

Part Three - Light Riders

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Worm eating and wearing Mum's bra

James was chewing his sleeve. He always does when he's nervous. I reached over and slapped his sleeve away from his mouth.

"Don't" I said, "Mum'll kill you if you eat another jumper."

"Can't help it" he said, watching the cards on the table. "I just don't wanna be the one that gets to wear her bra."

Nobody did.

It isn't very often that we get the house to ourselves. Mum and Dad had taken Tanya and Tamara with them to the shop. Miriam and Melanie were staying over at a friend's house. But it didn't take long before the rest of us got bored. There's only so much stuff you can nick out of the cupboards when Mum's not looking.

Lachlan came up with a great idea for a game. We each wrote down one really embarrassing dare, like being a human vase. Which meant someone would be lucky enough to stick all of Mum's gerberas down their collar so they hung around their face, then walk down the end of the street and back. Whoever did it would look like dill, but it'd be better than wearing Dad's long johns with a bucket over your head. Mind you, at least nobody would know who you were.

Seeing as it was Lachlan's idea, he had the first deal. He placed a card in front of each of us.

"You go first Tim."

Tim flicked his over, and sighed with relief – a Queen of Diamonds, that was good. It was the two's, three's and four's you had to worry about. James next. He turned his over – A ten. Not so bad. Bryan came next,

"A nine!" – he whistled, 'Not the bra, please not the bra' he stared intently at my card.

I flipped it over real quick, "Oh sshhh..."

"Great!" Bryan cheered at my five, my lousy five of spades. It looked like being me, unless Lachlan could come up with something lower. He was taking ages about it too.

"Come on Lachlan, turn it over!"

In slow motion he turned over the two of hearts. He groaned, I grinned.

James danced around swinging a beige coloured Mummy bra around his head.

"Come on, put it on" we all watched and giggled while Lachlan struggled with the straps, one cup was upside down and the strap twisted half a dozen times. He grimaced when James snapped a strap on his bare skin.

"How do you put these bloody things on?"

"Don't know. Ask Krissey." Tim laughed.

"Don't ask me, what would I know," I lied, and went red. I'd been wearing one for weeks, and I hated it. Why else would I come up with such a horrible dare.

"Over shoulder boulder holder" Bryan sang, "Give us a twirl, lover girl!"

Lachlan turned in an embarrassed circle. His chicken wing shoulder blades could have filled out the bra better than his bony chest. He looked ridiculous. James stuck half a dozen socks down each cup so they stuck out a mile.

"Come on bra boy" Tim hooked his finger under a strap and hauled him through the kitchen and out the front door. He stood behind him and tilted him around till he faced Mr Muldoon's house. Tim chuckled evilly.

"Off you go, we'll be watching."

Lachlan squared his shoulders as we milled around laughing. He drew in his breath, stood up tall and stomped across the street, just in time for Mrs Young to drive past, her neck craning as Lachlan paraded his naked ribs and lopsided boobs across the street and up Mr Muldoon's driveway. He knocked on the door. We dived behind a tree, giggling, and waited for the door to open. Lachlan kept looking over his shoulder towards us. He was supposed to wait till Mr Muldoon answered the

door and ask him if he could wash his car in his mother's bra. But as soon as the door started to open he shot across the front lawn, leapt the fence, fell over a wheelie bin and dived behind the tree too. Mr Muldoon stood on his doorstep and watched, shaking his head. "Is that one of you Bertram kids?" he yelled. We sniggered, He went back inside but he didn't close his door.

"Maybe he's going to call the police!" Bryan hissed.

"Don't be daft," said James, "he's going for his shotgun."

Lachlan was ripping off Mum's bra, "Well I'm not gonna get caught dead in this bloody thing." He got stuck in the loops and hoops and struggled like a trussed chicken. Nobody laughed harder than I did. What revenge. Tim ended up unclipping and unwinding him. Tim noticed Mr Muldoon come out his front door. He hushed us all as Mr Muldoon looked across the street. We hunched down behind the tree, stifling giggles. "I don't think he can see anything without his glasses," Bryan whispered. Lachlan sighed with relief. As soon as Mr Muldoon went back inside we trooped back inside too. James picked up the pack and shuffled while we argued about whether Lachlan had fulfilled his part of the dare. We decided it was close enough, and James handed each of us a card.

"What's the next dare on the list?" I asked.

"Eating a worm."

"Err, I think I'll go the Long John's before I'll go that," but I drew a six of hearts and everyone drew something higher.

James found me one, a big, fat, long, juicy one – but I found one that was short, anorexic and wouldn't require any chewing. It'd be just the one swallow. I wound it around a fork because I don't like touching worms – the back of my throat didn't either and it threw it back. The boys insisted I go again. I said I wanted a clean one – trying to stall – Tim washed it under the tap for me, wound it around the fork and handed it over. I closed my eyes, held my nose and tossed it in. It kind of did a wiggle at the back of my throat and was gone. I just had a slight taste of mud on my tongue and that was it. When I opened my eyes again they were all staring at me.

"You didn't think I could do it did ya?" I said. They shook their heads and I grinned. Feeling too queasy to think about what I'd just done.

"Aren't worms poisonous?" Bryan asked.

"Only their eyes" James sniggered.

"Well that's OK," I said, "mine didn't have any."

"Next!" I moved off quickly trying not to think of the poor worm dying in my stomach acid. Maybe I should have chewed to make its end quicker.

I got to see Tim in Dad's Long Johns, with a bucket over his head, shambling down the road. Lachlan walked down the street with gerberas down his collar and James with half a dozen stuck down his fly and a pair of Mum's undies over his head. I wished I had a camera. Bryan was the only one to get away with not doing anything. I think he was disappointed.

Things are kind of back to normal. Mum's been given the all-clear,-over-and-out-,just-keep-an-eye-on-you, come-back-in-a-couple-of-months, big-sigh-of-relief, doctors report. So we're all feeling pretty good. Shane is totally back to normal, no more weird and dangerous animals. Just a bit of wool pulling every now and then. I still have absolutely no idea what my Humya's gift is and if it wasn't for that jangling kind of feeling that it gives me sometimes, I'd think it was a dud. George has been real quiet. He spends most of his life reading stuff that I can't even understand the title of, let alone its contents. A while back he set himself the goal of reading all the non-fiction books in the library. School's cool, halfway through and heading for holidays. Andrew has settled down too, he's still a pain, nothing would ever cure that, but he's not picking on anyone any more.

When Mum got home she didn't even notice that the dishes had been done and we'd cleaned up the house. She yelled out as she walked through the front door.

"What the hell is my bra doing hanging off a tree in the front yard!"

“I’ll get it Mum.” I ducked past her and outside and left it to the boys to explain. I walked slowly so that the worst of it would be over by the time I got back. But I could hear her laughing by the time I’d hooked the bra off the tree with a stick. I hurried back, but then slowed down again when I heard her screech.

“What happened to my gerberas!” We’d been hoping she wouldn’t notice that the stems had all been broken. Bryan had tried his best to fix them with sticky tape and green paint.

But I guess she got over it alright ‘cos she made spaghetti for dinner, she said it was to give my worm some company.

Thief of Words

I stared at the newspaper Mum had just thrown in the rubbish.

“Are you finished with that?” I asked pointing at it.

“Hmm, it’s in the rubbish bin isn’t it” she said, turning away and hiding herself in the fridge. I reached for the paper, reading the heading that had caught my eye.

“Thief of Words, The Library Discovers a Strange Phenomena.”

“Not fen-o-meana” said Mum from the fruit and veggie compartment, ‘fen-nom-in-na. Strange story. Really does make you wonder.”

I unfolded the paper and felt Humya’s jangle doing a jingle. I skimmed the article quickly.

“Imagine” said Mum, “books just sitting on the shelf with no words in them anymore. I think it must be some kind of insect or microbe that likes the taste of ink.”

I looked up to see her butt peering out from the fridge and read out to it,

“A total of seventy five books have been found by library staff that are intact, except they no longer have words. Mrs Yet Foy, the Head Librarian, stated, “If it is a prank it is certainly one that has confounded us – how could such a deed be done?” It went on to say that local police had been brought in and Senior Sergeant Sullivan had called it a case for the x-files. The blank books have been sent to the Forensic department to try discover the method of ink removal. The only thing left in the

books is the stamped dates of when people borrowed them. Statements taken from the previous borrowers confirmed that the books, now devoid of print, had once been readable.”

“Amazing isn’t it” Mum mumbled into the freezer compartment.

“Hmmm” I agreed, “Amazing. Can I keep this?”

“It **was** in the rubbish bin Krissey.” Mum shut the freezer door and threw me a frozen bunch of grapes. I crunched one hard till it shattered.

“Stop doing that would you. Suck on them, or you’ll crack the enamel on your teeth.”

I grinned, crunching another one between my teeth as I turned and walked out the door.

“If you have to eat them like that, eat them with your mouth closed!” she yelled out behind me.

I shoved the newspaper article under Shane’s nose in Science Class.

“What do you think?” I watched him read it as we stood in line waiting for Mr Fastenon to hand out litmus paper. It was Monday and George wasn’t at school. Shane – who had only seen him yesterday, said he hadn’t been sick, just strange. It seemed obvious to me what was going on. I wondered if it’d be as obvious to Shane, He handed it back to me when he’d finished.

“It’s got to be” he frowned at me as he said it.

“Got to be what?”

“George.”

“Of course it’s George.”

“But how is he doing it?” Shane wondered aloud.

I shook my head, “Let’s find out.”

I skimmed through the names of some of the books that were now inkless and wordless, ‘Advanced Social Sciences’, ‘Economics of Developing Countries’, ‘Global Crisis’, ‘Environment in the Balance’, ‘The Politics of Change’. Hardly light reading.

“Maybe the aliens are using him to gather information,” Shane whispered.

"Maybe that's why he hasn't told us," I whispered back. I hoped that George hadn't found his gift and hadn't bothered to tell us. We'd promised to tell each other.

I remembered what Shane had said earlier, "Why was he being strange?"

"He was spouting on about stuff."

"Like...?"

"I don't know, I didn't understand much, stuff about the western civilisation ... monopoly or resources... heaps of stuff. He was just about frothing at the mouth. But he gets like that sometimes, you just about need a decoder to figure out all the big words. This time there were just lots more of them in a row."

"After school we should visit the library." I looked down at the twisted bit of litmus paper in my hands and grimaced.

George wasn't there, but there were hundreds of others. Everyone was hunting through books trying to find one without words. Mrs Yet Foy came rushing out with a chair and a loud speaker. She looked really peeved. She jumped on the chair and started shouting,

"Please put down all books, this is an emergency. Please place all books on the shelf and step away."

Nobody did. In fact one woman started piling books into her children's arms - they were in the Law section - I recognised her then, she was Mum and Dad's Lawyer, Mrs Stapleton.

"News from the Police Department indicate that there may be a strange form of fungus or virus in the library. The library is now closed and in a state of quarantine."

Mrs Stapleton yelled and tossed the books out of her kid's arms and half way across the room. The kids, who were only four or five, started to cry. She grabbed their hands and ran. Everyone was running. Mrs Yet Foy was yelling at people to remain calm, to walk in an orderly manner. Nobody did. People kept ramming the doors till the walls of the library shook. Eventually it was just me, Shane and Mrs Yet Foy who was looking around in dismay at all the dropped books and knocked over pot plants. She sighed and looked up and saw us standing by the Geography section.

“It’s not really a virus is it?” said Shane. Mrs Yet Foy smiled,

“No, but it’s a very quiet library again.”

I picked up a fallen maidenhair fern and handed it to her.

“However” she said, “we are officially closed while investigations are taking place,” she pointed to the door and said, “I’ll see you both out.” She patted us both on the shoulder,

“Look forward to seeing you both back here when things have quietened down and sorted themselves out.”

“I wish she was the School Librarian.” Shane said as we walked outside. Down the road we could see Mrs Stapleton standing beside her car, washing her snivelling kid’s hands with disinfectant and telling them not to touch their faces.

We stopped at my house for plan B. I rifled through Mum’s bookshelf and came up with – ‘The Politics of Economy’, and ‘Anthropology for Beginners’. Mum’s textbooks were a bit old and out of date, but it was the best I could do.

“What are you doing with my books?” Mum asked.

“Using them as bait,” I said and laughed, “Just kidding – George thought he might be able to use them for his school project. Mind if I borrow them?”

“Just make sure you bring them back in one piece.” I nodded, even though having the ink removed might not officially be one piece.

Shane was pleased to get moving. Tanya and Tamara had decided his real name wasn’t Shane it was ‘belly button’ and they insisted on calling him it every sentence. I don’t think Tamara had forgiven him for going barracouta on her a while back.

“But why wouldn’t he tell us if he knew?” Shane asked me as he wandered across town and over the Memorial Bridge.

“Oh I don’t know. But I reckon you’ll have to pull wool if it turns out he hasn’t. He promised.” I kicked what I thought was a loose stone – it turned out not to be, and it hurt so much Shane said the wool almost fell out of me. He reached over to pull it, but I flicked his hand away.

“Don’t. It freaks me out when you do that.” Then I felt bad ‘cos he looked so hurt, so I let him pull my anger out and flick it onto the road where it shrivelled and disappeared. I did feel better, even though my foot still hurt.

“Let’s just go around the back,” I said. I eyed off all the windows of the house, trying to spy Mrs Worthington before she spied me. Shane spotted her in the lounge room vacuuming under the couch cushions.

“Duck!” he hissed, and we scrambled under the window, round the corner and out the back to George’s shed. We knocked on the door but there was no answer. We went in anyway. George wasn’t there. He had been though. There were literally hundreds of books lying around. We both grabbed one, flicked them open. All the words were there – we picked up others off the top of different piles –they all had words too.

“Where is he?” Shane asked, “maybe we should ask Mrs W.”

“Nuh, don’t really feel like having my shoes disinfected or having my fingernails checked for dirt.”

“She’s never *really* done that has she?” he asked.

“Nuh, but she’d like to” I grinned and jumped onto George’s couch.

“Maybe we should wait here a while. Have a look around.” I shifted awkwardly. The couch was as hard as a rock.

“Sure” Shane sat down at George’s computer and wiggled the mouse till the screensaver of Einstein sticking out his tongue disappeared and a document replaced it.

“It’s a list!” Shane said excitedly, “a list of books.”

“What kind of books?” At the same time I asked, I stood up, and saw George sneaking around the side of the house.

“Look, there’s George. I think we should hide.”

“What?” Shane looked at me puzzled.

“I just wanna see what he does. He looks... sneaky.”

Skcus yllaer siht

“We could just ask him.”

“Too easy, come on – you take the cupboard... I’ll get behind the couch.”

“What say he’s developed x-ray vision?”

I didn’t answer. I pushed him into the cupboard and closed the door – I would have said something rude but I was too busy squeezing into the tight space behind the couch. The door opened just as I pulled my head behind a cardboard box – I could see George’s feet as they snuck inside the room. Who did he think he was hiding from? He was mumbling to himself. All the words had at least ten syllables and none of them made any sense... that’s when I realised that they never would make any sense... because he wasn’t speaking English. A big bolt of blue shock went right up my back. Something seriously weird was going on here, but I didn’t know what. I’d planned to get out from behind the couch and say giddyay at some point. Now I just wished he’d leave so I could too. I hoped Shane stayed put. George stopped mumbling. I could see his feet in front of his computer.

