

Part Four - The Gift of Goodbye

©Linda Cockburn

Page | 1

The Carcass

“Press it down harder” said Shane.

“Let your other foot off... sllllloooooooowwwwwlllly” said George.

The engine was stuck under the bonnet with rubber bands and paperclips, the whole rusty carcass vibrated, the steering wheel was huge and grimy with at least fifty years of accumulated finger sweat. The windscreen, wasn't. Instead, there were dangly bits of disintegrating rubber strips. George was hanging in one window, and Shane in the other.

“Man, you put a new slant on the word ‘idle’ – aren't you going to move?”

“Of course, I'm just getting my internal gears happening.” I struggled with the big iron gear stick that had a tennis ball for a knob.

“Push your clutch in’ Shane screeched only just loud enough to be heard over the crunch of various lumps of metal submerged beneath me.

“God, she's never going to get it” George mumbled. I glared at him. I stuck my foot so hard down on the clutch parts of the floor gave way. I shoved that mean old stick up and left, took my foot off the clutch and plunged my right foot as hard as I could onto the thong that was stuck where the pedal should be. The old beast worked its vibrations up into a full on shake and it took off down the track, George and Shane still clinging to the side.

“Change gear!” yelled Shane.

“Put her into second!” shouted George.

I needed both hands for that, I let go of the steering wheel. I grabbed for the gyrating gear stick. I almost forgot to stick my foot on the clutch. With a grunt I shoved the stick into second. Triumphant I

grabbed hold of the juddering steering wheel just in time to see Shane and George fling themselves off and the shape of a looming tree – brakes brakes!

“Brakes – where are they?” I screamed.

I took both feet off the floor, swung wildly around the tree and was heading over the paddock bouncing over logs and rocks, swinging around trees. I was going faster and faster. I was going down the hill, down the track to Shane’s dam. On either side were trees too thick to drive through. I saw a metal stick out the side of the steering wheel. I pulled on it, and two feeble windscreen wipers started wiping an invisible screen.

I twisted around and saw George and Shane chasing me.

“Where are the brakes!”

It was no use, they were too far away. I doubted if the old carcass would float, the doors were rusted shut and you have to climb in through the windows. I wondered, even as I continued my search for the brakes, whether I could swim out of them too. I looked on the floor and saw there were three pedals, clutch, accelerator, on left and right, the middle one must be the brake – I stomped on it, and the car groaned and knocked, but I was slowing down. I could see the dam ahead of me, just between the trees, I put my other foot on top of the first one and shoved harder. I was easing up, easing up, the dam was only ten metres away. Once I hit the muddy bank it would be a quick slide into all over. I was going so slowly now, just a crawl, with the brakes knocking and thudding I finally shivered to a stop and the engine did a little cough and died.

When Shane and George caught up I still had both feet jammed on the brakes and I was staring at the still flapping windscreen wipers.

“Wow!” Shane popped his head through the window, turned off the key and pulled on a lever beside the seat. “That was cool... both brake lights still work!”

Shane's Dad, John had found the car stuck under some old trees, we nicknamed it the 'Carcass' and we'd spent most of the weekend helping pull it out and fixing it so we could rumble around in it. It had once been dark green, now it was a nice rusty red with lots of scaly bits. After John had checked it out and given it a 'bushworthy' pass we had spent the rest of the day clearing a track of logs and rocks so we could cruise around without hitting too much. Of course I'd only managed to stay on the track for ten seconds then gone off course. But after the first six near disasters, I got the hang of it. Shane was really good. He swung it around like a pro, we kept at it till the old thing gurgled and died.

"It'll be one of those bits of sticky tape" I gibed.

"Nah," said Shane, "run out of petrol."

"Maybe we should push her somewhere, where do you want her parked?" asked George.

"She's been parked under a tree for the last ten years. I think she'll handle another night in the open."

Shane grinned.

We walked back to the house and ate some of Jace's muffins, ones made with stoneground flour and real ginger. Jace was humming around the kitchen like a bee. I wanted to talk to her about Mum, but she was so busy boiling this and curdling that, making homemade cheese that I figured I'd better leave it till later. We went upstairs to Shane's room and hung around.

Shane strummed on his guitar and sung a few words of his latest song. But he kept pulling faces then starting again. It went like this, "There's a song that's never been sung before, nobody knows the words, the few I knew flew out of me and spilled into my guitar. There's a song that's never been sung before, its about peace and love and harmony....Oh that sucks, that really sucks, 60's, 60's, 60's." and he'd start scribbling again. Ever since he'd figured out anger, and figured out peace, he was on a heal-the-world mission. So was George. He was mumbling into his dictaphone, stuff about the Child Slaviours, the group we'd formed to try stop kids being used as slave labour.

The only thing I was trying to heal was Mum. I lay down on Shane's mattress and wondered about Humya and my gift. The one I didn't have yet. I wondered what it might be. Humya gave Shane a gift to turn parts of himself into savage animals, and then it turned into being able to pull out everyone's else's savage. George got to stick books in his head and keep a whole library in there. Only that had changed too, instead he could pick up someone's hand, and give them a message on it. He said, it said, it's what the person needs to know. This was nice for everyone else, because it always seemed to say something good. Mine, well that was to say my Mum was dying. Yowie, whoopee and all that poop. I sighed. Mum was out of hospital again, she'd had all these tests and they'd found the cancer was pretty much everywhere and growing. More tentacles than an octopus, she had a whole octopi party going on it there. Mum was in a war zone, she was in octopied territory.

"Hey, what's a word to rhyme with electrify?" Shane asked.

"Die" I said.

"Do you think I could force Humya's Gift?" I asked them.

"Force it?"

"Yeah, to do what I want it to."

George and Shane gave each other knowing looks. Shane strummed his guitar and sang, "Like zap their little cancerous cells right out of their little black boots." I'm not sure I've said this before but Shane is a great singer and guitar player.

"Yeah," I said pointing my finger at the ceiling and making little zapping noises.

"The likelihood of that being the case is probably very low" said George.

"So you don't think so?" I grinned.

"Actually, I don't know" he confirmed. Even now, weeks after we got back from Taname I hadn't got used to know-it-all George admitting to not knowing something. Ever since he'd discovered his gift from Humya and figured out that not knowing something was alright he'd been practising not knowing things. He'd got pretty darn good at it too.

“I’ve been doing some research on cancer” George reached into his bag and pulled out a pile of notes, “There’s a summary at the top.” I flicked through his neatly indexed notes. It must have taken ages to do without his ability to stick books in his head. I was impressed.

“This is fantastic, thanks” I thought about giving him a hug but decided not to. Not sure why, one of those funny things about being a human, we all want to be touched and hugged, but there are all these funny, invisible, people rules that make you feel embarrassed if you do.

“I’ve got something for you too” Shane leant his guitar against the wall and flicked out a small drawer from his bedroom wall. “It’s actually from Mum and Dad as well.” He started singing, “The few I knew flew out of me” while he handed me a cardboard box. It was full of packets of seeds – carrot, parsnip, broccoli and other things I didn’t recognise like okra, yam bean, rainbow chard, tatsoi. On the back they had a description of the plant and how to grow them.

“Mum said she’d help you with your garden if you like. Mum’s a grow your own freak.”

“What kind of freak does she grow?” I asked, grinning so wide it’s a wonder my jaw didn’t break under the strain, “this is fantastic, thanks.”

While George and Shane played chess, I pored over seed packets and George’s notes.

“Tumours in rats have been known to diminish in size when given barley green.”

I circled main words, made lists of things I didn’t have, made drawings of garden beds and wondered how much I could grow, and how many brothers I could rope into helping me. It said stuff about Shark Liver Oil, maybe I’d be better off getting them to go fishing. I imagined them carving up a shark with kitchen knives, and Bryan, our artist, mixing sharks blood and egg white to get the perfect red. I could also see Tanya sucking the flower heads off all my plants like she did to Mum’s gerbera’s. I’d have to chain up Stink and Skunk every time the sprinkler was on and I’d have a ‘no hole digging – no matter what the crisis,’ cat policy. I’d have to convert them to kitty litter.

“I’ll have to get some potato seed” I mumbled.

“Potatoes grow from tubers” said George.

“What are tubers?”

“Potatoes that have gone to seed” he added.

“Which makes them seeds?” I asked frowning.

“Big seeds... I guess.”

“What does a potato look like when it’s a seed potato?”

“Its like a normal potato only it has protuberances.”

I looked quizzical.

“Oh... they grow little fingers and plant themselves” he sounded exasperated.

“Yeah” I joked, “and carrots grow on trees.”

“Wow” said George mock seriously, “you really need to read a few books.”

“Wish I could shove them through my head like you could, save myself so much time.”

“You want some help in the garden? I’ll research it, Shane – he can be the one with the dirt under his fingernails.”

“Huh!” I laughed, “after today neither of you will have fingernail room for snot.”

Eight Legs against Two

It was fat, so fat you could have stuck a saucer over it and its legs would still be hanging out, all eight of them. It was that massive that I could see its fangs glisten in the bathroom light. I was stuck, wearing only knickers, between it and the bath. I’d gone to shut the bathroom door, and there it was, saucer-sized and staring at me with all its hundreds of eyes. There’s only one thing I hate more than snakes, sharks and stone fish, and that’s spiders. I looked at the gap in the door and figured I could make a break for it, - eight legs against two. I ducked through.

So there I was, standing, strangely enough, still half naked on the other side of the door. There wasn’t much point in calling out for Mum, she’s our family spider catcher, the only one brave enough to

handle them, and she's in hospital, again. Dad's in bed, so is everyone and I've only just realised that the bath is still running and it was already full when I found the spider. I can see around the corner that I probably have one minute to deal with the hairy legged Huntsman before it starts to overflow.

I grabbed the fly spray out of the laundry cupboard and, armed with it, went and tapped nervously on the door. Nothing happened, I tapped again. A hairy leg bent around the corner. Then two. As it sidled over the doorjamb, I sprayed, big streams of spitting, white froth. So much I choked on it. The spider did a weird little dance and then he moved out of sight. The bath was overflowing. I was wearing only my knickers and I could hear someone running up the stairs behind me. I decided to make a dash for it. I ran back in. Something touched my face, something hairy.

"Arhhh!" I screamed, my fist slammed into the side of my head. Too late, I realised, I didn't have a hairy spider on me, it was just hair, mine. I staggered and slid on all the water on the floor then landed on it with a great, wet slap.

"You OK in there?" I heard Tim at the door. Darn. I felt dizzy from punching myself. I looked around, saw a towel and grabbed it. As I wrapped it around myself I saw the world's biggest huntsman clinging to it.

"You alright Krissey?" Tim asked again.

Screaming, I threw the towel into the overflowing bath and went roaring out of there before I found out whether or not it could swim.

"There's a big spider, a really big spider in there. Its overflowed the bath and it wants to kill me" I gibbered, running down the hall to my bedroom and grabbing an over-sized t-shirt before heading back to the disaster zone.

Tim is even more scared of spiders than I am.

The bathroom floor had enough water on it to saturate a hundred towels, Tim was trying to turn off the taps while not getting too close to the crazy spider doing a disco in the middle of it. He managed it, just at the same time as the spider reached the side of the bath and scrambled up.

“Arhh!” Tim jumped away and crashed into me and we both went for a slide before backing out into the hall.

“Man, that’s a big spider” Tim breathed.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you” I said, “I couldn’t have done that. Do you reckon we should call the wildlife people or something.”

“For a spider?”

“Well. It’s not tame, and it’s not dead” I said.

“Yet”, said Tim, “not yet it isn’t.”

“Fly spray just makes it dance”, I advised.

It was watching us, I’m sure. Sitting there on the side of the bath, shaking itself like a dog.

“Mum doesn’t let us kill spiders” I said.

“Mum’s not here” Tim said with a steely glint in his eye. “Wait here, watch where it goes” and he steamed off down the hall and grabbed the vacuum cleaner.

“It’s late” I said, “you’ll wake everyone.”

“What would you prefer... to use a jar?” he grinned.

I plugged it in, he flicked the switch.

“Watch it doesn’t run up the tube” I warned as he zeroed in on the beast. So he aimed and threw the tube, it missed and belched up water. Tim tried again, this time he got it fair and square. It thunked up the cleaner, banging its way into the bag. Tim stuck the vacuum, still going, in the cupboard, We left it there for ages to make sure it didn’t crawl straight back out. Together we mopped up the water.

“Thanks” I said, I still felt wobbly from the punch and from all the scare. My bottom lip seemed especially effected and I started to cry.

“It’s not fair. Mum should have been here.”

Tim nodded, "She would have been hand feeding it flies by now and given it a pet name."

"Tortoise" I said, "she'd have called it Tortoise."

"Why, Huntsmen aren't exactly slow."

"This one was. Besides it makes sense, Tortoise and the Hair."

