that's sticking to the wet lining of my mouth, tongue and throat.

I can't tell the priest about Sammy's death or Corey's kidnapping. I can't face what happened to Sammy, and I'm afraid of how this man-god will judge me.

Maybe I've kept secrets for so long that I've forgotten how to tell the truth. Maybe it's too late for me to be saved. Maybe I'm just a sinner and there's nothing that I can do now to help Nonna anyway.

'I'm sorry Father, I can't tell you what I've done.' I stand up and hurry out of the confessional, the familiar white noise ringing in my ears.

In the church I spot my dad among the Italian women. He's praying by the red light of the tabernacle, and he looks like a little piece of ash that's caught fire. I imagine him curling up like an ember and burning out of existence, like Sammy.

'Dad, where have you been?' I run over to him. 'Nonna's in the hospital!'

‘What’s happened?’ he asks, getting up off his knees. ‘Is she all right?’

‘No! She had a stroke last night! She can’t speak English any more!’

‘All right, let’s get down there,’ he says, grabbing my arm and starting to run. As we streak down the wet streets of our neighbourhood our clothes get splashed with rain and mud and dirt. Dad and I look like two lost children, wading through the waters of a raging river.

*

When we get to the hospital my eyes are blinded from the rain and my lungs are sodden; each breath is a struggle against drowning. I lean against the entrance doors, swaying and panting.

‘You okay?’ Dad asks.

I look up at him with eyes so dirty that he backs off, taking away the hand he’s offered.

‘Let’s just wait here a second.’ I’ve been desperate to get back to Nonna, but now that I’m here I don’t have the guts to walk in. I’m not sure that I can stand a word-for-word translation of the blank stare in her eyes. With her slow, slurred Italian she’ll tell Dad that she’s never seen me before, and the voice full of broken words—her broken English—will be gone forever. She won’t exist, and neither will I. I will be a forgotten memory. A blank look.

Dad reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cigarette. He’s realised the game is up, so he’s not trying to hide his habit, but I’m still shocked. For one strange moment I have the thought *Nonna will smell it on his clothes and go nuts* before it dissolves away into an ache.

‘I’m sorry, Mattie,’ he says. ‘I’m sorry I wasn’t here with you last night.’

I ignore his lame apology. I’m angry with him for his piss-weak words and nervous hands and stupid cigarette-chugging mouth. He’s falling apart and he’s no good to anyone, not even as a translator of bad news.

‘You haven’t been around for a long time, Dad.’

I wait for him to answer, to tell me what's been going on, but he doesn't. His silence creeps over me like fear. My father is a ghost, and I don't know who this ghost is. This is not the father who sang and juggled and joked with me at the back of the café.

'I know you've been missing work and going to the church. I've followed you before.'

I'm shaking now, trying to ignore Harry's voice in my head: *what was he doing there?*
What was he confessing to?

'I don't get it, Dad. You've never believed in God before.'

'I don't know.' He takes a drag of his cigarette. 'I'm not so sure of things anymore.'

I want to rip the cigarette from his hands and scream *what is wrong with you* but I don't. There's no point in whipping a lame horse.

He looks at me with his bloodshot blue eyes and says: 'I've sold the café, Mattie. I didn't have enough money to keep it.'

'But the café's making money! It's always full of customers.'

The café has never been an empty space. It's been full of noisy crowds for years: hordes of little Italian kids dribbling gelato, old *paesano* on the veranda smoking skinny cigarettes, waiters and chefs racing around in the crazy, hot mad mess of the kitchen. I could never have guessed that losing the café is the reason for my dad's misery.

'I stuffed up, Mattie. I made a few bad investments, I lost track of things here and there...' Dad sighs. 'It's not a complete mess, though. I've covered my debts by selling it, so I don't owe anyone money now.'

'But Dad, what are we going to live on? You need a job!'

'I sold the café to Mr Pinneri, the guy who owns the fruit and veg shop on Ascot Avenue. He'll keep me on as manager.'

Becoming an employee at your former business is pretty humiliating, even for someone as humble as my dad. But that isn't the worst of it, not really. The café is my dad's place: the

restaurant floor is his stage, his arena, his circus. Now he's a token manager who hides from customers and washes dishes out the back.

I realise he's been losing money for a long time. The sounds of the carnival movie were the first sign, and his refusal to eat the next. Then he started forgetting to juggle and smile and talk, and disappeared from the kitchen into his room, avoiding Nonna and me; finally he disappeared from work and went to the church, a man desperate enough to ask a God he doesn't believe in for help.

I've been worried about Dad for weeks, but it's hard to feel pity for him now. Losing the café is better than ending up with a dead kid and a murderer on your hands. It's better than losing the last thirty years of your life.

'Stub out that cigarette. We gotta go inside,' I tell him.