“Strange” he muttered – ‘The screensaver didn’t activate.’ And then he said something like ‘Schooner nar co par’ was it alien? George knew more words of English than anyone I knew. But he didn’t speak Swahili or anything. Maybe I’d been right all along when I’d thought Humya might have invaded George’s body and set up shop in his head. There was a small scrape, a tinier little click, then a huge whopping bang, with my head pressed to the floor. I could see Shane where he lay, his feet tangled in fishing net. George’s feet were there too, standing beside a groaning Shane as he rubbed his bum.

“What on earth are you doing?” George asked.

Shane looked up suspiciously, “Tell me what language you were speaking first.”

“Language I was speaking.... Oh, I often make up nonsense words, you know, saying ‘this really sucks’ but backwards, so it’s ‘skcus yllaer siht’ – So what are you doing in my cupboard, mending my fishing net with your feet?”

“We’re worried.”

“Krissey’s here too?”

I figured I might as well own up.

“Hey George, pull the couch out, I can’t breathe.” It took both of them to move it, and I crawled out doing my best not to look too guilty.

He was looking at us like *we* were mad.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“That’s what we’d like to know too.”

“I had a day off school – so what?”

“So it’s OK if we mention that to your Mum?” Shane asked.

George looked uncomfortable, “I’d rather you didn’t.”

I pulled the crumpled up newspaper clipping out of my back pocket and handed it to him. He glanced at it for only a second and handed it back.

“Fffff” he scoffed, “ink eating insects.”

“Did you read all that just now?” Shane asked guardedly.

“No” he said, “I read it last night.”

“So what, or who, do you reckon really did it?” I asked idly flicking through a book by his computer, but watching his face carefully.

“Don’t know” said George, “Look, guys, I’ve got a lot to do.”

“Hmmm, a lot of reading to get done, it’ll take you... years to read all these.” I pointed at the piles of books. George picked one up, he looked at us both really hard. He tossed it in the air. He twirled it in a circle before he caught it. Like a magician doing an act. He displayed the contents of the book to us both and we nodded obediently, yes it was chock a block full of words, words about philosophy for

the 21st century if the cover was anything to go by. He stood to attention. He closed his eyes. He brought the book up beside his left ear and then slowly pushed it through. It passed right through one side of his head, and his other hand came up to catch it as it fell out the other. Just like swiping a credit card through a money machine. If you thought that looked freaky you should have seen it when he opened his eyes. His eyeballs were black. He smiled. It was the most frightening smile I'd ever seen. He held out the book for both of us to see... it was empty. Five or six hundred pages of totally blank paper. He shook his head from side to side and the black in his eyes cleared. He blinked a few more times and then said,

"Why would I need to go to school... when I can do that?"

"What, do what?" Shane asked, "pull the ink off a page?"

"No, idiot. I've got every last word stored in my brain. I could pick up a pen and write the whole thing out if I wanted to. It's in my head, and I know everything that was once in this book. I know it like I know my own name."

He tossed the blank book down on the couch and then shoved it under the cushion... I could see there were lots of books there already. You can bet they were all blank too. No wonder the couch had been hard to sit on and hard to move, it was loaded with books that had been turned into scribble pads.

"I've just absorbed the philosophy of the 21st century... I could pass philosophy exams if I wanted to – I could lecture in the world's best university if they'd let me. Give me a library shelf or two and I'd be ready in half an hour."

"Yeah well, it sure beats sitting in class listening to Mrs.."

George cut me off excitedly, "They don't even teach this stuff in school! The teachers wouldn't know Wittgenstein; half of them would think he was a type of beer."

Shane and I just stared at him. George was looking all gooey eyed at the ceiling. Shane fished a book out from under the couch cushion and leafed through its blank pages, awe struck he asked,

"How did you find out you could do it?" he asked.

George shrugged, "I was in the library. I was frustrated because I'd started reading the non-fiction section when I was eight and so far I'm only in the 133 section. The paranormal... I've got to get to 1000 yet... it just seemed so slow. You know they only let you take six books at a time. I was thinking of ways to smuggle them out..."

"Steal them!" Shane squawked.

"I was going to bring them back," George said impatiently.

"Anyway, it just struck me how great it could be if I could just stick them into my head like a video in a video machine, or a DVD into a computer and just 'assimilate it' so I ... pretended to... just for fun... and it worked. It's the strangest feeling."

"So how many books have you stuck into your head now?" I asked.

"About one hundred and fifty" he said, "I'm making a list and trying to get a nice balance across the spectrum. Don't wanna get too top heavy on one thing."

"Where's the other seventy five come from?" I asked, "You only blanked up seventy five from the town library."

"Yeah and I'm busted already. That's why I took the bus and went to Langton."

"They've got a bigger library there." Shane said.

George nodded, "Hmm, they do..." he looked around at his books.

"If you don't mind... I have books to imbibe. Knowledge" he said pompously, "is an addictive thing."

Shane and I looked at each other. It seemed almost harmless enough.

"Is it a crime... you know to remove all those words and not put them back – can you put them back?" I asked as it occurred to me. I hadn't thought of that.

"Don't know. It's not something I've considered doing. I don't think you get this do you Krissey – knowledge is the most powerful thing in the world. When I'm finished I'll know more than any other single human being. What it takes a lifetime for people to assimilate I can have within minutes. I'm becoming the world's smartest person."

"That's... nice," I said sarcastically.

"It's not just nice, it could possibly be the most important thing to have happened to anyone and to everyone since, I don't know, Archimedes discovery of pycnometry."

"Pycnometry?" Shane asked. I reminded myself to tell Shane not to encourage him.

"Displacement, you know, water, volume, running through the streets naked."

I rolled my eyes. "Well if you're not arrested first for ..."

"Indecent exposure," Shane filled in the space for me.

"Yeah, that. Then the next time we visit... should we should make an appointment first?" I practised arching my eyebrow really high and putting my hands on my hips like Mum does.

"I don't mean to be rude, but just at the moment I don't have a great deal of available time." He started to turn away but I wasn't finished with him yet.

"Does Thursday the 23rd sounds good, say three clock" I tapped my foot on the floor, maintaining my arched eyebrow only with a lot of effort.

George stared at me. "I think I'm booked that day. I'm solving the issue of overpopulation. But I could fit you in on the 24th I'm resolving alternative energy sources, it should only take a couple of hours."

I grabbed Mum's books. "I was gonna give you these, but I think I'll take them with me."

He glanced at them, "Out of date anyway" he said. I tilted my chin, let down my aching brow and stamped outside. I waited a couple of minutes until Shane joined me. We both turned to see Mrs Worthington crossing the lawn towards us. She had white plastic gloves on, and a pink scarf around her head like she was fumigating a pigsty or something. She was hauling the vacuum cleaner towards George's shed. It dawned on me that she was probably going to vacuum under his couch cushions too. My smile was wicked.

"Oh hello Shane and Krissey", she smiled like her smile muscles were seized.

"Hi Mrs Worthington. I disinfected my shoes yesterday OK?"

She frowned at me and went to say something but I was already heading off down the path to the gateway.

Shane caught up after he helped Mrs Worthington with the vacuum cleaner.

“You shouldn’t be so rude... she’s OK, she can’t help being... a clean freak.”

“Hmm” I said. I still hadn’t forgiven her for serving me octopus for dinner the last time I stayed.

“Figured out Humya’s gift yet?” Shane asked as he swiped at an annoying fly.

“Nup.” The fly gave up on Shane and started buzzing me.

“Maybe that’s why you don’t like George’s gift much.”

I went to turn and glare at him but at the same time I caught my shoe on a clump of grass and fell over. He grinned at me when I scowled at him.

He kept on walking so that I was the one who had to catch up. He was laughing. I figured I might as well laugh too.

“Good thing about you Krissey is that you always end up trying to find the funny side of things.”

“Yeah, well right now I think it’s funny that George is trying to keep the lid on his couch full of blank books and his Mum is having a fit cos she wants to vacuum up all the poisonous lint under it.”

Poo Stinks

I was so excited I forgot to breathe... I went another half a block on my bike before I remembered to – the world went woozy and I had to stop – so it was on the side of the road with my head between my knees that I had my break through.

“Poo Stinks” I said loudly, and it wasn’t because I’d farted either.

I knew the one thing in the world that I was good at. Poo jokes. I was going to be a comedian and my first show would be called ‘Poo Stinks’. I had my school bag on my back. I flipped it open and grabbed my pen and in between a whirl of faint stars I wrote the beginnings of my first shot at fame.

I was going to be famous – famous for faecal matter. I could hardly wait.

It took me ages to write it, just ages. Half the time I was daydreaming about dark and dimly lit theatres packed full of people drinking sophisticated things in thick chunky glasses or super thin-stemmed ones. A bright, blue stage light would be zeroed in on me. I’d be sitting on a leather bar

stool casually tilting the microphone to one side as I waited for the audience's laughter to subside. 'Did I tell you about the time my two-year-old sister left a little log in her potty. No? Well my bigger brother found it. He's quite a comedian himself. It runs in the family. Anyway, he stuck four toothpicks in it, two for legs, two for arms and a beer bottle top for a hat. He wrote a little note in tiny little words and stuck it beside it, it said, 'someone help me, I fell out the bottom'." Roars of appreciation as people nudge each other and say how the expensive tickets had all been worth it. The old lady whose house I was sitting outside of came out after an hour and leant over my shoulder asked me what I was doing on her footpath.

"I'm writing," I said trying to remember the last thing I'd thought while trying to look polite.

"Oh, are you a writer?" she asked kindly.

"No, I grinned, "I'm a comedian" I said it proudly.

"Oh really, can I hear one of your jokes?" she asked.

"Sure" I tried her out on the one about Tanya, the potty and the toothpick poo. I watched her face the whole time to see if she thought it was funny. I don't think she did. She looked a bit embarrassed, she didn't laugh or anything.

"Oh," she said.

"They're about poo" I said, "All my jokes are about poo."

Her lips sort of went and squished together in that way that only adults do when they don't really approve.

"You don't like poo jokes do you?" I said smiling.

"Not really, no" she said.

"Did you like jokes about poo when you were a kid?"

"I don't think so, I don't remember."

"Do you ever laugh at the sound of a fart?"

Her lips looked like they might split under all that squishing pressure they were under.

“I don’t believe I do, no” she said, “If you don’t mind I think you should move along now dear. It’s not the right place to be sitting, doing what you are doing.”

I thanked her for listening to my poo joke. I said I was sorry that she didn’t like it. But that lots of people I knew thought poo jokes were funny. She didn’t even say anything at all, she just walked away. I was on my bike again by the time she looked back and I made sure to wave. Sometimes the most fun that can be had is by making adults feel uncomfortable. The way to do that is to be too honest or to say something that might be disgusting. I was beginning to figure out the unwritten rules of speaking... but I’ve decided that I’m gonna write some of my own.

When I got home I practised on Mum. She thought my act was funny. She even reminded me of a few things that had happened that I might like to use. Like the time she’d picked up a raisin off the carpet and put it in her mouth. After the first chew she knew it was poo. It’s great having a Mum you can talk total poo too.

George turned up at school the next day. Shane saw his Dad drop him off and watch him till he went in before he drove off in his BMW. Turned out that they’d found out he’d wagged school because Mrs Horn the next door neighbour had sounded the alarm when she saw him in Langton on a school day.

Shane giggled, “Mrs Horn made a big noise about it.”

I giggled too, “Mrs Horn is a real hoot.”

George frowned at us both,

“You two are incorrigible.”

“Yeah we are aren’t we” I agreed.

“You now what that meant?” Shane asked me.

“Nope. But you can bet book head does,” I grinned at George to show I didn’t mean it nasty. He didn’t seem to care. He sighed heavily.

“And another species dies, another thirty two thousand tonnes of air pollution billows out, another five hundred children die of starvation, another thousand are beaten or imprisoned for their beliefs... and Krissey she just goes on getting a kick out of being dum.”

Shane and I gave each other the ‘Oh my God’ look and followed George into Mr Fastenon’s class.

We were supposed to be writing up our conclusions to an experiment on melting points of various substances. I was jotting down another poo joke. Shane was laboriously cleaning out his nails with a scalpel and George, he was scribbling madly in his science book, no doubt to prove to everyone every possible known substance and its ‘melting point’.

“So Shane,” Mr Fastenon barked from the front of the class – are you trying to be the first person to identify the substance that accumulates under children’s fingernails?”

Shane looked startled, but he said nothing, Mr Fastenon continued, “Because it’s already been discovered ... it’s called...”

“Snot!” I said loudly, “the substance was first discovered in 1933 it was officially named, snot.” I giggled – I was trying out my comedian stuff – if you want to be a comedian you have to practise everywhere. The rest of the class sniggered, they might have laughed harder if it wasn’t for Mr Fastenon, who was standing at the front of the class yelling, ‘Mucous! Krissey! Mucous!’

It got me wondering that after my first sell out tour of ‘Poo Stinks’ I should do one called ‘Mucous Sticks’ or something like that. You could give away sticks of green jelly as refreshments. Mr Fastenon was giving me a detention. An hour of writing about the sex life of a ping pong ball.

“Please Mr Fastenon. I’ve already written one on that, could I write about the toilet habits of a ping pong ball?”

“OK, two hours, one on both.”

I groaned. Mr Fastenon turned to George, who was still hurriedly scribbling,

“Well George, could you enlighten us to the melting point of cheese?”

George flashed Mr Fastenon an annoyed look. He waved him away like he was a fly.

“Not important,” he mumbled, “Don’t bother me right now.”

Everyone shut up - I mean it's one thing to be a smart arse, it's another to tell a teacher to bug off.

Mr Fastenon's chin snapped up so we could all see the bit on his neck that he'd forgotten to shave for at least a week.

"What, Mr George Worthington, is currently more important than the melting point of cheese?"

George sighed again and looked down at what he'd written.

"I'm trying to isolate a time period in which we should expect the world's resources to become exhausted, and to factor in climatic change, species extinction, environmental impact on growing world population using current human population growth trends. So many variables. Basically a mathematical equation that could accurately predict the end of the world, or the period of time in which we have to rectify the inevitable."

"The end of the world?" Mr Fastenon echoed.

"Yes, difficult to define, isn't it? Is that merely human life forms, or all life forms? Or is it a significant deviation from the norm of current living standards?" George appeared to think of something new, because he bent over his pen and began to scratch away again, oblivious to Mr Fastenon's furious approach. He snatched up George's book. I caught a glimpse of it myself – it was weird – like another language with symbols I'd never seen before and heaps of it. Mr Fastenon grasped George's book and skimmed across it, his face was aghast - he looked over at George who, without his book, was furiously writing it all down on the top of his desk. Mr Fastenon was twitching now. His eyes flicked to George, then the book and back again – whatever George had done, Mr Fastenon was impressed, but he didn't look like that's what he wanted to be. Eventually he put George's book down and said.

"You can have two hours with Krissey. I want an essay on the life expectancy of an ant."

George flicked his eyes at him and nodded.

"If you'd only hush a while I could tell you the life expectancy of every last thing on earth." he drew his book back towards himself and kept on scribbling.

Mr Fastenon looked lost, and for the rest of the period, no one knew where to find him.

Get Smart Quick George

Mum had packed one of her super huge chocolate muffins. I was manoeuvring my mouth from one side of it through to the other. George was on the other side of the detention room fastidiously chewing on mandarin segments and placing a small pile of pips to one side. He was writing as furiously as I was. I doubt it had much to do with the life expectancy of an ant. He looked up and caught me staring at him. I held his eyes, while I swallowed my latest mouthful.