While we rung out towels I told him how I'd come to punch myself in the head so hard. Dad said later that it wasn't the vacuum cleaner that woke him, it was the sound of us laughing.

It amazes me, if a month ago I'd said I wanted to dig up the backyard and grow thirty-four varieties of organic vegetables I would have been caged in a zoo and fed hamburgers on the end of a pole. Only now it was completely different – even Mr Muldoon from across the road came over with strawberry runners and showed me how to plant them. "Full of C, he said, I think there's a fair bit of calcium too." He left me dumbfounded. Mr Muldoon has a particular dislike for children bearing the Bertram family name. Not that he's without reason. I grinned thinking of how Lachlan had knocked on his door wearing Mum's bra.

Jace was bringing around organic vegies from her garden and an old juicer so Mum could get as much of it inside her as possible. At first I think Mum thought that Jace was a bit of a weirdo, but after she helped clean up some of Tanya's sick she seemed to think she was fantastic. I mean, what does it take to become friends with some people?

We finally had the conclusion to our school plant experiment. The one where we were nice or nasty to the same types of plants growing in the same conditions. Mr Bier called an impromptu 'A lot of Rot Spot' and we talked about what it meant if it applied to not just plants, but people. Which was quite interesting. Though I did point out that often kids who were small got picked on because they were small, and so therefore it could not be said that being picked on had made them small. Mr Bier called me 'insightful'.

Andrew said that he wasn't small, and he had been picked on lots. Mr Bier nodded and said, "Did you feel small when you were being picked on? Inside?"

Andrew admitted that he did and that he always tried to be small around that person so they might not notice him as much.

The bell rang and the part Shane, George and I had been looking forward to was here. Everyone else shuffled out. We walked up to Mr Bier who was smuggling a curried egg sandwich into his mouth. He looked it at and then at us and reluctantly rewrapped it. What we had to show him was much better than a smelly old sandwich any day.

"Mr Bier, I found out about my gift." George leant on the desk and tried to look relaxed. But he wasn't.

"Oh" Mr Bier grinned and opened a desk drawer and pulled out a book, "The Principles of Egalitarianism" he flicked it open to show it was blank. George went red.

"Well it was in the rubbish bin Mr Bier."

"It's OK George, it should be me who apologises, I put it there deliberately, it was the cheese in your trap."

"You guessed?"

"I had a hunch that ink eating insects was doubtful, that the award for the person with the biggest appetite for books has always been won by you... it just made sense."

George grinned, "It was fun, but it wasn't really my gift. See, when we went to Taname, I discovered it was something different." Even as George explained what he could do I got the feeling that Mr Bier had already guessed that too. George told him about King Matapuma, and what had been written on his hand. Shane piped up and told him what it had said on his, when Mr Bier looked at me, I looked away. I guess he guessed that I didn't want to talk about it, so he didn't ask.

"I was wondering" said George, "If you'd like me to do it for you?"

"What? Take my hand and show me what I need to know?"

George nodded, He seemed quite shy about the whole thing.

"I know you probably already believe me, but - I just thought..."

“Thanks George, but what if it says something bad?” he looked at me and again I got the feeling that he had already guessed.

Shane nodded, “It could be bad. But it could be good too.”

“I think I’ll take the risk of not knowing” Mr Bier smiled, “how do you think you will use your gift George?”

“Not sure. It worked well in Taname. Maybe it will only be that amazing once. But it’s cool all the same. I can’t stick books in my head any more. But that’s OK too, I know now that I don’t need to know everything anyway.”

Mr Bier really smiled at that. “Sounds like everything went for the best. I was beginning to think you might need blood transfusions to dilute some of that ink your head had swallowed.”

Afterwards George said that Mr Bier was very ‘astute’.

When I asked what a ‘stute’ was he seemed to think I was very funny.

I pretended like it was a joke, but when I looked it up later I figure he’s right. Mr Bier is astute.

After that George went kind of mad on the hand holding thing. Andrew found out that when he had kids he wouldn’t pick on them. He looked relieved about that. Marnie, my used to be best friend, found out that she would be famous one day, but not for ballet. She kept showing everyone her hand. George told me he knew she would be famous for having the most amount of identical children. I thought that was fantastically funny. Kevin found out that he would be in jail by the time he was twenty-three. He kept his hand inside his pocket all day. I told him that by tomorrow, it would be gone and he looked a bit happier. It made me wonder if knowing it would be enough to make it not happen. You’d hope so. I’m hoping so.

Some of the things were almost silly. Leone found out that she wouldn’t have asthma in two years time, Heath that his breath really didn’t smell. Some kids didn’t share theirs, though I know that

George knew. It made him popular around school, which he needed to be, because it wasn't that long ago that everyone was calling him the 'Brain Pain', now he was 'The Hand Man'. Some of the teachers got to hear about what was happening, but they all thought it was some kind of trick. Like a transfer, that hand heat would melt onto the other person's palm. Mrs Lavery tried it and she didn't look very impressed when she read hers. George said Humya's Gift had told her she needed to be something other than a music teacher. She thought he was 'terribly rude', but everyone else knew it was terribly true. We didn't know it then, but after that year she never taught again she ended up working as a hair dresser torturing hair instead of kids.

Human Chewing Gum

Vanilla likes to sleep on my neck. Not sure why, but, as she's an obese and very furry cat, it's comfort zone zero. Every time I move her off she weasels her way back. She's so kneady, she pushes me with her paws and needles me with her claws.

"Why can't you be like Chocolate?" I grumbled. Chocolate is content to sleep on my feet. I dumped Vanilla on the floor and she meowed pitifully, but obediently jumped up beside Chocolate and within minutes they were curled together like Yin and Yang and fast asleep. I could feel their purring through the soles of my feet.

Even without a fat cat on my throat I had a hard time going to sleep. Whenever I closed my eyes I saw dirt, worms and seeds. We'd just spent the whole day digging up the backyard till it looked like a convention centre for moles. George had brought along a ball of twine and had pegged up rows and done everything with mathematical precision. Shane knew heap's about plants. Tim, Bryan, Lachlan, James, Miriam, Melanie and even Tanya and Tamara helped. Skunk and Stink got right into the action and dug holes till they were hauled away and tied to the Jacaranda in the front yard. So now we have these really neat looking garden beds, with thousands of seeds buried alive, soon to struggle their way

out. According to Shane, germination rates vary. I should expect most of them to emerge within the next two weeks. It seems like a very long time. I didn't know how much time I had.

It was around that time that I fell asleep, Not surprisingly, I dreamt of flying – I always do. Only this time I was surfing air waves – usually I flap my arms or fly Superman style – this time I was standing on the air and I could feel the shifting surface of the currents press against my bare feet. When I came to the end of one air current, I could always jump aboard the next. The trick was knowing when and where to jump – when I looked down I could see earth, a green and blue play dough ball. I was in space, surfing airwaves, breathing in blackness and wearing - absolutely nothing. Unless someone had super fantastic binoculars twenty metres long no one could see me. After a while I began to feel tired, really tired, muscle aching, back-breaking tired. All I wanted to do was stop and rest. But if I did, I would fall, and earth was so far away that if I did fall I would be human chewing gum. So I kept surfing, but I knew I couldn't go on forever. I started thinking about falling and how good that might feel. So I rode to the end of an air current. It bubbled away and I drifted to a stop. Like when coyote in Roadrunner runs off the side of a cliff; I hung there in gentle silence, and then plummeted. My stomach was suspended by a string from my gullet, a surging tide of blackness whistled past. I was a bomb fast approaching earth, a comet with a jet stream fleeting from my feet. G forces pushed my lips back from my teeth, and my throat was being crushed, I couldn't breath, and as I looked at earth I realised that it wasn't going to be a hit, it was going to be a miss and that I would be falling forever.

I pushed at my throat and found a cat there, a big, white, vanilla flavoured one. I heaved it onto the floor and gasped for air – back breathing atmosphere in bedroom biosphere once more.

“Still looks bald” I looked in frustration at my only just growing garden. If there had of been any weeds I would have been pulling them out. All week I'd been helping seeds out, coaxing off a few stubborn seed cases, and watering things till Dad told me I'd make the whole lot rot. George and Shane had

come around to ask if I wanted to go bush bashing. But I didn't. I wanted to stay home and be my mother's dietician and force feed her more bean sprouts and really garlicky hommus.

"It was only obvious in retrospect" said George, inspecting the tiny bits of green that had managed to break the surface of the new garden.

"I would never have guessed mine" said Shane, twitching out a bit of grass and tossing it into the compost heap.

"Maybe my gift is to make things grow... fast." I reached down and touched a tiny lettuce leaf and whispered to it, "Grow." It didn't.

"Your gift will happen when it's most needed" Shane said, "Look at George's and mine, - I was thinking that it happened when we were both surrounded in people and the whole situation was really full on. I reckon the same will happen for you."

"I don't know that there's much more time left to wait around for it to figure out that this is really serious." The words strangled their way out of me.

"My Mum's got you something" said George.

"What?" I was about to launch into a whole spiel about Mrs Worthless but George saw it and cut in,

"Don't be horrible about her Krissey, remember she's my Mum. I happen to think that she's OK. Even if we don't always think the same."

"Well, whatever it is... it's very nice of her." I stumbled over the words, "What is it?" I had in mind a gift-wrapped personalised cleaning pack with industrial strength ammonia.

"She wouldn't tell me, but she's quite excited about it."

There was a blonde hair and it was sitting on her shoulder. Really obvious against her navy blouse. My mother doesn't wear blouses, she wears shirts, but Mrs P for Perfect Worthington, definitely wears blouses. It made me feel good to see her the slightest bit 'unkempt', which is what she told George he was when he had walked into her house five minutes earlier. She must have seen me looking at it because she glanced to one side, saw the hair and snatched it off with a disdainful look. She didn't just

let it drop on the floor, not like a normal person, instead she took it over to a waste paper basket and dropped it in there. She simpered at me, I tried very hard to smile, but I guess my smile muscles just weren't up to it.

"Here, have a cup of tea" she pushed a little flowered cup at me. I picked it up and slurped a very long, slow, luxurious slurp. Then I found my smile muscles were in perfect working order.

Mrs Worthington had her 'I'm-trying-my-best-to-put-up-with-you' look on her face. So I dunked a shortbread biscuit in the tea and tried to dampen down my smile muscles response while I sucked the tea back out of it.

"Anyway," said Mrs Worthington, "I was thinking the other day that after my mother died I really wished I'd taken more photos of her."

I had a cryogenic smile, a snap frozen grimace.

"My mother isn't going to die" I said quietly.

"Ohhh..." she said, "Of course she might not die. Sorry... I didn't..." she shook her head, pursed her lips and looked confused. George sighed heavily, he gave me a 'don't-be-difficult' look. I shrugged.

"You see..." said Mrs Worthington trying again, "Just in case... I want you to have something... You don't have to take it. I just thought... maybe..." and she got stuck for a few moments, then blurted out, "I really loved my mother!" her hands went up to her face, but she didn't touch it. I could see her swallowing behind her manicured fingers and for once I realised I was seeing something that wasn't acrylic-coated, powder-covered and lipstick-frosted.

"I know you love yours too" she said and she lowered her hands back to her lap and she gave me a smile, one that went right up to her eyes.

I nodded.

"So I'd like you to have this" she pulled a black leather bag from under the coffee table and unzipped it, inside was a gleaming, black video camera.

At that moment I really wished I hadn't dug my fingers in dirt just so I'd have semicircles of grime under them, and I wished I hadn't twisted my skirt around so the seam was at the front. I felt so small I was microscopic.

"Thank you" I squeaked with my microscopic lungs, "it's exactly - I've really wanted - you're right. I don't think my Mum is going to die, not for years yet, but just in case."

I pulled it out of the case and ohhed and ahhed over it. When I looked up only George was in the room, Mrs Worthington's chair was empty.

"She's gone to clean out the freezer." he explained.

"She... that was very nice of her." I said lamely.

He nodded, "Yeah, Mum's really good like that."

"Yeah," I squinted at the mud under my nails, "I guess she is."

Weirdness Factor 103

Tamara sat on the bench and pressed her palms to her ears.

I pushed another carrot into the veggie juicer and milled it into goopy sludge.

"It gives me a hair'd ache" Tamara complained.

"A headache Tamara, head - ache" I pointed to mine, "hair doesn't feel anything, see, I can pinch it, cut it, fry it in oil and it's never going to ache. It doesn't have nerves."

Tamara looked thoughtful.

"Do I have nerves?"

"Yup, thousands, probably even billions, ask George next time you see him, he'd know."

"Guess that's why James said I had a nerve to eat his caramel custard."

"I pushed an apple down the veggie guillotine and the juicer screamed.

"Yeah" I said, "I think he was talking about that one." I pointed to the tip of her ear, she tried to bend it down and look at it.