Dad nods, tosses it away and takes a deep breath. I realise he's even more afraid than I am to walk through these doors. I turn away from him and go through.

Nonna is lying in her room with her eyes closed. I resist the urge to back out of the doorway before she opens them.

Dad walks over to her bed. 'Mamma,' he says gently.

Nonna opens her eyes. Her face betrays nothing because half of it is still lopsided, but she manages to speak in her slow, slurred Italian. Dad listens for a while, straining hard to understand her.

I try to be patient and wait for a translation but the soft drone of her strange language goes on, and the suspense gets to me.

'What's she saying, Dad?'

At the sound of my voice, Nonna turns her head, but she doesn't see me. Her eyes are old-person cloudy; they are blue, vague.

‘She’s very confused,’ Dad answers, turning his stricken face towards me. ‘She’s asking me where her little boy is.’

No 15/ Calling the Birds

I'm lying under the red light of Nonna's tabernacle, listening to the carnival music of Dad's old movie and trying to sleep.

Nonna's bedsheets smell like mothballs and lemon laundry powder, but I don't mind. It's better than trying to sleep in my own room, which is full of ghosts: Harry's shadowy form is curled up on the floor, and Sammy's lying on the window sill, a tennis ball clutched in his hand.

At least Nonna's room only has one ghost in it.

I think about the last time Nonna held me. I can almost feel the soft, wrinkly skin of her chest, and her golden crucifix pressed against my cheek.

I cry for the cat too, she'd said. But no worry. I never let bad thing happen to you.

What a silly old lady, I'd thought. Nonna didn't have the power to make such a promise. She couldn't protect me from the whole world, and she knew it, but she'd said it anyway.

Now I realise she was sort of right.

Everything was easier to bear when Nonna was here, even Sammy's death. I couldn't tell her about it, but I'd had her arms to hold me, her hands to fly at me with food and her broken English full of nagging and scolding and love.

I don't know if I can face the world without her.

Mr Dray can't hurt me now that he's been arrested, but I'm still in deep shit, and the police are probably looking for me. I'm terrified that Harry and I were too late to save Corey, and he didn't survive the night.

I'm also terrified that Nonna's going to die because I never took her dizzy spells and tiredness seriously. I should've walked with her to the doctors a long time ago. She probably wanted to go but never asked, because I whinged about taking her to the shops so much.

I know the stroke is my fault, because I broke her heart. If I'd been with her last night she wouldn't have realised I was missing and panicked.

Tonight Sammy is dead and Nonna no longer exists. I have to live with that.

That and my dad's stupid old movie.

I leap out of Nonna's bed and run into his room. It's pretty dark in here, but there's enough moonlight for me to see by. The DVD player beeps as I jerk the disc out. I hurry over to the window and hurl it out into the night.

'I can't sleep with that shit on!' I yell at Dad, who switches the light on and sits up. 'Every night you watch it and the music goes round and round and keeps me awake! I'm sick of it!'

I wait for Dad to spit and fume and shout at me for throwing the movie out the window. It's more than just a movie with carnival music. It's his memories, captured on old cameras in the sixties, converted into DVD form so he can watch it forever. It's footage of him as a ten-year-old, juggling fire, walking tightropes and doing acrobat routines; his life before he grew up and became my dad and had to run a café.

Dad doesn't show any anger. He puts his head in his hands for a moment and then looks up at me.

'It's gone now,' he says softly. 'I won't go looking for it.'

I feel my anger fall away. Dad looks strangely young with his blue eyes and sad thin face. He reminds me of a skinny, sad-faced boy who lives in an old house.

'Why do you have it on all the time?' I ask.

'The same reason I've been going to church, I guess. I can't stand silence, or being alone with my thoughts. I need help.'

‘You’re asking for help from God? Come on Dad, you don’t even believe in God, I know you don’t! You said that he can’t comfort or scare you because he’s not real,’ I say bitterly, sitting down on his bed and turning away from him.

‘It’s not a simple question of believing or not believing anymore, Mattie. An atheist going to church might seem crazy, but I was wrong—there is something comforting about that place. It’s where Nonna’s always gone when she’s had a problem—she’s always prayed and stayed strong in a crisis. I haven’t been coping with losing the café, and I had to do something. I figured going to the church is more acceptable to us Italians than going to a shrink. I think talking to shrinks is something only really crazy people do, but maybe I’m wrong.’

‘Dad, you stopped talking to *us*! You should have told us you were losing the café—we could’ve helped you deal with it! But you shut us out, and you were never around!’

‘I know.’ His voice cracks. ‘Tell me what I can do now, Matilda.’

I’m shocked. Dad’s always treated me like a kid, doing stuff like calling me a good girl and pretending that everything’s okay when it’s not. Now he’s asking me what he should do with his life.

