

PART TWO - Blacksnake Road

©Linda Cockburn

Snake Soup

"It's in there – I saw it!" Tanya shrieked.

"Yeah right " I said, "Like the time you saw Santa having a wee in Mr Bawn's fish pond."

Tanya danced around the vacuum cleaner pointing at it and yelling,

"Hey, everyone, quick, there's a snake in the cleaner!"

Tim, my oldest brother came to the door to see what was going on,

"Hmmm, he said, "What colour was it?" he walked over and gave the cleaner a nudge with his toe.

Nothing happened.

"Icky, yucky brown!" Tanya screamed, she was pulling her ears so hard they looked like they'd pop off the side of her head. She always does that when she gets excited.

Bryan, one of my five brothers, came outside with a paintbrush in his right hand and prodded the vacuum cleaner with his left toe too. It still didn't move.

"Wonder if it's poisonous?" he said.

"Maybe you should stick your mouth around the end and see if you can suck it out" said Lachlan as he too came to see what the fuss was about.

"Bet you anything that there isn't a snake" I said.

"How big was it Tan?" Tim walked around the cleaner with his head cocked to one side.

Tanya used her hands to show how fat it was,

Miriam appeared out of nowhere to point out, "If it was that big it couldn't fit up the vacuum cleaner in the first place" .

I don't know how big it is, it zapped up the cleaner so fast." Tanya hopped about excitedly.

“What’s the vacuum cleaner doing outside anyway” asked Melanie, who appeared at the crowded doorway.

“I ... I was vacuuming the garden” Tanya said quietly – that’s when I noticed that none of Mum’s gerberas had flowers any more.

“Geez, Mum’s going to kill you.”

“Maybe we should call the police” said Bryan.

“What for, a restraining order?” I laughed. He looked at me blankly.

“No... he said, “cos it’s an emergency, and in an emergency...” he waved his paintbrush at me expressively.

“Why don’t you put down your paintbrush and clean the paint out of your brain.” I scoffed.

“I can’t” he said, “Put down the paintbrush I mean. It’s stuck.”

I tried to keep my eye on the end of the vacuum cleaner and give Bryan a ‘What are you?’ look at the same time.

“I stood on it and broke it in half – it’s my best paintbrush. So I got Dad’s good glue and stuck it together. While it was sticking I thought I’d better read the instructions, I was reading the line where it says ‘avoid contact with skin when I realised-”

“That you were already stuck.”

“Yeah” he said, “Got any ideas?” he looked at his fingers closely and tried to pull one off the paintbrush, but it didn’t budge.

I started to giggle,

“Tanya’s ripped the heads off Mum’s flowers with the vacuum, and somehow got a snake stuck up it, and Picasso glues himself to his paintbrush-”

“Yeah, but I don’t go around telling people that my dog is an alien” he said.

I could feel my face sag right out of its grin.

“You said you believed me.”

“Yeah well, sometimes I lie” he snorted and held the paintbrush to his mouth like it was a cigarette and blew pretend smoke rings at the sky.

“Shut up you two” said Tim as he walked around the cleaner.

That’s when I saw the vacuum twitch,

“It twitched!” I yelled, pointing, “It twitched again!”

“Yeah, yeah, calm down, we saw” Tim sighed and scratched his head.

“Krissey wanna go pull out the plug?”

I ran to do as he said, when I came back he had a pink plastic pot, one of the ones Mum’s new gerberas had come out of. He picked up the end of the vacuum and dropped it over the top, capping it.

“Well it can’t get out anyway.” He picked up the cleaner and walked off down the back of the garden, we all trailed him. Me holding onto the plug, like a bridesmaid holding the brides train. Stupid thing to call it if you think about it, the brides *train*. Makes it sound like she must have a big caboose.

When we got to the bottom of the block where Dad has given up trying to mow and the grass is really long, Tim stopped. He flipped off the pot, and unclipped the cleaner so it fell open. He backed off in a hurry. I could see it then, a light brown-green snake, not too big, but big enough. It was coiled up and looking scared. It didn’t move.

“You just going to let it go?” asked Tanya.

“What would you rather I did?” asked Tim.

“I reckon we could make it into snake soup” she said.

“Snake soup?” Tim grinned. “First we’d have to kill it, most people who get bitten by snakes are trying to kill them ... sides it’s quite a cute little snake.”

“Things that can kill you aren’t cute” said Bryan who was standing there coating the sky with invisible paint.

“Is it going to move?” I asked.

“It’s scared, it’s thinking about what to do” said Tim. We waited another five minutes and it was still too scared – which is why I did what I did – I mean I didn’t want be standing around looking at a snake in a vacuum cleaner under the light of the moon. So I thought I was brave when really I was pretty stupid. I ran up and I kicked the vacuum cleaner, and the snake bit me. It bit me on the left foot right above my ankle. Then he turned tail (that means all of him) and disappeared into the long grass.

“Wow, did you see that, the snake hit me.”

“He didn’t hit you, he bit you. Bryan get the first aid kit, and Lachlan do the 000 thing would you.” Tim dumped me down in the grass and looked at the little-bitty scratch on my foot.

So I got my first ride in an ambulance, which would have been a lot more exciting if it turned out that the snake was poisonous. But after we went through all the identification stuff it turned out to be a yellow-faced whip snake. They can’t kill you, they just hurt like hell. So I went to hospital in an ambulance and I left with a bandaid on my foot. Bryan did better than that, he left with his whole hand in a bandage from where they removed his paintbrush. So when I showed everybody at school my tiny scar and told them what happened, nobody believed me.

I’m getting used to not being believed. Everyone thinks that I’m nuts, and the only slightly good thing about that is that they think that George and Shane are nuts too. At the end of the year we’re having a class party, everyone’s talking about what they’re going to dress up as. They all think that we will go as aliens, but we decided to go as nuts, peanuts to be precise.

Ever since the whole Humya thing, everyone thinks that

- a. *We made it up because we were bored.*
- b. *We are really lame*
- c. *That we shared a group delusion.*

I guess it would bug me more but I know that Mr Bier my teacher believes me. Mum and Dad keep saying ... 'We'd like to believe you.... But'.

I don't get adults, if they want to believe, then what's stopping them?

It's been three whole weeks since Humya, and while I can still feel his gift jangling around inside me I still have no idea what it is. Nor do Shane and George. George has theories, of course. He thinks if one of us accidentally chopped off an arm it would grow back, or that if a man from a small tribal village in Africa should suddenly arrive in our living room we'd be able to speak his language. But as I pointed out, none of us are going to try out his theory by chopping anything off, and how often does a man from a small tribal village end up in your living room?

Each time we see each other in school we give each other the 'look'. The 'have you found out yet look?' The last few weekends we've got together and did things. You know, swimming, helping George collect samples for his riverside botanicals set. It seems really normal to hang out with them. I wonder why it was I thought I had to hang out with just girls. This weekend we're going to Shane's house on Blacksnake Road – his Mum and Dad grow organic ginger and they're going to pay us to help harvest it. With the money I earn I'm going to save up for a digital camera. I've never been to Shane's house before, George told me it was really cool, made of mud and it has no doors.

"Then how do you get in and out?" I asked and he nonged me on the head with his Japanese textbook.

"They have doorways, but no doors hanging on them, dill. Just big heavy curtains instead."

Shane looked embarrassed and George added.

"It's a really cool house, more like a tree house than a proper house."

I would've asked more but Shane was still looking pink around his edges.

"What are your Mum and Dad like?" I asked him and he shrugged,

"Weird I suppose, you'll see."

The Fat Shark

So things were going well – I had my dog Skunk back, and it didn't seem like being stuck in an alien space ship without a body had worried him too much. Within a week he was back to his usual fat self. I was getting on well with Mum and Dad and everyone. I didn't even mind when Tanya insisted on crawling into my bed in the middle of the night and asking for fairytales. As long as she doesn't mind growing up thinking that sleeping beauty lived in a house made of gingerbread and all the other too-tired-to-get-it-right stories. I had two new best friends who had Humya's gifts too, and now I had the chance to earn some money. Fantastic.

Leela, Marita, Tina and Leone didn't even seem to notice me anymore. I was so out of their circle I was a square and I didn't even care. Sometimes some of the others said stuff about how I got around with boys, and no doubt George and Shane got stuff said to them about getting around with a girl. It didn't seem to worry them.

I don't know it had anything to do with what happened. I didn't even really notice it was happening for ages but I'm a bit slow like that. Sometimes I don't notice things. In our class, and in every class I guess, there's some idiot who gets a thrill out of picking on someone. Usually they pick on the quiet ones, or the ones who are a bit different. In Shane's case it's cos he's a bit fat, and he's really nice, the kind of nice that's not very good at sticking up for themselves. Which is why Andrew started on him I guess. Just little stuff to start with, mean stuff like smacking Shane on the back of the head really hard and saying it was because there was a mosquito there. Nicking his stuff, he even stuck his compass through Shane's book, the one with the plastic cover full of weird blue water so it dripped all over his essay on the Tawny Frog mouth. Andrew is a real poo. Nobody likes him. The really sick thing is that they all pretend to just so he won't pick on them too. Bit sad I suppose. He thinks he's got heaps of friends, when really he's got none. But I'm not going to waste time feeling sorry for him. Andrew sux.

So he kept doing little mean things and Shane let him. I tried a couple of times to shut him up, but Andrew wouldn't shut up even if you filled his mouth with petrol and stuck a lit match to his nose.

The day I figured it had gone too far was when I caught Andrew and his mates gluing shut the lid to Shane's lunch box. All morning they'd been bagging him about how fat he was, and how he should go on a diet, so it wasn't too hard to figure out what they were up to. Lucky it wasn't instant glue. As soon as they were gone I cleaned off the glue and put his lunch box back in his locker. At lunchtime you should have seen their faces when Shane opened it up just like normal and started pigging out on his alfalfa and cheese sandwich. That's when Andrew went too far.

"Hey Fatty – did you eat the glue too?"

"Huh?" said Shane who had no idea what Andrew was on about.

"Look guys he must have stuck some in his ears" And he pulled hard on one of Shane's pretending to look in it for glue.

"Ouch!" said Shane, "that hurt" and he rubbed his ear, and pretended as though nothing was happening. But the rest of them were gathering around like sharks ready for a feeding frenzy. Andrew leant in real close to Shane, Shane pulled back, but he was already as far up against the library wall as he could get. I could see Andrew's hand make a ball, and I could see what was going to happen. I had to stop it. I said the first thing I could think of.

"Oh no! Andrew, you've got a bee in your hair!"

I couldn't have picked a better thing to say, how could I have known that Andrew was scared of bees.

He started leaping and hollering,

"Get it off, get it off!" He looked so funny I couldn't help laughing. Next thing, we all were, even Shane.

When Andrew stopped panicking about his invisible bee he stood staring around, his hair stuck out in all directions and his eyes wild. And he had the angriest, meanest look I've ever seen. It made my stomach go all crimpy.

“Come on guys, I’ve had enough of this lot” he called his retreat. His troops dropped their grins and stuck silly little smiles on instead. Just when it looked like they were going to sidle off Andrew turned on Shane,

“And you, you just watch it fatso” and he punched him, right in the face. Shane didn’t have a chance, he was still sitting down, he even had a mouthful of sandwich and Andrew just bopped him one. Shane let out a little shriek and fell over. Andrew shook his hand like it hurt and then blew on his knuckles. And he grinned, grinned like a fat shark. I just watched while he walked away, big bouncy I’m-so-good steps. Shane was groaning. George was asking him if he was OK and I was just watching the big, dumb bully walk away. I opened my mouth to shout something at him and for once I didn’t find any words there.

Even though I gave Shane the marshmallow log out of my lunch he couldn’t hide the misery on his face, or that pinky-purple blob on his jaw. We spent the rest of lunch talking about what a complete pain Andrew is, and how unfair it all was. I think one of us would have brought up the topic of what to do about it, if we really thought there was anything.

I remember when Kalina picked on me in Fourth Grade. She used to get all the girls to ignore me ‘till I reckoned I had to have been the most hated girl in school. Lucky for me I had so many brothers and sisters at school and they didn’t mind if I hung out with them ‘till Kalina got bored and picked on someone else. But Shane, he just has George and me.

That night I took two of Shane’s favourite chocolate bars from Mum and Dad’s Milk Bar and put them on my ‘I nicked it’ tab. I guess then I thought I was doing Shane a favour. You know, he likes chocolate, it makes him feel good, but really it was to make me feel not so bad about not sticking up for him ‘cos I was too scared.

So the next day, which was a Friday, I gave Shane two chocolate bars and Andrew gave him a black eye. The worse thing was that instead of getting angry at Andrew I got angry at Shane ‘cos he didn’t do

anything. He didn't fight back, he didn't yell, he didn't cry, he just took it. Being angry with Shane made me not think about how I didn't do anything either.

George wasn't there when it happened. It was just Shane and I. We were walking down the corridor at lunch time, the one we weren't supposed to. We were going to see if Mr Bier had left the classroom unlocked so we could go in there and hide. Only Andrew and his mates came around the corner before we did. It didn't take much to imagine them goosestepping like Nazi's. Andrew never even looked at me. He never does, it's like I'm not even there. He said a few nasty things, lame stuff really, things about hippy parents and fat bums, and getting around with girls. But it's like he's trying too hard to come up with something horrible and then ... bop... just like yesterday, only this time Shane didn't shriek. Probably because he was expecting it. Then they took off, jabbering and yelling, all excited, because of what they had done, and there I was standing there, with my mouth open. This time I put a few words together and managed to yell,

"You bloody little-" but they were already out the door, and when I turned around Mr Fastenon was standing at the science room door with his hands on his hips. He can't have seen anything, just heard the noise. He gave us five seconds to vacate the corridor or ten consecutive detentions to be served in his science room. To be honest I like detentions with Mr Fastenon, he gets you to write about weird things like the sex life of a ping-pong ball. But we got out of there and went and found George. George said we should tell someone – But Shane reckoned that'd only make it worse. As it was things got worse anyway but not like any of us expected.