“You know, before they had mirrors nobody would have known what their ears looked like,” I said. “Or the back of their neck or their backside” I added. She started twisting around trying to see her own bum and fell off the bench. Tamara is pretty tough, she didn’t cry.

I went into Mum’s room. She was lying down, reading a book. Something about ‘Dying Well’.

“Flying Smell... is it good?” I asked deliberately not looking at her. I know this is really odd –but I have a problem with Mum, I can’t look at her, not in the eye. I can’t figure out why. I don’t love her less because she dying – I don’t feel ashamed of her or think it’s her fault that an octopus has taken her over.

“No” she said, “it sucks.”

“Suck on this then” I handed her the coagulating juice. Mum grimaced, “I liked it the first couple of days, but a juice every hour. I spend half my time peeing.”

“Gets rid of all the impurities,” I picked up the last glass I’d brought her. “Now you just rest, no getting up unless it’s to pee.” super unfazed I added, “By the way, I’ve got a healing session organised for Thursday.”

“A what?” Mum laughed.

“A healing session, Jace said she’d organise one if you were keen. I said you were.”

“I am, am I?” I could hear her wondering about whether to kick up a fuss, and then deciding it wasn’t worth the effort. Mum was a long-standing member of the ‘no nonsense brigade’, just about as much as Jace was ‘the dreamy, full of witchy nonsense’ one.

“Yeah six women from the healing group are coming to make a healing circle and - I don’t know, they shove the black trespasser out. They’ll give him the boot.”

“They’re coming here?” Mum sounded dubious, “that kind of stuff just makes me squeam and squeam and squeam.”

“You did say you’d do anything to get well didn’t you? Now drink that up, the vitamins are oxidizing.”

I slipped out real quick.

They were weird. There were no doubts about it, weirdness factor 103. The first one, Mavis looked like she was a long, lost treasure map, one that had been folded over so many times that the wrinkles were set hard and fast. Everything about her was faded, her skin, hair and clothes were all a vague kind of no colour except the purple star she'd stuck right between her eyes. She had a walking stick with a dragon head that was pretty cool. She pointed it at everything she was looking at. She even pointed it straight at me, then she nodded as though I'd passed some invisible test. Theresa was the next one, she was Mavis's daughter and she was all the colour her mother didn't have plus ten other peoples. She was like a parrot, gold, shimmering shoes, and a rainbow fusion of reds, blues, greens, purples. She chattered on and on, but it was nothing talk, stuff you didn't need to answer, and no one did. Sonya was covered in feathers and beads and liked to be called Anna-star, her spirit name. Jennifer was famous for being the reincarnated spirit of Cleopatra, she said that another woman in England was also claiming to be Cleo, but she was an imposter. Zenta (I doubt that's her real name) cleared the room of hostile presences by gently wobbling her eyeballs, looking left, then right and pressing hard on her left thumb. Lindley said that the feng shui was all wrong with the house, there was no wonder it translated into bodily illness.

Mum had a dangerous look on her face.

Jace seemed the most normal of them all. After everyone had chatted for a while, used the loo, had a watermelon juice and cleansed their auras. Some by chanting mantras, some by pressing pressure points, one by prayer and Zenta by gargling salt water. (Jennifer impressed me greatly by briefly speaking in tongues.) They asked Mum to sit down in the centre of the room and they sat down in a circle around her.

Mum's face was twitching.

I watched from the kitchen as they briefly touched hands, hummed and then extended palms towards her. Mavis Map Woman said a word like 'Shoeban' which might have something to do with their shoelessness. Not sure. But all the woman all went hummmmmmm when she said it. When the hum

died down she said 'locksun bray' and they all hummed again. But by that time I wasn't watching any of them. I was watching Mum. I couldn't see her face, but I could see her shoulders were shaking. I knew what was coming.

None of the women did, they all had their eyes closed when Mavis started gibbering on in some strange kind of language which sounded like what I did when I was five and thought I was an Arabian Princess.

Mum swivelled her head at me. She had both hands in her mouth and her eyes were bulging. Very quietly she stood up and tiptoed past Jennifer and out the kitchen door, which I had opened because both Mum's hands were still in her mouth. None of the women even realised she'd gone.

I shut the door behind her and was just in time to see Mum race to the back fence, pull out both hands and roar with laughter. Then she giggled, one of those snorty uncontrollable giggles for ten whole minutes. Then she sighed, giggled once more, patted me on the shoulder and said,

"Maybe we could have a talk now. I've been trying to pin you down. It's about time we talked about it. I'm not going..."

"No", I interrupted, "they'll know you're not there. How about we just creep back in and pretend like you've been there the whole time?" I could feel her trying to meet my eyes, I kept my head down.

"I'm ready now" she whispered and patted me on the back. We crept back in, Mum tiptoed into the circle, sat carefully down, closed her eyes and looked very, very serious for the rest of the healing session.

After they left and Dad and the kids had come home we had a group giggle session around the kitchen table. Dad said,

"Well there's one thing you don't have to worry about. If you lived through that, you'll never die of embarrassment."

“I want a tick list” I mumbled to George. We were supposed to be doing long division. George had already finished and I hadn’t yet started.

“There are eight hundred and fifty species in the tick arthropoda family. Two main types though, argasids and Ixodids...”

“No! A list that says, in order to get life right, you need to have, or do, or be and you match yourself up and tick the right boxes, and what you can’t tick you aim to be able to.”

“It wouldn’t work” said George, he looked that kind of amused he called supercilious and I called Super Silly Ass.

“Multi choice? How about a fact list of life and that if you know all the facts, you passed.”

“You passed what? Life?”

“Yeah”

“Life’s not a test.”

“What is it then?”

“An average of sixty to seventy years.”

I shook my head at him, “Yeah, but what do you do in those years to get it right, or maybe not to get it wrong?”

“You behave yourself.”

“That’s how to be a good kid.”

“Well, the way I see it lots of people have lots of invisible tick lists. To live right might mean to believe in God, or to do good things, or earn a lot of money. Everyone’s different.”

“Yeah, I guess for your Mum it’s to eliminate dirt and germs.”

He looked at me with disgust.

“Do you really need to know what life is supposed to be?” he asked and I almost said yes, I did, before I figured out that he wanted to hold my hand with Humya’s Gift and transfer the answer. I was tempted but I couldn’t bear for it to say the same thing as last time, so I shook my head.

“OK, he said sounding disappointed.

“Well, seeing as Krissey has already finished hers, what’s the answer?” Mrs Tait our asthmatic mathematics teacher wheezed at me.

“I haven’t a clue” I said, and my voice said that I didn’t give two hoots either. I could see her starting to get into the uptight and ready to boil teacher routine.

“I wouldn’t waste your breath” I intercepted, “I haven’t a clue how many times 362 goes into 8,765 and I don’t care, never will.”

Mrs Tait pointed to the door.

“You can go wait outside young lady. I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

“Whatever.” I scraped my chair painfully across the floor. I dropped my maths textbook so it splatted, and rudely splayed its legs. I gave it a little kick as I walked past it and out the door. Which I would have slammed if it wasn’t one of those unslammable spring doors. I was really peeved. I mean really deep down mad, I could feel it oozing around my chest like a big blob of molten lava. If Shane could see me now he could have twenty-three jumpers worth of anger wool to pull out of me. I was surprised at how peeved I was about having to sit in a classroom and bend numbers into shapes. It had never seemed so pointless, less than pointless, absurd. In the scheme of things it wasn’t even a crumb off the cake of life, it was a microscopic piece of icing sugar.

Mrs Tait wheezed at me for five whole minutes, the usual stuff, respect, the importance of being able to put order to numbers. I didn’t really listen, I just looked at her and wondered what kind of life it was trying to punch numbers into kids and have them come out with the right answers.

The Bertram Family Chronicles

Entwined were the legs and arms of everyone. I was a part of Miriam, who in turn was blended into Melanie. I could tell it was me, it wasn’t just the shambles of caramel hair or blue eyes, Bryan had managed to catch the kind of girl, almost boy that was me. He had my head tipped back in a laugh that

looked into the face of Lachlan, joining us with a grin that kept the whole connectedness of our family going. Tanya and Tamara were pencil lines. I went to the next image, which almost seamlessly moved on from the last. Mum and Dad with arms full of shopping bags, one of dads had spilled the beans, literally, cans of them cascaded down and into a garden, one that grew lettuces and the grinning heads of all nine of their children. Our family over and over. I sensed that Bryan was waiting for a reaction.

“Bryanangelo!” I breathed, “this is fantastic!” The mural was going to be huge, it was spread across an entire wall of Mum and Dad’s bedroom. Most of it at this stage was just pencil sketch, he’d only just begun on the painting side of it. Even since this morning, it had doubled in size.

“You wouldn’t know it to look at it that his Mum and Dad can’t even draw stick figures” Mum murmured from the bed. She was half-asleep, drugs the visiting nurse gave her made her woozy.

Bryan looked pleased. “Long way to go yet. Mum’s giving me ideas as I go.”

“It’s very pleasant to watch my family unfold.” Mum smiled through half closed eyes.

“Come sit with me” she patted the side of the bed.

“I’ve got to go see if Tanya’s managed to do a poo.” I backed out of the room.

I walked down the hall yelling,

“Tanya, done anything yet?”

“Yep” she called back.

“What is it, a donkey sized one, elephant or hippo?”

“I think it’s a mouse one” she chirped. And when I looked over her shoulder I could see floating the very smallest poo ever claimed to be human.

“And a very small mouse’s poo ... finished?”

She nodded and I cleaned her up and took her down to the kitchen. I fed her and Tamara muesli bars and mandarins before juicing up three oranges and an apple and a handful of fresh mint. I went back upstairs and found Mum had fallen asleep.

Bryan turned from his painting.

“She told me that when you get back to wake her up. She wants to talk about something.”

“Oh no, I think its best we let her sleep”, and I left the juice beside her bed, “when she wakes up, make her drink it.”

“Sure... do you think it will work?”

“What, the juice?”

“Yeah, “

“Who knows, it can’t hurt, can it.”

“I guess not. I think you should talk to her. She’s been trying to talk to you for...”

“Hang on, I think I heard Tam in the fridge.” I walked back down the stairs and wondered if Mum felt like this, always moving to avoid one disaster after another.

The video camera was such a bonus. It gave me a license to be an observer, one step removed. It meant I could trundle around the house prying into rooms and recording my family. Mum and Dad having a cuddle, Melanie, Miriam and Mum having a cuddle. Mum screwing her face up, trying to drink lemon juice. Tim picking Mum up and taking her out to the garden. Plonking her in a chair and telling her off for doing too much. Mum poking her tongue out at Tim. Mum and Tim having a cuddle. Everywhere, all the cuddling was like a big basket of little licky puppies all scrabbling over each other for attention and cuddles.

We were sitting around the TV one night watching some dum thing. I don’t think anyway was really watching it.

“Turn it off” said Mum, James did.

“Turn off the lights” Mum said, Lachlan did.

“Grab a candle” Mum pointed at Dad and she giggled when he jumped up to do it.

“Look at this family,” Mum laughed, “finally, I have them trained.”

Dad lit the candle and stuck it in the middle of the table with a trickle of melted wax. It wasn't a very nice candle it was old and had hairs stuck to it. They sizzled and stunk when they burnt, but that didn't seem to matter.

"Tim, do you want to find that bar of chocolate I've been hiding in the fridge, it's behind the two blocks of cheese."

"Mum!" I pointed my finger at her,

"Yes," she grinned, "I've been eating unorganic, adulterated, preservative saturated, colour added food behind your back" she rubbed her hands together, "nothing like a good bit of chemical compound to get your bowels moving."

Tim arrived back with the chocolate, the fact that the wrapper was still intact meant I held my tongue, but I could see I'd be doing a bit of detective work in the morning to see if there was anything else stashed anywhere.

Mum opened the block and started dividing it out amongst us.

"I want to hear stories" said Mum, "stories about our family."

I flicked on the video camera and sat it on top of the TV so the chronicles could be recorded.

Mum started first.

'Remember when we first got Skunk and Stink and I wouldn't let them into the house?'

We all nodded.

"Remember how they used to get up onto the table outside the window and put on pitiful faces to make me feel guilty enough to let them in? Well I also recall being shown a very broken toaster and told that it had fallen off the bench. When I asked how it fell I was told it was suicidal. Remember that?"

We all grinned.

"Well I happen to have been at the top of the stairs when Lachlan opened the window to pat a particularly hairy bohemian, who, seeing the opportunity, jumped through the window landed in the

sink and managed to wag his tail so hard he pushed the toaster, who by all accounts, was not the least bit depressed, off the bench.” She smiled wickedly at us, “just to put the story straight” she added.

“Well” said James, “I thought this was supposed to be stories, but it might as well be a confessional as well.” he leered at us all as we leaned closer, “I know whose been eating the tins of condensed milk out of the fridge for the past five years.”