“You weren’t going to tell us were you?”

George sighed, looked back at his page. I could see him thinking about whether to ignore me or not. He sighed again and laid down his pen.

“No, I wasn’t – you couldn’t possibly comprehend.”

“Yeah, I’m too stupid, I don’t eat books.”

“Imagine if someone found out, I could be used as a spy tool. Smuggle me in, toss a few confidential files through me, smuggle me back out, no evidence, just an innocent kid.”

“It’d make a great movie”, I said, brushing the crumbs off my desk, “but I don’t think so.”

“They’re more likely to put you in a special hospital,” I smirked, “For those who’ve lost their cover or had their spine broken.” I couldn’t help grinning at how enormously clever I was. George didn’t seem to notice, he was probably too busy noticing his own clever to recognise mine.

“Besides, it’s a criminal offence to destroy public property.” George said.

“You’re full of ink!” I scoffed, “Shane’s figured it out and I reckon he’s right.” You don’t want people to think you’re smart because an alien gave you a get smart quick gift. You just want everyone to think you’re super smart all on your own.”

George’s face confirmed that Shane was right. He turned around so fast all his mandarin pips flew off his desk and across the floor.

“Quiet!” He hissed, “I’m deeply involved with Quantum physics.”

“So what” I hissed back, “I’m deeply involved with poo!”

I brushed the crumbs off my page and got back to my latest ping pong poo joke.

Last night's forgotten nightmare had made my eyes blurry and my mood less than marvellous. We were walking to our first class, and I wasn't really looking forward to it. Hearing George rattle on with 'pre-determined's and 'accentuating the obvious', and other such cryptic phrases made me come up with a few less cryptic ones of my own. Like 'go dip your head in candle wax'. I swallowed it back, but only with an effort. I hadn't realised that George was tired too till Shane said,

"Man, you look dog tired."

"More like dog eared – wouldn't you say Krissey? Actually I was up all night, I learnt eight new languages. Well, to be more accurate, I would have to say I learnt eight ancient languages."

"Wow!" Shane said in awe.

"Another eight tonight I hope ... did you know there are around six thousand five hundred languages in the world."

"You're going to learn them all?" Shane sounded like a puppy barking at George's heels. I was trying hard not to show how much it bugged me.

"I'm going to try," George said. George can be a pompous twit. Just a pity that pompous is a word that I learnt from him.

"Good, maybe you could write down all the words for poo in other languages – I might be able to use them in my routine." I goaded.

"Your routine?" George asked.

"I'm writing a comedy called 'Poo Stinks'" I almost danced down the corridor at the thought of my marvellous, magnificent, maniacally funny masterpiece. I saw Andrew the ex-bully coming towards us. As he passed, he punched me, hard, so it hurt.

"How ya going?" he said smilingly. Seems strange that whether he likes you or hates you he punches you just the same. He kept walking without waiting for an answer. Ever since Shane had pulled out his anger Andrew had been smiling. Like real smiling. I watched Shane who was looking at Andrew like your mother does when you do something sappy, like make her a cake and spell birthday, 'brithday'. When I saw George's face I stopped almost dancing.

“What’s up?” I asked. He looked really mad.

“You think the whole thing is some elaborate joke, like life has a punch line and you are the one whose going to find it.” He glowered at me, “If only you knew how terrible life is, it’s filth and madness, it’s greed, greed, greed and deadly hate.”

“I watch the news” I said, “I know what it’s like, doesn’t mean I have to go around crying all day.”

I shoved the door of our class open and refused to meet George’s eye.

Shane was watching us both – I could see his hands itching to pull out our anger wool. I made sure I was out of arms reach. We had Mr Bier and we were doing a new experiment. We had three lots of the same flowers growing along the same wall and we were standing in front of the first group talking lovingly to them and beaming them kindness. The next group got nothing at all, except water, the next got hate and muttered harsh words. We were trying to find out if they would grow different. I kept wanting to say that Andrew had had lots of yelling at in his life and he was taller and bigger than all of us. But I didn’t. Besides, if it counts for anything he certainly isn’t brighter. So far our flowers were all about five centimetres high and they all looked exactly the same.

George did what he’s been doing all week, he ignores what’s going on in the class and writes huge amounts of alien language at high speed instead. If a teacher interrupts, he treats them like a two year old who keeps repeating the same thing over and over. If they persist he talks to them in such a way that they look totally stupid. He rattles off scientific findings or mathematical theorems, or quotes great lumps of some old English dude until they creep away defeated. He even corrected Mrs Tait our French teacher, he told her that when she thought she was saying that the corneille (crow) flew up into the tree, she was actually saying that the cervelle (brain) was. He told her that her French was very ‘rudimentary.’

Mrs Tait went very red, and told him that he was very rude.

I kind of got the feeling that none of the teachers like George much lately. It’s never smart to make people look stupid. By the end of the week George wasn’t talking to us much either, and when he did neither of us understood a word of it anyway.

“Compound interest is one of the seventh wonders of the world, at least that’s what Einstein believed. If only it would work in my favour a little faster.... Hmm. He said he imagined himself riding on a beam of light, that’s when he discovered the theory of relativity; imagine that, riding on a beam of light?”

Which might not seem too weird, but I’d asked him if he wanted one of my cheese and pineapple sandwiches. By that time he’d shoved half a library in his head and the newspapers were full of the search for ink eating microbial insects. It seemed obvious - why didn’t the teachers catch on? George’s eyeballs were going grey and whenever he spoke it was like some dusty professor.

He’d invited us out to his place on Friday. I had a feeling that something strange was going on. I’d expect him to prefer having his head in a book, or even a book in his head, than to spend time with dumbo’s like us. But I walked back to his place with him anyway.

“I feel like the world has just got smaller. I could hold it in one hand. If I popped it in my mouth I’d already know its flavour.”

“What flavour is that?” Shane asked.

“It’d taste like an apple, one that looks OK, but really it’s been covered in spray and it’s gone soft and floury, parts of it are poisoned.”

“Hmm” said Shane thoughtfully, “I think the earth would be more like an egg...”

“An Easter egg” I interrupted,

“You wish.” Shane grinned. George looked unimpressed.

“So now you have the world in the palm of your hand, what are you going to do with it?”

“Reverse the damages sustained. Create and develop rational, logical and ethical steps to ensure its continued survival. Instigate new global laws and treaties to enable the world’s population to exist at more than just the basic level of survival, but in health and safety... “ George raised his arms to the sky theatrically,

“Amazing isn’t it... I weigh forty-seven kilograms, the world is estimated to weigh 5,972 billion, billion tons, and the sun 1,988 billion, billion, billion tons. That makes me .00000000043 of the size of the

world... and yet... I think I can change it... knowledge is all-powerful” George puffed out his chest, all bloated with book. “Humya has given me the foundations.” he focussed on the horizon zealously.

“Yeah, but it’s not a house till you have built the walls.” I pointed out.

“A roof” said Shane, “you’ll need a roof” and we giggled. George tried hard not to notice.

“Humya gave me this gift for a reason. I think he meant me to save the world.” He struck a pose like he expected someone to come along and set him in bronze.

“Man, George you are such a superdude.” I grinned at him.

“Krissey you are impossibly facile, facetious and ... super stupid” he blustered. “We’re talking about changing the world, the equivalent of tilting it on its axis.”

“George, if anyone is tilted on their axis it’s you, you can’t change the world and you can’t move it either.... Forty seven kilograms, remember?”

“Watch me” he stalked off. I watched him ... not quite knowing what to think of George right now.

“Oh well,” I said to Shane, “At least it will be interesting to watch.”

Shane smiled a bit guiltily, “Never know, he might.”

“What, change the world?”

“Yeah, I reckon he might.”

“I’m watching” I grinned, this time even with ‘get smart quick George’ on the scene I knew I had to be right.

The Word Trappers

Being with George wasn’t much fun. He kept burbling on about statistics and moral priorities and all that world stuff that we get too much of on TV. After an hour I said I had to leave, that I’d just thought of a new poo story and I needed to get it written down. Shane said he’d come with me for company. I guess he was keen to leave too.

“Actually, before you go... I was thinking,” George was looking at his computer wistfully. He hauled up the tower and stared into its winking green eye.

“You’re not thinking of pushing that through your head are you?” Shane asked.

“Why not?” George said, “we could try.”

“Hardly, you’ll electrocute yourself,” I pointed out.

“I’m willing to bet I won’t.”

“I’m not having anything to do with it, nothing” I backed towards the door, “People will really figure you’re nuts when you starting talking in Javanese.”

“Java” George laughed, “Hyper Text Markup Language, Binary ...”

“Talk canary, Kookaburra, whatever, but stick that computer through your head and you’ll go nuts.”

Shane said quietly.

Before either of us could even yell, George bent down and pushed his head into the side of the computer, his eyeballs rolled up and a row of zeros and ones flashed over them. He started to shake. Shane reached him first and jerked his head back out. George slumped to the floor. Shane shook him till the grey in his eyes cleared and his eyeballs floated back.

“Don’t do that again,” Shane said shakily.

“Idiot.” I said as though I was angry, but mostly I was scared, “How are you feeling?”

“A bit scrambled. I guess the brain doesn’t organise stuff in folders and its memories aren’t measured in megabytes.”

“Stick to ink” Shane suggested.

“Sure. I think I’ll do that.” George looked queasy, he shook his head again, but grinned. He turned to one side, found a book, slotted it into the side of his head and let it drop out the other. He checked to see if it had words still. It didn’t. He nodded happily and turned away.

By the next week George was getting anxious. His supply of books had fallen away – most of those he looked at were out of date or too simple. He was planning a trip to a university library – he couldn’t become a member, he was too young, he reckoned he could slip inside unnoticed to graze. I hoped he’d get arrested soon.

Poo Stinks was coming on well – I'd timed myself – I'd said it all into Mum's dictaphone and it was twenty two point five minutes long – I was aiming for at least half an hour. I thought it was funny, at least two minutes of my twenty two were the sound of me giggling. I guess that means it's only twenty minutes long. I'm going to practice not giggling.

My latest story was Mum's application for a loan. The loan manager had come to our house – he said he knew how many kids Mum had, it would be easier that way. Besides, he liked a trip out of the office. He pulled up in his brand new car – in his spick and span suit and his carefully packed briefcase. Mum let him into the house. It was only a week after James and Lachlan had a fight and made a new doorway into their bedroom by smashing their way through the wall. I think it was James head that did it and I think it was Lachlan's hand behind James head that helped it through. Anyway the house was looking as tidy as Mum ever got it, but we all figured by the way the bank manager was looking around it didn't look as clean as the inside of his ears. He had really big ones and you could see right inside. If you shone a torch in you'd probably see his brain. He'd been talking to Mum for a while when Tanya started goosestepping around the house. Flicking up one leg and frowning. Mum interrupted Mr Billson (we called him Mr Billsoon) to ask her what was wrong. Tanya flicked her leg real hard and a poo flew out the bottom of her pant leg and stuck half way up the wall. We were all falling around laughing. Mum didn't say anything, Mr Billson talked real fast while Mum got a tissue and picked off the poo and walked into the loo and flushed it. She washed her hands, came out looking like nothing had happened. She asked me to go clean Tanya up. I did. We could all smell her, it was one of her silverbeet poo's. Gross. So I didn't get to see him leave. Tim said he wouldn't shake Mum's hand and that he kept wiping his own hand on his pants like they were dirty. Mum didn't get the loan. I reckon he didn't want to use the same pen as Mum to sign the paper.

George didn't get arrested, but on Thursday he did get picked up by the police and escorted home. He was caught graffitting the public swimming pool wall.

"I ran out of paper. It was important."

They explained to Mr and Mrs Worthington that it wasn't your usual graffiti as it was in thin black felt pen and was around one thousand small neatly printed words of which most were incomprehensible. George told the police that he was merely trying to find a way round the dilemma of world decline, a way in which to halt and reverse the ecological damages sustained. Our existing levels of resource use had to be addressed in order to arrest the inevitable and impending extinction of all human and non-human life.

They'd raised their eyebrows and left.

Mrs Worthington told him she was proud of him for trying to save the world but really it was very important to abide by the law. I wasn't there, George told us this story, but I can just see her face when he said to her,

"So it's not law abiding to express myself on a public concrete wall, but it's OK to spend fifteen hundred dollars on a nose job when it could have saved hundreds of children's lives. I hope you think your profile's worth it."

For three weeks George scribbled in books. When Shane and I went to see him, there were about one hundred of them sitting scattered on the floor. We asked him about them but he just waved us away and kept on writing. There were blisters on his fingers and blood on the page.

"He's getting real skinny" Shane said while we sat on George's back door step watching him.

"Doesn't have time to eat. Saves time pooing too I guess."

Shane looked at me with just the right degree of disgust to give me a thrill.

"He's starting to stink."

"Hmm" I grinned wondering what Mrs Scream Clean Worthington thought of that.

As we watched George write we both saw something incredible happen. A word like a trapped snake writhed under his skin. I think it was 'metamorphose' or something. It went grey as it slithered under his elbow and away. Both Shane and I almost choked, we pointed at it and each other. "Did you see that?" we hissed. We watched for another hour as words rose and submerged.

"They're trapped. I think they want to get out," Shane said. I think he was right.

That's about when I decided I'd trapped enough words on a page to make thirty minutes of world wowing comedy. I went over to Shane's place and tried it out on his parents John and Jace and they thought it was great. But they are so nice they would.

I tried it out on Mr Bier one lunchtime and he laughed enough to make me happy. He told me some weird thing about how in hospitals they call a poo a 'stool'. I hope that's not because they sit on them. He also told me that he had stuck a book about 'Egalitarian principles' in the rubbish bin for George to find, he showed me the book. Which, surprise, surprise, didn't have anything about egal's or principles in it any more. So Mr Bier had made the connection with George, blank books and libraries under quarantine. He didn't seem too concerned about it, but he did ask me to let him know what was happening. He obviously didn't let anyone else know, because news crews were still all over the town interviewing a tired looking librarian about the 'Case of The Missing Words' and scientists with their eyeballs stuck to microscopes and thoughtfully rubbing their chins. One scientist said she thought it was a form of light sensitivity combined with unusually high concentrations of ultra violet light. There was an hour feature on one of the commercial channels. George was too busy to watch it. He called it the 'Comedy Hour'. At the moment he was writing to scientists, economists, politicians and 'eminent' thinkers of the 21st century'. He was trying to get them to take his 'Theory of World Dissolution and its Reversal' seriously. He'd written to fifty of them, so far he had fifteen responses, they all either said they'd looked at his theory briefly, and that one day he had a bright future (once he'd gone through university and gained a doctorate.) But most of them were automatically generated responses that more or less said 'Thanks for your interest, but I don't

have time to sit around and read other people's stuff all day. Don't bother me again... here's a web site to go to to be impressed about how bloody clever I am'. It was obvious George said, that they hadn't read it. I told him that they were all, 'eminent stinkers of the 21st century' and that maybe next time he sent stuff not to tell them how old he was. People only take thirteen-year-old boys just that bit more seriously than they do thirteen-year-old girls, which is not a lot.

Gray George

That night, I lay in bed and visualised myself standing in front of heaps of people. A huge crowd, all waiting for me to speak. Without looking at my notes I went through my whole routine, only pausing to give them time to laugh, get over it and laugh again. I even saw one kid pee himself when I told the story about how Lachlan sat his toy elephant Muddlehead on one of his own mistakes, so that when Mum found it she'd think it was Muddlehead instead.