After school I stopped off at the Milk Bar and swapped my school bag for my overnight bag. And met up with George and Shane so we could ride the rest of the way to Shane's place on Blacksnake Road. I mean how cool is that? I live on Burton Street, boring. We were riding along and George was rattling on about the chemical compounds and medical properties of ginger. It's one of those conversations where my brain drops out of gear and I kind of coast along with the words. Skunk and Stink were coming along

too, and as it was it took most of my attention not to get the two of them tangled up in my tyres. Mostly they were coming because George's Mum and Dad wanted to meet Skunk. Shane told us that they believe in Humya, 'Hippies are good for one thing, they believe in everything'.

"So, you got any snakes?" I asked, rubbing my ankle.

"Why, thinking about kicking some around?" George laughed.

"Huh" I said, "I only kick snakes that are stuck in vacuum cleaners, got any of that variety Shane?"

"Nuh, I've only ever seen a few carpet snakes, I reckon they might be related. Dad pulls out their ticks some times."

"What?"

"You know, snakes get ticks too."

"I'm more scared of ticks than I am of snakes" I grimaced, "Nothin' worse than having an insect stick its head in your body and drink your blood – yuck. What's your scariest thing, you know animal or insect?"

I asked, "I mean we already know Andrew is scared poolless of bees." I giggled, but neither Shane nor George did. I crashed so hard into Stink that he yelped so I had to stop to give him a pat. When I caught up with them Shane was saying,

"Snakes, it'd have to be snakes. They are about the only thing that can kill you."

George nodded, "Me too."

"Nope." I disagreed, "spiders. They are the creepiest, ugliest, vilest things with two hundred eyes and eight legs. I'd rather be stuck in a room with a snake than a spider."

"Spiders only have two eyes"," said George in disgust, "Sometimes you can't help yourself can you, sometimes you just got to go and be a girl." By the time I thought about what to say to that we had turned into Blacksnake Road which is dirt with lots of hills. So for the two-kilometre bike ride we couldn't say much because we were either puffing our way up a hill or flying down the other side. I thrashed myself breathless to beat them to Shane's front gate just to show them what it meant to 'sometimes be a girl.'

“Besides” said George who didn’t seem to notice he’d just been beaten by a girl, “For every fifteen million humans there are five thousand billion spiders. You’re outnumbered”

“Where do you get all that stuff from George? I reckon you make half of it up.”

That really made him breathe in hard and look at me like he’d want to deck me.

I grinned at him to show I’d only been joking, he forgave me and grinned back.

Shane’s gate way is fairly obvious because it has a wooden tree stump letterbox with feathers and beads draped all over it.

“A dream catcher” said Shane.

“Cool” I said trying to pretend I didn’t see Stink having a pee on it.

“Hmmm” said Shane as he started up the drive.

“Promise me,” he said, “that when they ask how I got a black eye it was cos we were mucking around together and I got George’s elbow stuck in it.”

Not River, not Forest, Shane

“So how’s George’s elbow?” Shane’s Dad asked.

“Fine Mr Wilkie.” George took another sip of the ginger, carrot and beetroot juice and looked away.

“Oh George, don’t do that to me.” Mr Wilkie said regretfully.

George went red around his ears.

“Do what Mr Wilkie?” he said quietly, thinking himself caught out in a lie.

“Call me Mr Wilkie, it’s John, call me John. And Mrs Wilkie over there, you gotta call her Jace or, or what will you do Mrs Wilkie?” he called over his shoulder. She reached over and swatted him with a tea towel and laughed.

I couldn’t help myself but stare at them. Mr Wilkie had the most beautiful, white-blond hair, it went right past his bum like George had said it did. And he had white, blond bushy eyebrows so you could hardly see his eyes, which were very, very blue. Mrs Wilkie was just the opposite, she has skin like Milo,

big brown eyes, a bit like Skunk's actually, and incredibly tight ringlets all around her face, and she was tiny, they were both tiny. So how was it that Shane was Shane, these two beautiful and different people had made Shane, who was kind of brown and wishy-washy and just a little bit too fat.

Mrs Wilkie, Jace came over and gave Shane a big hug and looked closely at his eye, touching it with her fingertips, then she surprised the hell out of me and bent down and kissed his eye. I mean, if my Mum did that in front of my friends I'd start legal proceedings. Then she amazed me more and put her arms around George and gave him a hug and kiss too. I looked away. George looked like he enjoyed it.

I slurped on my juice and wondered what my Mum would think of their house. It really was made of mud, lots of mud wasps had been building too. And there were no doors, but they did have windows, but no curtains, not that you'd need them out here. All the furniture was big heavy bush furniture, stuff that it didn't matter if you scratched. There were huge candles everywhere, with hardened cascades of dripping wax, sometimes it ran over the floor. There was a wooden spiral staircase in one corner and a guitar hanging from the wall. The floor was made of heavy grey slate and was cold on my bare feet. It'd probably be cold here in winter, except they had the biggest fireplace I've ever seen, with two huge black metal dragons on either side. Almost as though they were breathing fire into the fireplace. Mrs Wilkie – Jace saw my eyes drifting around.

"Shane and George, why don't you show Krissey around, she'd probably like to see your bedroom and where she's going to sleep."

"The tree house " whispered George.

Shane started up the spiral staircase and I followed George. There was a small dark corridor and at the end of it there wasn't a wall, but a cast iron balustrade and beyond that, the bush. Shane turned right.

First off, it was huge, with wooden floorboards that someone had painted some cute little lizards on, then I realised that they were real and flitted away when I walked across the room. A room with only

two walls – where the two outside walls should be there were just more wrought iron balustrade covered in jasmine and humming with bees, and beyond that, rainforest.

“Wow” I said, there were big wooden posts that you could wrap your arms around and not touch fingers on the others side. They were carved and painted with stuff, faces, flowers, unicorns and giraffes, Shane had his own candle stand too. It dripped like a frozen fountain. Mum wouldn’t let me have a candle in my room in a pink, purple or blue fit. Shane’s bed is a double mattress in the middle of the floor with a huge mosquito net draped around it. He has a chest of drawers like a pyramid in the corner of the room. He had only two walls, but he’d made the most of them, one was covered in masks made from bark with hideous expressions one had a knife handle stuck between its eyes,

“That’s supposed to be Andrew” Shane grinned, pointing at it.

“Can I have a go?” asked George.

“Sure, but I don’t think it can hold together much longer. I’ve stabbed it too many times.”

“Is this voodoo or something?” I asked nervously.

“Nuh, Mum reckons it’s good therapy.”

“Does she know...?”

“Uh, uh” he said shaking his head, “and I’m not about to tell her.” He stuck his head down and looked miserable.

“Why not?”

“Dad and her will do something daft like go and see him and try to heal his angry spirit or something lame like that.”

“Only thing of his I’d like to heal is his mouth” I bit my lips together as though they were stuck and pretended to talk through them.

Shane giggled, “Heal his hands to his ears too, that’d look good.”

I turned back to Shane’s other wall, there were bits and pieces of paper that had been blue tacked and pinned, tickets from concerts, cards, school stuff, nice pieces of paper and poems. There was a bit of loo

paper hanging there that I just had to ask about. Turned out that Shane went to the loo straight after the lead singer of 'Tall Dark Stranger' had been there and had kept the toilet paper as a momento.

"I asked him if he'd sign it. But he thought I was mad."

"Shane this has got to be the coolest bedroom ever" I walked around one of the posts spotting out carved frogs and yellow peace signs.

"Told you John and Jace are the coolest parents." Said George.

"They're nothing like what I expected" I said, "I figured that your Mum's so dark and your Dad's so white that they must have really mixed you up well to come out so brown."

You know when the room does the freeze thing, when someone pushes the volume button up real high on silence and it kind of shrieks at you ... well it only ever happens when you say or do something wrong. Like the first time I swore at home, even the house stopped breathing.

"What did I say?" I asked looking at them both warily.

"I'm adopted," said Shane, "it's no big deal."

"Oh. I didn't know. I'm sorry" I stumbled badly and decided to shut up.

"Who did the carvings?"

"Mostly me... I got adopted when I was two, which is way I'm called Shane and not something like River or Forest."

"You are really very good at carving Shane," I pored over the shape of a snake.

"My parents died when a train hit their car... I was in the back seat and wasn't hurt at all."

I turned to look at him. George was looking at me like my Mum does when she thinks I'm misbehaving.

"Man, that's really sad... do you..."

"Remember them? I remember sitting on Dad's knee singing Seesaw Margery Daw, and Mum telling me what a good boy I was for having a poo in the potty. That's all though, and they feel like antiques, like maybe I'm making them up or something. I've got photos, wanna see?" he walked to the mask wall and put his finger in a knot in the wood and pulled, and out came a drawer. Impressed! Shane showed us photos of him smiling up at his Mum Agatha and his Dad James. Shane looked just like his Dad. The

funny thing was all I could think about what that smug-faced Andrew and what a complete brown lump of smelly stuff he was being. I looked into his Mum's eyes and promised her that I wouldn't let Andrew hurt Shane any more. He didn't deserve it. I handed back the photo.

"Let's really kill him," I said.

"What?" Shane looked shocked.

"Andrew, let's kill him" I grabbed the knife out of Andrew's facemask and plunged it in savagely. George and Shane looked at each other like I was strange. It didn't matter. I'd made up my mind. Andrew was not going to pick on Shane any more.

Mutant Frog

John was tuning his guitar in the kitchen and stirring a thick, creamy sauce on the gas stove top. Whatever it was it smelt fantastic. I'm always awkward when it comes to people I don't know. I usually try to shut up big time. Because when I do talk I seem to know what not to say and when to say it at the wrong time. Dad told me I suffer from Enterovirus (foot and mouth disease) and always says, 'I'd wash that foot first.' A good sign to stop talking.

I jumped when something warm and furry touched my ankle. But it was just a tiny, tabby kitten. I picked it up and gave it a cuddle; it looked at me with big blue eyes and sneezed. It rubbed its nose with the back of its paw and sneezed again.

"Oh" said John "You found Tabitha... she allergic to humans."

"What?" I laughed, as Tabitha sneezed again, more violently. She twisted in my hands, jumped free and took off, sneezing all the way.

"She's allergic to people, they make her sneeze."

"I didn't know it was possible"

"Nor did we. Jace is treating her to see if she can help it. So far all she's done is teach her how to spit. Not too keen on herbal remedies it seems."

“Jace is a healer,” said Shane proudly, she’s really good at it, she healed Mrs Schmack’s boils and stopped Arthur Malloy’s nosebleeds.”

I laughed, “And now she’ll witch away Tabitha cats sneezes” Shane frowned at me. I had the curious flavour of foot on my tongue.

“I’m sure she’ll cure her too,” I added.

For dinner we had Gado Gado. Vegies and eggs and cubes of tofu smothered in spicy peanut sauce. It was yum. Usually I don’t like eating anything different. I thought I’d be brave and pretend to like it, but didn’t need to pretend too hard. After dinner I taught George what a tea towel was and made him use it. At his house they have a dishwasher. He’s never even taken his plate to the sink. We talked the whole time about what we have to do and what we don’t. George didn’t have to do anything.

“You wipe your own bum?” I asked and got a stony silence from him.

“Least he doesn’t have to wipe other peoples bums like you!” Shane laughed.

When we finished cleaning up John played the guitar and sang. He had this big deep voice, which was strange because he’s such a little man. When the chorus came Jace sang too, she had a voice as high as his was low, and together they sounded beautiful. I’ve never been able to figure out how one person can sing, play the guitar and tap their foot. It like the patting your head and rubbing your tummy thing, plus jumping up and down. Then Shane gave me the second shock of the day. He took the guitar and played this really neat song and sung. He might look wishy-washy brown, but his voice was all blue. My Dad loves the blues so I know what it was we were listening to. When he finished I clapped, so did George. It turned out he wrote the song too. I started feeling a bit stupid about treating Shane like he was a bit stupid. Everyone sang, even I tried to, but just quietly. Later we had a cup of chai tea which was sweet and spicy, and told stories. I love stories. Usually adults don’t appreciate mine, but John and Jace laughed when I told them of the exclamation mark poo.

Tamara was in the bath last week when we heard her screaming hysterically, we all ran to the bathroom expecting something terrible, she was cornered up against the tap as far as she could go by a big floating poo. The amazing thing was the little poo floating at the bottom of the big one. It looked just like an exclamation mark. It sure made her scream. Dad fished it out with a kitchen pot and Bryan wouldn't eat anything cooked in that pot for a week. I got to tell the snake story again too. John and Jace asked about Humya and our gifts. John fussed over Skunk, who thought that was pretty good.

When we went to bed we carried up two single mattresses and Jace brought up pillows and blankets. The mosquito net was so big that all three mattresses could fit under it. I was a bit shocked, but managed to hide it. Mum and Dad wouldn't let all of us sleep like that. Not boys and girls together. But it was OK. Not much different from when we stayed the night at the three rocks. We hadn't been in bed long when a little bird started flying around the room.

"Look at that little bird" I said.

"That's a bat" said George.

"Oh" I watched it for a moment, "is it the blood sucking type?"

George giggled, "I knew you'd ask that ... no it's eating insects" he yawned, "Go to sleep, it's late and we have to be up early tomorrow."

"Sure. Night."

"Night" said George.

"Night" said Shane.

"Hey Shane?" I said.

"Yeah."

"I'm gonna kill that rotten little shit for you."

"Thanks Krissey, I'll visit you in jail" he rolled over and I found out something else about Shane... he snores.

I didn't go to sleep right away. I never do in a strange place. I could see quite a bit by the light of the moon. Like, the shape of bats against the sky. It's a pity I didn't go to sleep right away. I might have missed seeing a huntsman spider the size of a dinner plate creep across Shane's wall, the one with all the paper. Once I saw it I couldn't shut my eyes, even when they hurt so much they watered.

"Hey George?"

"Hey what?" he said sleepily.

"There's a really big spider on the wall."

He didn't even move....

"Well don't go kicking it will you."

I kicked him instead.

"It won't hurt you, 'sides it can't get in."

"There might be gaps."

"There aren't any gaps OK."

"But there could be."

"But there aren't... night." He said firmly and I was left alone to watch the big hairy thing walk across Shane's school timetable.

It was light and there was a strange green frog sitting on the floor. If I could reach my hand through the netting I could touch it. It looked bizarre it had a black headdress like a hairy fringe over its head. I'd never seen anything like it.

I struggled to sit up and poked Shane. He grunted and I was forced to poke him harder. It was, after all, morning.

"Look Shane!"