“Who?” said Mum, “I tried everything but DNA testing to find that one out.”

James pointed to the back of his own throat.

Tim threw a pillow at him. “I was the one who always got blamed, no one ever believed me. You little rat!”

“The reason we all had fleas” said Lachlan, “was because I slept in the dog kennel.” We all laughed, and then Miriam piped up,

“It wasn’t really Bryan who hung my Barbie doll by the neck on the clothes line, it was me.”

“Why?” asked Mum, “you loved that doll.”

“Yes, but I’d been reading the poem “The Gallows Queen”, I was just - playing.” She looked embarrassed.

“Fair enough” said Dad, “I never told anyone this, but I hung, drew and quartered my Teddy Bear when I was a kid.”

“Well”, said Mum, “How about some stories, not secrets, I think you should all keep those, any more revelations before we move on, any burning secret that has been waiting for the opportunity to be divulged?”

“Huh?” said Melanie.

“Got anything you’d like to share?” said Dad.

“No” said Melanie, “well, not unless you want to know who started the snail collection in the freezer downstairs.”

“You said you wouldn’t tell anyone!” James hissed, “Besides you were the one who cooked the flies in the microwave.”

“OK, OK, far enough” said Dad, “let’s just have a few stories without surprises huh... Krissey?” Dad patted my hand, “Krissey’s famous for her stories, got any non odorous ones?”

“I remember when Tan and Tam were born” I said, “ I remember how we all made something for them, I made a nest out of raffia and put two little yellow paper chickens in the nest, and drew nappies on them.”

“Yeah, I remember” said Bryan, “you borrowed my brown paint to put a poo stain on them.”

“So, you made them a knitted necklace for two and they were so tight you almost strangled them.”

“You two, cut it out” Mum sighed noisily.

“I’ve got a good one,” said Tim, and he told us about how he and James had been fighting over Dad’s old bike. Tim had been riding it around the street and wouldn’t give James a turn. James kept standing in front of the bike to force Tim to stop. But each time, at the last second, Tim would swerve and James would jump to one side. This had been going on for ages when James jumped in front of the bike again and this time decided he wasn’t going to move, no matter what. By chance, Tim decided exactly the same thing, he wasn’t going to swerve, so Tim, the bike and James had a collision, which knocked James over, and Tim rode over the top of him. James was laughing at the end of the story.

“Later on that night when I was having a bath I found tyre mark bruises right across my chest.”

Mum laughed, “you two never told me that.”

“Nah, didn’t want to get in trouble” they grinned at each other.

We went through till eleven o’clock and two more video cassettes before Mum yawned and said, as much as she was enjoying it she had to get to bed.

“I’m so tired, could you carry me?” we all watched while Dad picked up Mum and carried her up the stairs. I was fiddling with the video camera, the battery pack wouldn’t come off and I had to fight the urge to throw the whole thing against the wall. Dad had NEVER picked Mum up like a baby and carried her to bed. I had this huge pressure on my chest. I had to find a way to heal her. Humya’s gift had to pull through and soon. I went to bed and gave the whole absent healing thing a go. I placed small balls

of white in her tummy and watched them dissolve like disprin and sift through her blood, dissolving all octopus in its way.

Limitations

The ball dropped to the ground and rolled under a desk.

Heath scooped it up and threw it back.

“Right” said Mr Bier who was starting a new experiment called, ‘Limitations’.

“Can anyone stop the ball from hitting the floor when I drop it?”

“Sure” said Heath getting up from his chair.

“Ahh, no, I forgot to mention you cannot leave your chair and you can’t do it with the aid of any device.”

We thought about it for a while. I mean, my answer is no, but it’s just as likely that there is. I looked at George who was chewing on his lip. I know he’s not even thinking about forces of gravity, he’s off saving child slaves in Taname again.

“I could ask you not to drop the ball?” Shane said.

Mr Bier shook his head, “You might not be able to tell this, but my hand is very weak and I can’t hold onto it forever, even if I wished to.”

“Put a piece of elastic on the ball and tie it to your hand?” Luke suggested.

“No devices, besides you’d have to get off your chair.”

“Are we agreed then, that if I drop this ball you cannot stop it from hitting the floor?”

We all nodded, “so no one here can place of cushion of thoughts for it to bounce off, and coax it up when the forces of nature demand it goes down?”

We reluctantly nodded.

“What other things are there that we cannot stop?”

“The earth going around the sun.” said Marita,

“A match from going out if you put it under water,” said Luke.

It wasn't till Shane quietly said, "You can't stop a fast moving train in less than two seconds." And I thought about his Mum and Dad, and from there to thinking of mine. Then I realised that though Mr Bier wasn't looking at me that the 'Limitation Experiment' was *about* me.

I raised my hand, "You can't stop your nose running when you've got a cold, and you can't stop pooing when you've got the runs."

Everyone laughed. Mr Bier did too. He looked at me for five seconds really hard and then said, "And what else can't we stop?"

I looked away and out the window and tried not to listen to the list of things, meat from rotting, open water from evaporating, till Marnie said it, "You can't stop from dying ... I mean you can't live forever."

The words buzzed like demented bees. I felt half the blood in my body make a bee line for my face as everyone agreed,

"Yeah, you can't stop someone from dying." Said Leone.

I put my hand up,

"You CAN stop someone from dying."

"How?"

"Well, if they're dying of thirst you give them a drink."

"What say they have an incurable disease?" Mr Bier had me pinned to my desk with his razor sharp eyes. I didn't want to be pinned anywhere, by anyone and especially not into answering this particular question.

I opened my mouth to say you feed them organic food, you have healing circles and wait for miracles to occur from a gift you were given by an alien dog. I shut my mouth. I remembered seeing the words that George's Gift had written on my palm, "your mother is dying'. I felt like my heart was in a blender and every pulse churned me up further. No amount of good intentions and carrot juice would save my mother, whatever Humya's gift was, it wasn't going to save my Mum.

My mouth opened and white hot words came gushing out.

“My mother ISN’T dying, my Mum WON’T die! my Mum CAN’T die!” I was screaming at Mr Bier, and he was just standing there.

The more I screamed the words ‘My Mum can’t die!’ the more I heard the lie, the more I knew the truth, my Mum was dying and I couldn’t stop her, nobody could.

My Mum was going to die and leave me, leave us. When my Mum died I would never see her again. She would be gone. No phone calls to heaven. Everyone was staring at me, shocked. I didn’t care. Nothing else mattered.

The blender had gone through my heart and now it was starting on my head. It threw me into a vortex of horror. I knew there was something I hadn’t yet done. If she died before I told her that I’d miss her for the rest of my life, that I need her, that I love her. I haven’t said goodbye.

Mr Bier was saying something, with an effort I tuned into him.

“Go home” he said again, not angry, just gently.

I ran past my locker, past all the classrooms full of kids whose Mum’s were just fine, I ran out into the courtyard. A group doing drama turned to watch as I steamed past. Mr Gunnabul yelled out but I didn’t stop. I could see Mr Tatterson sneaking a cigar in the bike stands. I did a quick turn and kept running. Without a bike it would take longer – and I just didn’t want another minute to pass before I told her. I wanted to scream it out. I’d been so stupid, so busy keeping her alive that I forgot the important stuff. No, I hadn’t forgotten, I’d seen it, knew it, but I’d been hiding.

My legs thought that Sampson Street was three times longer than normal, my lungs thought Taylor Street was ten times. When I turned into Burton Street I could see Dad’s car in the drive. I ran up the steps and barged through the door. I tried to calm down as I climbed the stairs. She could be asleep. I’d have to wait till she woke. The words were white hot and I had to get them out of me before they burnt.

Dad must have heard me, he opened the bedroom door, and he looked shocked.

“How...how did you know?”

“Know what?” I puffed.

Then his face pulled up like a little kids and he started to cry. My white hot turned cold.

“No” I said very quietly,

He grabbed my hand tightly, “Just now” he said, “about five minutes ago.”

I brushed past him into the bedroom, past Bryan’s unfinished mural, Mum with a stroller, one kid in her arms, three in tow. I could feel Dad behind me, his breath softly crying.

My eyes had anchors, I had to haul them up till I could see her in the bed, She looked asleep. I walked over and sat beside her, she didn’t move and when I touched her I could feel that the space that was inside her had closed over, that my Mum was gone.

“I’m sorry Mum” I nudged the rock in my throat to one side, “I ran home to tell you I love you, I realise that just because I’m not ready to say goodbye doesn’t mean I don’t have to.” I lifted her hand and brought it up to my cheek. She was warm. I kissed her palm and cried into her empty hand. Dad was patting my shoulder.

“I’m sorry” he said, “I’m so sorry.”

“I just wanted to say goodbye. I wanted her to know that I love her.”

“She knows, he said, she knew.”

“But I wanted to *tell* her” I cried.

Dad rung Tim who closed the shop and came home and the three of us sat there, we didn’t say a lot. We decided to stay there with her till the kids came home. After a while Dad climbed onto the bed with her and held her in his arms. Tim and I left them together while we walked around the kitchen looking at each other, but saying nothing. The silence stretched out till I had to break it.

“What do we tell the kids?”

“Don’t know. How do you tell a kid their Mum’s died?”

“Yeah.”

Lachlan and James were the first through the door. Tim told them that Mum had 'gone'.

"To the hospital?" asked James.

"No" he said.

Lachlan raced up the stairs, but it took James a few minutes before he followed with leaden feet.

We didn't have to tell Bryan, he just saw our faces and he started crying. I waited downstairs for Miriam and Melanie while Tim went upstairs – I heard Lachlan gasping and yelling, "No, no, no, no!"

From the lounge room I watched Miriam and Melanie they were laughing about something, Miriam was pretending to be riding a horse like a queen. They were both so little, they still had baby teeth and that little-kid, thin, blonde hair.

I made them sit down because that's what people do in movies. I said that Mum had 'passed away' but that didn't seem right, "Mum died today," I said.

"Where is she?" Melanie asked. I pointed upstairs, they looked at each other, held hands and asked if I could take them to see her. But I chickened out and didn't walk in with them. I stood outside the door and listened to them crying, "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy!" I saw the corner of the wall beside their bedroom. I figured it was hard and if I cracked my head against it I might be knocked unconscious. I seriously thought about doing it. Being inside me was more than I could handle. I struggled to find something else to think about.

Tanya and Tamara. They were still at daycare. Usually they were picked up about now.

"Tim?" I called and he came to the door, his eyes were red and his nose was running.

"Maybe we should go and get Tan and Tam."

Dad heard me and nodded. I needed to be doing, not standing watching my Mum's body not move, and grow cooler.

Tim and I didn't talk while he drove. Seemed like every time I went to say something I realised I'd be saying nothing. Nothing that mattered. Just then if I'd said, "What shall we have for dinner", would have been real bad, there's only thing I could say and they were the words rushing around in my head, "Mum is dead, Mum is dead." He already knew that.

As we walked up to daycare, I thought to ask him,

"Did you say goodbye to her - before she - went?"

He nodded, "I guess I did – we were talking last week and she said goodbye first – so I figured if she was ready to say goodbye then it must mean..." he trailed off and started to choke.

We told the Daycare Assistant that Tanya and Tamara wouldn't be coming in tomorrow. They didn't even ask why. Part of me wanted to blurt out, "Because our mother is dead" But another part of me knew that it could never mean as much to them as it did to me.

That night I found Melanie crouched in the kitchen cupboard staring at packets of brown rice. I found Miriam floating in a bath full of water – she told me she had 'drown-ded' I said I felt like I was drowning too. There was a strange couple of minutes when I actually felt relief. I didn't have to worry about Mum dying any more, because now she was dead. The worst thing that could happen, had.

After the doctor came, the people from the morgue brought in the stretcher and took her away. It seemed terrible that Mum would never be in the house again. They'd be no one to yell at us in the morning, or to get rid of all the big spiders. No one to make us laugh.

James and Lachlan turned on the video and watched our family, Tamara laughing at Mum trying to balance a sausage on her nose. Bryan getting Mum to put her hand prints in his mural. I hadn't

realised how much of her the octopus had eaten. I guess I hadn't really been looking at her. I remembered how I wouldn't meet her eyes. I wouldn't even look at my own Mum, even when she asked me too. She had been trying to say goodbye, but I wouldn't let her.

If they had an x-ray machine on my chest right then they'd have seen my insides rip apart. I got the full blast all in one split second, it blew me too pieces. I staggered against the couch. I was going down, if I went down I wouldn't be able to get back up. They'd have to chain me to a wall for the rest of my life while I howled like a dog. They'd put me in a padded cell and I'd gnash my teeth forever. This was too much. I couldn't be trapped inside myself and know that my Mum was dead. My Mum is Dead. Then something in my brain hit the overload button. The madness faded away. I was walking into the kitchen, grabbing three packets of instant pasta and pulling a pot out of the cupboard – it was while I was measuring out eight cups of water that I decided that as long as I lived I would never laugh again.