I figured that if I could visualise Mum's black octopus in her womb into oblivion then I could visualise myself to a standing ovation.

George was going as grey and saggy as Muddlehead's ears. He went around looking like an old faded newspaper, a word every now and then appearing at his elbow or sliding down his arm to disappear into his palm. He was quiet... too quiet for George, he didn't scribble, he didn't talk, he just looked into space. You got the feeling that if he went one more shade of grey that he just might fade into a concrete wall.

Shane talked to him heaps, gave him books, one of which was 'Mensa's Advanced Mathematical Strategies Manual'. George gave it back a few days later, it still had all of its words. It turned out that he had rung twenty-three 'distinguished' people and had tried to bend their ears about his theory. All that happened was he got his ear bent by his mother when she got the phone bill. George said that all the great thinkers of today were 'patronising, condescending and contemptuous', I didn't look up the dictionary, but I got the idea.

“No one’s going to give a thirteen year old enough money to run a laboratory. They’ll wait till things are really bad and then give me a gas mask or send us all to the moon. It’s useless, all this knowledge is totally useless, if I can’t do anything with it, if no one will listen. One of the scientists told me that no one would ever give me money to develop or investigate my theories, because it would interfere with all the major money making and exploitative companies who would rather make me dead than lose their exploitation rights.”

I was sitting beside him in the library at lunch time making notes for ‘Poo Stinks’ plan when I saw the word ‘desolation’ give a little wiggle and disappear under his left ear. George was starting to be a real worry.

“Is it really that bad?” I asked.

“Dire” he said.

“Dye-r, Huh?”

“Grim, as in formidable, redoubtable, perilous and ominous.”

“Oh, much clearer – what’s the worst thing?” I asked. George rolled his grey eyeballs.

“That nobody is doing much – we’re still burning coal for most of our electricity and all the sun gets to do is act like a glorified light bulb so we can see what we’re doing while we burn it.”

“Oh.”

“But that’s just one thing among millions ... there are all the people, the refugees, the poor, the starving, the tortured, imprisoned, the enslaved. The land and sea, which are used to absorb our toxic wastes, land clearance and degradation, siltation, erosion, eutrophication, water quality issues, global warming ...”

“Hang on... still catching up, you said, ‘enslaved’ as in ‘slavery’. I thought that was over mega years ago.”

“Nup. Still happens. There are estimated to be around two hundred and fifty million children aged between five and fourteen who are working as slaves, or paid a pittance for manual labour. None of them get an education.”

I was glad when Shane found us and handed over a big bunch of grapes each. We hunkered down so Mrs Butler the Librarian couldn't see us. There's nothing like squeezing a grape between your tongue and the roof of your mouth and sucking out the innards and chewing on the skin. Before George could rabbit on about chemical sprays on fruit I said,

"I've decided. I'm going to use the money I've saved up to hire the town hall. I'm going to run a comedy festival on Friday the 18th of September."

Even George found that vaguely interesting. He looked at me strangely while the end of a word curled around his nostril and disappeared inside, it said, 'self absorbed'.

I giggled, "Am I getting up your nose George?"

George shrugged.

"I'm going to invite other people to get up ... you know, tell a joke, have a rave, see if they can raise a few laughs."

"Will there be a prize?" Shane asked.

"Don't know." I hadn't thought of that.

"You could always get some local business to sponsor the festival."

"Good idea' I was aware that George was staring off in the distance with swirling grey eyes.

"Have you got a poster designed?" Shane asked.

"Um, no."

"Oh well, you'll need one, Flyers too."

"I guess." I was beginning to see I hadn't been as well organised as I'd thought I'd been.

"How about any other advertising, any special guests?"

"Special guests?" the blue spotlight on me faded and shone on someone else, "Like who?"

"I don't know, but you'll need one to draw a crowd."

My spotlight flickered and went out.

"Hmm" I said, "You've done this before haven't you?"

"No... I just think about stuff like this sometimes."

“Wanna help me do it?”

“Yeah, sure” Shane grinned, pulled out a schoolbook, tore out a piece of paper and started taking notes.

“What are you going to call it?” he asked.

“My routine is called...”

“Poo Stinks” George interrupted with a sigh, “we know” he looked across the library and his eyes went dark, glazed and crazed. I waited for George to tell me I couldn’t call it ‘Poo Stinks’ but he didn’t. I don’t think he was even listening any more. I nudged Shane and we both waited. But George didn’t speak, instead he screwed up a letter from a scientist who didn’t want to know about him or his theories and threw it in a rubbish bin. I expected him to rant on about how it was I could dare to laugh when all around the world people were dying, but he didn’t. That more than anything made me realise that George had given up hope. I wondered if Humya knew this would happen when he gave George the gift to shove books through his head. Seemed a pretty cruel thing to do. Mind you Humya did say that it wasn’t possible to help some planets, maybe George was living proof.

So while George grew greyer Shane and I tackled the ‘Poo Stinks Comedy Festival’ – it was fantastic. Shane knew exactly what to do – he made plans, I agreed to them, he gave me lists of things to do and I did them. Jace and I made up two huge banners while Shane badgered Mrs Butler into letting him use the school photocopier free of charge. Nobody’s done that before. I think Shane has uncovered a talent, it’s one of those ice to the Eskimo’s things or maybe Toxic Waste to Chernobyl. Anyway, Mrs Butler said she’d come to the Festival. Shane managed to wangle enough money out of the local businesses to make it worth peoples while getting up in front of lots of other people and making an idiot of themselves. He also decided we needed to serve food on the night to assist in covering expenses and making more money. He’d been lightning quick with the calculator to work out how much we needed to charge as an entry fee to spin a good profit. Shane’s never been this

good at maths before. When he brandished the calculator in my face, the number on it looked impossibly good.

“But what are we going to do with it? Spend it on chocolate?” I asked.

“No, well some, maybe we could buy a car.”

“What?”

“We could drive it around Mum’s and Dad’s place, That’d be cool. A bit of bush bashing.”

“Yeah, maybe ... maybe we could go somewhere – on a plane or something. I’ve never been on a plane.”

“Would there be enough money for all three of us?” he asked.

“Yeah, if there wasn’t we could always afford to buy George a book about how the earth is dying, and he’d probably wouldn’t notice we’d gone without him.”

“George is a worry” Shane mimicked throwing a book into his head, “he only sticks the really bad ones in now... The ones about apocalypse’s.”

“What? Pocky lips’s?”

“The end of the world.”

“He worries me. We could go sky diving.” I said.

“Yeah, right, like my Mum and Dad would let me do that.”

“True. No wonder thirteen-year-olds don’t have any money. Not much point if it’s only the good stuff you can’t buy.”

“We could always spend it on chocolate.” Shane smiled.

But the money wasn’t that important. It was the doing it that was – we spent ages working out how the stage should look. I wanted a whole lot of cartoon figures holding their noses and looking into the centre of the stage at whoever was performing. Shane reckoned it would be like saying that the comedian, who was standing there, ‘stunk’.

“Well I reckon a lot of the acts probably will.”

We talked and planned for hours – it was so exciting. I'd never done anything like it before – it was jittery tummy stuff. What say nobody turned up? But as soon as we distributed flyers kids came up to us and said they were coming, and so were the rest of their family. Mr Bier said he'd love to, even the principal Mrs Reese said she would. Shane rung and asked the Mayor, who said he would too. He called it 'an interesting initiative', and asked if we would like him to stand up and tell the story about the time he fell into a long drop toilet. Some people turned up their noses. Shane said they were the kind of people who, 'never lifted the cover to catch a whiff of their own fart'. We were in the newspaper, they called us 'young entrepreneurs'. Can you be an entrepreneur without knowing what one is? That's when things started getting real serious – I thought ringing the mayor was brave, but Shane rung all the TV news crews and three of them were covering the fest. At night I lay awake and rehearsed 'Poo Stinks' till I was telling poo jokes in my sleep.

Shane, The Horned African Cucumber Farmer

Shane handed me a sheet of paper in English class. He'd scribbled this on it,

Rule Number One

Adults aren't very good at being adults, and they are always learning.

Rule Number Two

Kids are very good at being kids, but they are always being pushed into being adults, and they are always learning.

Conclusion:

Be a kid, because at least you get to do it well and be patient with adults and forgive them often, because they're just practising and not always doing very well.

I pointed to the bottom of the page and whispered,

"Sign it."

He laughed, but very quietly because Mrs Dennison was in a really bad mood, Corey had balanced a pencil on his top lip and everyone had laughed. Mrs Dennison told him not to be so stupid, so when she turned around and started writing on the whiteboard we all balanced our pencils on our top lip. When she turned back around I guess we all expected her to laugh, but she didn't, she freaked out about how we were all little monsters with no class. Of course I had to drop my pencil off my lip to yell out,

"We only wish we had no class." Pencils fell off lips all over the place while everyone laughed.

That's when Shane started scribbling. Shane always amazes me when he comes out with that deep stuff.

He signed it with a big fat squiggle underneath his name.

"One day" I said, "you're going to be a famous philosopher."

"Yeah maybe" he said, "but I'd make a better horned African cucumber farmer."

I had this picture in my head of thousands of cucumbers with cow horns on them and Shane standing out there inspecting his herd. I giggled, he giggled, we both giggled, and neither of us could stop.

"What are you two laughing about?" Mrs Dennison snatched Shane's signed scribble and read it, when she finished she looked at us both with a kind of look you give three-legged, burping spiders.

"It's OK, Mrs Dennison, I forgive you" I said.

She looked at us both for ages and it took all of me not to giggle. She shook her head at us as though she felt sorry for us, rather than the other way around. She went back to her desk and pulled out a whole huge pile of snap quizzes. We know her snap quizzes, she only ever gives them out in emergencies.

She passed them around,

"OK, you know the drill, anyone who fails the quiz gets to do the opposite side of the page for homework."

The whole class groaned.

“Blame Krissey and Shane, not me, they drove me to it.”

Ouch. She went and sat at her desk and read a magazine while we grizzled our way through it.

George, whose pencil was still balanced on his top lip, was staring into outer space. The word ‘pointless’ was curled up on his arm and then it fell, or maybe leaped from his elbow and hit the floor, it shattered, and then faded away piece by piece.

One night I dreamt I was flying over our town in the dark. I could see the streetlights, regular like they’d been plotted out on graph paper. I had something in my arms that was making it hard to fly. I could see the blue spotlight at the ‘Poo Fest’ and I knew I was late. I tried to fly faster but the thing in my arms was a huge weight – in the forever it took to get into the spotlight I almost dropped it, but I didn’t and it wiggled and squiggled under my arm. I flew down and landed with a thump in the blue glow. I couldn’t see the audience, the light was in my eyes. But I knew they were there. I looked down at the thing in my arms. It was the black octopus... and he was smiling at me with big white teeth.

I woke up so fast my head didn’t know it had left the pillow till it hit the bed light. Why would I dream about him, that horrid cancerous lump that used to be, USED to be in my mother stomach? They’d fished him out and thrown him. He was gone. My mother was fine. I did a mental x-ray of her tummy and there was nothing there but a half-digested spaghetti bol and all the other usual organs, doing the usual thing. It took me ages to get back to sleep.

By the tenth of September we had almost everything organised and twelve acts signed up – most people had fifteen minutes in which to make as many people as they could, laugh. Mine was the longest at thirty minutes, and I was starting to feel very, very nervous. I hoped nobody fidgeted or yawned, or doodled like we did in Mr Fastenon’s classes. Mind you, if you are going to talk for half an hour on the chemical changes in inert substances, then that’s going to make anyone yawn. But

poo -I mean that's interesting stuff. Nobody talks about it, it's the hidden and embarrassing subject, but it's something we all share – we all poo, and everybody's poo stinks.

Tamara was eating more gingerbread than she was rolling. I handed her the lion cookie cutter, "Make some lions Tamara, you're eating too much, you'll make yourself sick."

"No, I'm not" she said indignantly.

"You're lion." I nudged the shape closer to her. She picked it up and pressed as hard as her little hands could let her. Tanya had made fifteen different animals to Tamara's three.

It was Sunday. Mum and Dad had gone off to the shop and I was baby-sitting – again.

The phone rang. Tim answered it real quick. I think he has a girlfriend.

"Who shall I say is speaking," I heard him say. Mum would be pleased. He covered the receiver and hissed at me,

"It's Mrs Worthington." Then he dropped the phone so it clunked hard against the wall and walked away. Mrs Worthington, what did she want? Maybe she wanted to volunteer to clean up after the Poo Stinks Festival. Maybe try to talk me into changing its name to the 'Toilet Blue and Air freshener Fest'.

"Hello?" I tried not to sound incredulous and failed.

"Krissey, Mrs Worthington here."

"Yes, I know."

"Have you seen George?"

"No. He said he was doing family stuff this weekend."

"Well, he's not. I don't know why he would say that.... He's gone off somewhere without telling me. He's been very strange just lately."

"I noticed. What part of strange do you mean, Going grey, saying huge words and speaking other languages?"

"That's some of it, Do you know why? Is it... is it drugs Krissey?"

“No, it’s not drugs Mrs Worthington.”

“Well then, what’s going on?”

That was hard. An alien used my dog Skunk for a body suit and wandered around earth and gave us all a gift while he was here. George’s was to be able to shove a book into his head. He thought he could change the world. Now he’s figuring out that he can’t.

“No idea,” I said while I chewed the lie out on the telephone cord.

I heard her sigh. If it wasn’t for the baby octopus dinner I might have felt sorry for her.

“Well if you see him, could you tell him he’s needed at home? I want to know why his computer is smashed on the floor. His father can’t get it to work. It’s just a blank screen now.”

I gulped.

“Well thank you for your time Krissey. Goodbye.” She hung up before I could say bye back.

When I turned around I saw Tamara with her cheeks bulging. So were Tanya’s, her fifteen animals down to nine.

“For homeless turtle’s sake, swallow.” I told her.

“I feel sick,” she said. I rolled my eyes. If my luck was anything to go by, she would be, and it wouldn’t be on the lino, but on the carpet.

I picked up the last lump of gingerbread and pounded it with my fist so it was spread out just a little bit. I told them it was in the shape of a car, when they told me it wasn’t, I told them that it was the shape of a car that had crashed. I stuck it on the tray.

“Time to cook.” I whipped the last bits out of their fingers – dumped them on the tray and shoved the whole lot in the oven.

Then I rung Shane.

“I think he’s flipped it,” I said.

“Why?”

I told him what Mrs Worthington had said.

“He’s stuck the computer through his head.” Shane said. Which is exactly what I’d been thinking.

“Now the computers blank,” I completed the thought.

“Strewth” Shane said, “we should go and find him, and hope he hasn’t crashed his hard drive.”

“I’m supposed to be baby-sitting.”

“Get out of it... this could be really bad.”

The only one who was around was Tim, and he was going out to meet someone. Judging by the time in front of the mirror he was clocking up and the smell of Dad’s cologne, it wasn’t one of his mates.

“I’ll try,” I said doubtfully.

“Cool. Ring me back. I think I have an idea where he could have gone.”

“I knew you’d know what to do.” I said.

“Thanks” said Shane, sounding amazed.

“You sound surprised,” I said.

“Well Krissey, normally you never say anything nice. See ya.”

And he hung up, ‘never say anything nice’ was ringing in my ears when I stepped into Tim’s room.

“You look really nice,” I said. He tried hard not to look pleased.

“What’s her name?” I asked, he pretended to look confused.

“So, you’re not going out with anyone?” He went red and shook his head.