‘Well, you can tell me the truth about Nonna, for a start,’ I say.

He frowns. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Dad, I saw you whispering with the doctor in the hospital. You know more than you’ve let on. I want to know if Nonna’s going to get her memory back.’

‘The doctor thinks she’ll start to remember things, Mattie. Confusion after a stroke doesn’t last forever, but we’ll just have to wait and see.’

‘But what if she never remembers? Can that happen?’

He shrugs. ‘I suppose so. I don’t know.’

The idea of never having Nonna back causes a wave of fear to swell up in my head; it crashes about my ears and leaves me in pieces. I sit down on the floor and start to sob.

‘Dad, it’s not your fault that Nonna had a stroke, it’s mine! I thought it was normal that old people got dizzy and tired, I didn’t realise she was so sick! I didn’t say anything, and now she’s nearly dead!’

‘She’s not nearly dead,’ he says gently.

‘Somebody else nearly died—a kid,’ I wail. ‘I’ve messed up really badly. It’s not just Nonna whose been hurt.’

Dad gets off the bed and sits down on the floor with me. ‘Okay, *bella*, take it easy. Slow down and tell me what’s going on.’

I tell him everything. I don’t hold anything back. All the secrets I’ve been keeping push past my silent tongue and come spewing out: the finding of Sammy, the kidnapping of Corey, the sneaking off, the running away, the old house and the river, birds, cats, dead dogs, dead children.

When I finish I realise I’m crying, but not because I’m sad. I’m crying because the deep silent place inside me is breaking up, and relief is trickling out.

‘Mattie, you haven’t done *bad* things at all,’ Dad says. ‘You’ve suffered because you couldn’t ask me for help, and made decisions that I should’ve made for you. Look, none of this is your fault. You didn’t kidnap Sammy or Corey. You just tried to deal with these situations the best way you could.’

The words *none of this is your fault* ring through my head, ringing over the sound of the white noise. I put my arms around Dad. I’m shaking and confused, but I feel hope for the first time since Sammy died. Dad hugs me back and strokes my hair.

‘Dad, if Nonna gets her memory back, we have to move away from this neighbourhood,’ I tell him. ‘It’s too dangerous, and Nonna’s scared I’ll get hurt. The stress of me being in danger will kill her for good. She’ll have another stroke.’

‘But we haven’t got much money now I’ve lost the café—’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I tell him fiercely. ‘You have to find a way. You have to protect us now.’

Dad looks at me for a long time. ‘Okay. We’ll move. I don’t know how, but I promise we will.’

Dad hasn’t been good for much lately and he’ll never be as strong as Nonna, but this is more than I could’ve hoped for. He’s been hollow and sick and withered inside for a long time, but now, slowly, he’s coming back. He’s not crying now because he’s too empty to cry. He’s like a man made of air; a man who’s empty and filling up with blood.

*

I sit on my window sill and wait for Harry, but he doesn’t come. I’m watching his parents’ flat, hoping for a sign that he’s living there again, but it’s not looking good. His bedroom light’s been out for hours.

There’s no cloud or wind, so my view’s clear, but I feel strangely blind. I’m looking at an alien landscape, rather than the usual half-lit stairwells, overgrown bushes and giant gum trees of the courtyard. The laundry lights aren’t flickering as usual, because someone’s replaced the fluorescent tubes. The bushes beneath the gum trees have been cut back, and all the broken bottles and glass have been taken away.

The flats have never been this quiet. There’s no stray cats yowling, no music, no windows open. I hope that Sammy’s death and Corey’s kidnapping has changed this neighbourhood forever, but I doubt it. The truth is everyone is laying low due to the cops being around. They’re leaning pretty hard on Clifton Street.

I decide to go to the old house. I'm pretty sure Harry's not living at his parents' flat. He would've seen my bedroom light on and come over here if he was.

Sammy's death and Corey's kidnapping haven't changed anything for Harry. He hasn't made up with his dad and gone home, even though he helped him smash Mr Dray's windows. Harry's dad is still a violent pig, and his mother is still a crazy drunk.

All he has is me.

I pull on a jumper and climb out of the window. Dad knows that I've been sneaking out so I don't have to hide it anymore, but I wish I did. I'd give anything for Nonna to yell at me about it and do something outrageous like putting bars on my windows. I miss everything about her, even her over-the-top reactions.

It's a blue night full of shadows, and Clifton Street is cold and ghostly. I fight through the long wet grass of the old house and climb into its wooden skeleton. Impressions of Harry's sneakers are stamped into the floorboards like fingerprints, so I follow his muddy trail to the back.

'Hey Harry, wake up.'

He's lying on his back, a mound of blankets concealing everything but his face. It's very cold in here even though the night's still, and there's no wind whistling through the cracks.

'Where have you been?' he mutters, sounding annoyed. 'Get in.'