He rolled over and looked to where I was pointing. He frowned.

"A weird green frog... ask George, he studies frogs."

So I kicked George awake, he was grumpy till he saw the frog.

“What kind of frog is that?” I asked.

“It’s not a kind of frog, it must be a mutation.”

“Mutation, wow...wonder if they’ll name it the Bertram frog?” I wondered if I could make money out of it like Lachlan reckoned he could from the one-eyed cane toad he found a year ago.

George stared at it, then the long fringe curled and wiggled. George snorted.

“It’s no mutation. It’s a green frog that’s just eaten a very big spider, and can’t fit it all in its mouth.”

I looked again, and it was true. It was a very big spider that had come at least an arm span from my face during the night and the green frog has saved me.

“Ahhh, you’re my frog prince” I thanked him while I watched him slowly devour all the remaining legs.

Attack of the Black Octopus

Breakfast was a lot like at our house, everyone getting their own and cleaning up after themselves. Though Jace helped George out when he couldn’t figure out how to make his own Milo. Instead of harping little kids on, about food and dropping their toast jam side down and then eating it, cat fur and all, there was a peaceful atmosphere. I noticed how John and Jace spoke so calmly and quietly. I guess they don’t have to make themselves heard over all the squabbles. I told them how Tanya stands beside me and chirps away like a little bird.

“Tweet, tweet, tweet” she says, when really she saying, she wants something ‘too eat’. They thought that was really cute, not too sure what they thought of the next story though, how I found her outside without a nappy on and tweeting at Stink and offering him a fresh piece of poo.

“Urrrr” said George, if you told that story to my Mum while she was eating breakfast she’d ask you to leave the table.”

“I bet she would,” I agreed, grinning anyway.

I guess if I found Shane's house different then George must find it really different. He told us once how his Mum and Dad have three sets of cutlery at each meal. I had to ask what cutlery was. But all the knives and forks had different purposes and how many rules there are to eating.

"At my house the only rule is to make sure you swallow every now and then otherwise you'll choke."

Thinking of Tanya and her chipmunk cheeks.

"What's it like having nine brothers and sisters?" Jace asked.

"Crazy."

"I bet... drive your Mum and Dad crazy too?"

"Oh no, they're used to it. I help out when I'm around, all the oldies do."

"She's always telling gross stories about poo." said Shane.

"Wanna hear..." I began.

"Nope," said George, "we don't. I always figured I'd have kids, now I'm going to invent a drug that makes my sperm swim backwards." Everyone laughed.

I told them, "When we are really bad at home. You know, fighting, Mum starts cuddling Dad and asks if she can have another baby."

"What does he say to that?"

"Never hear him, we're all shouting 'no!'"

John and Jace teamed us up and got us going in the ginger. I'd never seen what it looked like before, it's pretty interesting really, it is like a weird grass with strange knobby root on the bottom, they're a bit like clouds and you could see things in them, but mostly it was just crabby old mans hands and deformed goats. The work wasn't make-you-puffed-stuff it was in the make-you-pooped-group. After a couple of hours I was flying half-mast. My back was killing me and my fingers were numb, my knees had little stones stuck in them. I had one of Jace's big hats on but between the sun and my back in another ten minutes I'd be,

"Totally and Oatally buggared" I said aloud.

“What’s that?” John laughed on the other side of the row from me.

“Oops – I meant totally and utterly buggared.”

He grinned and showed me a yoga move that would help, and it did. Yoga is a bit like playing Twister only you’re not supposed to laugh.

“My Mum went to Yoga once, but they asked her to leave” I told him.

“Why’s that?”

“Every time they got her to put her feet over her head she’d fart.”

“That’s not so bad” he chuckled.

“Probably not, but she couldn’t stop laughing.”

Jace told me about the time he was at a hippy shop and he snuck out a really smelly one. He said the shop pretty much evacuated within moments, he was busy walking around pretending nothing had happened when the guy behind the counter came out with an incense burner on a brass chain and swung it around the shop holding his nose.

“It must have been seriously smelly one,” I giggled.

I like John, it’s not often an adult will talk to you about the stuff that really matters. Both John and Jace are so gentle, just like Shane and you don’t have to worry about what they are thinking, cos you know it would only be good. At the end of the day I was exhausted, but it was a nice kind of exhausted, the kind where you almost look forward to feeling your muscles ache the next morning. We ate dinner sitting on the floor playing monopoly and had a singalong, I even sang loud enough for the others to hear.

Dad rang up on Sunday and said he’d come pick me up. I was surprised. The rule around our house is if it’s further than biking distance you don’t go. Dad said hello to John and Jace, and said ‘no’ to a freshly squeezed ginger and apple juice. It almost seemed a bit rude the way he didn’t really look at them. His face was kind of lopsided and his smile was on such a weird angle it almost fell off his face.

"Is someone dead?" I asked when we got in the car. He shook his head, "No", he said, "Hang on I'll get back onto the sealed road and I'll tell you then." while he navigated the narrow and pot-holed track I looked in the back seat and saw Miriam and Melanie. They looked at me with a funny kind of guilty smile.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Mum has an octopus," Melanie said.

"And it's getting bigger," Miriam added.

I stared at them blankly for five or more seconds, but they obviously didn't know more about Mum's octopus. I looked back at Dad, the corners of his mouth were twitching, not because he was trying not to smile, it was because he was trying not to cry. By the time he turned into the road I was pretty twitchy too.

"Well?" I asked

"Your Mum has cancer. It's in her womb. It's in the shape of an octopus."

"And it's getting bigger."

"Yes."

I was quiet for a while. If they knew it was getting bigger, then they had to know it was smaller once too.

"How long have you known?"

"A month."

I fought with the question of why they hadn't told us and then got hit by a much bigger question, one that did weird things to my guts. I couldn't ask that one, instead I asked,

"What are we going to do about it?"

"Your Mum's going to hospital tomorrow. They're going to run a few more tests and then they're going to try and remove it."

"My breath went all thick in my throat, I had lots more questions, but I couldn't trust to ask them without crying. So I didn't say anything. After a while Dad said, "If it's OK with you we'd like to ask

you to do some babysitting for a couple of weeks. Roster you on with Tim, James, Lachlan and Bryan so you have one day off school a week for the next couple of weeks, maybe more," he looked away from the road a moment.

"I know it's a huge thing to ask. But we decided not having a Mum for a while and a stranger in the house looking after the pips is just too much to ask."

"Yeah sure...that's fine Dad. Don't worry. I'll do it." That horrible question was like spew in my throat. I swallowed it and it tumbled around in me and made me feel sick.

Mum was as much the same as Dad was different. When any of us look really down Dad always says, 'what's wrong with you, had a big mouthful of mournful soup?' Dad had had a whole bowl and asked for seconds, and Mum was busy packing her bag for hospital and cracking bad jokes about hospital food.

The little ones had no idea. Melanie even said she thought Octopus's were cute.

"Wave your arms like Henry," she sang, pretending to be the one off the Wiggles. Like, so not cute, Melanie, and we packed her off to the kitchen where Lachlan fed her Wiggles spaghetti.

"How about you lot go into the kitchen and make popcorn or something" she said in the end when James and I fell over each other trying to get her comfy pillow into her overnight bag.

"I'll even let you leave the lid off if you like."

"Nah, it's OK" Bryan said and took off. I think he was crying.

So we all left, except me. I still had the question and it was doing star jumps in my throat.

"Mum, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Did... could... is it possible... has...?"

Mum laughed, "Yes... no... maybe...never."

"Mum, stop being funny, this is a serious question I'm trying to ask."

Mum stopped what she was doing and sat down on the bed and dragged me down for a big Mummy cuddle and waited for me to try again.

I managed to cough the star jumper out of the way long enough to splutter,

“Could having all us kids give you the octopus, the cancer I mean?”

That’s when I knew things were really bad. Mum started to cry, I mean not quiet little pretty tears, but the big, ugly sobbing ones. She hugged me so hard that it hurt, but I was hugging her back pretty hard too. I hoped I’d strangled the bloody thing.

“No, said Mum, “No, it’s nothing to do with having lots of kids. Nothing at all.”

Still, when your Mum has cancer in her baby carriage, it makes sense that plonking too many babies in it for too long could do it to you. Besides, even if it was true and that too many babies had done it, she wouldn’t tell me anyway.

A fist full of fang

So Mum went to hospital and Tim stayed home with Tamara and Tanya. At school Mr Bier was rambling on about black holes, when Shane slipped a brown envelope across the table with a grin. I pushed it hard down into my pocket and tried to give him the right kind of grin back. It had to be the money I’d earnt in the weekend picking ginger. Suddenly saving money for a camera seemed even more important. If I had a camera I would take two hundred and fifty thousand photos of my family. I’d have the biggest photo album in history, every time someone smiled I’d be there, click, every successful poo in the potty I would be there with my camera, click.

George prodded me so hard I almost fell off my chair. Mr Bier was talking to me.

“Hello there Krissey, did you fall into a black hole, or are you still with us?”

“Still here” I said regretfully.

“Well sorry about keeping you. I was wondering if you could tell me something about a black hole?”

“In my house a black hole is where money goes.”

“Interesting theory.” Mr Bier smiled and asked George who gave a three-minute spiel on every fact known to science about what a black hole may or may not be.

“Yeah, it’s that too” I finished off for him and the rest of the class laughed.

At break George, Shane and I hunkered down behind a big shrub in the shade and ate our lunch. No one said anything about hiding from Andrew, but we all knew that was what we were doing. I spent the whole time thinking about whether to tell them about my Mum, but every time I opened my mouth to say it I found myself sticking a sandwich in, or feel my throat swell up, or noticed they were talking about something which made it seem strange to bring it up that my mother had an expanding octopus in her stomach.

In the end it kind of had to come out anyway.

“Hey Krissey, you going in the cross country this year?”

“Nup.”

“Why not?”

“Not coming to school on Thursday.”

“Why not?”

“Mum’s in hospital. Gotta look after the little dudes.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why is she in hospital?” George asked muttering something about getting blood out of stones.

I frowned at him and shut my eyes and said very, very quickly.

“She-has-cancer-and-they-are-going-to-do-tests-and-see-if-they-can-dig-it-out,-and-I-can’t-handle-talking-about-it-so-please-don’t-ask-anymore.”

I heaved a bit and stuck the rest of my grapes in my mouth all at once and nearly choked, least if I had tears in my eyes they’d think it was cos of that. But they didn’t have time to say anything because we

were all staring at the head that was floating over the top of the shrub grinning down at us like a shark cornering seals.

“Well, what’s this, an orgy, can I join in?”

None of us said anything we just stared up at him in dismay. I dropped my eyes and I could see a whole collection of feet on the other side of the bush. Bugger.

I put my chocolate crackle that I’d been saving for last back in my lunch box. Guess this is where I need to pump myself up and make sure I do what I said I’d do for Shane’s dead Mum, and for Shane too. This is where I make brave and kill the sucker.

I winched myself up the wall and made myself look back at Andrew, who wasn’t looking at me of course, he was zeroed in on Shane, saying something about blubber boy’s hiding, blubber boy is dead meat. I tried to grab hold of that, ‘I wanna kill him feeling’, but it was getting trampled all over by the ‘I’m gonna get killed’ one. Andrew’s hand reached through the bush and grabbed Shane by the throat and hauled him right through the bush. I heard him thump down on the ground on the other side and say ‘ouch’. Which made Andrew and his cronies laugh.

George and I looked at each other and stepped out from behind the bush and stood there feeling at comfortable as lumps of snot on a birthday cake.

I looked around for bees, but there were none. I tried to think of something to do, and could only think of lame things to say. I didn’t know if my voice would say them convincingly anyway. Andrew was leaning in close to Shane and deliberately spitting when he talked, so that Shane had to wipe his goober’s off his face. I could see Andrew’s clenched fist, and the excited looks on his mate’s faces, they were waiting, they were enjoying it, they wanted to see Andrew hit Shane.

“What should we do?” George hissed at me. I shook my head.

“I’m gonna get someone.” He said.

He disappeared. I was standing there, the only one who could possibly help Shane. I thought about Shane playing guitar, his Mum kissing him, and the bark facemasks, I even thought about listening to

him snore at night. Things were heating up, Andrew was making little leaps around Shane as he taunted him, he was getting tense and wound up, his mouth going at a great rate and his fists were getting higher, drawing back. Shane stood there staring mildly at him. Waiting. He knew what was going to happen. Slap! Andrew whacked Shane across the face.

“What are you, dumb? Big dumb lump, can’t ya even talk?”

Shane’s look disintegrated. I could see he was going to cry. I could just feel it. If he cried, oh God that would be the end of him.

I marched over and kicked Andrew, hard, really hard on the shin. I stuck my hands on my hips and laughed at him my bravest laugh.

“Pffff! If it isn’t Andrew.. the bee boy... blubbers over an insect one millionth his size.”

Andrew curled his lip at me but looked back to Shane,

“Gonna let a girl stick up for you are you?”

“No” said Shane, “It’s OK Krissey.”

“No it’s not. Frankenstein here, thinks he can beat people up just cos he’s tall and has the brains of a headless rat.”

I could feel that big surge of anger bubbling up and my hands curling up into fists too.

Andrew looked at me for a second, I mean really looked at me. You could see into the back of his head through his eyes, and all it was big time nasty stuff. Andrew has no brains, and you can’t talk sense to a cretin.

“Look you, bug off” (Actually he said something else). He reached out and shoved me. I staggered, but came back at him in a rush and this time when he shoved me he shoved me in the throat and I fell over in a heap, gasping. So I was on the ground when it happened. It happened so fast it was like it almost didn’t happen. Shane’s hand came out, but where there should have been a hand there was snake with its jaw wide, its fangs gleaming. They hovered for a microsecond over Andrew’s neck and then sank deep into his shoulder. The snake wiggled a moment to get its fangs even further in. Andrew was screaming at the huge snakehead on his shoulder. It pulled out its fangs, and Shane’s hand dropped

back to his side, just a hand again. But when Andrew turned around there were two big dots of blood on his shoulder, so I knew it had to have happened.

Andrew was gibbering, clutching his shoulder and moaning, saying something about how he was gonna die. Get an ambulance quick. I was still sitting on the ground, but I couldn't do anything but look at Shane. Who was standing there as calm as if nothing had happened. He looked down at me and smiled. "Reckon that fixed him," he said.