“Oh great, so you don’t mind looking after Tanya and Tamara? I’ve got to find George, he’s gone and done something stupid.”

Tim looked stuck.

“Well...”

“It’s really important. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t.”

“What’s up?” Tim asked, leaning forward and looking concerned.

My turn to look stuck... the truth was funnier than fiction. He’d just laugh.

“I... we, think George is on drugs” I said, it was dum, but better than saying he’d encrypted his brain in an algorithm.

“Oh hell,” said Tim. Tim is a nice bloke, much nicer than I am. It took him five seconds, but I could tell that all five of them were painful.

“OK,” he said.

After what Shane had just told me I thought to say,

“Thanks Tim, you’re great, you’re the best, she’d be dum not to love you.”

He scowled at me, I grinned at him. I could tell he was pleased. Maybe there was something in what Shane said.

Downstairs I could hear the sound of Tamara spewing.

The Grain with a Brain

“Radiating, mega-blasting heatwaves off asphalt” I swore.

I wondered if my bike tyres would melt. Trust George to pick the hottest day to go completely barmy. Even Stink and Skunk had only taken two steps out of the shade of the Jacaranda and then slunk back under.

I mean, what did George really think he could do? I remember last year how George tried to convince our class that it was OK to eat insects because two thirds of the world already does, and they’d just laughed at him. Three years on and he thinks he can change the way the world tilts on its axle or whatever. Well a bent axle meant a bumpy ride. I thought of all the things I could say, like, ‘Get used to it’, ‘Live with it’, ‘Deal with it and grow up’.

Right now I had better things to do, I’d been making big curly turds out of clay all yesterday and I almost had enough for one for each table as a centrepiece. Now I’m off to try save the kid who wants to save the world.

I met Shane at the Memorial Bridge. We puffed like blowfish for a few minutes and then Shane pointed down the trail where I’d gone for the Alone Spot Experiment. It had been the night the alien ship came, abducted Skunk my dog, and Shane, George and I became friends, and it’s where Humya the alien gave us our gifts. I shrugged at Shane; it was worth a try.

It seemed like such a long time ago that we had been down by the river. Then it had seemed so amazing - we'd seen an alien ship, seen it nick off with Skunk, then we'd found him again, only he had Humya in him and we'd spoken to the alien through skin to dog contact. It had all seemed so mind blowing then, now it was like the first day of school, long ago, and, 'wow, what did I get so excited about', sort of feeling. It was all so normal. So while we were tracking George down, all I thought about was why it was that I hadn't thought to bring a drink, how Shane looked like he'd lost weight, and how he'd gone and gotten taller instead, and just how many inches taller I'd need to be to be a model. And how many lots of surgery it would take to look like one. Really, how *could* anyone be bothered?

Shane was waffling on,

"I should have known this would happen. I should have done or said something before now."

George thought he could change the world and Shane thought he could change what people did. Everyone goes around trying to change things all the time. The only thing I'd ever seriously tried to change was the black octopus in my mother's stomach, and I like to think that all those nights lying in bed and visualising eradicating him had paid off.

The track was seriously over-grown. Hardly any one came here anymore. Everyone went swimming in the local pool instead. So the stinging nettle that I stepped in had managed to survive right in the middle of the track without getting squashed. I'd seen Shane jump over it, but I was so dum I waded right in. I stung, itched and swore the rest of the way. Shane led us out to where the three rocks had been. The three huge rocks that I'd once had to climb over, that was before they'd been shrunk into little stones by the aliens. I remembered that George had stuck them in his pocket. Where they once stood were just three deep holes in the ground. George was lying in one of them, curled up like a baby in the womb. Shane and I stared down at him and watched as rows of zeros and ones shimmered across his eyeballs.

“Binary” Shane whispered. It was an emergency; George had climbed into his brain and gotten lost. We just stood there. If he’d been bleeding or drowning or being attacked by wild animals I would have known what to do. But not this.

Shane bent down and touched George’s shoulder.

“Hey, George?” George didn’t move. But a word wriggled over his forehead. It said, ‘leavemealone’.

Personally I thought it was a good sign. But Shane looked even more worried.

“George, sit up.” George closed his eyes, opened his mouth and started making a noise like a guinea pig. Little squeaky squeal noises. Then I realised he was making the noise a computer does when it’s ‘thinking’.

“Here, let me have a go. This always works.” I leant over and said to George the computer.

“I’m going to push your reset button. When you restart you will work.” I pressed firmly on the end of his nose. And he made all the noises a computer does when it shuts down and restarts. I almost laughed. George was really quite good at mime. Shane and I passed that, ‘can’t hurt’ look between us as we waited for George to load all his programs into his operating system.

“If it doesn’t work I’ll give him a hard boot.” I pointed to my shoe and grinned. Shane didn’t even notice my joke, he was too busy watching George as he lay there blinking into outer space.

“Desktop” I said, “he’s on his desktop.... Maybe we could email him or something.”

Shane shrugged, “Where’s his keyboard?”

“He has a mouse!” I grabbed George’s hand and moved it around like a mouse over his leg.

I pretended to double click, and said, “I’m opening your word processor.”

He whirred and clicked. I waited till he was quiet again.

But we got stuck there. Not having a keyboard was going to be a problem. We stood around and looked at George the human computer and wondered lots of things. Mostly I wondered what we would tell his parents.

“Maybe we should restart him again, and restart him into human or something.” Shane said.

"Can't hurt," I said and Shane grabbed George's hand and went through the motions of shutting him down.

"I'm going to click into the box that says, 'restart as a human'." He told him, and clicked OK.

"Thank God we both took basic computing this year", I mumbled as we watched George beep and burr. When he shut down, he let out a long bleep like a computer does when you hit something it doesn't think is a good idea. Then he went quiet. His eyes didn't open. I wondered if that was it, there was no human left and we'd just shut him down permanently?

"Let's hope the computer didn't think it was running his heart and lungs or something, and we just shut him off." I whispered.

Shane grabbed George's hand and felt for his pulse.

His eyes widened. I really started to panic. Maybe we wouldn't have to explain to Mr and Mrs Worthington how it was that George had installed a new brain, but that he was dead.

"My pulse is at least four centimetres higher than that and to the right" George whispered, and then opened his eyes just a slit to glare at us.

We both sighed so hard and at the same time that I found myself laughing. But it was one of those laughs that are embarrassing because you're not really laughing because you think something is funny.

"Can you sit up?" Shane asked.

"If I wanted to, I could sit up," George said quietly. "Why don't you both go away? It's no use. I'm just creating more carbon dioxide alive... I'm just more human pollution."

I looked at Shane, he was much better at this stuff than I was. He was scratching his head.

"I've been thinking about how you can change the world, George. I've got a plan."

"It's no use. Go produce methane somewhere else."

"Huh?" I asked Shane, and he rolled his eyes.

"Gas" he explained and he pointed to his bum.

“Here’s as good as anywhere. So while you lie there and practise dying, how about I tell you my plan?”

George lay there and ignored us.

Shane settled back on his heels and began.

“First thing that was wrong about how you wanted to change the world was that you figured the world wanted to change. It doesn’t. But that doesn’t mean that it won’t. You’ve just got to figure out how to make it. Second thing you got wrong was that you had to start at the top. Well, it doesn’t work that way either, but the biggest thing you got wrong was you tried to solve everything at once. You can’t.”

I shoved Shane, “This is going to help?” He shoved me back. Then George mumbled.

“I’m just a grain of sand on a beach. The tide will do what it wants. I can’t change anything.”

“You’re a grain with a brain George. You can help keep some of the beach out of the tides reach. What you need to do is change one thing... spend your whole life making that change happen. That is possible.”

George didn’t say anything, and he didn’t move. Shane was just the opposite he stood up and started bouncing around speaking at three hundred miles a minute.

“If there is one thing in the world that is worse than any other, what is it George?”

When there was no response he continued as though he had, “You’ve been talking about environmental stuff. What makes you most angry?” No response, “Is it people? Is it starvation? Is it violence? Is it war?” A quiet second, George lay still in his dirt walled egg, “You have what it takes George. I know you need money and I’ve been thinking about that too. If you’d like you can have my share of the profit from ‘Poo Stinks’.”

He looked at me, waiting...was he asking me to give up my share too? Oh, I think he is, and he’s looking disappointed that I’m not speaking up. I winced,

“You can have my share too, if you think it will make any difference.” I muttered.

"It will," Shane looked pleased. "You see George, you think 'Poo Stinks', stinks, but making people laugh will make money, money you can use to change the world."

"It's not enough." Wriggled over the back of George's neck.

"It can be. It's a start. You have to start somewhere small, feed it till it grows, and it will grow. It's just not a magic beanstalk, it's a tree and you've got expect it to take years before you can climb it, and years before it bears fruit."

"Shane, that's beautiful" I said. Really, Shane *is* pretty amazing.

"Right now you can't help anyone," Shane said quietly. "You're lying in a hole in the ground making noises like a computer, and I'm sorry George, but five minutes ago you made a really bad methane smell. I figure you might as well do your best, give it a shot. The only thing you didn't learn from your books was to never give up."

George opened his eyes and stared straight at Shane. But he didn't say anything.

"Humya gave you the gift for a reason, and it wasn't so you'd stick a computer through your head and go outer space surfing." George didn't blink. His grey eyes were all swirly.

"What's the thing that makes you most angry about the world?" Shane asked gently.

"Everything, Everything makes me angry, and makes me really tired too."

"But name one thing, one thing that really hurts."

"Slavery, child slavery. Kids that don't get to go to school because they are carrying bricks on their backs." George whispered.

"Get out of the hole George, you've got work to do." Shane said, he held out his hand. Honest, I was almost ready to cry. George looked peeved about it, but he held out his hand and scrambled up. First thing that happened was his hard drive must have been put in a spin. He did a funny little twirl and a little beep and dropped to his knees.

"We have to get rid of the computer" I said, "I've got an idea." I dropped down beside George and asked him to recall the name of a book he'd stuck in his head,

"The Trials of Modern Civilisation. Authored by Thomas B Macleay, third edition, first published in--"

“Cool” I interrupted him. “If you stuck it in, you must be able to get it back out. I don’t think you need it in there any more George, you’ve overloaded your hard drive. I want you to imagine grabbing hold of it and chucking it out of your head. Think you can do that?”

George nodded miserably. He shut his eyes and jerked his head to one side.

I felt something brush past me, but there was nothing there. Then he opened his eyes and his mouth and he spewed. I got out of the way just in time. Tamara and Tanya have given me lots of practise. It was black and tarry spew, and it smelt just like ink. It soaked into the ground at his feet. I even got to see some of the words in all the mess. But it was great, George had just become one book less.

The Child Slaviours

It took hours and it was almost dark by the time we’d left, but there were at least fifty books and an operating system soaking into the ground. We hadn’t finished, but at least George was a little less grey around the ears, and he seemed like he had a grip on things, at least a little bit. He kept hoicking and spitting all the way home. He might have been a little less grey, but both Shane and I were feeling just a little bit green.

Shane, who was feeling pretty good about himself - and I guess he deserved too - was spouting on about how, “it takes all people George, people like you who have vision and have the knowledge to do something and direct things, it takes people like me to do the actual driving, I’m the doer, the organiser.”

“What about me then, Shane?” I asked.

“Ahh, you’re the person who makes us laugh and makes us realise that as bad as the whole thing can be, we can still laugh, if we couldn’t smile the world wouldn’t be worth saving.”

I thought that was pretty cool.

“You know,” said George, “people have chained themselves to trees and set themselves alight, they’ve starved themselves to death trying to change the world and it doesn’t make a difference. In the end it’s profits that matter, not people. It’s like the world is a sandpit, and the big kids in the

sandpit won't share the toys and hog all the sand. We're snot you know, snot under nature's fingernails and it's about time she gave us the flick."

"Nice image" I smiled wryly.

Shane was frowning, and thinking hard too. "But," he said, and he paused a long time, "George, a while back you told me a story about a guy who stood in front of a tank that was going to Tiananmen Square where it was going to kill students who were protesting. He was just one little guy with his shopping bags in his hands, and he defied a tank to run him over. They shouted at him to bugger off and he just stood there. Eventually, he moved or was moved and the tanks rolled on and they went and killed heaps of people. I went and found a picture of him on the Internet. I reckon the world needs more people brave enough stand in front of tanks."

I went to say something about the likelihood of getting me to stand in front of one, but Shane shot me a look that shut me up.

"George told me another story about a Polish Prisoner of War in a German Concentration camp, he was forced to work in the mines and was hardly given any food, but he shared what he did get with the Jewish people who weren't getting any. And got the rest of the Polish people to do the same."

"Yeah, he died of starvation." George said dryly.

"But when they pulled his body out of the mine, everyone was really sad, because he was a great man, someone who didn't just worry about himself, he worried about the rest of the world too. It's not always about living and dying is it? It's about living well. How was it that Einstein discovered his theory of relativity?"

"Relativity... His theory of relativity. He said he imagined himself riding on a beam of light."

"Yeah, well, you've got to be a light rider too, George. You aren't going to change the entire world, but you can change some of it."

I hoped that didn't mean Shane expected us to die trying.

We didn't say anything to each other from then on. It was just the sound of us walking, George hoicking. But something had changed. I hadn't known when I started off to do the Alone Spot

Experiment so long ago, that by the end, everything would have changed. Right then we would have been really surprised to know that pass-books-through-his-head George hadn't even got his gift yet. Not the real one anyway.

Tamara always goes stupid around people and hides in corners and says she's too 'shiny' (she means shy). I used to think that Shane was shiny too. But he's not. It might have been Humya's gift that did it, or maybe just because of all that happened when he went wild with his anger animals, and then figured out how to pull everyone else's out. I don't know. But it seems to me that Shane's becoming someone different than I'd figured him to be. Shane is really very, very smart. Smarter than George in some ways.

We held our very first meeting in Shane's room, the meeting of the 'Child Slaviours'. Which was a name I came up with. The saviours of child slaves. It was about all I did. It was all pretty serious and took us hours, but in the end we came up with a plan. First off, we needed money. 'Poo Stinks' would be our first charity event. We had to save money so George could go to a small country called 'Taname' It had just three hundred thousand people, and a long history of child slavery. George saw it as the place to start. If he could convince the government to make child slavery illegal and raise the minimum working age, it would be a great first step to ending it throughout the world. He already knew the language of the people, he already knew its history, its culture. I won't get as bogged down in all the details that he did. But he'd come up with a plan and my job was to raise money. The first thing that we did was have stickers made up that said 'Slavery Stinks'. Shane was organising a lunch time session where we would let the students know about slavery and tell them how they could help. I said I would come, on the condition that there weren't any tanks. George was writing a speech for 'Poo Stinks' which would be the only non-funny thing to happen. He would present his speech at the end of the night and people could make donations or buy the stickers. Shane made phone calls to flight centres to find out how to get to Taname and how much it would cost, and organised for Passport applications to be sent out. We agreed, in the end, that if we raised

enough money and our parents let us go, then we should. Seems amazing. From a dream to have a 'Poo Stinks' Comedy Fest, which I thought was huge, to trying to end child slavery in the world. It's a big leap. But I had the feeling that with the three of us on the job, we could do it.