284 Minutes

I rung Shane.

"Shane" I said.

"You OK?", "You really worried me today."

"I didn't get home in time."

He was silent for a while. "I want to do something" said Shane, "Tell me what I can do?"

"Sure, You can tell *me* what to do."

"Have you been crying?" he asked.

"A bit."

"Well, that's good."

We were both quiet for a while.

"There isn't anything I can say is there?" he said.

“No” I looked hard at the wall and the edge of the table, wondering which one would be harder.

“Could you tell George for me?”

“Sure, I guess you won’t be at school tomorrow. But after school we’ll come by and see you, OK?”

“Sure.”

I hung up.

Miriam and Melanie slept in Dad’s bed. Tanya and Tamara slept in mine. I pushed the bed hard against the wall so Tanya wouldn’t fall out. They really didn’t have much of a grasp on what was going on. But they knew something huge was up. We were like a house of zombies wandering around with red and glazed eyes. I kept wondering about if Mr Tatterson hadn’t been smoking and I’d got to my bike, if I’d have made it home in time. I desperately wanted to look in my Mum’s eyes just one more time.

I thought I’d stay awake, but as soon as the girls stopped squirming I fell asleep. I slept like a log.

The funeral was dum. All these people who I half knew walking around with sad faces which I didn’t think that they’d earned, or smiling and laughing like they didn’t care. Some old guy I didn’t know asked me how I was, he said I looked like I was thinking very hard.

I’d actually been trying to figure out where exactly I was, outside whose house and what street I was in when my mother’s heart stopped. But there are limitations, like Mr Bier said, and there are some things you can never get to know. It didn’t really matter anyway, whether Mum died of heart failure, snake bite or a greedy octopus, it all ended up being the same thing. I told the old guy that I was wondering if pineapples grow on trees or not. He looked surprised, but told me that they didn’t, that they were a form of bromeliad, then he looked awkward and walked away.

There were bouquets of flowers everywhere. It made me mad that no one had thought to give them to her before she died. Mum loves flowers. I have a hard time thinking about putting an 's' on the end of things Mum did or does, or a 'd'. Mum loves flowers or Mum loved flowers.

Jace and John were there and they gave me big hugs. Jace had been crying. John looked like he would like to. Mrs Worthington came up and pressed three very neatly folded handkerchiefs into my hand. I didn't tell her I only use tissues, and that in our house we call handkerchiefs 'snot rags'. She said she'd made thirty-two meat pies and thirty-six vegetable ones and that she'd been to our house and popped them in the freezer. George was right, his Mum was OK, different from me, not my kind of person, but that didn't mean she wasn't a good person. I surprised her and gave her a hug.

"We have 284 minutes of my Mum on video tape – Thanks."

She beamed. I didn't.

Then it was over. We left the coffin containing my mother sitting in the church. We got in the mini-van. Tim and Dad in the front. I wrestled Tamara and Tanya into their car seats and we drove off. Leaving Mum to the body burners. Dad grabbed four pizzas. We hardly ever get to eat pizza, but it tasted like rubber in my mouth and after the first mouthful I gave up. Our house is never normally a quiet place, but nobody put the TV on, nobody could think of anything to say – so we lay around staring into space. I found Dad lying on his and Mum's bed. He had his eyes closed and his hand touched her pillow. I lay behind him for a while and cuddled him.

"We'll get through this" he said. But he didn't sound real convinced.

Bryan was a serious problem. He spent all his time in the garage. At first I thought he was painting, but when I went out he wasn't. He said he'd never paint again. Yeah well I'm never going to laugh. But I didn't tell him that.

“I keep thinking” he said, “that if I just hold my breath long enough God will see me and realise that it’s just not on to take her and he’ll give her back.”

“You’ll only faint” I said.

“That’s the worst bit” he said, “I always end up taking a breath. Like maybe I’m not strong enough, don’t really want her back that much.”

“Don’t be stupid. If you hold your breath for too long you die. Simple, sad, fact.”

“Yeah”, he said, “maybe I would.”

But he got me thinking, maybe if I didn’t smile for a year God or someone would give her back. I know she’s being cremated, and her ashes put in a box, but miracles happen. Maybe Humya will come back. If he knows how to pull out a dog’s soul and put it back, maybe he can reassemble Mum from the genetic material in her ashes, find her soul and put it back again.

That night Dad sat us all down at the kitchen table and handed everyone a letter except Tanya and Tamara, who got a chocolate instead.

“They’ll get theirs when they’re older.” Dad explained.

On my envelope Mum had written my name in her usual big scrawly letters. It looked beautiful when she wrote it. So ordinary when I did. Everyone opened their letters and read them. I didn’t, I sat and watched them. Dad raised his eyebrows at me.

“If I read it now, then I won’t be able to read it tomorrow without having read it today.” I explained.

He looked confused. But shrugged and said, “It’s up to you.”

“I’ll save mine.”

Everyone walked away from the table and found a space alone. Just in case I walked out to the garage to check that Bryan was still breathing. He was. I wanted to rip my envelope open. But at the same time it felt great to have it in my pocket, a part of my Mum. Like a present that could always be opened. When Mum was around we circled around her. She was gravity. Now I can feel us all drifting into outer space, little lonely planets. This little lonely planet is looking for a black hole to fall in.

Tomorrow we're going back to school. My Mum no longer has a life, but the rest of the world figures our job was to get on with ours. To be normal. But someone had got out the branding iron and in big swollen letters are the words "My mother's dead" across my heart, nothing would ever be normal again.

Krissey Grasshopper Bertram

I found Mr Bier in the classroom repairing a chair.

"Hi Krissey" he said, smiling. Mr Bier is always smiling.

"My Mum... isn't alive" I said. It was easier than the big 'D' word.

"I know" he said. He pushed the broken chair out of the way.

"Did you know... that... it... that I.... that I had to go home?" I finished in a rush.

"Sometimes I get feelings about things" he said.

"Pity it wasn't ten minutes earlier" I said. I knew, he knew, I didn't mean anything by it, "sorry I shouted at you." I tried to make my whimper sound like a whisper. Kids were walking in. Everyone was grating chairs over my nerves.

He shrugged, "What's a bit of shouting amongst friends, huh?"

He smiled, my muscles were so well trained that they almost smiled back, but I stopped them just in time.

"Thanks" I said and wandered to my desk. I sat there for an hour. George and Shane kept whispering to me, but I didn't seem to have any space in my ears for words, so I just kept on shrugging. They were doing acronyms and palindromes, the best ones of which were 'god' backwards is 'dog', and 'live' backwards is 'evil'.

After class Mr Bier crooked his finger at me. Everyone else was storming out, like a big boiling wave crashing through the door. I sat on top of a desk and pretended to be real casual. I don't think he was the least bit fooled.

"How's it going?" he asked, like he was asking me if a scratch had healed.

I shook my head, I didn't trust myself to speak.

"If you had one question, what would it be?" he asked.

"I guess I could ask 'why?', but everyone asks that. Besides", I gulped, "I don't really think there is a good answer. I don't think anyone planned it to happen. These things just happen, right?"

He nodded.

"Well then I guess my question is, is there any meaning to it? Does it mean anything?" I shook my head, "It doesn't make sense."

"If dying doesn't have significance, then how can life have any either. Are we just a big load of ants running around, doing stuff to keep ourselves alive, when really there isn't any point to be living if that's all there is to it."

"Something like that. Why am I here?" I started to snivel. I pulled a tissue out and blew my nose. Rotten snot.

"Well, the way I see it death is the biggest single limitation in life... you can either see it as some huge monstrous thing to be frightened of, or you can learn to use it to make sure that your life is meaningful."

I thought about that one for a while. But it just sounded like nonsense to me. The more I thought about it the angrier it made me.

"So this is a lesson then, and what am I supposed to do with this lesson. Do I get to sit an exam, get a diploma. Do I get to laugh again!"

That's when Mr Bier did something I didn't expect. He started to cry.

Right there like it didn't matter if anyone saw him. He said, smiling through the tears,

"Krissey if you learn to smile again, you pass the exam."

My insides screwed up and I wanted to scream.

“My Mum” I hissed, it was hard to breath and get the words out, “is bits of bone and ash in a little plastic box, my little sisters are worried she can’t breathe in there and that she’s squashed. I can NEVER smile again!”

Mr Bier surprised me again, he gave me a hug.

Not a little hug, a great big one and I even felt him do a little sob thing in his throat. If anyone had told me that he’d do that, I probably would have made sure not to be standing here right now. But it was OK being hugged by Mr Bier, I knew he really cared. While that didn’t give me my Mum back, it does matter. I surprised myself and hugged him back.

“I guess teachers are human too” I said kind of embarrassed.

“Some of them are” he laughed.

“Mrs Tait,” I said, “She’s not.”

It started off that I was a grasshopper. I could see all the forest of grass and I could jump high and land on a really bendy blade, I’d hold on with all my legs while the living trampoline slowly came back to still. Then I’d jump again. I realised that I was a grasshopper living on the ground jumping high as I could because I wanted to see what was ahead, but no matter how high I jumped, all I saw was more grass. Then I realised that I was a grasshopper and that all I was meant to see was grass. Then I changed into a prey mantis, praying on the end of a blade of grass. Praying that I could change, and be more than a mere bit of green. I stood up on the grass, reached high into the sky, saw past the clouds, saw past the rain, saw past the sun, saw past everything that was past the sun. Realised how microscopic I was and how microscopic was my view. As I jumped from my blade of green grass I realised that I was so bound to earth by the belief that when I jumped I would fall, that I did. I kicked my legs higher, flew past the grass, flew past the trees, flew past the buildings, flew past the clouds, I was flying, like I was always meant to, because I’m not a grasshopper, I’m a fly, flying.

I woke up feeling great, feeling fantastic. Shane's gift was about peace and anger, George's about knowledge, mine was obvious all along, I was meant to fly. I was never meant to save my Mum, as much as I wished I could have. I hadn't failed.

I savoured that feeling of flying, the feeling was so real, I already knew how to fly because I'd been navigating wind currents in my dreams since I was knee high to that grasshopper.

I pulled my arm out from under Tanya, who rolled over and grunted like a little pig. It was just starting to get light, the earth was doing its slow cruise around the sun, flying inside space, supported by the weight of the universe. I felt rightness in me. Without waking either Tan or Tam, I maneuvered my toes to the floor. I fledged down the steps with imaginary wings on my feet. I wasn't so quiet about getting the ladder out of the garage and leaning it against the side of the house. I was trembling with excitement. All my life I'd wanted to fly, not with the aid of any 'concraption' as Miriam used to say, but by myself, launching myself into the air, and hurtling safely through its folds. I clambered up the ladder, it grated against the guttering. The tricky part was getting over the top while the ladder teetered dangerously. I hadn't really settled it as well as I could have. It would be just right that before I got a chance to test it out that I'd fall and break my arm or leg.

I was on the roof above the kitchen, it was the lowest part of the house, everything else was two storey. I looked longingly at my bedroom roof, but figured that, without hauling the ladder up and using it to climb, I couldn't get there. The grating sound as I hauled it over the guttering would be enough to wake everyone anyway. So I had to content myself with the first storey. Peering over the side I could see the garden, all the little neat rows of just beginning vegetables. Growing even though I didn't talk to them any more, or water them, or weed them, they grew because it's one of those mindless things, the law of just being. Like I had once been a baby in my mother's arms and without any thinking on my part I had grown to be the me I was now. The law of just being was that I would

keep growing, despite wishing I wouldn't. Despite wishing I could ungrow, that time would fold back on itself and I could be a little kid again.

I stood on the edge of the roof and it creaked under my weight. I breathed in deeply, like a diver, but divers expect to go down and I didn't. The sun was touching everything so lightly, so gently, touching the covers on the world ... 'wake now, I'm here to watch over you, wake now'.... I felt effervescent, a bubbling calm. I breathed in again and smiled at the world. I might not have my mother, but I could have flight. I knew it, deep in me, every molecule of me was a smug smile.

I raised my arms, imagined soaring into the first rays of the sun. I bent my knees, sprung, I arched into the void, reached for the sky, and for a moment I hung there, then like a canon ball I plunged to the ground and landed face first into the compost heap. I spluttered mud and cow poo. My knee hurt, and my hand was a ball of fire from where it had taken some of my falling weight.

I hadn't flown. I hadn't flown.

I pulled myself to my feet and limped back into the house. I had a shower, and it was while I was inspecting bruises that I realised that it wasn't that I couldn't fly, that I hadn't flown, it was just my technique. Even Superman needed the old one, two, three before he could launch. I had to discover what it was that my gift of flight needed for it to work.