By the time George arrived with a teacher Andrew was lying on the ground sobbing and Shane and I had the good sense to get out of there. They took Andrew to hospital where they swabbed the snake wound for venom, but said there was no way it was a snake, it would have to have been ten metres long to have fangs that far apart. Even so, the school got some men in blue overalls to come and they made a search of the school, but they didn't find the snake.

So now Shane knew his gift. After I got over the shock of it I figured it was a pretty damn good gift. If Andrew tried to bother him again... whammo, snake time!

[My Barracuda Buddy](#)

The maddest I've ever seen Mum was when Lachlan sucked a candy cane to a sharp point and stabbed James in the arm with it. I reckon she near split herself yelling at him. Looking at the kitchen now, I figured it was a lucky thing she was in hospital, because after this her sides would need stitching too. Tanya and Tamara had climbed in the kitchen cupboard, tore open a whole 2kg bag of flour and one of sugar and had made 'snow' on the kitchen floor. They'd made snowmen of themselves too. Powdered up like they were with eyelashes thick with it, their little pink smiles looking up at me like I was supposed to laugh or something. They stood there waiting for me to say something, do something, and all I could do was stand there. It was going to take hours to clean this, maybe even days.... It looked like

it might never ever be clean again. Especially where they had added water and mixed it together to make 'snow cakes'. It's not like I'd left them alone long. I'd just gone out to put the washing on the line. I'd left them watching TV. Tanya started to giggle.

"Funny" she said.

"Not funny" I choked.

She nodded, 'Funny!' she demanded with a little frown. "Funny, funny, funny!"

"NOT FUNNY!" I yelled and she stared at me, lip out before she started to cry. Oh God. Just what I needed. Once she started so did Tanya. I felt meaner than a goanna with its tail on fire.

I ignored them while I got out the broom and started cleaning up. As fast as I swept up the draft through the window kept swirling it back behind me. As hard as I swept there was still flour and not floor where I'd just been. I kept cleaning till I couldn't bear to hear them bawling, the big gaspy out of breath kind of crying that really gets on your nerves and you'll do anything to make it stop. I gave it ice cream, two big bowls and that shut them up long enough for me to get phase one of the clean up under way. I could tell there were at least four more phases after that.

It was Thursday, my day to do the looking after, and I'd thought it would be a great day off from school, turned out to be three or four nightmares rolled up into one. First Tanya, who is only one, fell off the end of the couch into Mum's favourite pot plant and bent and broke most of its stems. Next I turned on the oven to heat up some fish fingers for lunch and ten minutes later I smelt this horrible smell. Took me another ten minutes to find the purple plastic dinosaur sinking into a puddle of its own purple plastic at the bottom of the oven. Then, Tamara who was playing quietly with Bryan's old fire engine took off her nappy and peed all over the floor. When I asked her why, she told me that this pee wasn't for putting in the toilet it was for putting out the fire. Now this.

I went and stood outside for minute in the bright hot sun and tried to think myself good. I mean, I could have died when that snake bit me. I could have died lots of times before now. But for some

reason I hadn't. Suddenly I felt like a butterfly. Silly big wings and a little body, even a hard wind can kill a butterfly. Suddenly I saw it all very clearly, that we are all big silly butterflies with only a day to live. It amazed me that we manage to live so long. All we have to do is fall a couple of feet and land on the wrong angle and boom... you're gone. You have to breathe all the time, or you're dead, you have to eat only stuff that won't poison you, and there are all sorts of animals that will stick their poison in you if you get too close and they don't figure that you're friendly. When we drive we hurtle along almost straight at other cars, that are hurtling along too, all you have to do is get it wrong by just a little swing of the steering wheel and you are gone. It could be around the corner right now. I remember George telling me how his Mum had three bath mats in the bath in case he fell over and cracked his head. I laughed then, but now I could really understand it. I hurried back inside in case Tamara or Tanya had swallowed their spoons. I felt like crying. Somehow it had seemed we would all live forever. That what is, would always be. But now Mum was lying in hospital and they had decided to try throw a whole lot of poison in her on purpose and hope it killed the cancer before it killed her.

George and Shane came over after school. They'd never really been to my place and it seemed a bit strange having them there. I asked them about school sports, they both shrugged like they didn't matter.

"Best part was when Mr Bier brought out his chess board and we had a game under the trees at lunch time", said George, who hated anything to do with sport unless it was figuring out fractions of seconds in timing, or statistics in scoring.

"Best part was Andrew" grinned Shane.

"He's back at school?"

"Yeah" Shane actually giggled.

"What happened?" I asked pulling Tanya off my ankle where she was drawing big sloppy circles in orange marker.

They told me how Andrew had come back to school looking like the snake bite had shrunk him. One of his friends told how his parents had taken him to a psychiatrist who kept asking him if he had taken any hallucinogenic drugs. He didn't know what that meant and had asked if two many blue slush puppies could have done it.

Andrew was really quiet and when Shane, whose last name is Preston and Andrew's is Prentice were made to sit next to each other he got up and asked the teacher to be moved.

"Mostly" admitted Shane, 'Cos I hissed at him."

"Wow, bit of a pity we won't get to see the snake again, hey."

"Yeah, well, I've figured it out now. I can do the snake anytime, and other stuff."

"Like what?" I dumped Tamara back into her bouncer and gave her a bit of a push to get her going.

When I turned around Shane had his eyes closed and his lips pursed and were going a bit red around the gills.

"What's he doing, he looks like a fish?"

"Shh" said George, "Just watch."

Just when I figured nothing was ever going to happen. George opened his eyes and instead of human eyes they were the round, flat, googly-stupid eyes of a fish, he grunted a little and then his face buckled and changed and suddenly his whole face was like a fish, a barracuda maybe, with big ugly thrust out jaw and teeth and gleaming scales. I jumped back. Tamara looked up, saw him too, and screamed.

She didn't stop screaming for half an hour, by which time both George and Shane had left. Shane with a face that looked human again. Fish eyes gone. He said he was sorry about Tamara and tried to say sorry to her too, but anytime he looked at her she screamed louder. Even though he said he was sorry you could see he looked kind of pleased.

"I've never scared anyone before, I've always been the one afraid."

“Yeah, well you don’t scare me” I lied as I closed the door behind them. It took me another ten minutes to calm Tamara down. I’d just about had enough of Thursday.

That night I dreamt that I was standing by the river fishing when I got a bite. I tried to pull it in, and then realised that something on the other end was pulling back even harder. I pulled and pulled and no matter how much I tried I was the one getting pulled harder. My feet were dragged down to the river, my toes gripping on the very edge of the bank, I was straining with my whole body. I could see down in the water that what was on the end of my line was a big black octopus and it was looking at me laughing, as it pulled me in.

Krissey Fish

The Bertram family went to the beach. Dad arranged to have someone else come in and mind the shop. Dad has never in the history of being a Dad, EVER done that. So for the first time since the beginning of the Bertram family, we all went to the beach together. There are about five big hills on the way there, and the van nearly didn’t make it. We tried not to look behind us at the big line of cars doing their best to go as slow, as we were to try and go fast. I could just imagine having to get out and push, and having the thing roll back over top of us and all the other cars too.

As it was, our car was pretty hot too by the time we got there, Dad had the hood up and was dodging jets of steam while we pulled out two eskies, four pink beach umbrellas, God knows how much baby junk, nappies, things to put dirty nappies in, bottles and bottle cleaners, plus a stack of towels and togs and a mega bottle of sunscreen. Mum makes all of us wear sunnies at the beach too. We’re all sick of hearing that ‘Most of the damage done to your eyes is when you are under ten’. She just rolls her eyes at me when I say I’m way over ten. Wearing sunnies would be cool if it wasn’t that these sunnies were all the same, bright so-you-don’t-lose-them purple. So all of us, even Dad has to put on purple sunglasses, sit under our four pink beach umbrellas, smothered in yellow

zinc cream and count our blessings that we don't have matching togs. Mine are one piece and blue and starting to get too small.

It's funny how it kind of sneaks up on you; my togs were way too tight over my 'wee boobs' as Dad called them, right in front of *everybody*. How embarrassing. I even overheard Mum telling Dad that she and I would have to go 'shopping' soon. It was the way she said shopping that made me squirm. Bra shopping, whoopee, don't ya just love being a girl. I spent most of the day in the water, up to my neck trying to drown off my 'wee boobs'.

From where I was, out in the water, ducking under waves and watching out for jellyfish, I could see my family on the beach. Dad spent most of his time with Mum, every two point five seconds he touched her. Nothing yuck, just a pat on the shoulder or leaning over to scrape sand off her feet. Some of the kids at school talk about how their parents fight, mine never do. After all the having kids, poo, spew and bleary-eyed mornings, they still love each other. I hope when I grow up, if I have to get married (I mean it doesn't sound like it's that interesting a thing to do, but if everyone else is doing it, then you kind of have to anyway) then I hope I end up getting married like Mum and Dad have. Not as many kids, but I hope someone loves me enough to tell me I have snot in the corner of my eye, and a hair growing on my chin, like Dad does Mum and not be oh'd out by it.

In the afternoon I helped Mum get Tamara and Tanya to sleep by walking them up the beach in their strollers. It was nice walking with Mum. We didn't say much. We went back to the beach umbrellas and parked the strollers in the shade. Mum read a book while Dad, Lachlan James, Tim and Bryan played beach cricket, at least he did till he was overcome by the urge to create, and wandered off to mould gnomes and gargoyles out of sand.

Miriam and Melanie were off collecting shells, feathers and interesting bits of wood. I didn't really

feel much like doing anything. My fingers were still wrinkled from the last three hours underwater. Then Dad got out the fish kite and they flew it, only Lachlan let it go and Tim, James and Lachlan had to race three miles down the beach to try and catch it. Mum looked up from her book and laughed. Dad ran back up the beach and thumped down beside us. He called me his 'Krissey Fish' I called him a 'Gargantuan sized gorilla bum'.

"Where'd you get a word like that?" he asked.

"What, the whole thing?"

"No, that has the true flavour of a Krissey original, no, the gargantuan bit."

"George of course, he made me repeat it fifty five thousand times till I said it right."

"Must be good having a friend who knows so much."

"Yeah, most of the time, sometimes it's just annoying."

I could see he wanted to ask me more but thought that he probably shouldn't. I thought he probably shouldn't either. I hoped he didn't think it was strange that I got around with boys too. I think it was all because of my 'wee boobs' that he was worried. Adult stuff is so weird. I like being a kid, because then things are as things look, adults make so much more out of everything than is actually there. Sometimes you'd think that packing a bra was as dangerous as packing a gun.

We played noughts and crosses in the sand. Mum fell asleep and Tamara fell awake... right out of the stroller. It was my fault. I didn't like the idea of being chained up while I slept, so I figured I'd unclip her harness while she did. She rolled right out and landed face down in the sand. Poor thing. So I took her for a walk so she wouldn't wake Mum. When she stopped crying we paddled in the small waves. She called the sea 'the big drink' and wouldn't go in because of all the monsters that lived there. So I showed her how to kick the waves and yell 'buggar off monsters!' She thought that was lots of fun, I couldn't help thinking about the octopus monster lurking at the bottom of my mother's sea,

"Buggar off Monster!" I screamed.

On the way back home I sat in the back of the van on top of the pink umbrella's and waved at all the grumpy people stuck in cars behind us. We might all wear purple sunglasses, but who cares.

Bluster Fizzle

Mr Bier was talking to Leela on the other side of the room, while the rest of us worked on origami stuff. I was watching how George's tongue sticks out the side of his mouth when he's concentrating. Shane had a sheet of cellophane and was crunching it up for no reason, the sound of it was really getting on my nerves,

"Stop winking that crapper" I snapped. Then laughed, 'Don't.. crinkle... that... wrapper" I said slowly enough to get it said right. Shane laughed, but George gave me his, 'it's not that funny look'. I reckon he must have inherited that one off his Mum.

"It's your fault anyway" he said to me while we folded red pieces of paper to form dragons, only mine looked like a frog. "Shane would never have thought of it if you hadn't said it."

I looked up from the instructions and said,

"Hows that?" incredulous, I think that George is trying to blame me for Shane turning into a fish in front of my little sister.

"You're the one who said he looked like a fish."

"I heard you say I looked like a fish and I kind of used that thought" Shane agreed. His dragon looked like a fairy on fire, "but really I was thinking about something that made me angry."

"Well I hope it wasn't me" I said with a shudder.

"Probably Andrew" said George.

"No, it wasn't Andrew" Shane disagreed, "I was thinking about Leela and how she eats with her mouth open, and how much I hate hearing her food goo up in her gob."

"That made you mad enough to turn your head into a fish?" I asked, incredulous.

"Into a Scomberomorus commerson, actually." said George.

“A barracuda” Shane automatically explained.

“Well, you can bet I’ll never talk with my mouth open again.” I huffed.

“Don’t you mean ‘eat’ with your mouth open?” Shane asked with a grin

“Oh, yeah, that too” I giggled, “better not eat with my mouth full either.”

We all laughed, but I was feeling kind of yuck about the whole thing.

“Anything else that makes you mad you wanna tell us now?” I smiled like it was supposed to be a joke, but I seriously wanted to know, I mean, if he hates nose pickers, I might just have to stop.

Later on Mr Bier apologised for having to take us through what he called, ‘another torturous trip through tiring and tedious tutorage on time-consuming tasks’.

“Alliteration” whispered George.

Mr Bier had Shane go to the front of the class and write on the white board three words he thought were examples of onomatopoeia. I lifted my desk and whispered to George behind it,

“Do you reckon he’s safe?”

“What do you mean, safe?”

“Do you reckon he could really hurt someone?”

“Who cares if he can. I can’t see Shane hurting anyone.”

I put my desk down and could see Mr Bier looking at me funny. I smiled tightly. I wondered if he’d heard about Shane’s magic snake trick.

Shane’s words were ‘hiss’, ‘slither’ and ‘snake’.

He smiled meanly at Andrew on his way back to his seat.

Mr Bier smiled too. ‘Snake’, isn’t strictly onomatopoeic. But bravo for the other two. A bit of a theme happening here I see. Anyone else have any non reptilian examples.”

Shane grinned at me,

“It’s really nice not to be scared anymore.”

I looked ahead at Andrew, who was.