Slavery Stinks

I told Mr Bier about it on Monday and he said he would help any way he could. He made things easy with the Principal so that she let us hold our meeting in the school auditorium. On the day even some of the teachers came. George promised not to get too wordy, and he did really well. He quoted statistics and stuff, and it all made sense, but when Shane stood up and told about how kids in other countries needed us, that made more. He told stories about kids with names, and just how horrible some of their lives were. He didn't believe we could or should let them live and die like that. If we have a hope of changing the world, first we had to make it worth saving, and doing that would change it for the better anyway. A world that let little kids work in sweatshops and factories and work ten-hour days for next to nothing wasn't worth saving. He's really good at that stuff, he made me feel like it was up to me to help, and that we aren't powerless. He said that by the time kids got bigger they'd decided they are too small to make anything change, and they forget how to get really angry about things. That's why we had to do it now. We asked if there were anyone who wanted to help, and if they did, to write down their name and their class. Andrew was one of the first people to sign up. He said,

"People picking on little kids really sucks." I guess he knows that better than anyone.

The part I played was to let everyone know that 'Poo Stinks Comedy Festival' was going to be a charity performance, and the money was going towards the 'Child Slaviours'. Please invite everyone they knew to come along. By the end of lunch we had three hundred and twenty one names written down. George hadn't just lost the grey look, he was starting to glow. Things were getting better.

At home things were getting hectic. Every night I was making heaps of phone calls organising the last things to do with the 'Poo Stinks Fest. I'd wondered for a while whether I should get upset about how it's been taken over by the 'Child Slaviours', but I reckon it's OK. Shane was right. Being funny is great, but using funny to change peoples fate, is better.

Shane is getting really big on lists and having stuff on them ticked off. He calls it Time Management and Goal Setting. Though I get annoyed sometimes, it does work. It helped me get to the place where everything is done, and it's just the waiting I have to wait to be over.

I made it up to Tim for looking after Tamara and Tanya while I went and helped save George by looking after them whenever Mum asked him to. He was slipping out and staying out late all the time. He was looking really dreamy-eyed too. It was almost cute.

I was keeping a real close look out on Mum. The Black Octopus dream had really put the wind up me. But she looked just like normal. Her and Dad were spending heaps of time together. I think that the black octopus really put the wind up them too, and they're sort of doing the 'love thing' as much as Tim.

I found Mum out in the garden after school. I think the only reason she goes out there is to get away from everyone for a while. Why else would anyone volunteer to go stand out in the sun and let it beat you over the head? It was the same reason I went out and stood with her, sweating and pulling cobbler's pegs out and chucking them into her wheelbarrow. Tamara and Tanya were driving me insane,

"Krissey, can you make me a drink?"

"Sure. What do you want?"

"A drink."

"Yes, but what type of drink?"

"A cold one."

"What kind of cold drink do you want?"

“One with ice in it.”

“What icy cold drink do you want? Milk? Juice?”

“No, I want that one” and she points at Dad’s bottle of beer.

“No, you can’t have that one.”

“Why not?”

“It’s poison.”

“What’s poison?”

“Something that makes you sick. Would you like a drink?”

“Yes, I want a drink.”

“Good, what would you like to drink?”

“Something cold.”

And it just keeps on going.

So I’m out here. Mum doesn’t know it but there’s a dash of beer in Tamara’s juice. She’s making spit drawings with her straw on the walls with it. But seeing as I’m not there, I can’t see it, I can’t be blamed.

I know I’m out there to ask Mum something. But I’m finding it hard. I want to know if she’s been to the doctor lately and what he said. But if I do, she’ll just tell me it’s all OK. The really horrible thing is that I’m not sure that things are. I had another dream about the octopus last night. He had a bicycle pump stuck up his bum and he was blowing raspberries while he pumped himself bigger.

“It must be getting very exciting” Mum said.

I nodded, “It’s getting huge. The Poo Fest, that is.” I shunted the black octopus out of the way and grinned.

“I’m very proud of you. Have I told you that yet?”

“Only five or six times. I could always hear it again though.”

Mum grinned. “Wish I’d done something like that when I was a kid.” She pulled out a huge thistle and tossed it in the wheelbarrow.

“If ... if you died tomorrow... you know, being stupid enough not to notice a bus or something... is there anything that you would wish you’d done before you got hit by it?”

“Get out of its way probably.” Mum grinned and chucked a weed at me. I chucked one back, but then gave her a look that told her she couldn’t get away with it that easy.

She was quiet for a few minutes while she thought,

“I’ve never liked the idea of jumping out of planes or anything. I’ve never been what anyone would call adventurous... hmm, I’d like to have seen my parents one last time, and you kids, just having you kids around and being able to cuddle you all as much as I could, let you all know that I love you. Just that kind of soppy thing. Is that what you meant?”

“Kind of. I just thought you might have wanted to be a doctor, or a singer, that kind of thing.”

“Well, if you’re looking at a bus that’s just about to hit you, I don’t think I’d be thinking about what I hadn’t done, just about what I couldn’t have.”

That was a good answer.

“So what about you?” she asked.

“Oh that’s easy. I want to fly.”

“What, a plane?”

“No. I mean really fly, no motor, no wings, just fly.”

Mum laughed, “Wait till after the bus hits you. I’ve heard angels do a lot of that.”

So I hadn’t asked her the question that I meant to. But it didn’t seem to matter. I stayed out there pulling weeds and counting worms till Mum had had enough. We didn’t talk much. Sometimes words just get all tangled up anyway.

Breast Fiends

It was the last day of school before the Poo Stinks Fest. There were flyers up all around school. There were stickers too, ones that said, ‘Slavery Stinks’. Heaps of people were buying them. George had been working on mission statements, policies and codes of practice in order to get ‘The Child

Slaviours' to become a registered charity. He didn't spend any time in class actually doing what he was supposed to. But the teachers were so used to it now that they just let him. Either that or they were too scared of what he would say to them if they didn't. I wondered what they would say if I told them that he feeds his head with books and had shoved a hard drive through it, too. When Shane used his gift to become fierce and dangerous animals he'd only ever once shown it to one adult other than his Mum and Dad. That was the P.E teacher, Mrs Petersen, and she'd fainted when he'd gone trumpeting elephant... she'd decided she'd been out in the sun too long rather than even dream it was possible for Shane to mutate. I bet none of them would believe me if I told them what George can do... it would certainly make all those scientists in the town libraries jobs easier. None of them had been able to figure it out. In fact, our town was becoming world famous. But I think we could get more famous yet.

I didn't listen to Miss Dennison rave on about Electric Eels in the Amazon, while it was interesting to know that they can zap you up to 550 volts. It isn't when she goes on about electrocytes and a few too many numbers for my brain to wrap around. So I started thinking about the 'Poo Fest' instead. I wasn't sure about it any more. I read my stuff out last night and it sounded dum. Mum said it was because I'd read it out to myself nine hundred times and it probably sounded tired to me, but to everyone else it would be fresh. But I wasn't so sure that the old woman who I had told my first poo joke to on the side of the road wasn't right. Besides, what's the difference between old poo and fresh poo? It all stunk... I had a horrible feeling I would too. Maybe it was just gross and nothing else. I wanted to tell Shane what I was thinking, but I could see his head was coiled around electric eel numbers. George was developing new blisters in his new crusade to kill off child slavery. So I tried to think of a new poo joke to liven up my routine. But I couldn't think of anything. I started to feel all shaky and I felt like crying. I had a feeling I was about to really mess up, that or mess myself.

We got off school early on Friday. We had the principal's permission. Shane handed me a clipboard with a whole list of things I had to do, he'd even prioritised them. Jace and John turned up early. They are doing all the catering. Mum had Tamara and Tanya with her, and she was running around setting up tables and trying to keep Tamara from eating the clay turds I'd made. I just stood there and watched everyone rushing around and it seemed amazing that all this had come from me sitting on the side of the road with my head between my knees imagining being famous for being funny about faecal matter. Now it was here, and it was real, and in, I looked at my watch, three hours and twenty-three minutes a whole heap of people would be coming here, paying us money to make them laugh. What say they didn't laugh?

"Krissey?" Shane was poking me in the back with a big cut out of a toilet. In his other arm he had a potty.

"Give me a hand would you?" I took the toilet and a super sized toilet roll and walked over to the stage with him.

"You feeling OK?" he asked.

"I'm scared pooless" I said, "And the whole thing is about Poo. What was I thinking of?"

"Trust me, it will be cool" said Shane. "I could get George to work out the probability of no one turning up, but there's not much point, they will."

"And if they turn up, what's the probability that they will laugh when they do?"

"High," said Shane, "very high." And he squirted a bottle of 'French poo-fume' at me.

So I figured I'd just do everything on Shane's list and worry about things later. George was setting up his 'Slavery Stinks' stall where he had information on child slavery and leaflets on what we could do about it. He had all these photos of skinny, dirty little kids carrying heavy loads or looking dazzled by the cameras flash in dark and dingy factories. He looked really happy. His grey had gone away. I saw the word, 'felicitous' running down the back of his leg. I don't know what it meant, but it sounded fun. I wonder why it is that no one else has ever noticed them, and why it is that his Mum and Dad aren't coming. It doesn't really surprise anyone. But I guess it must have disappointed him.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“Brilliant.” He grinned, “I’ve been meaning to tell you how sorry I am. You know, about putting the whole ‘Poo stinks’ thing down.”

“For a while there you thought laughing was a crime.”

“For a while there I thought living was one too. Thanks. You and Shane. You’re the best friends any one could ever have.”

“I don’t know” I said grinning, “I was going to give you the hard boot if you didn’t get over thinking you were a computer.” I tapped his leg with my foot.

“The three of us” George looked very serious, “we can change things you know. You by laughing, me by thinking, Shane by organising. We’re child activists.”

“Sounds like some kind of aerobics,” I said. “Nasty stuff. But I’m glad, you know, that we’re breast fiends.” I went red and George laughed. It was nice to see him laugh again.

“Best Friends” I said slowly, to get it right.

People came up to look at George’s display. He talked to them, telling them some of the horrible stuff that happens to kids. I know we’re trying to help them, and I really hope that we do, I just find it really hard to hear it. I just don’t understand how people can do that kind of stuff.

I hadn’t eaten anything all day. I thought I’d spew... ‘Chew Spew’ might be one of the next fests. That is, if I survived this one. Jace and John were having fun in the kitchen. They are so cruisy. Mum came up and said goodbye. She had to take Tamara and Tanya home. She said Dad would be over soon with Lachlan, Bryan and James. They were going to sell the door tickets. Tim was going to sell the food and drinks. Mum said he was bringing a friend with him.

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“Jemma,” she said, “be nice.” She grinned. So she knew. Tim must have told her.

Krissey 'Bowel Movement' Bertram!

The place looked great. There were toilet paper streamers and brown poo shaped balloons. All the tables had chocolate covered liquorice bullets in little bowls. Bottles of 'poo-fume', which were really just vanilla essence in water, and my clay turds. Brown napkins with 'Poo Stinks' stamped on them. Later on they'd be eating little turd shaped sausages. On the stage were Jace's gigantic sized cut outs of all things poo. Potties complete with straining babies, and large piles of poo buzzing with flies stuck on wires. Really, it's fantastic. People started arriving early, and all the tables were full by the time Mr Bier got up to start the show. He pretended that it was a very important occasion, one that you got all pompous about and when he introduced an act he said things like, 'Mr Aaron Johnson will now recite us a poem. The poem might one day win awards for its contributions to mankind. It's entitled, 'Did you ever wonder where poo goes?'

In the poem it turns out that studies have shown that when we flush the toilet, the spray of all that water has poo and wee in it and it takes two hours to settle, and some of that poo and wee gets up your nose.

The next act was cool too, Tammy Winbuckle told everyone about how the toilet was invented. I never knew it was by Thomas Crapper. She also told how every second there is two hundred and forty kilograms of poo being passed in the world. That meant close to a ton every four seconds. That means in sixteen seconds we've done the human equivalent of passing an elephant. I thought she was very interesting, and she got quite a few laughs. The television crews turned up and they filmed the next act, Peter Maryborough, who was pretty good, he told mainly fart jokes, and made funny fart noises. I wondered if our two judges, the mayor and the principal of the school would note that so far he hadn't said the word poo once.

We stopped for a while, and played music while everyone looked at their menus. There were things like 'poo in a blanket' – a sausage wrapped in bread. That kind of thing. It didn't seem to put people

off eating, which is what Jace was worried about. It only made them laugh. Dessert was going to be great, it featured chocolate marshmallow logs with ice cream.

Shane was having a ball. He seemed to be everywhere at once. I saw him talking to the news crews, and then waving his hand at me. I went over and they interviewed the three of us. We each had a couple of sentences in which to say something. Shane said something about showcasing the town's talent, and giving kids a chance to show that they were capable of doing anything. George said something about how he saw it as a valuable opportunity to inform people of child slavery and that 'slavery stinks' too. He started talking about 'the child slaviours'; but they cut him off. They turned to me and I said something lame; 'I'm famous for poo jokes.... My family is full of great material.' George and Shane smothered a giggle while I took a few seconds to figure out why.

That's when I started to get into the whole thing and enjoy it. Everyone was having a great time. There was nothing to worry about. By the time it got to my part I was feeling really good, right up to when I stood in front of the microphone (which John had very cleverly transformed into something poo-like.) Then I looked out on everyone, all those people who I knew and could talk to anytime... and they all suddenly looked like strangers. Mr Bier was right beside me, I think he could tell how scared I was. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently. He introduced me as 'the girl who's done a wonderful job of organising tonight's festivities. It's great to introduce Krissey, 'bowel movement', Bertram! Here', he said, "have a stool" and he handed me one. When I sat on it, it made a great big farting sound. Everyone laughed, suddenly they didn't look like strangers any more. And I did it. I talked for thirty whole minutes about poo. I remembered not to talk too fast. I remembered to wait for them to laugh. And they were so obedient - they always did. When I finished they clapped and laughed and someone stomped their feet. It was fantastic. I think the best laugh I got was out of the matchstick poo that 'fell out the bottom'. I could see Mum and Dad standing at the back, they were still clapping, and it was Tim who was stamping his feet. I could see him over by the kitchen, standing there with his arm draped around a girl's shoulder. I walked off the stage feeling fantastic. I didn't stop feeling fantastic for days.

In the end it was Helen Schmacker who won the prize, she'd done a series of mimes, a constipated monkey, an elephant with the runs, and a mother trying to change the pooey nappies of triplets. She was very good. And seeing as I wasn't allowed to win because I was one of the organisers, I thought it was fair. The sponsors got up and gave her the prize, and said how they had wondered just what they had got themselves in for, but in the end it was all good, clean fun.

We didn't finish cleaning up all the fun everyone had had till after one in the morning, but I wasn't tired. I was still floating along on everyone's laughter. George thought knowledge was power, but having a whole bunch of people laughing at something you said - that was real power.

Shane, who was in charge of the money, spent most of his time thumping stuff out on the calculator. Turns out we'd done better than we figured we would.

"Taname" said George, "here we come!"

For a quick second I thought of some of the things I could have done with that money. Like buy a digital camera, the one I'd been dreaming about for ages. But it was only a second. Then it seemed like the second best thing I'd ever done.

"Excrement, excrement, excrement!" George spat out. He slammed the phone down and turned to glower at us. It was Sunday. There were only four more days before we jetted off and into a foreign country. One, after what George said, might not be as happy to have us there as it had at first seemed. It was making me nervous. He had just spent ten minutes in a phone call, looking very serious and speaking The Yulkik language. The only word of this language I knew was,

"Too-kurana." Hello.

I figured that George would try to keep me from knowing any more so I didn't blow it for him when we got there.

“Great command of poo language there George” said Shane. We waited for George to calm down enough to tell us what was wrong.