But first I had to get the kids up, help wash four other faces, four little bodies and four other sets of hands, Dad would cook breakfast, which was usually French toast. He reckoned it was the highest scorer on the most nutritious and the least amount of dishes. Bryan would make interesting shapes out of bread and call them sandwiches and pack them into lunchboxes, Lachlan would make beds, James would clean up the house, Tim would oversee breakfast. It was a team effort. We'd been doing

it so long now that it was unthinking. Except every now and then I think I'd rather be doing anything else. This morning was one humdinger.

That's a word Mum used to say, I remember bringing in a caterpillar once for her approval, 'Wow that's a humdinger' she'd said, and I went to school with it and told everyone it was a humdinger caterpillar.

I limped into Miriam and Melanie's room and they were both in the same bed, Miriam had her arm around Melanie's neck. They looked so peaceful. I wondered if it made it easier, having a twin. Maybe they didn't get to feel the 'so alone' stuff I was going through. I tweaked both their noses, I pulled both their ears and blew on their eyes. Melanie opened hers first, "Quit it" she whispered and went back to sleep.

Growing Wings

At school I stared blindly at the chalkboard. In my head I was practicing leaps and bounds. I wondered if, like Shane and George, I needed something to trigger the flight mechanism. Words like trajectory, propulsion, gravitational pull circled through my head. I drew plans. I could either jump from high buildings, or try running across a flat area and taking off like a plane. I mean it might sound dum... but jet planes are huge, great, haulking things and I've always had a hard time believing they actually go anywhere. I remember reading that bumble bees are aerodynamically unsuited to flight, but that doesn't stop them. It didn't seem that far fetched to believe that I, too, can give up my earthly chains and fly free. I wrote that down on my paper. 'earthly chains, fly free'. Maybe Shane could use that in a song. Maybe he could write a song about me, 'The Girl Who Flew.' I'd be famous. Either that or I could keep my gift of flight really quiet and just share it with Shane and George. Maybe I could take them for joy flights. That almost made me smile. But I swallowed it back, and frowned up at Mrs Tait. So far, not smiling had been easy.

At break I took off. That is to say, I ran off down the corridor and out to the sports field. My leg hurt but I did my best to ignore it. I dumped my back pack under a tree and did a few star jumps. I did some of the stretching exercises that Mrs Petersen taught us. The last thing I needed was a leg cramp or some flight muscle to go spastic.

“The gift of flight, the gift of flight, the flift of gite, the flift of gite” I hummed to myself like Map Face Mavis would have. It was while I was touching my toes that I saw Shane and George crossing the field. They were talking, I didn’t need any gift to figure out what it was about. I knew I was acting strange, even for me. But I figure that’s only to be expected, considering.

“Whatcha up to?” Shane asked when they caught up.

“Growing wings” I said, training my face muscles into a no smile.

George hmphhed as only George can, that special blend of exasperation and distain.

“What are you two doing?” I asked.

“Watching you grow wings” Shane grinned.

Man, weren’t they going to be blown out when they saw me flying. They were standing there looking like they were waiting for something, and I knew it had nothing to do with feathers.

“What’s up?” I asked,

“We’re worried about you” George said.

“You won’t talk to us” said Shane.

“What is there to say that I haven’t said?” I asked, and was pleased that they both looked baffled. Tim’s, ‘how to deal with teachers’ lesson was doing well. When people ask you stuff you flip it back on them as a question, a hard question.

“How you are feeling, maybe” said George.

“I feel OK” I said, “Anything else?”

They looked awkward, I felt kind of mean about it to.

“Your anger stuff, it’s at boiling point” Shane said quietly.

“Well don’t pull it out will you.”

“Why not?”

“Because at the moment, it’s all I have left.”

“How about we use my gift then?” said George, “Now that... well ...” he grimaced, “now that the worst has happened, it can’t say that any more, it will have to be something else and maybe it will be good.”

I pulled my leg up behind me and grabbed hold and yanked so hard the muscles at the front of my leg almost popped off. “Maybe it will be that my Dad’s dying.”

“Maybe it will about your gift” said George,

“Or about your Mum” said Shane.

My ears pricked up at that, “What about my Mum?”

“That she’s OK ,or that she’s with you.”

The boiling in me lifted off the lid,

“My Mum’s dead, she’s not OK and she’s not with me. That’s what being dead is about, OK!”

Shane took a step back and sighed.

“What was that you were saying about feeling OK?” he asked.

I glared at him, “I WAS feeling OK, now I don’t. You want to do something about it?”

“Yeah.” He said reluctantly.

“Well leave.” I was fuming. But part of me thought that maybe that was a good thing, use a bit of that steam to ram myself through a few clouds.

I had my back to them, when I turned my head over my shoulder they were walking away.

Shane turned and saw me looking at them.

“It must feel terrible” he said.

“How would you know, your mother hasn’t died!” I snapped. Then cringed. Both his mother and father had died when he was only a little baby, “Well it’s not as though you even knew them” I added.

Shane just looked at me sadly and whispered, “But that’s the part that hurts the most.”

He opened his mouth to say something else and then thought better of it. He turned and hurried to catch up with George. They spoke, George shrugged, Shane shook his head. I turned away again.

I guess it was true. What would I rather have had, a mother I knew for thirteen years, or one I never knew. With one you grieved for what you did have, the other for what you didn't. Mind you I'd be grieving for what I didn't for the rest of my life too, I got it both ways. That didn't make it worse, I guess. Just different. I felt like saying sorry, that I didn't really mean it.

It was too late. They were both gone.

I turned back to my view of the sports field. I'd always liked running, I was even pretty good at it. I jumped up and down on the spot and started back on my chant,
"The gift of flight, the flift of gite."

I started running. The wind was at my feet. I steamed. Hardly even felt the pain in my leg. I took bigger and bigger strides, then one, two, three, jumped as high as I could, my arms out in front of me, even my eyes strained forward, but I clumped back down and rolled across the grass. I looked around to see if anyone had been watching. I must have looked like a dill. My leg really hurt now. I pretended to tie and retie my shoelace while I got control back of the pressure of ten million tears. Why couldn't it be easy, why couldn't I be up there now, flying around, free? Was it so much to ask? I guess I had to wait until my foot healed, and I had a bit of privacy so that if I tried again I wouldn't feel too embarrassed if I failed. Besides, I wanted to keep this gift to myself. No joy flights for anyone, just me.

I was tuned into another station on the great radio of life. There was no doubt about it. What everyone else was listening to just didn't make sense. All my receivers were right out of whack. Mr Bier was going on about tidal zones and marine biology. My head was cloud gathering. Everyone seemed very excited about something. I had a blue piece of paper dumped on my desk. A permission form. Permission to... I read down the page, go on a class trip to the beach for a marine excursion. It was going to cost money. I hate having to ask Dad for it. Maybe I could wag, maybe I could have a day off

sick, or develop an amazing allergic skin reaction to sand. I folded the paper over as many times as it would and shoved the blue chunk in my pocket.

The bell rung, and I limped out of the classroom. I know I looked like I was walking with everyone, but that was just an illusion. I know I was dressed just like everyone else, I was about the same height, I carried the same books, but I wasn't like any of them at all. Shane and George tried to walk with me, but I pretended like they didn't exist. When I got to my locker I found an envelope inside. I shoved that in my pocket along with the blue wad of permission form. It was only lunchtime and I felt like the rest of the day was bigger than me. More than I could possibly struggle through.

Outside I heard a crack of thunder, and the nearest window told me the sky was dark and it was raining. Everyone was trooping through to the common room. The thought of being crowded in with a whole lot of other people all broadcasting on a different frequency was more than I could handle.

I walked the other way. I walked out of the building and out into the rain. People were scurrying everywhere like frightened mice. Lightening pierced the sky with its pitched forks and the thunder crumpled soundwaves. The rain was churning up the ground, and it felt just fine. I started walking again. My hair instantly turned into a wet mop and trickled water down my collar. My shoes sucked up water through their soles, and within seconds my socks were sodden. I kept walking, no one was standing at the gate to see who had school passes and who didn't, so it was easy to walk right through. The wind was lashing trees, whipping branches back and forth, my skirt was stuck to my legs and could only flap half-heartedly. A nearby crash of thunder rumbled the ground. I didn't flinch.

In the event of a thunderstorm do not shelter under trees. It was one of those community announcement ad's on TV, I crossed the road and walked into the park. It was crowded with eucalypts. I found a nice tall one to sit under. I sat there, staring into space, watching lightening do its dazzling

dance. If I cried now, no one would know. I tried to push out a sob, but they were constipated and it came out more sub than sob. I pushed my hands into my pockets and felt the envelope. I pulled it out. It had my name on it. I tore it open and read,

Dear Krissey,

I am really sorry about your mum. I can't stop thinking about how hard it must be for you, you look so sad. You really gave me a fright that day when you yelled at Mr Bier. I've never really thought about what would happen if my mum or dad died. I think you are being very brave. Nobody is saying anything to you about it, mostly because they're just like me, they don't know what to say. I think we're all worried you'll yell at us too. But I thought you'd like to know that we all care. I know I do.

Love from

Marita.

I tried to stick it back in the envelope but they whole lot was so wet it stuck together, so I squished it up and stuck it back in my pocket.

Why wasn't caring enough. I care that whales get eaten for breakfast in Japan, but it doesn't stop it from happening. I care that species are dying off every day, and that kids are slaves. Some are so poor they don't get enough to eat, and that lots of people think it's OK to go around with guns and shoot people, just because they are genetically 1000th of a degree different from them. But it doesn't make a damns worth of difference to any of it. All caring ever does it make things hurt.

I got up and started walking again. I watched the lightening and dared it to strike me.

"Come on then, hit me why don't ya, frrrrrrry me!"

I saw a woman running to her car with an umbrella over her head. I couldn't see her face, but I yelled at her,

"My Mum's alive, you're dead!" and I pointed my magic finger. Maybe Humya's Gift would do that for me. But the woman didn't even hear me, she got into her car and drove away. I tried not to think about if it had worked and if the woman had kids of her own. Because, I kept reminding myself, I am not a person who cares.

Wave to Mum

By the time I got home the storm was almost over and my clothes were plastered to me. No one else was around. I walked through our quiet house like a stranger. I pulled off my clothes and had a stinging hot shower. I heard the phone ring. I didn't answer it. It was probably school. I started to sing,

"There's a song that's never been sung before, nobody knows the words, the flew I knew flew out of me and spilled into my guitar, there's a song that's never been sung before, it's about the Bertram family. The song that's never been sung before, is about shit, and crap and no harmony." Then I got out, got into my pajamas and went to bed. It was only one o'clock, but hey, who cares.

Under my pillow is Mum's letter. It's been three days since I was given it. As soon as I touched it I started to cry. My fingers fumbled with it while I ripped it open, careful not to rip where Mum had written my name. I brushed my fingers over the letters. It seemed so strange, Mum would never write my name again. I folded out the paper,

To my Darling Krissey,

I love you all so much that it burns. It seems impossible that if you are reading these words it's because I am dead and I cannot be there to help you.

Ever since Tim was born, each day it has seemed like I have had presents to open, children who change and grow and be, so different, no matter how many layers I unwrap, and how much anticipation there is, the gift is still always there to be opened. I love you, my unwrapped gift.

I know that this has been hard on everyone, but I have been watching you and know you have felt that it was up to you to stop me from dying. But it's a responsibility that isn't yours. You have not failed me, I haven't even failed you. Some things just happen, some things are just meant to be.

You asked me a while ago what it was that I would most have liked to have been or done, I said, at the time, that I was happy with my life, but now when I think about it, I would have liked to have been more like you. So full of beans and fart jokes, irreverent, uninhibited and so very brave. I hope these qualities help you now.

I know we didn't get to say goodbye, not face to face, but I hope you accept this as our last words and that braided into the very fabric of your life is a strand of me that will see you through to the end. Memories, thoughts, feelings can't die. I hope that I can take a strand of you with me. I miss you already. I know you will all look after each other. Please kiss and cuddle Tamara and Tanya for me, and tell them lots of stories, with or without the poo, so that they have memories of me too.

I want to thank you for helping make my life so wonderful.

I wish I could write forever and not have to end. Or there have to be one.

Goodbye sweetheart,

Your Loving Mum.

I stuck my head under the pillow and held it hard over my face. I was back in that mad space again, of knowing just how much I had lost. It had only been five days since Mum died. Five. I couldn't last too many more. Not like this.

Lachlan and James were watching the TV again, watching Mum.

"We better make a second copy of this" James said,

“Yes” said Tim, “You’re wearing this one out.” But he sat down too and started watching. Miriam picked up Tanya’s hand, ‘Wave to Mum” she said, “There she is, she’s on TV, wave to Mum.”

Tanya looked confused. But she waved anyway.

I was making dinner. Spag bol. It was amazing how my hands could just go and do it all without me really paying attention. I could hear James telling a Mum story.