Mr Bier was writing everyone's examples on the board, 'crack, snap, boom, bang.'

It was nice at lunchtime to sit down in the middle of school and not feel like you had to check the blurry bits at the edges of your vision for Andrew shaped lumps to materialise.

"Bluster fizzle" I said, "That's what he's got."

"Who?"

"Andrew of course, all his bluster has fizzled."

"Now he's just a loser" Shane giggled. He had a notebook and was writing a list of things he could do with his gift. So far he had,

You could jump into the school swimming pool and go shark...

Assassinate dictators who had bad hearts, just by fright.

You could do magic tricks, go behind the screen and materialize as a human sized bat....

(make lots of money maybe?)

You could just scare the living sillies out of anyone.

I looked at his list over his shoulder,

"Geez, how much anger do you have. Imagine walking behind the screen and realising you just couldn't get pissed off enough to turn bat."

"Nuh" said Shane, "Getting angry is easy, I've been practising."

"You practise getting peeved?"

"Yep, sometimes I don't even have to think about it. Last night Dad was singing real loud in the kitchen and I couldn't hear the radio. Next thing I knew I had these floppy, grey, hairy things hanging around my knees and a big trumpeting noise nearly shook the house to the ground."

"What?" I asked,

"He went elephant. African or Indian?" George asked interestedly.

"Dunno, Dad went ape though, jumped up and down and waffled on about respect."

“What do they think of your gift?” I asked, not sounding too sure about it myself.

Shane shrugged, “As long as I don’t go around hurting anyone, no digging lion claws down teachers backs, you know, the usual stuff.”

“Not much usual about your stuff.”

Shane changed the subject, turning to another of his lists.

“I’ve been going through my encyclopaedia of dangerous animals to try make sure that I don’t get boring, you know, it’s bad enough being a human 100% of the time, if you can be something else, why not try everything out.”

“What’s next on the list.” I turned around and saw deep inside the snarling salivary jaws of a Tasmanian devil. Its beady, black eyes gleaming with anger. I jerked back, and tried to hide my fright as best I could,

“Sarcophilus” George said, looking the kind of pleased that he does when he knows something that no one else ever will “means flesh lover.” I shot him with a look, and turned to Shane who was back to light-brown and boy, wanting to keep an eye on him in case he warped into something equally as hideous.

“Good to see there’s Australian animals in your book Shane, but I didn’t think they were dangerous.”

“They are to wallabies and possums and wombats, just one savage bite to the head, and it’s all over.”

“Oh” and I moved further away, I looked at George, who was grinning hard. But I noticed he was sitting far enough away from Shane to feel safe.

“What say all of you goes Hippo?” I asked.

“I’ll bust out of my clothes if I did that wouldn’t I” he grinned.

“Good, so I’m not likely to get crushed to death under your big hippopotamus bum if I sit next to you.”

“I’d never hurt you Krissey. You know that.”

I didn’t say anything, because funny thing was I wasn’t sure any more.

Hugs and kisses, smacks and bruises

It seemed strange to see Andrew looking so small, he creeps around, with more shrimp in his footsteps than shark. Even stranger, Shane had gone from mouse to monster in just about the same amount of time. It's pretty good really. Shane is the happiest I've ever seen him. When he pulled the 'hiss, slither, snake' stunt the whole room filled with muffled giggles and mean glances at Andrew and his shrimp shrunk even smaller. I considered feeling sorry for him, but it didn't work, he deserved it. I remember how Shane only went snake after Andrew shoved me in the throat... it was like Shane was sticking up for me and not himself. That felt really good. Humya's Gift had made Shane a hero, even if it was just a little bit too creepy.

I walked up behind Andrew who was scratching 'sux' on his desk. I couldn't resist it, I slapped him hard over his neck so that the noise rang around the room. Andrew jumped and hiccupped at the same time.

"Oh sorry Andrew. Just thought I'd kill that mossie on your neck for you" and I kept on walking. Revenge is good.

Other things have changed too. Andrew used to have his gang of followers, now they are too embarrassed to know him, they pretend not to hear him when he calls out their names, their shoulders were so cold you could see ice forming on them. Suddenly Andrew wasn't the centre of the crowd any more. Just as suddenly Shane was. Everyone wanted to see Shane go tiger, go hyena, go cane toad. The uglier and the scarier the better. And it was kind of fun, but I missed just the three of us hanging around together. Shane was cool though, and that made George and I cool too. Besides everyone believes us about Humya too.

I decided one lunch time to go to the library to use the computers. Nobody likes going there much cos' Mrs Butler thinks that the Internet is a tool of perversion, she makes even Jack and the

Beanstalk look pornographic. I wanted to use it to look up stuff about cancer. Man alive, half the stuff I found had words like 'sarcoma', 'malignant' and 'squamous'. I got to see pictures of black cancerous lungs and big bubbly skin cancer. Really yuck stuff. It took me ages before I found what I was looking for, I scribbled some of it down on the back on my English book, till Mrs Butler the librarian came over and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Your half an hour was up ten minutes ago young lady" she said. She wiggled her head at me. Shane reckons it's to readjust the rod in her spine. Her lips puckered up like a drawstring bag and she reached over to cut me off. Then she looked at what I was reading.

"What are you doing reading *that* kind of material!" she asked.

She probably thought it was some kind of weird new perversion that 'young people' were into.

"My Mum's got it" I whispered, I grabbed my book and started off.

"Young Krissey?" she called out, I pretended to look around for the old one first.

"That's fine, you can keep searching till the end of the lunch hour, but just this once mind you" and she disappeared behind a book shelf, but not before I caught a look in her eye that scared me more than any of Shane's barracuda and cane toads. Mrs Stiff-Stuck-up-I-hate-children, Butler, felt sorry for me. My Mum had cancer, but that didn't mean she'd die would it? Or maybe Mrs Butler could tell, just by the type of cancer I was looking at that there was no hope, so why not be nice to the poor orphan brat. I know, you have to lose both parents to be an orphan, maybe that would make me a part-orphan though. I wrote down the rest of the info and then, just to fix Mrs Butler I typed www.sex.com into the address bar and pressed enter. It must set an alarm off somewhere because old rod back was out in a flash... but me.... I was already halfway gone.

It was my turn to go see Mum in hospital. The hospital staff thought all of us at once would be too much for her. Because everyone's busy at home and the shop, I agreed to go by myself. But it's scary. Maybe because the air has been disinfected so much and lost all its germs that it echoes a lot in here. It feels dead and empty.

Mum looks skinnier than usual. Probably because those jokes about hospital food are true. Mum didn't talk about her operation, though she did show me the stitches, which are pretty yuck. I read somewhere that when you are cut open your fat looks like sago. I didn't like to think about Mum cut open while they pulled out the octopus from a sea of sago. Now that they had, we had to wait to see if they'd got all its tentacles out.

I told Mum about the flour, and her snow children like the story was funny. Which it kind of is now that I've finally got it off the floor and I've had time to get over it. I told her how they both end up in my bed and how after you calculate the width of the bed and divide it into four, one part for me, one part for Tamara and one for Tanya and the fourth part for the cold puddle of wee one of them has left, it means I only have fifteen centimetres to sleep on.

"But we're OK' I finished off.

Mum told me to try not to make her laugh – it hurt too much. So I told her about Shane. She frowned all the time, even when I tried to make her smile when I told her about finally getting to whack Andrew's invisible neck mossie. She frowned even harder at that.

"Krissey, did you know I went to school with Andrew's Dad?"

"Nup, was he a creep too?"

"Some people thought he was. Andrew sounds just like him."

"Oh God, it must run in their genes." I was trying to think of a good way to make sure Andrew didn't get around to breeding when Mum said,

"I hated him. His name was Graham and I really, really hated him. Poor boy."

"Sounds like he deserved it" I said, picking up Mum's get well cards and flicking through them. There were some people here who I'd never even heard of. Sometimes I realise that way back in the deep dark depths of time Mum didn't used to be a Mum and had friends and hung out with them, and didn't even know she'd end up pushing out nine of us hairy little pumpkins.

“No he didn’t deserve it Krissey. See, he used to come to school with broken arms and bruises, took us all years to realise it wasn’t cos he hadn’t learnt to walk straight.”

“You going to tell me that his Dad mucked him around?” I asked.

“And his Grandfather.”

“His Grandad!” Both lots of our grandparents lived in different states and I didn’t get to see them much, but I couldn’t imagine either of them even giving our big toes a Chinese burn.

“Wow, maybe it is genetic.”

“Maybe” Mum said quietly, “But perhaps it’s what they learn. They don’t know about hugs and cuddles, just smacks and bruises. To them, that’s what life is about, and that’s how you make friends.”

“Man, that is sad” I thought about Andrew’s big dopey face, his broken finger last term and the stitches on his head not that long back. I haven’t even thought about it. I felt sick.

“And I smacked him on the back of the head” I said miserably, “Mum?” I had to wait a while till my voice wound up to full strength, “Why’s all this living stuff so hard? Why isn’t anything simple any more? It used to be really easy.”

Mum gave me a hug and kissed my hair.

“I used to try and make it so none of the hard stuff got to you. I don’t know if it’s the right way to do things. I sure can’t hide stuff any more.”

“Then if I ask you that question again, the one about your womb and us kids...”

“Please Krissey. Don’t ask me that question again. I don’t know the answer and I really much rather we didn’t even think about it.”

“You think we did do it to you don’t you.” I didn’t ask her, I told her.

“I know that I love all you kids, I wouldn’t want it any other way” she said.

I could tell by the way she said it she meant it. But it didn’t make much difference.

“If you had been told this would happen before you had us would you have?”

Mum thought about it a long time.

"I don't know what I would have done. I was a different person back then than I am now. You kids made me change. I think you've changed me for the better."

The Sadman gives me the squeeze

"Try a daisy" I said, "Daisies are friendly."

Shane sat back, closed his eyes, frowned, grunted a little with the obvious effort, and then his head exploded in white daisy petals with a yellow, teeth-filled centre.

"Rahhhh!" it screamed, then dropped its petals and changed back into Shane's head.

"I figure that can't have been the friendliest flower huh?" He said.

I shook my head.

George was sitting on one of Shane's mattresses in his tree house bedroom going through encyclopaedias on dangerous animals picking out every fierce thing on four legs or two wings.

Shane's angry baboon scared me so much I let out a great big fart.

"Err, err oh yuck!" said Shane holding his nose.

"Oh, fall out!" said George.

"Nothing fell out!" I said indignantly.

That made them laugh, it took them three whole minutes to catch enough breath to explain that fallout was the radioactive dust from a nuclear bomb.

"Oh yeah, well I dropped a bomb, nothing radioactive about it, thank you!" I stomped off to go see Jace. Shane and George thought I was mad. They couldn't think of anything more exciting than transfiguring Shane into pure ugly. George had had a serious try at turning himself into a piranha, but just made himself look like an idiot instead.

I found Jace out in the ginger picking off twenty-eight spotted ladybirds. The ones that aren't all that great for plants, and stink when you squash them. She gave me one of her big, all face, smiles, not like some people who only smile with a little bit of it. It made me feel better. I mean, I don't really

know her that well, and what I had to say might sound stupid. She asked me how school was, and if I had gotten over Shane's gift, I brushed that off, cos Shane's gift was giving me the willies and I couldn't think of anything positive. I started walking along side her picking off the ladybirds and squashing them too. They really stink, but it seemed like the least thing I could do, considering what I was about to ask.

"How's the sneezy kitten?" I asked,

"Not too bad, still sneezing, but not as much."

There was a few moments of quiet, and then Jace made it real simple.

"I heard about your Mum, Krissey, how is she?"

So Shane had heard, he just hadn't said anything. I thought the whole Andrew/Snake thing had made him forget.

"She's OK... I guess." Dad used to tell us that the sandman puts sleeping sand in your eyes to make you sleep and the sadman put drops of lemon juice in to make you cry. Well the sadman had the squeezer out and was going at it full on.

I couldn't see anything much through all the juice, but I could feel Jace giving me a big hug. Last time I saw her doing that I thought it was yuck. It didn't feel yuck now.

We ended up sitting down in the middle of the ginger row while I blubbered like a big baby. The funny thing was when all the blurs dried up enough to see, I could tell Jace had been crying too. I hadn't come out to cry. In fact no where in my plans had I sat down in the middle of the place and snivelled.

"I want to know how to heal Mum" I found enough voice to speak. "Do you know how?" I hiccupped on the tail end of a sob and ended up giggling, more out of embarrassment than anything. Thank God Shane couldn't see me now.

"I don't know anything about cancer Krissey."

I didn't know what to say, I hadn't thought she wouldn't know how.

"There are things you can do that might help."

“Like what?”

“Perhaps you might like to try absent healing.”

She sat down right there and told me how to go about it. How the power of thought can heal, and how I could visualise Mum’s cancer just fading out of the picture. It sounded cool, it sounded like I could do it too, and more.... Humya’s gift might help out, it might even end up being Humya’s Gift, assuming of course, that Humya was smart enough to know what was going on in my mother’s stomach. Seeing as he hadn’t been able to figure out what was going on in Skunk’s while he was in his body, he probably didn’t. Maybe I could *make* it be my gift. Imagine being able to heal her just with the power of my own thought. Best thing, was now I had something I could do.

I could hardly wait till it was dark, quiet and I was more or less alone so I could give it a go. Jace had said not to expect it to work right away. I had to be persistent. Dad told me once that I had to be the most persistent pain in the bum he had ever known. Right now it sounded like that might be a good thing.

I lay in bed real still. I could see a Daddy Long legs up in the corner of the room and I concentrated hard on him and took myself down into the deep part of me where I imagined a big ball of light glowing, just like Jace had told me too. I imagined blowing on the light like it was a fire till it burned brighter and stronger, then I punctured it with an imaginary needle so that the light streamed down my arms and out through my fingertips. I imagined Mum in bed. I imagined her tummy, her stitches and all the mess inside that the octopus had left and then the light as it left my hands and moved into her. What was red and sore became smooth and calm, calm and smooth, smooth and healed. If there is any octopus left... my light will eat it!

I kept spelling it ‘bowl’, Mr Bier put seven extra ‘e’s in the words till they all spelt ‘bowel’. I’m about as good at human physiology as I am at spelling. You can bet that George has all his alimentary

canals and oesophagus's correct. I reckoned I had most of them right. I held up my hand.