“His eminent Holiness, Matapuma can only see us for half an hour.”

“Half an hour? I thought their customs meant you had to take that long to say hello in twenty three languages while gargling salt water, sing songs backwards and electrocute monkeys before you even got to talk.” I exaggerated wildly.

“Not quite that bad, but almost” said George.

“Oh well,” said Shane, as he wrote something else down in his new journal.

“The President of the United States wouldn’t even give you one minute. Maybe His Holiness will talk longer than half an hour if he thinks it’s worth it. He probably thinks you are just some stupid kid. And obviously, seeing as lots of kids are slaves in their country, stupid kids don’t count for much.”

That seemed to settle him down.

“What you writing?” I threw a liquorice bullet onto the page he was writing on.

“Philosophy” he said vaguely as he finished the sentence.

George looked up, interested.

“The Philosophy of Food” Shane added looking up to grin, “I might not be able to ride a light beam like George and Einstein, but I’m gonna try at least straddle the thing.”

“How does Food Philosophy work when it’s switched on?” I asked.

“OK. When someone gives you a bag of lollies, do you eat the good ones first or the ones you like the least?”

“This sounds like psychology not philosophy,” said George, “I eat the greens ones first because I don’t like them and leave the chocolate ones till last, because I like them most.”

“Other way around for me” I said, “I eat the yummy ones first.”

“OK” he scribbled something into his book and then asked,

“When you are given the lollies do you eat them all at once, or do you make them last days and days?”

“Days and days” said George

“All at once,” I said.

“Hmm” said Shane and jotted notes for a few more minutes.

“Well - if all the candidates for prime minister were given a bag of lollies, then I reckon we could choose the best one for the job if we watched what they did with them.”

“How’s this?” asked George sceptically.

“Well, if the world’s resources were seen as a bag of lollies... then the candidate that chewed them all down real fast and ate the good ones first, is likely to only notice or to care that there are only a few lollies left in the bag. And forget that we might need or like some more for tomorrow. I think a lot of people, eat their lollies like that and don’t care what’s going to happen tomorrow about their or the world’s sweet tooth. It’s just the same when it comes to oil, and trees and wildlife and stuff.”

“So I’d make a bad Prime Minister because I eat my lollies too fast.” I grinned. It might have bugged me, but seeing as I’ve never wanted to be a PM it didn’t really matter.

“I’ve got an idea about cakes too - how do you make a cake? Do you follow the recipe or do you just add a bit of this and a bit of that?” Shane chewed the end of his pen thoughtfully.

“I’m a bit of this and a bit of that” I said, chewing on three liquorice bullets at once.

“I’ll follow the recipe,” said George, chewing on his lip, “or I would if I’d ever made a cake”.

“Hmm” said Shane thoughtfully, “I’m working on what that means.”

The Bum Hum

I went home and left them to it. I played with Tamara and Tanya and watched everyone when they ate. I could feel something humming inside me, I could feel that something was getting close. It made me jump up and turn things on and off, open and shut the fridge door till the fridge light broke. I don’t know what all the humming in my head was about, but, like I said, something was getting close.

I concentrated on the hum under my bum. I placed both feet on the vibrating floor. I shut my eyes, but found it was worse than when I had them open. I opened them again. I looked left, out the window, and at the shrinking buildings. It always amazes me that when you move away from things they look like they're getting smaller, while I stay the same size. Looking out the window was making me feel sick, so I looked right. George was beside me leafing through his notes and mumbling words with lots of 'kiks' and 'wiks' and 'woo woo's'. He was going to be no help at all and, seeing I was tied into a seat and the doors were sealed shut, and the hum under my bum had turned into a roar. I was forced to clamp my teeth down on my tongue just in case I forgot not to swallow it, and just in case it decided to scream I held my hand over my mouth. The plane took off.

"You OK?" George asked once we'd levelled out.

"No." I mumbled, "I bit my tongue."

"Oh good" he said, "I expect it's never too late to learn."

I rolled my eyes at him, "Thanks, Mum." And poked my injured mouth muscle at him, and leant past to where Shane was sitting. He was tapping his fingers on the armrest to the music on his headphones. He gave me a grin and mouthed, "OK?"

I was forced to nod. I mean it's not as though I was dying or anything. It's just my stomach that had gone Girl Guide and was practising reef knots.

George rumbled on about our itinerary. He changed the time on his watch to the time zone we were flying into. Shane was happily eating his and my aeroplane food, while I thought about how poor Skunk must have felt when he was abducted, peeled and stuck in a jar (for all I knew.) While he got zapped around space without even so much as a tongue to loll or a paw to steady himself. I tried not to picture us like some paper plane all fragile and itty-bitty. I tried not to think of how many thousands of mechanical parts there were that could go wrong, how it might take one screw not screwed in tightly enough to drop and shake the rest of the plane to pieces. George started on about flammable gases and heat generation, points of ignition till I put my headphones on and listened to the ABC news about the search for a missing plane. I couldn't help noticing that the Girl Guide had

given up on my stomach and left it in a permanent half hitch. That was, until we landed when she reappeared to demonstrate her techniques with a figure eight loop knot and a clove hitch. I nearly spewed, worse things were to come. Another two-hour trip in a small plane, not quite paper but it did feel just like a few sheets of corrugated iron tacked together. I was the first off the plane when we landed, but I found it hard to walk away, mostly because my feet had become convinced that they could grow roots into the tarmac. We were met by a very smiling man. His ear to ear grin had me grinning too. He kept saying stuff so fast it sounded like a clicking cricket. George said his name was 'Dikwikknee' and he was here to take us to the palace. The whole place was like crashing cymbals and clicking castanets, all out of tune and no one seemed to notice. In the airport when we left, it had all been ice-cream smooth silence; here it was like a bag of crunchy chips. Shane might be interested in that thought. Maybe every situation you were in was like a kind of food. Like a party is a trifle, and being on your own is just the custard.

When I leant over and whispered it to Shane, he looked at me very blankly and then tapped George's shoulder.

"I think Krissey is dehydrated" he whispered.

Worse, I heard George saying something about 'demented'.

Dikwikknee took us to where a donkey was hitched to an open cart. Dikwikknee clapped his hands and gestured to the back of the cart for us to get in. George was the only one of us not to look surprised. I'd been expecting at least a car, even if it was really old. But we clambered on and set off down the dusty road, our bags clutched between our knees. Everywhere there were people who wore dusty shades of brown; even the sky was dusty beige. It seemed amazing that we were here, in a strange little country that used children as slaves. I wondered if someone with a gun might come and take us away and we'd find ourselves working in a mine underground for years before we died from a Vitamin D deficiency. George'd told me twenty times so far that it wasn't possible, but since Humya had been around I knew that almost anything is.

After winding our way through narrow streets and mud buildings watching people scurry out of the way as they wandered along with clay pots and baskets of strange vegetables on their heads. I saw lots of kids too, they all looked dirty, but had smiles like Dikwikknee. We came to a slope and the donkey made his way up. The crowds of people dropped away and there weren't many houses any more. George said something to Dikwikknee who nodded enthusiastically. George jumped off the cart and we did the same. It felt good to stretch our legs and I'm sure the poor donkey thought it a good idea too. Once we got to the top of the slope, we could see the palace in the distance. The sunlight dropped through the clouds and made it look quite magical. According to George it was entirely made from mud, and had four hundred rooms. So Shane would be right at home. From the outside you could see turrets with jaunty little rooftops, all different shades of brown. Obviously this wasn't a place that had a big demand for paint. Dikwikknee said goodbye at the gate and passed us onto Kunjatiktik, who led us through at least one hundred of the four hundred rooms till we came to a little wooden door, no different from all the other little wooden doors. I wondered how he could tell which was which. He opened it and pointed us inside. Chattering to George, who, I believe, was having a great time showing off his language skills. We'd been talking for weeks and weeks now about how we'd be staying at a King's Palace. The picture in my head had had lots more colours, ones that sparkled with jewels and shimmered with silk. I screwed that one up and replaced it with a crumpled up piece of brown paper bag. We stood in the hallway clutching our dusty bags and waited for George to finish making nonsense noises. Kunjatiktik gave us a quick, flashing smile, dipped his head, and was gone. Shane and I were both watching George very closely for clues.

He ducked through the door, and we followed. Inside it was much bigger than what you'd have thought by the size of the door. I'd begun to wonder if they were going to park us in a cupboard. There were three bed like constructions, one on each wall, with a bucket at the end.

"They don't expect us to...?" I pointed at them in horror.

"No, they are for bathing" George said grinning. "Outside, three doors to your left is the toilet... just make sure you don't fall in and get yourself covered in your favourite subject."

“Fall in?” I whipped back out into the corridor and down the hall to the left. I opened the third door. Inside was nothing but five holes in the floor and a few buckets of water. But the smell told more of a story. Five holes meant up to five people at once. I heard some one behind me, I got out of the way so a tall man with a big white beard down to where his belly button was could stoop through. He looked at me strangely, probably because I was still standing there and watching. I moved away from the door and another man walked in the two started tik tik talking and lifting their robes. I could hear them laughing as I zipped back down the corridor.

“Wow” I said, “there is this amazing communal poo hall.”

“Perhaps we should see if the school will start one” George grinned. Shane was lying on his bed and looking like he’d fall asleep any second.

“So what has all the tik tiking been about?”

“Mostly just hello and how are your twelve children and your parents and all their children and the welfare of your goats.” He smiled and sat on the edge of his bed and yawned too. I don’t know how both of them could be so sleepy.

“We get a tour of the castle tomorrow morning and then a tour of the city, then a quick lunch and back to the airport.”

“And a flight in a stapled together aeroplane” I grimaced. I decided I’d have a go at waiting that long before I gave birth to one of my favourite subjects. I didn’t like the idea of squatting in front of anyone. There are some things about poo that are sacred.

“Dinner” said George, “is at seven” I looked at my watch, which I hadn’t gotten around to changing.

“That’s ten o’clock our time.”

George nodded. “I suspect Shane will be stocked up.” Shane’s almost asleep hand rose and tugged his pack open and shook it around till we could see packets of chips, biscuits and chocolate.

‘I was worried they’d only feed me goat’s brains” he mumbled.

“Good thinking,” I said, I thought about swiping the chips straight away. But strangely, I found myself lying back and closing my eyes.

A Load of Crat

I was staring at a strange and beautiful spider with green, gold, black and red stripes. It was making a delicate web across the corner of my room above the bed. I raised my hand to touch it but withdrew it when someone knocked on the door. Kunjatiktik poked his head in and gave one of the smiles that I was to learn all the people of Taname possessed. One full of happiness and teeth. George began to immediately tik tik at him cheerily. Kunjatiktik looked at me and frowned, then at my beautiful spider and he frowned some more. He bent down, took off his sandal and gave it a quick hard swot so it was a mashed little, not-so-beautiful-any-more spider in a smashed up web.

“Oh” I said, “I thought it was rather beautiful.”

“And deadly, it seems, if it bites, the Amakilkik spider’s poison paralysis’s your heart muscles.”

George translated Kunjatiktik’s explanation of the spider’s sudden death.

I said a few poo words.

“Crat?” Kunjatiktik repeated curiously. I guess he didn’t hear me quite right. George said something to him quickly and he nodded understanding.

“I told him you said many, many thanks” said George.

I nodded at Kunjatiktik and said, “Excrement, poo, do do” and smiled beatifically. Kunjatiktik smiled back and then led us out. George gave me the hugest kick.

It’s funny, when you are in a strange place with strange people, you really have no idea what to expect next. Usually when you walk into a house where you’ve never been before you already have an idea of what it will look like, because all the houses you know look something alike. Some people like knick-knacks and have them everywhere; other people have lots of empty space. Some people are really clean and other people might as well have signs on their doors that say, ‘don’t disturb the dust’ like ours. But when I ducked my head and passed through the little door it opened into the hugest room I’ve ever been into. There must be five hundred people. It was hard to tell, because it was dark and the whole room was lit by hundreds of candles placed on tables and crannies in walls.

The room was alive with both real and shadow people. When we walked in the cricket clicking went much quieter and all the faces - lots of them with long belly button touching beards - were staring at us. Kunjatiktik ushered us through and sat us down at a table, the chairs were very low, so that everyone's faces seemed to be just above the height of the table. I soon realised why. It was because everyone ate with their fingers, and it made it easier to shovel food into your mouth without dropping any down your beard or body. I saw one man pick up his beard and use it to wipe his mouth like it was a wash cloth. I was so busy looking around that I hadn't paid much attention to the food. Shane nudged me with his foot.

"This is worse than goat's brains."

I looked at my plate. This was worse than Mrs Worthington giving me a plate of baby octopus. It was a big tangled pile of very lightly battered locusts or crickets. George who must have known something like this would happen was grinning at me. He picked up one of the little battered beasties, closed his eyes, tossed it in and swallowed very quickly. He grabbed a mug of water and sloshed it down.

"Full of protein" he said. But he didn't pick up another one. Shane and I sat there frozen. Neither of us wanted to be rude. I'd never eaten anything six-legged before and I wasn't about to start.

Kunjatiktik cricketed to George, maybe that's where they get their language from; we are in the land of the Cricket People. It made you wonder what the national sport was. George was nodding enthusiastically. I was hoping that meant McDonald's had opened up a local branch. Kunjatiktik hurried away.

"Rice," said George, "he's bringing us some rice."

"No snotty snail sauce, crushed worm salt or cockroach crotch spice?"

"Krissey do you have to be so supercilious?" he sighed.

"Super Silly Arse? What are we doing in a country that thinks battered cricket knees is food?"

George shook his head and began conversation with the woman beside him, who laughed and took his bowl of crickets and began to guzzle them. She passed the bowl to a little boy beside her who

must have been three or four and who dipped his hand in and shovelled them into his mouth, stray legs and limbs hanging from his lips as he crunched them. I looked away.

Shane leant over and said very quietly, "You know who you remind me of?"

I shook my head, contemplating the size of the eyes of the cooked crickets.

"Mrs Worthington."

My grin dimmed.

"Oh yeah, and how's that?"

"She's always looking down her nose on anyone who does things differently from the way she does."

Grin, more than dimmed, it died. "OK" I said, "You've scared me now. I promise to be good."

By the end of dinner I knew that the doors were small because wood in Taname is in very short supply. Because of that they burn animal dung on fires. The people we are eating with are the members of the royal family, all five hundred; the kids scurrying around with dishes are slaves to the Royal family for life. They have a special tattoo on the side of their nose, which looks like a beetle. It lets everyone know that their parents had been slaves and their parents, too. I also discovered that burping, farting and wiping and picking your nose are OK things to do in public, at least in Taname.

The thing that George was interested in was that the King was not eating with the rest of the family. When he asked Kunjatiktik why that was, he looked embarrassed and told him that the King and his Wife no longer eat with the family as the children bother him.

"Great, a King that hates kids" I muttered, "how're we, just out of nappies as we are, going to convince The King Who Hates Kids to stop tattooing nose beetles on the little snout faces?"

George didn't even frown at me. Instead he scooped up some more of the rice, probably to help take away the insect taste as well as to hide his look of misery.

That night all three of us tossed and turned. George because he was nervous and worried, me because I kept thinking I had beautiful green and red spiders snuggling up with me, and Shane because he was hungry. We ended up talking all night. George even taught me a few extra words

like thanks, 'yatik', no thanks, 'natic' and please, 'Zikla'. We passed around a packet of jaffas. I teased George about insect eating and how protein packed each fibrous leg was. I tried to cheer him up, in the end he cut me off mid fart joke to say.