“Remember when we stayed down the coast and the garage had an electric roller door?”

“Yeah, it rained all week.”

“Remember how Mum pushed the button, saw that the roller door was coming down and did a ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ job and ran and dived underneath it before it closed.”

“Yeah, those stuck up people from next door had their noses so high in the air they almost tripped over Tan.”

“And Mum laughed, she really laughed.”

I caught a glimpse of my face in the window and quickly whipped the smile off it.

“That’s what was great about Mum, she didn’t care about what other people thought”, said Tim.

“Yeah” and everyone went quiet again.

Perfect Flying Weather

I was like a lettuce that had been a week without water. I was so limp I could barely walk. I slumped down in the bus and looked out the window. Shane and George were chattering behind me,

“That’s right hey Krissey?” Shane tapped me on the shoulder.

“Yeah” I said, I had no idea to what.

Mr Bier was waffling on about the bus rules. I put my finger in a hole in my hem and ripped it wider.

Out the window I could see Mr Wavelin mowing the school grounds on the ride on. His face was grim.

Made me wonder if he found his life meaningful.

The school bus lurched out onto the road and we rumbled off. Everyone cheered. The sun was shining,

little puff fish clouds swam across the sky, everything looked picture perfect. I caught Marita looking at me. I guess this was when I'm supposed to smile. I mouthed 'Hi' instead and looked away in case she thought I wanted to talk. I had rows of words, like bullets inside me. I was a loaded pistol ready to fire. I put the safety catch on and slumped down further in my seat. I was just too tired. I closed my eyes. I went to sleep.

I was standing on a beach. It was warm and golden, a peaceful scene, but I felt terrified. I watched the waves, looking for something. I had something in my hand. A coin, a gold coin. If I put it in a special phone box, I could make a call to heaven. In the sand there was a phone box. I hurried, excited. I stuck my gold coin in, and it clanked and clunked and dropped out the bottom. I picked it up again and stuck it in, same thing. I checked all the instructions, they were all right, I wasn't doing anything wrong, it was just that the stupid box wouldn't take my stupid coin. I punched it, and all of a sudden a stream of gold coins came spilling out. I grabbed at them and tried again and again to feed them back into the slot. But none would work. I realised there was water around my ankles. I looked outside and saw the tide had come in. I stepped out and into deep water. I was back to being terrified again. A gold plated fish, prehistoric and huge came swimming at me. He stopped just in front of my face and he said,

"Do you want to know the truth?"

And he whispered it to me. It was fantastic, it was wonderful, I felt every piece of puzzle snap into place.

Then I woke up with a breath snatching jolt.

Shane was tapping my shoulder.

"We're here now sleepy head" and he squeezed my shoulder. "What were you dreaming?"

"I was dreaming that it's harder to fly, its easier to float."

"Huh?"

"A fish told me – in my dream – a fish told me."

As we climbed out of the bus, I thought about it. So it wasn't to be that I rammed clouds with my

Superman stunt, I'd just have to concentrate and float like a balloon, all gentle and serene. It made sense.

We were given identification sheets. We had to locate all twenty-three organisms on them. We weren't to disturb them or damage them, just observe. I folded my sheet up as many times as I could and stuck it in my pocket. This was the same beach we had come to with Mum and Dad a while back. Not long after Mum's octopus had been discovered. In biology we had learnt about symbiosis and how two organisms could live off each other, but it was only the octopus that lived off Mum, Mum didn't need it. So it meant it was parasitic, it lived off her, but weakened or killed her. Which is pretty stupid. It meant that the remains of the octopus was burnt up and sitting in the box at home too.

Every one was dividing up into groups. Before Shane or George could do anything I walked into Marita's group.

"Can I be part of your group?"

"Sure" Marita smiled. I didn't.

I didn't look at George and Shane either. I couldn't handle being with them right now. I think it was because they were so worried about me, so careful about me. We took off to the rock pools. I trailed behind remembering how last time I was here I was all hung up on my 'wee boobs', as Dad had called them. Now I wore a bra all the time and I didn't even think about it. Made me wonder if death was like a bra - that eventually you got so used to wearing it that you hardly even noticed it. I couldn't imagine that being without Mum is too much like wearing a bra. I wondered if I'd ever be able to wonder about anything else.

Everyone seemed so fascinated about something called a *Nodilittorina pyramidalis*. Splash Fringe Levels and Littorinids, shells, that had tight fitting doors called operculum to keep their water in when the tide went down and the sun tried to fry them.

I put my hand up.

“Yes, Krissey?” Mr Bier smiled at me.

“Mum called that kind of sea life, rock snot.” Everyone kind of sniggered. But they all looked awkward too and wouldn’t look at me. Mr Bier grinned,

“Yes, some people like to eat molluscs, and other shellfish, and they do have a very mucousy texture.”

“What’s mucous” someone asked.

“Snot, it has a texture like snot, Sean.” Mr Bier teased.

Everyone laughed at that. I remember long ago asking what an ‘anus’ was. I remember the old me, the one who couldn’t help herself but crack a funny every possible opportunity. Now here I am, way down the track, I’ve got a smile disability, and laughing, well the idea of ever doing that again is not laughable.

Mr Bier talked about tides and how the moon created a bulge on the side of the earth it was facing, which made a tide, and how on the other side the tide was created by centrifugal force. I remember how Mum always said that she could see a handprint on the moon. We used to make up stories that it was the handprint of God pushing it away from earth till it was in just the right place in space.

I felt very tired. I sat down behind everyone and dug my heels into the sand. I closed my eyes. I tried to think very hard about nothing, but the harder I tried to think of nothing the more I thought of something. Not hard to guess what. Mum. If I didn’t sidetrack soon I was going to end up crying. That would really embarrass everybody. Everyone was walking away. My group were going up the beach. I followed them like a lame dog.

“Hey” yelled George, “wanna come with us, we’re looking for Nodilittorina?”

I shook my head and ran to catch up with the others. They were going to the cliff face, they were studying the rocks, looking into crevices. I looked up at the cliff, like a stern face above me. I saw the winding rock steps up the side and didn’t even need to think about it, I was already walking.

“Hey!” yelled Marita, “Where you going?”

“To find fossils” I said and kept climbing.

I could hear her telling everyone else. I climbed quicker. I dropped my backpack and kept going. The sun was really blistering, it might have been that which made me feel dizzy, woozy, spaced out. Then I realised it was because I could feel myself hunching up inside my chest, as though all of me was in there, waiting, and that only just a little amount of me was doing all the hard work of moving. I guessed it was part of being able to float. I needed to centre all of myself. I launched off the last step and onto the walkway. The council had built it a few years back after some idiot backed off the side when he was taking a photo of his family. I wonder if he took it, and if they all look surprised.

I turned and saw that Marita and the others were climbing up too. That hadn't been a part of my plan. They were all smiling and laughing. Made me spew.

I ran. The cliff goes right around the beach and reaches out in to the sea, crosses its arms and glares. It is sheer there. Straight down, its feet splashing in the sea. It was higher there too, giving me time to get the whole flying, floating thing happening. The way I figure it my gift really needs to know it has to happen.

For George and Shane, their gifts happened right at the very last moment. The no return thing. I figured if I jumped, there was no return.

When I got there I ducked under the rail and looked over. Below was rocks and sea. I inhaled deeply. I was panting from having run up the stairs and along the boardwalk. I wanted my head clear for this. I looked out across the sea, the sun tinkled on waves, the wind was gentle. Perfect flying weather. I would have liked to have done a few loosening up exercises. But when I turned around I could see Marita and the others had made it to the top and were walking along. Bugger. I needed a bit more

preparation time to fumble around inside myself and find Humya's Gift, to adjust my invisible wings.

I sucked in my breath and let it out slowly. I imagined myself getting lighter and lighter. Mere leaf, mere grain of sand.

"Lighter than air, lighter than air." I stepped to the very edge. I didn't look down.

I heard Marita in the distance yelling, "She's going to jump, she's going to jump!"

Wouldn't they get a surprise.

When I turned to my left I saw the beach and all the scurrying little people. George and Shane were down there. Maybe I would take them on joy flights. It wasn't their fault Mum had died, it wasn't their fault that they cared and that caring wasn't enough. But I couldn't think about them now. I had to concentrate. I flicked my head around and saw that the girls were almost here. I had to jump now before they were, before they grabbed me.

I leaned out. I held out my arms and surrendered myself to the sky, I leapt forward. I could feel myself falling, I told myself to trust in Humya's Gift, Humya would come through, but I was hurtling, I was falling. It was no surprise. I knew then what I think I'd already known. I was going to die.

Fumashwar

I hit the water with a smack. It whacked the air right out of me. The bubbles of it streamed past my ears as I sunk. A wave had me by the scruff of the neck, it was pulling me under, deeper. I tried to keep myself from breathing back in water. But it happened anyway. It gushed down my throat. I couldn't see anything, yes, seaweed, a rock, my own hand. I was drowning. I wasn't flying, I was drowning. I wondered if I should try and get to the surface, but I already knew it was too late. My eyes were going fuzzy, the sea was going grey. I felt a faint sense of relief. Of all over. The beginning of the end, of no more me. My eyes stirred one more time.

I saw her. Her hair swirled in the current as she shook her head.

“Krissey. Why did you go and do that?”

I shook my head too.

She held out her hand and touched mine. “I love you sweetheart. But you can’t go and die now.”

I didn’t say it, but I thought it, ‘why not?’

She touched my face, her fingers were very, very cold. I jolted as a whole series of images tumbled through my head. I saw myself scrambling through time, on fast forward, till I was very old. I was standing at a fridge door looking inside at a large slice of cheesecake. I stood up and I looked around a kitchen till I was looking right back at myself, the drowning me, and the old me said, “I don’t want to die. My life is a wonderful thing, I want to live it.” Then the old me shut the fridge door and I was looking at Mum again. She was smiling. She reached down and kissed me, cold, cold lips.

“Can we say goodbye now?” she asked.

I nodded.

“I love you Mum. I miss you. I will always miss you.”

“I’m not all gone” she said, “Some of me is still here.”

Then something hit me - hard. I was being dragged, a wave maybe. I didn’t care. I tried to reach my arms out to Mum, but my arms wouldn’t move. ‘Goodbye’ my mind whispered. I know she heard.

I was in the air. I could feel it against my face. Against my shoulders, against my waist, against my legs and feet. I was out of the water. But I wasn’t on land. Water dribbled out of my nose. I opened my eyes, I could see Mr Bier, he was looking at me, worried. He squeezed hold of me and I sputtered up water, a great gush of it. I coughed. It was hard to cough because the wind was so great. I opened my eyes wider and wondered why it was we were moving so fast, a boat? I looked around. We were high, we were getting higher. Mr Bier had a hold of me, and we were flying. He didn’t look the least bit surprised.

“You OK, in there” he asked.

“I saw my Mum” I said.

“I know” he said, “I just couldn’t wait any longer. You were almost all dead.”

“Are we...?”

“Yes” he said laughing, “We’re flying.”

I looked woozily above me to see if it was a helicopter. But it wasn’t.

“Who’s flying most?” I asked going into another round of splutter cough. Maybe I really was all dead.

“I’m flying most” he said. And he was. He was holding me, and we were flying, not that fast, but flying just the same.

I looked confused. “I’m the one whose supposed to fly.”

He grinned, “Hang on, let’s go down there” and he pointed to a little cove, and he twitched his head to one side, and we changed direction, I held on tight as we flew faster, drew nearer, till the sand came up at us, too fast. Mr Bier twitched his head back and we pulled up just above the sand, and settled slowly down on it. My legs wouldn’t hold me up and I collapsed in a sodden heap.

I lifted up my head, went to say something, but instead I spewed great gushes of seawater. Mr Bier rubbed my shoulders. When I was able to I wiped my face and asked,

“Who are you Mr Bier?”

He was rubbing the sea off his face with his hands, he laughed, “I’m one of those teachers you were telling me about a while ago. One of those that aren’t human.”

“You’re an alien?”

“If an alien is someone who doesn’t come from earth, then that’s me.”

I waved my hand weakly at him and coughed and spluttered a little more.

“Why would an alien want to be a teacher?”

He looked suddenly serious, “Because,” he rung salt water out of his shirt, “there are three children I wanted to watch over. Humya’s Three.”

I looked confused and flopped over onto my back and shook my head. It was all too much.

“You three think that you were all drawn to the same spot, the Three Rocks, by chance, but you were not. You were always meant to be there. You were chosen even before you were born.”

“Why?”

“Well, this might not sound too good, but you were an experiment of mine.”

I screwed up my face, “Go on.”

“Some of my – people - think that earth is doomed.”

“Humya thought we were a waste of time.”

“That’s just like Humya, pessimist till the end. I don’t happen to think that way.”

“So how are we a part of your experiment?” A sudden and horrible thought crossed my mind.