I slip into the blankets, feeling relieved. This is a better reaction than I've expected. I was sure Harry was going to be furious with me for leaving him to face the cops alone.

'How's Corey?' I whisper.

'I'm not sure. I think he's all right. He's alive, anyway. My dad said he was drugged up, not dead.' Harry yanks half the blankets off me. 'Quit hogging them, will ya? It's bloody freezing.'

'Haz, what are you doing here? I thought—'

‘What? That I was going to make up with my dad?’

‘Maybe. I dunno. What did you tell the cops about Corey? Are we in deep shit?’

‘I ran off before they had a chance to ask questions.’

‘But I left you with your dad, and you were throwing the rocks at number twelve...’

‘Yeah, so what? I got out of there pretty quick after you pissed off.’

‘Maybe you should tell the police the truth about your dad. They might find a place for you to stay, somewhere better than this.’

‘No way. I’m not going to dob in my dad and end up living in a foster home, not after what I’ve seen. I could end up living with some asshole even worse than him, someone like Mr Dray.’

‘That wouldn’t happen! The government would have to check—’

‘Check what?’ he interrupts. ‘Look at Sammy. He wandered around all the time and the cops turned a blind eye to it, just like everyone else.’

‘Haz, you can’t live in this dump.’

‘Why not?’ he shrugs. ‘I just need you to do me a favour or two. Can you get me some food and some money?’

‘I can’t steal money from my family!’

‘I’m not asking for a lot, just a bit to get by.’

‘I can get you the food, but not the money. No way.’

‘Mattie, I’ve been hanging around here waiting for *you!* I’ve been shitting my dacks in this house for two days, and now you won’t even steal ten bucks for me?’

‘I didn’t stay away on purpose—I’ve been at the hospital! Nonna had a *stroke*. It’s messed up her brain, and she doesn’t even know who I am.’

‘Is she gonna be all right?’

‘The doctors say so, but she doesn’t seem—’

‘The only reason I’m still in this shit-hole is you,’ Harry interrupts. He sits up and puts his face in hands. ‘Come on, Matts, our parents are all hopeless. Stuff ‘em—we’re on our own anyway. Sammy’s death proved that. Just get me some money, will you? I don’t need much.’

‘You don’t get it, Haz.’ I take a deep breath. ‘Nonna had a *stroke* when she realised I was missing. I can’t steal her money, or my dad’s. I can’t keep sneaking out to be with you.’

Harry flings the blankets off and stands up.

‘So what are you going to do if she gets better?’ he shouts. ‘Leave me to rot in this shit-hole?’

‘If Nonna gets better there’s no way I’m going to make her worry and cry about me.’ My voice breaks. ‘Harry, there’s only one thing Dad and I can do for her, and we have to do it. We’re leaving the neighbourhood.’

‘You’re gonna leave me here and move?’

‘Yeah, I guess so.’

He turns away from me. His shoulders are shaking in the moonlight. ‘Are you still gonna be friends with me?’

‘Harry, you’re my best friend, but I’m not sure that I can be. Nonna’s scared of your dad, and she doesn’t want me to hang around with you.’

Harry lights a candle and starts scrounging around the floor.

‘What are you doing?’ I ask.

‘If you’re getting out of this neighbourhood, so am I.’ He shoves some t-shirts into his bag. ‘I’ve got no reason to be here now.’

‘Harry, I’m sorry.’

I follow him out of the house and onto Clifton Street. He turns the corner and walks away without saying anything. I can't guess where he's going, because he's heading in the direction of the river, and even Harry, the boy who can't go home, will never go there again.

I can't follow. I belong with Nonna. I'm just a bird that's flown away for a while; a bird that's being called back from the trees.

*

'I very sorry, but I no like the roast chook and chips.'

Nonna's English, both slurred and broken, carries out into the hallway. It's the most wonderful thing I've ever heard in my life. It doesn't sound broken to me anymore—it's a language of scolding and love and nagging and outrageous exaggeration.

'Are you still having trouble swallowing, Madam?' I hear a nurse ask.

I hurry into Nonna's room, desperate to find out if she can remember me. Nonna's sitting up in bed and frowning at a tray of food.

'This isn't chicken and chips,' the nurse says, looking confused.

I run around the bed to Nonna's side, ignoring the nurse. 'Nonna! Nonna, do you know who I am?'

She looks up at me. 'Don't you be silly, Mattie! Course I am knowing that.' She sounds tired and her English is worse than ever, but I understand every word. It's Nonna, *my* Nonna, even though her face is still lopsided, and she doesn't look the same.

When I put my arms around her I realise she smells strange, like hospital bleach and hand wash and laundry powder. Her warm cooking smells lie deeper in her skin; I hug her tighter so I can smell pasta sauce and pizza dough and *cotoletta*.