"I'm not sure knowing everything or anything means a thing. If everybody thinks they know what matters and they're not prepared to question it, then... I can't change their minds."

"Take small steps" said Shane, "it's like you're on one of those conveyor belts that is taking you backwards, you have to make sure you are stepping just a little bit faster than it, and all the time, if you want to move forward."

"Great analogy" George whispered across the dark room. No one said anything for a while, then they only noise was Shane's quiet snore and the sound of a thousand uneaten crickets chirping a chorus to a starry sky.

We woke up to the sound of meowing kittens having their strings plucked. Outside the small window, we could see people sitting around playing strange guitars and women and children were dancing. The singing was more like a waiting sound. Every now and then the music paused and everyone said, 'hey'. While freezing on the spot. The kids obviously thought it was a great game.

"It's called Miliklaba, 'Bringing in the morning' said George. "It's a celebration of the day."

"Cool, I wonder if we can join in?" I asked.

"Only by invitation."

As if he'd heard, Kunjatiktik knocked on the door and asked us to join them for Miliklaba.

We shoved ourselves into clothes and ducked through the door. It was great dancing with them, there must have been all of last night's crowd in the courtyard and everyone was smiling and lifting their face to the sun and greeting it and each other. It's amazing what you can convey, through the language of smiles. It made me wish we did something like that at home. I imagined it, but only for a moment. I could already hear Mum say, "Oh there's not enough time to wipe my own bum, let alone any one else's, and you want me to go sing at the sky?"

Afterwards we were given breakfast, which was a sweet and seedy fruit, dried figs and a runny kind of yoghurt that tasted very strong.

“Goat’s milk yoghurt” said George, “the fruit is Samibika.”

“Not bad.”

“Very high in C,” he nodded.

We were shown around the Palace. There was a well, which was over a thousand years old. I looked down it and thought of the person who must have looked down it a thousand years ago and wondered if anyone else would be looking down it around about now.

A boy a bit older than us was the well boy or ‘sumik’. He had the job of drawing water for the women who came with wooden barrel buckets. His father had had the job all his life and when he died it was his son’s turn. He’d probably die here by the well, lifting water. Because that’s what he’d spend his whole life doing too. He didn’t look at us or smile. He had a beetle on the side of his nose. I kept looking at him hoping to catch his eye. He knew what I was doing, but he kept looking at a distance and ignored me.

“Ask him if he is happy.” I asked George.

“Click click, cricket cricket” he went. The boy blinked a couple of times and then very slowly he nodded. But you got the idea that he did it only because he should and not because he wanted to. It made me feel really sad. The Sumik boy was the same age as Lachlan and James. I tried to imagine them as Sumik boys but couldn’t. The Sumik boy made school look like an entertainment centre.

The King Who Hates Kids

The rest of the palace was pretty much mud pressed into blocks and stuck together with more mud and lots of little wooden doors. The doors of rooms that had royals living in them were carved. The more carving, the higher their standing. When we got shown to the King’s room, his door was huge. Bigger than normal doors are at home and it was one hundred percent carved with insects and people, goats and strange little symbols that George said were words offering thanks to various

Gods and asking for protection from them too. Kunjatiktik talked to George very seriously before we passed through. I could tell by Kunjatiktik's face that this was a very important occasion. I ducked through the door, even though I didn't need to, and was blinded by the colour. It seemed that all the colour that was missing in Taname had found its way here. The walls were all rich velvet red with gold threads in amazing patterns, the floors were a weird kind of sheepskin... which I later realised must be goat. The throne in the centre of the room was a deep green colour, the three primary colours were everywhere. The windows had blue stained glass and the light they threw turned us into underworld creatures. The air was very still, as though it was moving very slowly, with its fingers to its lips. We were told to be seated, and then the King stepped from behind his throne. He was hugely fat. A million million crickets must have gone into getting him that size. When he sat down it was more of a controlled fall down. The throne groaned under his weight. We waited, no one said anything. George seemed to be waiting too. Finally George cleared his throat and started tik tiking. No doubt it was all the usual goat stuff. The King flicked his finger at a corner and a man moved out of it and answered the King's question for him while he stared at us. I got the feeling the only reason we were allowed to come was because he wanted see what we looked like rather than to actually listen to us.

I didn't understand a word of what was said, and sat like a big dummy the whole time. It was only afterwards that I found out what happened. But I'll tell it as though I could click tik like the best of them.

When all the goat talk was over, it turned out that the King had twenty three thousand of them, but no children. George talked to him about what a great job he was doing in keeping peace with his neighbours, and how during his reign there had been no new wars, and that it was a great sign of his wisdom. And lots of other, you're so wonderful, stuff. Then he started on about the child slaves and how they had no schooling, how they worked long hours and did the work of men. How many of them did not receive adequate food and housing. There were no places for them to go if they were

sick or injured. Many of them died young, and how was it that such a great and powerful leader had not noticed this and done something about it.

George, who can speak fluent Yulkik cannot always read the non spoken human language. Shane is a PhD master, while I'm probably only scoring an average of fifty or sixty percent. But it was pretty darn obvious to even a complete idiot that the Great Matapuma was transmitting huge waves of it. Anger, the kind you couldn't ride, but the sort that knocked you flat. George was so passionate about his speech that he didn't feel the impact, he just kept on walking into deeper water. Matapuma's eyes were flicking all over the room and his lips were tight, his arms wrapped around his big belly and his ears were going red, and I don't think it was from the pressure of his big whopping crown either. George took a breath and went to resume, but the Matapuma bent forward and almost hissed at him.

"Sik Kalakam kuma" which turned out to more or less mean, 'And who do you think you are?' He went on to say, "So you've read a few books and you know the underbelly of my country. Every country has an underbelly, one that scrapes low against the ground, one where only those who can hold closest survive. Your country has an underbelly too."

George stayed stumped for only three or four seconds, then he started another volley of statistics, as though maths could solve the matter. Stick enough numbers in and you could spell change. He was right in there, he could see now that Matapuma was angry, so he tried harder, and the harder he tried the angrier Matapuma got. Beside me, Shane was watching all the anger wool and was dying to pull it out. But he'd promised George he wouldn't unless he asked. George was breathless with kik klik, but it was the clock on the wall with its tick tock, that did him in. As soon as the half hour was up Matapuma theatrically raised his hand and pointed at the world's gaudiest watch set in curved and carved peacock feathers. The meaning was clear. George stood there, his eyes blurry. I saw his bottom lip tremble. To me this was a 'give it a go, what have you got to lose' trip. But for George it meant everything. It was the reason why he'd climbed out of the hole at the three rocks. It

was like he had the whole world inside of him, and it was busting to get out, he absolutely swelled with it.

The King's Man stepped between the King and us. He was obviously telling us, very politely, to bugger off. George was watching the King over the man's shoulder.

"Tikla, tikla" he cried.

I could feel every child pulled from its mother, every shoeless step on scorched earth, every heavy load crushing the vertebrae of a child's back. I have never felt such intensity as George's focus on the King. Then he did something I didn't expect, he ducked under the King's man's shoulder and grabbed the King by the hand. The King looked startled, and then his eyes closed and he began to shudder. Within milliseconds the room was alive. Wall hangings billowed as men stepped out from behind them. Men with knives. I grabbed for Shane as two of them stepped behind us, the looks on their faces all the warning we needed. I could see George and the King, they were crowded by men bristling with large lumps of sharpened steel. The King's eyes were open, and they were staring incredulously into George's, which were burningly fierce. Perhaps it was all the King's gaudy rings that made the light shimmer as their hands parted. The King slowly turned his over to stare at his palm. His mouth dropped open in a fat little 'o' of wonder. He bent closer and studied his palm, the room watched as a large tear wobbled its way down his cheek and dropped on his slightly curled palm.

He looked at George and said,

"Dikla mikme natik la, " How can you know?"

George replied, "I don't know anything, I know nothing at all."

The King curled his hand to his chest as though it pained him.

"You wrote the name of my dead child on my hand. But it is a name only myself and my wife know.

No other can learn of it, and no one shall speak it, unless the demons learn and steal his spirit."

George shook his head and repeated, "I know nothing, I know nothing at all."

“How can this be?” The King wondered as he stole another peek at his palm. Drawing in a deep breath and staring over the heads of all and into a nothingness that no one else saw.

“My child reaches to me across death and writes himself on my palm. He tells me that I must save all the children I can, in saving a child, I save him. In saving a thousand I liberate him a thousand times too.”

He lifted his palm to his eyes and placed it hard against his forehead. Perhaps it is to be closer to the touch of his dead boy. Then he cradles it in his other hand as though it were a child. I can see now why it is that he doesn't sit at the table with the royal family any more. For it would mean sitting with babies and children, none of them his own. Mum told me once that people often despise the thing they cannot have. The King Who Hates Kids, is really, the King Who Lost His Child.

George is finally silent. The room too, is silent as we watch the King bend his head to cry. The moment lasts a second, maybe two before he raised his face again and smiled.

“Malikili matiltidk” he says and the men with knives slide away, the wall hangings billow and they are gone. Only the same one man is there and he looks uneasy.

The King speaks to George, he is no longer angry and he looks suddenly, a much nicer man. George nods, he doesn't smile back, he seems too stunned. Then we are led unresisting to the door, it opens and we are once more on the opposite side of its huge carved expanse. Shane and I, who have heard everything and understood none of it, stand there and stare at him and though we didn't know it then, he said for the third time, but this time in English, “I know nothing, I know nothing at all.”

Tin Foil Flight

I nudged a small stone towards the edge of the well. It is the size of a pea, small and grey. It had probably been sitting out in the sun for several thousand years and when I pushed it that extra centimetre it dropped over the edge and began its slow and steady descent to a place it would spend, without light, for at least several thousand more. Is this what it feels like to change the stuff of life, to change things from the way they are, to the way they were? George had. He'd just spent

the last four hours talking with the King. It turns out that George's gift was never to swallow books with his head, Just like Shane did, he got it all wrong. It wasn't for him to know everything. Now he thinks it is his gift to let people know what they most need to.

"Do you know the King's dead baby's name?" I asked and watched the next pea-sized stone disappear into the depths.

"Yes, but I told him I didn't – and I won't tell you either."

"Thanks for trusting me."

George shrugged. Right now it didn't matter to him, he was as high as I was straight after the Poo Stinks Fest.

"So," said George, "Do you want to know what you most need to? I think I can do it again."

I was busy watching the ripple of my latest pebbles entry, so Shane answered.

"Of course, I can't imagine what that could even be."

George shut his eyes tight and grimaced like he had a fart stuck. "Yeah, give me your hand" and he took Shane's – I could feel that jangling pull on my nerves again as Humya's gift started zipping around in me too. Then George and Shane both let out a great sigh and their hands parted and again that shimmer of light.

Shane turned over his palm and read the words written there. His lips moving. I tried to crane my neck to see, but risked falling into the well, so I had to content myself with waiting, he passed his palm to George first, who read the words and nodded, then to me. In a strange grey and spidery writing like an old man had written, the ink spilling into the lines and whorls, was. "You are the mouthpiece of peace, sent like cool water to pour on the world's wounds."

Which is pretty cool really. Shane looked pleased about it too. We talked about what that could mean and we all agreed that we can't wait to tell Mr Bier when we get back home. I held out my hand to George, I was scared, the kind of feeling you get when you sneak downstairs late at night when everyone in the house is asleep and watch a horror movie with the sound down. The scariest part isn't the movie, it's getting caught watching it that seems much worse. All the bumps in the

night might be skeletons in less than hygienic bandages, and it wouldn't be half as frightening as hearing Dad's feet start down the stairs.

George stood up and took my hand. I felt him focus. His hands weren't hot but they were like pinpricks or a thousand tiny hailstones stinging my palm. I wondered if the words would be tattooed there forever. Which would be terrible if it said something like, 'You are here to talk lots, and have nobody listen.' It was probably going to be about making people laugh. The pinpricks didn't hurt but they drew my attention away from my thoughts. I felt my head fill with pinpricks too, Humya's gift rattled inside me – then was gone. As was George's hand. I opened my eyes, I hadn't known I'd even shut them. I looked down at my curled up hand and opened it. I screamed. The sun was hot on my head, but I felt like I had refrigerated water for blood. On my palm it said in the same spidery handwriting,

Your mother is dying.

The plane took off on a slant, one wing dipped low so I could see the brown scab of Taname below me. The plane lurched and groaned. Even if the rusty looking engine burst into flames I don't think my stomach would even kink let alone go into elaborate knot tying. I wasn't just feeling empty, I felt like a can that someone had tipped out, thrown on the ground and stamped on. I felt all blubbery, but I didn't have any tears.

"It might not be true," whispered Shane from beside me. He'd already said it a hundred times.

"It is." I said. Remembering my flying dream with the octopus jammed under my arm. I'd known it then that it was back, but yesterday, seeing it written on my palm just made it real. I'd scrubbed at the words till my skin went thin and red. But they were still there. George called them 'indelible'. But this morning they'd gone.

George said he was sorry as many times as Shane said it might not be true. But George never said that, not even once. Instead he spent the rest of yesterday in discussion with the King's Council. The King asked George to take each of their hands and show them his gift. None of them had to hear that someone they loved was going to die. It was all tears of happiness and smiles.

“What say you try it again, maybe it will be different?”

“It might be the same,” I went to whisper but it came out whimper. George as usual, was as up as I was down. It’s amazing we could both fly in the same plane. He’d already written a few pages of memos to himself since we took off. He’d got what he’d wanted, he’d convinced a country to abolish child slavery, (thanks to Humya’s Gift, Mark II) even if it did mean he now knew, he knew nothing. It was like a badge of bravery. Every time someone asked him something he seemed to answer. “I don’t know”, he said it felt good because before he had always been too ashamed to admit it.

There were another four hours of flying in a bit of tin foil on the back of a wayward wind current before we got back home. I imagined Mum standing there, not alone, she could never be that with that blasted black thing in her. What did I say to her? Did she need to know? Sometimes it was obviously better not to know things. Why was it that I had to know? I know I don’t want to know, and I know that sounds stupid. One good thing I guess is that dying isn’t the same thing as being dead. Mum was sliding towards it, but maybe if I was strong enough I could lift the end of the slide and tip her back the other way.

“George?” I snapped him out of his memo scribbling. He looked at me with a big glob of guilt sliding down his skin.

“Yeah?”

“Did you ever shove anything about cancer into your head?”

“Some, I think I spewed most of that out though.”

“Do you think you could still shove books back in?”

“Don’t know” he grinned, “I guess I could try.” But I could tell by his face he thought I was wrong tree barking.

“Good – I want to know what food and stuff gets rid of it.”

Shane and George were looking at each other and raising their eyebrows just a tiny fraction. I knew that they thought I was stupid to keep trying.

“There’s something I know” I said, and found a big mob of tears closing in on my throat. “That knowing is not the same as being, my mum might be dying, but she’s NOT dead yet.”

I didn’t mean the last bit to be so angry. But it was all the tears had pulled out clubs and it was the only way I could get the words past the mongrels.

I shoved my hand in my mouth. I hadn’t done that since I was really little, I looked away from them both, and back out the window.

Shane squeezed my arm and said,

“If you’d like me too, I’d like to help.”

And then George, reached over and grabbing my hand.

“Me too.”

The tears were chasing each other down my face. I snivelled and tried really hard to get a smile out.

The smile was to show them that I already knew they would.