"Yes Krissey?"

"What's an a-nus" I stumbled over the word. Everyone started to laugh and I didn't see why.

"An anus" said Mr Bier, (and incidentally I did recognise the word when he said it). "Is where poos comes out." Everyone roared. I did a big neon bulb flash of pink and red.

"I always thought it was spelt A.N.I.S" I said, "sides I always call it a bum hole."

Even Mr Bier laughed. Shane almost had a real case of fall out, of the non-radioactive kind. I got called 'Anus head' and 'Anus Breath' all day, but it didn't bug me much. Nobody meant it like they wanted it to hurt. But things were a bit different for Andrew. It was like everyone was on his case. Anyone who Andrew had ever picked on was getting their own back and that was everyone. Everyone but me.

The worst ones where his old 'best friends'. Nolan even lit Andrew's shoelaces in class, by the time he noticed the smoke his shoes were almost on fire. Mr Bier tipped a vase full of water over them, looked around hard at everyone, especially Nolan and walked back to the front of the class as though nothing had happened. I could see Andrew's hands trembling while he tried to find out the square root of ninety nine.

At lunch break he sat on his own. I went up and said I was sorry for smacking him on the back of the head, he sneered at me and said,

"Yeah right."

So I walked away, later on I figured that he didn't have any other way to respond, he only knew how to sneer and snarl, maybe nobody had ever said sorry to him before. I kind of wished Mum hadn't told me the story of his Dad, because now I couldn't be mean to him, and I'd been enjoying it.

The God of Dangerous Animals

While Shane was doing the Pterodactyl to a group of eager onlookers I asked George what he really thought of it all.

“Well,” he said, “I think it’s really cool, the only problem is there’s not much point in there. Why would Humya give us a pointless gift? Turning into a Pterodactyl, it’s just not going anywhere.”

“Yeah I was hoping mines more useful” and not so ugly and mean, I thought to myself.

“You any closer to finding out yours?” I asked. George sighed and shook his head.

“I’m going to tell him not to be so mean to Andrew” I said.

“Why?” George sounded surprised, “I reckon he should get his own back. Andrew’s... Andrew’s an A.N.I.S” he laughed.

But I tried it anyway. I wouldn’t have if I’d known what would happen.

It was really hot and muggy lunchtime and everyone was a bit narky. Shane’s crowd had gone off to the pool and we three were alone for once and sitting under the trees, George was reading a book on Latin Phraseology and was spouting things like,

“Oderint dum metuant’, ‘Let them hate me as long as they fear me’. It made me think of Shane too, and how ‘metuant’ could almost be ‘mutant’, just made for him.

Shane was yawning. I figured I’d get him before he fell asleep. Before we both fell asleep.

“You reckon that Andrew has had enough now?” I asked casually.

“Enough of what?” he mumbled.

“Being bullied.”

“Andrew’s the bully remember” he said, and opened an eye to look at me, then shut it again. I felt kind of ill. Suddenly Andrew wasn’t the bully any more, Shane was. I used to be scared of Andrew, now I’m a bit scared of Shane. Where was the old Shane? The one that never got mad, the one who sang the blues, drank chai tea and did Tai Chi?

“No” I said firmly, “you’re the bully.”

“Oh come off it Krissey, it’s all a bit of fun” he sounded annoyed. He swatted at a fly that was buzzing his nose.

“But it’s not fun for Andrew, he’s so scared of you he’d eat an old mans regurgitated Mars Bar before he got stuck in a room with you.”

“Well so he should be scared. You know last night I dreamt that my hand turned into a snake, and bit off his whole head and swallowed it. Thing was, when I woke up I realised it was all the chickpea patties I’d eaten. Felt like I had a whole head in my stomach” he laughed. I shuddered. Shane was a monster in the making.

I told them about what my Mum had said about Andrew’s Dad and Grandad.

Shane shrugged, “Well I guess somebodies got to teach him a lesson. He can’t go around being a big bully. Besides, it’s nice to get a bit of respect for a change.”

“Yeah well, I’ve got news for you, they only respect you cos they’re scared you’ll turn turtle and nip off their heads. Besides, who’s going to bully the biggest bully?” I heard Shane sigh.

“Oh geez, get off my case Krissey, you are getting to be such a serious pain in the ANIS!”

I turned to look at him and screamed. I couldn’t get to my feet fast enough. I felt dizzy, I felt sick. I started to run, but my knees kept bending in strange directions, and I blobbed everywhere. I couldn’t look back; I didn’t want to see the fat, black octopus sitting under the trees.

Mum came home that night. We had a party. I made Russian Fudge, Mum’s favourite and we sat around eating it and trying to cuddle Mum without pulling her stitches. Tanya asked Mum how big the sewing machine was that sewed her up. We were all so happy to have her home. But we couldn’t help noticing how white she was, and how she stooped when she walked, and how she sat down as soon as she could and didn’t bounce up to do the dishes. Not that we would have let her – it just seemed strange.

“I’m feeling a bit bilious” Mum said to Dad and she went green.

“What’s bilious?” asked Miriam. Dad picked Mum up and carried her to the loo and we heard her being sick, “oh that” she said, and we all went quiet. I looked at the Russian Fudge and figured it was all its fault, but if it wanted to it could blame me, I’d made it.

Mum went to bed early and we all sat downstairs and watched TV. I ate the rest of the fudge and felt bilious too, but I wasn’t sick.

That night while Mum lay in her room, I lay in mine and pushed a whole barrowful of white light through the space between us, and watched it be absorbed into Mum. I asked God, Buddha (who’s not really a God, but is as good as) and all the other Gods I knew to heal her. Then I thought about how most Gods don’t think other Gods exist and don’t like you to mention them, so I asked all the Gods individually to forgive me for trying all the others out. I wondered if I tried hard enough that Humya’s gift would slot into place and anything that was left of the octopus would just melt away.

After that I thought about Shane for a long, long time. I decided that the way things were and after what he’d done, that we couldn’t be friends any more. Which meant I couldn’t really be friends with George much either, which meant I couldn’t go out to Blacksnake Road, which meant I was pretty much on my own again. But going Octopus, that was really horrible, it was beyond any kind of horrible I’d ever had done to me. Shane needed to go turtle and pull his head in.

At school I traded desks with someone who was keen to sit beside Shane. Once upon a time that was nobody. Now it was everyone (except Andrew.) If I’d thought about it sooner I should have put a price on it. Instead Brodie sat beside him for free and kept looking at him like he was a God, the God of dangerous animals. Shane pretended like he didn’t even notice that I’d moved. George looked stuck. He wanted to be friends with both of us. He leant over when Mr Bier wasn’t looking and said, “Really, he’s sorry he did it.”

“I can tell” I said, watching Shane turn his hand into a goanna’s claw to impress Dallas, “Shane” I said, “is out of control.”

I didn’t get just how much.

In the afternoon, which was even hotter than the day before, we had P.E, the only thing that would have made us happy would have been to go for a swim, but Mrs Petersen said that if we went for a swim they’d have to deodorise the pool afterwards. So we got to do ball skills instead, I don’t mind ball skills, I’m pretty good at it, but today was just too hot for chucking around balls and bodies. Shane made only the smallest attempt to catch the ball, if someone didn’t throw it right at him he let it go past, and whoever was closest got it for him. Mrs Petersen saw this and yelled out to him to get his own balls. When the next one went past and he didn’t even bother stretching out a hand she charged over and blew her whistle at him and stamped her foot. I couldn’t even tell you what she said, everyone was watching Shane. The transition was almost instant, one moment Shane, the next an elephant, who blew its trumpet and stamped his foot on the ground, you could feel the tremors and the little aftershock when Mrs Petersen fell over in a dead faint. Shane was back to Shane a moment later, he looked a bit embarrassed about what he’d done, then someone cheered and then everyone was yelling and laughing and saying, “Good one Shane.” Mrs Petersen went and sat in the shade and got one of the girls to bring her a glass of water, lucky for Shane she thought the sun had got to her. Even so she looked at Shane suspiciously. She let us all sit in the shade and read Health and Fitness magazines, and drink lots of glasses of water for the rest of the period. Everyone thought Shane was a hero.

Why couldn’t anyone else see what was going on? I moved closer to the hero,

“Why did you have to go do that Shane” I hissed through the crowd. Nobody noticed me, but Shane did. He looked at me like I was just another annoying fly. He went to turn away, then turned back and said,

"You're just jealous" he said.

"Jealous! Hardly – I might only have a couple of friends but none of them have to feel scared of me if I don't agree with them."

Brodie and Jacinta muttered something rude about 'boring' and something about 'Anus'. Shane rushed at me, I backed away, and a huge space opened up between us, as everyone rushed to get out of his way.

"Don't get any closer!" I yelled.

"Why not?" he said.

"Because if you get mad and turn croc I want my head to stay where it is."

"I wouldn't do that to you Krissey" He looked hurt.

"I don't believe you. You don't even think about it any more, it just happens, and if you think all these people are your friends, well you've got it wrong. They were all Andrew's friends once too, now look at them. They're only your friends because they're too scared not to be.

Dallas threw a Health and Fitness Magazine at me, it hit me in the head and flapped off.

"Go play with your bully boys." I yelled at Shane and I stomped off. I figured I'd risk getting a detention and just kept walking till I got home. But when I walked around a corner Mr Bier was there.

"Well said" he said.

"You heard?" I mumbled at my feet.

"Yep."

"You know what's been going on?"

"I've been watching" he said. "Don't worry, Shane's not so dumb that he won't figure it out eventually."

"I hope you're right."

"I think there's more to Humya's gift than turning your head into a horror," he grinned and patted me on the shoulder.

“Come on, I’m going to ask Mrs Petersen if I can have you all back early. I don’t think she’ll mind.”

I grinned, “No, I don’t think she will mind at all.”

The dumbest Alien in history

Now that I was really alone I decided to spend my lunch break in the library again rather than sit on my own. This time I didn’t look up cancer. I looked up digital cameras. After two weekends at Shane’s I didn’t even have half as much money as I was going to need. And there wasn’t going to be any more going out to Blacksnake Road again. Almost made me wish I’d shut up. Almost. All I had to think of was the black octopus to remind myself that that was impossible.

It wasn’t Humya’s Gifts, it was Humya’s Curses and I had one in me too. What was I going to have? The ability to grow huge and stamp on buildings, maybe I’d get real thirsty and drink all the lakes dry. I wondered if maybe I’d just turn into a great big pink balloon and float away... That sounded kinda nice.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. My time was up already? I turned expecting Iron Rod Butler, but it was George.

“We need to talk” he said. I nodded, grabbed my things and made for a dark corner. One of the cubicles that were meant for study but were really a graffiti gallery. Right behind George’s left ear someone had written SHANE RULZ in red, green and blue marker. I made George move so I couldn’t see it.

“Shane’s losing it, he’s becoming a 100% dangerous animal.” he said, “Sooner or later he’s not going to be able to hold back at all, he’s going to really do someone damage.”

“He’s holding back?” I joked and George nodded.

“He told me it’s so easy to do it just happens, he’s got so good he just turns into whatever that person fears the most...”

“Like the Octopus” I said.

George screwed up his face, “He feels really bad about that. It happened before he had time to stop it. The worst thing is he feels like he will really use his fangs, claws, teeth, poison, whatever to kill or maim someone. He says it comes into his mind and just about before he can stop it, it happens. I think he’s scared.”

“From where I’m standing it looks like he’s having a ball.”

“Who’d ever believe it of Shane...” George shook his head, “Shane and I have been friends since daycare. Shane was always the one who got scratched and bit or hit. He never used to cry and he never used to hit back.”

“Well he’s making up for it now” I mumbled.

“We’ve got to do something” George said urgently.

“They don’t make strait jackets for people’s heads do they?”

George groaned and smacked his head into the table.

“I don’t believe Humya did this, He’s gotta be the dumbest alien in history.”

“If it’s OK, can I hang around with you for a while?” George asked, “I can’t handle watching Shane self destruct.”

“Yeah, sure” I said calmly, secretly feeling happier than a peach tree full of parrots, “I’ll let ya.”

So all week we tried not to watch Shane and his groupies turn school into an instant horror show. You’d hear squeaks and shrieks and sure enough, Shane the wild-tusked boar would be around the corner. Dallas even had a bandaged hand from where Shane’s Komodo Dragon had mistakenly clawed him – not that Dallas seemed to mind, he acted like it made him special.

“You could be in a circus” Eliza said.

“Yeah” I mumbled just loud enough for Shane to hear, “As a freak.”

I shut my eyes in case he went Octopus – when I opened them he’d moved away.

That night I had the flying dream again, the one where I start off doing the one, two three, Superman thing, and hurtling past trees and buildings and into the open sky. My stomach does a flip

flop cos it feels so high. But I like it, it feels good. I start off sort of swimming through the air, then I get the hang of the flying thing and I go faster, faster till everything is just a blur. Scared, I force myself to slow down. I see a park where kids are flying kites. I decide to go there. As I get closer I realise all the kids are Shane and all the kites, oh God, all the kites are black Octopus's. I hit the bed with a thump.

Shane is getting to be a real nightmare.

And George, George was starting to seem normal. I'd always thought (as much as I like him) that George is a bit weird. Now beside Shane he seems 100% normal, even when today at school he told me that a megabyte is 1024 kilobytes, which wouldn't seem so strange except it was right in the middle of Mr Bier telling us about the force behind a dinosaurs bite. How a T-Rex has the same force as a small truck behind every tooth. Now that really is a mega bite.

Each night I spend a whole hour doing the white light thing. Each time I do it different. Once I imagined myself rolling the white light into balls and throwing them to Mum to catch. Each time she caught them they disappeared into her hands and travelled to her tummy, one time it was like a puddle that seeped out of my feet and caterpillared over to Mum's bed and climbed in. I even dreamt I filled Mum and Dad's room so chock full of white light that I almost burst the seams of the room. I woke up and realised that I needed a pee real bad.

I hoped all the white light was doing some good. Cos it sure was taking it out of me. Mum seemed better, she didn't stoop when she walked anyway, but she was sleeping a lot. Next week she's going for more tests to see if there are any tentacles left. I gave her tummy a mental x-ray and all there was, was her bowel, her uterus, her colon and a fair bit of sago... I got the feeling everything would be alright.

The Silly Rules of Speaking

On Friday George asked if I'd like to stay over at his place for the night. I didn't think I should, but when Mum found out she more or less made me. She said everything would be fine without me, at least for one night. So I did. I wasn't sure what it would be like. I had George coach me about cutlery and other silly rules of eating. I thought I'd do OK. As usual it was the silly rules of speaking that I mucked up. But for once I actually felt good about that.

Mrs Worthington was running around making sure everything was just right for Mr Worthington, who didn't seem to notice and never said thank you. In my house he'd have copped an ear full of frying pan for that. Mrs Worthington told Mr Worthington that she'd cooked him his favourite. He said something about having eaten a late lunch and not being that hungry. Made me realise that even some adults haven't figured out the silly rules of speaking. She didn't seem to notice, maybe she was used to it.

We sat at the table, with all the knives, forks and spoons, napkins in silver rings, glasses and a jug of chilled water on a silver tray. I was so busy chanting the laws of cutlery that I barely noticed Mrs Worthington putting the plate in front of me, when I focussed I fell off my chair. Mrs Worthington looked annoyed.

What was going on? Curled up amongst other unusual stuff were dead baby octopuses. I looked up to see Mr Worthington stick one into his gob and chew noisily. It was all I could do not to spew right there and then. I looked at George whose face was like a light house flashing at me, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry!' – he obviously didn't realise octopus was on the menu. Mrs Worthington didn't seem to notice. She smiled at me when I sat back down.

"So" she said, "George told me your mother's ill."

I stared at her, at the perfect line of her nose and at the ever-so-plucked eyebrows. I prayed for a bleeding nose, an asthma attack, a heart attack, a bomb attack. But nothing was going to save me from the dead octopus on my plate and this horrible person that just happened to be my best friend's Mum. If Shane was here, at least he could go crow and peck out her eyes.

"Yes" I said, the syllable dropped out of my mouth like drool.

"Cancer. How very ghastly" she said, "My mother died of cancer, that was years ago now" she said it like she was talking about having an unfortunate stain on her blouse. I couldn't seem to stop staring at her. She did this sort of stretched elastic band thing with her lips, she probably thought it was a smile.

George tried to interrupt her, "We finished out experiment on the conductab....."

"Now, now" said Mrs Worthington, "we were talking about Krissey's Mum weren't we Krissey."

I didn't need to say anything, she already had something else to say.

"Must be hard, poor woman, all those children, makes you wonder doesn't it, it can't be good for you to have so many."

George was almost choking at the end of the table, Mr Worthington just kept ploughing dead octopus bodies into his mouth. If I didn't do something and something soon, I'd embarrass myself and cry.

"Did... did I tell you about Tamara?" I asked hesitantly.

"No, you didn't dear, do tell us."

"She was in the bath last week, and she started screaming..." George started chuckling and I found myself smiling too, "And we all ran in and she was sitting there cornered, and floating right in front of her was the biggest fattest..."

George was right, I did get asked to leave the table, it was a wonder Mr Worthington didn't have to too, for spitting bits of octopus all over it.

One minute the bread was just minding its own business, then snap, a little mouth surfaced, closed over it and was gone. Turtles are cute, much cuter than Shane's version. Which has beady yellow eyes, and come to think of it, sharp teeth. These bread eaters don't. If we were still friends I'd tell him to get anatomically correct about his mutations. And if you can figure what that means you can probably figure out that it was something that George said.

"See the eel?" he pointed it out. I drew up my feet so they weren't dangling from the little bridge over his family's lake. Other people would call it a dam, but not George's parents; they stuck swans in it and called it a lake.

I watched the eel closely, it was a mottled grey colour, they call that a roan in a horse, and this eel was just about big enough to qualify. George strategically dropped bread to tempt it closer, but it went for one of the turtle's legs instead. The turtles cleared a path. Even the ducks were wary. George told me that some of the ducks didn't have all their feet because of the eel.

"Oh God, it's another bully!" I said.

"Pretty much. Makes you wonder if that's just the way the world is supposed to be, there's always something stronger."

"And meaner."

"Getting around, thinking that what it wants is more important than what you want, so you'll just have to suffer."

"Doesn't seem fair" I said.

"It isn't" George popped some of the bread he'd nabbed from the kitchen into his mouth. He'd grabbed it just before following me out the door. I'd been a bit embarrassed about being asked to leave. But George seemed to think it was great.

"Secretly" he said, "I always wished I could do something as cool as that, Almost worth going hungry."

Almost. We lamented the lack of anything to put on the bread and threw more of it at the crowd of waiting turtles.

"I always thought adults just knew the silly rules of speaking." I said.

"Not all of them." George said uncomfortably, so I added,

"I thought it was like growing boobs, it just happens, and that I'm just an all round late developer."

George blushed, so I added,

"You know I always thought that's how you got pregnant – you just got to the right age where it just happened, you never had to do anything nasty like sex."

"You think sex is nasty?"

"Well the way Mrs Butler goes on about it, you'd think it would have to be."

"I shouldn't have told my Mum about your Mum... being sick" George changed the subject. My turn to shift uncomfortably. I'd been wondering if he or Shane would ever say anything about my Mum. Obviously it mattered to them enough to talk to their Mum's about it, cos both of them knew.

"Is it OK to talk about?" George asked and I nodded.

"Cos after you told us not to, Shane and I figured we'd stick to your rules", he waited, "so...", he said, "do you wanna talk about it?"

"Not unless you know of any cures" I replied, but smiled, and added, "I thought neither of you cared."

"Shane wanted his Mum to talk to you about it, but he thought he couldn't ask, you talked to her anyway."

I didn't say anything, I didn't know what to.

"Shane's been doing the white light thing too. He thought it might help."

That really stunned me. It just didn't fit in with what I thought of Shane right now. It fit in with the old Shane though. Now I was really confused. First I thought Andrew was all bad, now it seems he's mostly just sad. Shane's always been nice, now he's being a complete turd, now he's back to nice again. Why can't people be just one thing all the time? Like movies where everyone is either a goody or a baddy and wears white or black clothes so if you're too stupid to pick up the signals they're colour coded for easy identification.

Just to prove the point Mrs Worthington came out with scones and jam and banana smoothies and to say sorry for losing her temper. She smiled very sweetly at me. Even with the scones, jam, smoothies and smile I still didn't like her. I wish everybody had traffic lights inserted in their foreheads. Whenever you met someone for the first time the appropriate light shines up so you can identify them as being a good friend (green), just get along with OK (amber) or a definite enemy (red). That way you wouldn't have to try and figure it out, because let's face it, everybody does their best to look like they're friends, when most of the time they're lying. Like Mrs Worthington and her smile.

The traffic light scheme reminds me of one of Shane's. Shane came up with a revolutionary weight loss scheme (which was Humya inspired.) He'd decided that people should photosynthesis. That meant you sat in a dark room for a week to lose weight. I reckoned there would be a lot of thin, pale people wandering around in big hats, all the sunbathers would be horribly fat. George pointed out that prisoners would die of starvation in a couple of weeks. None of this bothered Shane much, he kept finding ways around it, like sun lamps and special sunscreens. But when George pointed out that the chocolate market would be so depressed that all the manufacturers would go out of business and there would be none for sale, Shane decided that the whole thing was entirely too impractical, but anyway fat and thin has nothing to do with good and bad.

So if people are sometimes good, and sometimes bad, well that just made life bloody unbearable, how could you ever tell which one they were going to be on any particular day? Maybe instead of just being good or bad everyone was somewhere on the line between both things. I was being to realise that people seriously did need to be colour coded. Just to keep it fair you'd have to have a check up each year to see if you'd changed.

George and I talked about it for a while, he reckoned that we should check out peoples shade before they were born with a system called amniocentesis and abort all the babies whose shade was too many shades of bad. I argued that nobody was born bad and besides I reckoned aborting babies was as bad as you could get. We argued about that one for a while. In the end he said you couldn't colour code badness anyway, you just had to figure it out for yourself. Which brought me back to step one. How can you tell when people are bad? We watched the eel have another go at a duck's foot.

"By observation" George said.

"Some people are really good at hiding it" I said,

"Observation over time" George the scientist said.

"I know!" he said, "Someone needs to develop a vaccine for ignorance."

"Hey?"

"An immunisation against ignorance. The moment you are born you get the jab, and then you can't ever do anything out of ignorance" He looked quite excited as he thought about it.

"It would mean that you couldn't ever decide that what you wanted was more important than what someone else did."

"So they'd be no bullies" I asked.

"That's right.... No bullies. Never know, I might just decide to make that my whole life's work. Finding a cure for cruelty, stupidity and ignorance. There's a Nobel Peace Prize in that."

I reckoned I'd be shoving his Mum to the front of the vaccine queue.

"You know" he said, "when you told my Mum and Dad that story?"

"Yeah"

"Well you told the wrong one."

"Huh?"

"At Shane's I told you that Mum would chuck you out if you told the 'tweet, to eat' one."

I grinned, "Yeah well, I'm saving that one for breakfast."

Fifty-Three Shades of Bad

That night we got to sleep in separate rooms. Mr and Mrs Worthington slept with their door open so they could listen in case we crept into each other rooms. That was pretty yuck, firstly because it made me feel dirty and second because Mr Worthington might not snore in his sleep but he sure does fart. Must be all those baby octopus banging around in his colon.

Mr Bier never did come up with a good explanation as to why a part of the body preoccupied with poo had the same name as a punctuation mark that meant to pause. If your colon paused it was called constipation, a pause in words could mean contemplation?

I rolled over and tried to get comfortable. I felt like I was in a chocolate bar wrapper, the sheets had so much starch in them they crackled. I imagine that would excite Shane, the dreams he could have in these sheets. I wondered if he was doing the while light thing right now? I sighed and cleared my mind of Shane, Mrs Worthington and the wafting smell of Mr Worthington's farts. I loaded up an imaginary cannon with white light and blasted it across town, past stars, startled birds and into Mum and Dad's bedroom, where it did what it was supposed to, and evicted any last remaining octopus.

Then something crossed my mind that put me several shades in the dark. What if I could transfer any last octopus bits out of Mum and into Mrs Worthington? If it wasn't for George. I would.

James was outside cleaning all the fingerprints off the sliding door with a cloth and a hose. Tamara was on the side he'd just cleaned smearing it with doughnut fingers and making James swear. Tim was doing the ironing, something he's never done before and he was swearing too.

"You lot can start wearing the same clothes all bloody week!" he yelled out.

I was finishing cleaning out all the mouldy things out of the fridge which wasn't so bad after I rediscovered someone's left over Easter egg crouched at the back. It might have gone all white, but it tasted alright. Not sure about all the left over, half-empty cat food tins that were suppurating beside it. Lachlan was putting the cleaner around. Miriam and Melanie were drowning in the bath, change that, cleaning the bath. Lachlan was sweeping the verandah and watering the plants. Tanya, thank God, was asleep. But where was Bryan?

I yelled out to him, but he didn't answer. I checked his room, but he wasn't there.

"He's in the garage fixing the mower" Lachlan called out. Bryan fixing the mower? He couldn't change a light bulb, he couldn't screw a lid on half the time.

It was Saturday, and we were doing as much housework as we could while Mum and Dad went to do the shopping. I eyed the garage, and I eared it too. Something was definitely going on in there. I stalked it. I peered around the corner. I shrieked. Bryan was standing there with a dumb smile and a paintbrush (he might as well have left the last one glued there). He was standing back from his masterpiece, which was a cardboard box that the new fridge had come in. He'd sliced it open, spread it out and had painted a huge black octopus on it. Straight after shock came pure rage.

I swore at him, I threw every last ugly word. He just grinned.

"Wanna have some fun?" he asked. It's a wonder he didn't shrivel under the look I gave him, or burst into flames. He handed me a paintbrush loaded with red.

"Wanna spill his guts?" he asked.

"What do ya mean, spill his guts?"

"Let's kill it. My art teacher said it's good therapy." Then I got what he was up to, this was like Shane and his bark mask of Andrew.

"Sure" I demon grinned.

Bryan loaded his paintbrush too, and we did it. I smacked it one hard in the head. Red splattered and dripped. Next Bryan had a go, he chopped off three tentacles and stabbed it in the guts. He whooped while he did it. It felt great.

“Die!” I yelled and found I was kicking it too. We heard a noise, turned around, and there were six astonished faces at the garage door.

“Come on” said Bryan, “We’re killing the sucker.”

“Hang on” said Lachlan, “I’ll get some knives”

He came back with eight blunt kitchen knives, which pleased Tim greatly, and we got stuck in. We shredded the bastard. Under our combined onslaught there wasn’t a piece of cardboard left that was much more than an inch wide and we yelled and we cawed like crows. Even Tamara got into the action, though I don’t think she understood a thing of what was going on. In the end Tim suggested we burnt it, and we gathered up all its bits, huffing and puffing from all the violence and we lit the sucker. Bryan spat on it, James had big fat hoick. Tamara spewed from all the excitement, only she missed.

We stood around as the last flames died down, and I looked around at them all. We were all thinking about Mum and that horrible word dying, every time I do, my heart jumps onto a bucking horse. Even though we didn’t talk about it to each other, we were all thinking about it. I could see in all their faces that they felt just like me. Scared, really scared, it’s like after all these years I get to realise that there really is a monster under the bed. Only it’s not under the bed, it’s in my mother. We went back inside and left Bryan to put out the last flames with the hose. Later James told us he peed on it too.

We went back to our jobs grinning, even Tim didn’t complain when Lachlan brought another two tons of washing off the line to iron. When Mum and Dad got home the lawnmower still wasn’t fixed, I hadn’t done the dusting and the flood in the bathroom still hadn’t receded. But who cares, after today any octopus that thought it could hang around here and survive, just might have another thing coming.

By Tuesday I was back to thinking Shane was bad, all fifty-three shades of it. First Dallas, Brodie and Shane glued Andrew's locker door shut. It took Mr Thomson, the school caretaker, three hours to open it with a crowbar. The Principal, Mrs Reese, called an inquiry into who the little rat shit was who did it. She didn't say rat shit to us, but Leela overheard her saying it in the staff room. Somebody owned up that it was Andrew who had, to try and set Shane up. So Andrew got hauled over hot coals on that one, because that's the kind of thing you'd expect from him. As well as the coals they would have liked to have pulled his toenails out and do mean things to his eyeballs. Man the whole place was just one big bad dark patch, like a pee stain on a mattress.

The next day Shane's school desk was glued shut. Everyone pointed the finger at Andrew, who was almost incoherent with 'no I didnt's'. They almost believed him till Shane said there was a Snickers bar in his desk, and he'd never let anything come between him and it. They led Andrew away, a broken man. I don't know what torture they inflicted, but by the looks of him when he returned they must have turned to the eyeball treatment, they didn't look too good.

So I kept asking myself – if I knew the truth, why wasn't I up there saying, 'hang on, the truth is...' ? Because I knew that if I thought Andrew was getting squashed, I'd end up one millimetre thick. I was back to being scared again, I didn't like it. I gave Shane dark looks. By lunchtime Mr Thomson had rescued Shane's Snickers bar, I was the only one there when he did. I told him Shane said he could eat it. So he did.

Pulling the wool

At lunchtime George was waffling on, I didn't really pay too much attention. I was thinking about other things, mostly about Mum, when I heard him call Shane something weird.

"What is e-stranged?" I asked, "you reckon Shane's spent too much time surfing the net?"

"Idiot", he said "estranged."

"Yeah, I know, I heard. So what does it mean when you are the one to say it?"

"Kind of like, he's turned into a stranger after having been good friends once."

“Sounds like you used it in the right place then.”

“Context” said George, “I used it in the right context.”

He looked at my blank and slightly peeved expression and wisely dropped it.

“Having you around is worse than having a teacher” I mumbled. George just grinned.

“When I was a kid”, he said, “I used to wonder why they called them toe trucks, you know T.O.E as in the ...”

“Yeah I get it.... That’s cute, how old were you then?”

“About three.”

“Well I would have been eight before I realised that the big hooting bird everyone called an ‘Ow’ wasn’t called that because it was in pain.”

“That’s cute too, even if you were eight . How long did it take you till you figured out a saw, wasn’t hurt either?”

“Saw?”

“You know S.A.W and S.O.R.E.”

It took me a while to type all the letters into my eye computer so I could see what he was spelling, I grinned, “Oh come on, I figured that one out by the time I was seven.”

I started telling George the story about how at home we call oranges ‘High Shoes’ because Tanya thought that was what we were saying when we said ‘orange juice’, but I didn’t get far, we could hear loud voices, we could even hear them chant, they were saying,

“Fight, fight, fight.” Which could only mean one thing, a couple of boys without brains were going to try and beat each others out. If it were two girls you got to hear, ‘cat scrap, cat scrap, cat scrap’ chanted. George and I looked at each other and nodded. Even though it was horrible to watch, you always ended up watching anyway.

When we got there, we had to ask Jodie who was fighting, because there was too much of a crowd to see.

"It's Brodie, he's gonna kill Andrew." She looked really excited about it. I felt kind of sick.

"Is Shane there?" George asked.

"Yeah, It's his turn next."

"Turn next?" I asked feeling my stomach do a big slow roll.

"To kill Andrew" she said offhand as she leapt up and down trying to catch a glimpse. George and I stared at each other.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"We could tell someone" George said.

"Nah" I said, whenever you ran to the teachers you ended up getting hassled for weeks. If it wasn't for the snake turning up on the end of Shane's hand the time that Andrew tried to beat him up, then George would have been in real trouble. Seemed strange but when it really came down to it if I was standing at the top of a cliff and a whole bunch of kids told me to jump and a teacher told me not to. I'd probably listen to the kids.

"We could go sit in the library" I said.

George gave me a 'you're a worm' look.

"We've got to stop him" he hissed.

"How? He's turned animal George, there's no stopping him. If you get in his way, he might just decide to go cassowary and peck out your eyes."

"He's our friend."

"He's e-strange" I said and George snorted at me.

"I'm going in there." He looked at the crowd, this great big seething mammoth of people jammed in close to get a good look at someone getting smacked around. When it comes down to it sometimes people are just spew. George put his hands out in front of him like he was going in for a dive, he even puffed his cheeks out like he was taking a big breath and he aimed for a gap between shoulders and in he went. It wasn't really anything I decided on, I just found myself following him, it was easier in the wake. It turned out that George was using his hands like the point of a drill, ramming them

into shoulders, and everyone yelled and moved aside. I could hear cheers, when someone must have landed a good one. The chant, 'fight, fight, fight'. swelled out of the mammoth. Surely a teacher would hear? Then I remembered that it was Mr Tatterson's lunch duty and everyone knew that he spent that sitting in his car by the bike stands trying to find out who was letting down bike tyres. Really I think he was using it as a good excuse to read a book and smoke the world's stinkiest cigars. I bet they had planned on starting a fight now, no one would notice, no one would come to the rescue. Now it was up to George and I... or at least George.

We broke through the last lot of bodies. Andrew was just in the process of staggering around looking like he'd drunk too many blue slush puppies. Blood was dripping off the end of his nose. He looked up, I could see his eyes, what I didn't see there frightened me. He wasn't even trying to fight. Brodie kicked him in the guts, and he fell over. Everyone roared. Everyone hated Andrew so much, it was all those years of being a bully that had done it. Right from when he was in Kindy he was stabbing kids with thumb tacks. I looked for Shane. He was jumping up and down and cheering. What I didn't see in his eyes frightened me too. We were being jostled by the crowd, who were only just managing to keep themselves from getting in with their fists and feet. My stomach thought it was on a tiny boat pitching around in the middle of a big sea. Brodie waited till Andrew stood up before punching him back down. Andrew's face was a big fat grimace waiting to cry. I waited for George to do something. But it was like he was paralysed. It was all we could both do to stand there. I looked around at all the smiling faces, like this was fun, like it was a comedy, like it was OK to smack someone around till they cried, till maybe they died.

Brodie turned around to Shane and said something. Shane said something back. He was grinning. Then Brodie stepped out of the way and Shane moved into the circle. Andrew was still picking himself up. Shane started bouncing around like he was Muhammad Ali. He looked like a complete idiot. Short, fat and half the size of Andrew. Normally he wouldn't stand a chance, but Brodie had

pretty much already finished him off. Shane tucked his fists up by his sides and bounced around a bit more.

“Go snake!, go snake!, go snake!” the crowd started to chant and you could see Shane’s face when he heard what they were saying. He looked at them, beamed back a great big smile into all those smiling faces. All his fans loved him. The boat I was in, almost overturned.

He punched the air, and at the end of his hand was the hissing, fang-filled mouth of a snake, he punched with his other hand, and an alligator snapped on the air, the next punch, a dog snarl, the next a baby shark. He bounced his way toward Andrew who was trying to back away, but the crowd kept shoving him forward. He turned in a panic to try and scrabble his way through, but the crowd were like a four metre brick wall. Knowing he had no hope, he turned back to Shane and his ever changing, stranging fists. I wondered if this was where I should leap in and save him. But I was scared. Shane was mad. I thought of the black octopus. I couldn’t handle that one again. I waited for George to do something,

“Do something!” I hissed in his ear,

“He went to lurch forward, but suddenly he stopped. Brodie had him by the arms, and was wrestling him back,

“No you don’t” Brodie yelled, “It’s Shane’s turn.”

“Kill! Kill! Kill!” the chant changed and grew quicker, faster like a beating drum. It was up to me. It had to be me, there was no one else. Even as I went to jump I knew I was doomed. My arms snapped back, my wrists Chinese burned. It was Dallas, he had me in an arm lock. I kicked him, he kicked me back. But it was all too late.

Andrew was staring at Shane’s fists, at the bear, at the barracuda, at the black snake, the brown snake, the taipan and the death adder. Shane must have honed in on Andrew’s greatest fear. He was close enough to strike. Then all the snakes disappeared. Shane went very still. You could see him

mustering up for the big one. The air shimmered around him and I knew that whatever this one was going to be, it was going to be big. Shane's hand poised, ready to strike. George and I both screamed 'NO!' at the same moment. As his hand came down it didn't change into snake, or a bat, or a dingo, but it stayed a hand. It reached down and tugged at Andrew's jumper, it was hard to see where I was looking from but it looked like he was pulling something out of him, something black, something grey, I looked for blood but there wasn't any. Everything went very still. Suddenly the noise that was so deafening was now deafeningly quiet. Shane was talking, he was talking to Andrew, and he was saying,

"This is your anger and I'm pulling it out."

Andrew was staring at the stuff that was coming out of him, like extra thick, fat wool. Shane pulled it, twisted it off and threw it behind him, I watched as it disintegrated and disappeared. More and more he pulled.

"You don't need it any more" he said. Andrew looked horrified, he tried to grab hold of the wool and pull it back but it disappeared in his hands, and Shane kept pulling the stuff out of him, twisting and throwing it.

"You wanna know why?" Shane said quietly, "Cos you got to know. Even though your Dad doesn't get how it's done, how being a Dad should be, you gotta know You gotta know that he loves you."

Andrew was crying, big baby crying. He was looking at Shane in the strangest way, but not like he was frightened any more, more like he was amazed, really amazed.

"My dad hates me" he sobbed.

"No, no he doesn't. He just doesn't know how to love you. Someone needs to teach him. He's so confused half the time he's hitting you he thinks he's doing you good."

"My dad hates me" he sobbed again, and Shane kept pulling,

"This is your anger Andrew, you don't need it any more. Your Dad loves you." The black stuff kept coming. The crowd was like an over-inflated balloon that had just lost air. No one chanted, no one jostled, suddenly there was a space between people.

“Does my Dad love me?” Andrew gasped.

“Your Dad loves you” Shane repeated,

“My Dad loves me” Andrew said too.

I found myself walking away, no one noticed, I felt relief, relief like nothing I'd ever felt before. I looked up and I could see, over by the water bubbler, Mr Bier was standing there, and he was smiling. He looked across at me and winked. He knew that Shane had figured out, finally, what his gift really was. I looked back and I could see the crowd moving apart, breaking away, I could see Shane and Andrew and George standing together. I could see Andrew, and he was smiling. I looked back at Mr Bier, but he was walking back down the corridor. I thought about Humya, In my head I told him I was sorry for thinking he was the stupidest alien ever. Finally my boat sailed into calm water.

E-stranged No More

The next week we went around to Andrew's house after school. Andrew was nervous about asking Shane to do it. But it turned out just fine. Mr Prentice was sitting on the couch, drinking beer and watching gardening videos. Which was strange because the Prentice's don't have a garden they have two dead Gemini's in the front yard and two old tyres with dying geraniums in them.

Andrew started talking to his dad, really quietly so we couldn't hear him. It made me a bit nervous, because Mr Prentice was a big man, even if the biggest part of him was his stomach. Mr Prentice looked over at us and laughed, which made me very very nervous. Shane was standing beside me and he whispered.

“Man, he's got black stuff spilling out his ears. I hope I can do this.”

Andrew just kept talking, we moved in a bit closer and we could hear him saying,

“Dad when I was real little, I remember you telling me about how when your Dad got angry he’d lock you in the laundry, and how he made his dog bite you, how he hit you.”

Mr Prentice didn’t say anything, he was looking at the TV screen where they were talking about hand pollinating pumpkins.

“Did it hurt?”

“Course it bloody hurt” his father said and dropped his empty beer bottle on the floor and picked up another one.

“Dad? Do you think your Dad loved you?”

Mr Prentice said a whole lot of swear words and started getting real upset, he waved his arms around and even managed to get off his chair to have a bit of a swing at Andrew. Shane stepped in and started pulling, and Mr Prentice well he started unravelling. It took half an hour to pull all the black wool out and by the end Mr Prentice was lying on the floor his big belly shaking as he cried and cried and cried. When there wasn’t any black stuff left we left too. George reckoned he saw Mr Prentice put his arm on Andrew’s shoulder and give it a squeeze.

Shane told us how he found his gift. He had a theory that all his snakes and crocs, had been showing him how it felt to be inside anger, what it felt like to feel rage, pure rage. Because he had to know it from the inside before he could reach in and take hold of other peoples and pull it out. Faced with Andrew he had looked down into his terrified face and felt all his anger disappear down the plug, and as it disappeared he could see this black stuff all screwed up and hurting in Andrew, and he could feel that it was anger, and he could feel what he was angry at, and he knew without even thinking, that if he could see it then he could touch it too, and he could wrap his fingers around the stuff and yank it out.

“It was the most amazing moment of my life” Shane said, “then I looked around and I could see all the others standing around and I could see their black stuff sitting there too.” And how most of the

teachers were just boiling over with it, especially Mr Tatterson, but we'd already figured out that one anyway.

"The only teacher who doesn't have it, is Mr Bier", which we'd pretty much figured as well. So there were no snakes, no more wild and dangerous animals. Shane was suddenly just Shane. E-stranged no more.

To celebrate we went out to where the three rocks had once been and sat around talking and eating too much chocolate. Shane told me how I had a small hard block of black stuff, most peoples he said, sort of moved around a bit, but mine sat there like it was waiting for something. I didn't know what it was waiting for. He offered to pull it out, but that seemed pretty freaky, so I told him it didn't seem to be doing any harm where it was, so he left it. If he took some out of George, well, they didn't tell me, but suddenly George seemed a bit looser, not quite so uptight. But maybe that was just me imagining things.

At home everything seemed like normal. I wondered how Shane would see us all when we sat around the kitchen table and ate dinner. I wonder when he saw us all laughing if there was black stuff around, but everyone seemed happy. Nobody was up to talking about Mum. She was looking better all the time, so we left the whole subject alone. But we dropped less things, and we picked things up more. We wiped down benches and cleaned our own dishes, we did everything Mum asked, and sometimes we made the effort to do some of the things she didn't. I happen to know that Tim went as far as cleaning out the loo. He said it was all 'boy pee' up the wall anyway and why should Mum have to clean it. Personally I think he should be rewarded with a medal for that one.

Me I was just the same too. I'm working weekends again at Jace and John's. Soon I'll have enough money for the camera. Most nights I do the white light thing. Mum was, like I said, looking better so

I figured it must be working. The results for the tests she had are back next week. I'm pretty sure that they will come back an empty sea, no more black octopus.

So I still don't know what gift is jangling away inside me. I just hope that it's as cool as Shane's. I lie awake at night and try and figure it out. But I always fall asleep, just at the moment when I think I've got a grasp on it. Typical.