“Is my Mum dying a part of your experiment?” I choked, but this time it wasn’t on seawater.

“No” he said firmly, “absolutely not.”

I wrestled with it a moment. But I believed him.

“Help me here” I said, “I’m not sure I know the right questions.”

I remembered how George had written his down for Humya.

“We don’t have long” he said, “we have to get back. The group of girls saw you jump and me fly after you...it’ll be messy to clean this one up.”

I nodded and waited.

“Aren’t you going to ask me why I jumped?”

“No” he said, “Are you going to tell me?”

“I was trying to fl-”

“Die” he interrupted and raised his eyebrow at me, and waited for my response.

“Well” I said, ‘either I flew or I didn’t, and if I didn’t fly, well, then yes, I figured I’d die and that seemed not such a bad thing.”

“I’m assuming that if you were standing at the top of a cliff you wouldn’t try the same thing?”

“No” I grinned thinking of my Mum, of the old me contemplating cheesecake, “I’m shit scared off heights.”

We laughed.

“I’m quite fond of earth.” Mr Bier said.

"I came here around two hundred years ago and hung around for a while. Then when I came back the next time, everything had changed so much. So much had got better, and so much had got worse. It was all predictable I guess. Still shocking. Everyone else threw their hands in the air and shook their heads. But, I don't know, I feel that there is something special going on in this world and I decided that I should try and tap into it, maybe I could help things change, but not by changing them myself, but by reaching people, teaching people. I could never do that as an alien, so I did it as a teacher."

"But I thought you lot don't have bodies." I looked at the one he was wearing suspiciously.

"No" he grinned, "we don't. Quite objectionable things they are, like wearing a very heavy suit of armour. And keeping it clean and tidy and fed is a bother. Though I've developed a taste for curried egg sandwiches."

"Whose.. how did you.. Where did you get your body from?" I was thinking of Humya taking over Skunk's.

"Oh, it's Mr Bier's alright, and he's happy enough. He's somewhere in the universe now, seeing things no other human ever will. Last I heard he was smelling the Bemwar flowers of Malandil. Very nice they are too, but very addictive. When its time for me to go, we will trade places and he will continue on as Mr Bier. Probably pay him not to talk about his time in space too much."

"No" I agreed, "everyone will think he's loony."

Mr Bier nodded.

"What's your real name?"

"Fumashwar" he said, it sounded more like rain falling from yellow leaves than a word.

"Do you know what my gift is?" I asked.

He looked sad, he took my hand and squeezed it, "It was to be something else, but a while back it changed," He smiled at me and a tear slipped out of his eye, "you've just had your gift" he said, "yours was the gift of goodbye."

We walked back. Mr Bier, Fumashwar, said it would be better than flying, that we had both made

enough of a scene already.

“It’s going to take some explaining this one.” He sighed.

“Did you know I was going to jump?”

He shook his head.

“I heard Marita scream - ” he shrugged.

“Thank you for saving me.” I started to shiver even though it was warm.

“I’m just glad you wanted to be saved.”

“What was my gift going to be, before it changed?” I asked.

“I know it wasn’t flying.”

I looked embarrassed.

He grinned. “What did she say?”

“Mum?”

He nodded and I was silent for a while as I recounted it to myself.

“She said she loved me, that she was around still, that part of her was anyway. She showed me my life, all my life and I knew that I didn’t want to miss out on it. It’s too much to lose. Even though this is a thousand times harder than anything I’ve ever had to do, it’s worth getting through it, because, life is - it just is.” I struggled with conveying what the feeling was like into words.

But when I looked at Mr Bier, I knew that he knew.

When we got back to the board walk half the kids were there looking into the water and pointing. I could see that the thing they were interested in was a big pile of seaweed.

“That’s her there!”

“No its not, over there, by that rock.”

I looked for George and Shane, but they weren’t there. Mr Bier and I walked up beside them. Everyone was so busy looking over the side that they didn’t even notice us.

“I saw him, he was flying.”

“Oh rot, it was just a big wave that carried them to the side. Mr Bier can’t fly.”

I grinned at him.

“No, but he sure can swim.” I said loudly. Someone turned to look at me and saw both of us standing there, drowned rats with our hair stuck to our heads and our clothes dragged down and dripping with water and crusty with sand.

Everyone started asking questions, three million at once. I said I didn’t remember anything. Mr Bier pointed down the beach where I could see two people sitting. Shane and George. I nodded and set off down the boardwalk. I jumped the steps two and three at a time and sprinted over the beach. It was hard to believe that just a short time ago I was almost dead.

I could see their heads bent down together. George was holding onto Shane. They thought I’d gone past almost dead and managed the full thing. I slowed down and waited for them to look up. But they didn’t. All my insides clenched. I felt terrible thinking about what I had almost done.

It was almost worth it to see the looks on their faces when I plonked down in front of them. George was shocked, surprised and then angry.

“What the hell did you do that for?”

Shane was grinning from ear to ear. I grinned back.

“I thought I could fly.” I shrugged, “worked out that I couldn’t.”

“You bloody idiot!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Wanna hear about Mr Bier?”

George was still ranting but Shane came up and gave me a fat hug. I hugged him back.

“I’m so glad you’re still here” he said, “and that you’re smiling.”

“I’m smiling am I?” I felt my face and sure enough it was covered in big, wide grin.

I don’t think I’d ever felt as lucky as I did right then. I’d got to say goodbye to Mum. I had Dad and my brothers and sisters, I have Shane and George, Mr Bier. I have people that care, and caring is enough. I

can see that now.

I told them about Mr Bier, about flying around to the cove, and what he'd said there. They were as amazed as I was.

George immediately started formulating questions to put to him. But Shane was watching the group that was trooping back down the steps, his eyes on Mr Bier,

"It's incredible" he said, "All this time, no wonder he wouldn't let George read his hand."

"There's something else incredible" I said, and I told them about Mum.

Not Flying, Surviving

The rest of the day was a blur. I sat in the shade and rested. George and Shane kept me company. Mr Bier came over for a while and George asked unlimited questions. We learnt so much. One of the things was that we, Humya's Three, were part of an experiment to see how receptive humans were to their environment. Whether there was a hope that humans could ever care enough about other people, the rest of the world and themselves to do something about saving it.

"So, did we pass?" asked Shane.

"There are no passes, not the way you mean. But my conclusions, yes, I think that if the rest of the population responds to world need the way you three do. There's a good chance the world can pull its head out of the sand."

"I hope we do" George muttered.

"The world is counting on your generation. It will be up to all of you."

He had only managed to half convince the rest of the class that he hadn't flown. He thought it was a good idea that the real Mr Bier made an appearance soon.

"I can't risk being discovered."

I buried my hands in the sand. "I'll have to say another goodbye" I whispered.

“Yes” he said, “you will.”

He looked a bit sad about it too.

That night I pulled everyone into the lounge room. I sat them down and pulled out a candle. I lit it, got Tim to turn off the lights and I told them a story. A story about Mum. We all did. Most of them made us laugh. Then I told them about what had happened that day and how I had seen Mum. I don't think they believed me. James said something about loss of consciousness and low oxygen levels. But I think Dad did.

“I just wanted to say that I'm glad I've got you lot. That I care about you all a heap.”

After everyone went to bed I heard Dad get up. I followed him out into the kitchen. He was making a cup of cocoa, and I got him to make one for me too.

“Can't sleep?” I asked.

He shook his head. I could only wonder what it felt like to be inside him. I felt less like a kid than I ever had, and Dad seemed like more of one.

“Did she look happy?” he asked. I knew what he meant.

“She looked... OK. She didn't look scared, or lost or anything.”

“That's good.” I could feel him shake.

I sat on his knee and cuddled him like when I was a little kid.

Mr Bier had been cheered by the school assembly for his brave actions in saving a student who 'fell' off a cliff on a recent school excursion. There were talks on how he was going to be given a bravery award. There was also a brief talk on appropriate safety behaviour either at school or on trips, such as staying behind guard rails. Mr Bier stood at the back of the room and when I turned around to look at him, he winked.

Mr Bier told us that Tuesday was the day. He'd arranged for the swap over to occur down where the three rocks had been. He said that he would like it if we could come with him, both to say goodbye and also to help Mr Bier back home.

"He's bound to feel very strange adapting back to having a body again."

It was obvious the way Mr Bier spoke, that having a body was far from a good thing.

So, all week in class we sat and watched him teach. I started to notice just how different he was from other teachers, and how obvious it had been all along. He had been watching when Shane got his gift. He'd known all along about George's too. He wasn't a 'stute', he was an alien. None of the other kids knew. It was a great temptation to tell them. But it's not as though someone who jumps from cliffs has that much credibility.

Even though I was smiling again. I knew it didn't mean I was 'over' Mum. That would be a long time away, if ever. I missed her so much, and everything had thorns on it. Every time I opened the bathroom cabinet and I saw her 'bottle of quiet water' I'd given her for Christmas a couple of years ago. The pot she had burnt when she'd had to climb up onto the garage roof to save James, who was only three. I'd read her letter so many times and I'd cried so many times it's a wonder my eyes don't bleed. But I also feel that deep down inside me there's a place that knows everything will be OK again one day. That nothing this bad lasts forever. I'll survive and I'll help my family to survive too. When I'm ready I'm going to get back into doing something to help the world. George is off to Taname again soon. He's managed to talk to lots of countries and got a fund going, one to help child slaves. I think he's really great. A pain some times, but I'm glad he's in my life, I'm glad he's one of Humya's Three. Shane is getting into bullying. He says that one day he's going to get really good at it. What he's really doing is started up a program that's run by kids, for kids in schools. He says his aim is to reduce school bullying by fifty percent in the next two years. I said I'd help him any way I could. He said he'd help me too when I got around to doing something great. I just have to come up with it yet. I've been researching

the net and, like George discovered, there is so much to do. I'll have to decide on one thing, and stick with it.

I found Bryan in the garage yesterday. He'd wound sticky tape around his mouth, and then shoved blue tack up his nose. He was going a yucky shade of purple. It didn't take me long to pull the tape off, longer to get the blue tack out of his nose.

He was trying to stop breathing, and bribe God into giving Mum back. I told him he was a twit. But no bigger a twit than I was. We talked for ages, and while we did I opened up cans of paint and stirred them. I stuck a sheet of paper to his easel and handed him a paintbrush.

"Paint me how you feel." He looked at the paintbrush distrustfully. But dipped it in the black pot and began to draw large black circles, there were sharks in the circles, in the centre was a little figure calling out in the dark. He painted. I smiled. I knew we would both be alright.

The End

On Tuesday night Shane, George and I met up at Sandy Bottom Creek. We leaned over the side and made bad jokes about jumping. We made plans for going bush-bashing in the weekend. I didn't know if I could come. I had to wait and see what was going on at home first. Dad had asked me if I'd like to help out at the shop more. He'd pay me on a per hour basis. He thought I was old enough, as long as I didn't go advising people to jump off cliffs. I was really happy about it. It meant he could get to see the kids more at home, and I'd get to see less of them. I'd brought home a recipe book from the library and Dad had told me that being Mum wasn't my new job. He said that I wasn't allowed to forget that I was Krissey, and thirteen years old. I still had lots of teenage things to do. Which I was happy to hear too.

George was looking at me funny.

"What?"

"Just wondering if now, well, Shane said your anger wool isn't knitting three or four jumpers all at

once. I just thought, maybe you'd like to..."

"Hold your hand George?" I simpered at him, and grinned mischievously.

He laughed. "Yeah, wanna hold my hand Krissey?" I had set out to make him feel uncomfortable, but suddenly now I was.

"Sure."

He reached over and took it. I felt choked up.

"It had better be good news or I'll chuck you over the side."

I felt his hand slide into mine. His eyes closed as he concentrated. I felt the pinpricks in my palm. I held my breath and waited. Then he was stepping away and I was bringing up my hand. The light was getting dimmer, but I moved my hand so a ray of light lit it. I bent over my palm.

I gasped.

"What does it say?" Shane was leaning over and I snapped my fingers closed over the words.

"Wow" I said, "I wasn't expecting that."

I looked at George, who of course, knew what it said too. I looked away.

"Come on, the anticipation is killing me" Shane wheedled.

I shook my head, "This one's my secret. You better keep it too" I pointed at George, but I couldn't look at him. Imagine that. It had never crossed my mind. I had only ever thought of George and Shane as friends, nothing more. Now I had to get around with them knowing what it said on my palm.

Mr Bier saved me yet again and came driving up in his little old Honda. It seemed amazing that an alien was driving around in a mustard yellow Honda and wearing thick rimmed glasses and the body of a man who was currently somewhere in space. He pulled over into the grass verge and locked the doors.

"Better hand over the keys now I guess. Wouldn't be too good if I took them with me."

"I've given it an oil change and tune up. I've also given his body a shower and fed it an hour ago. You might want to let him know."

"Crazy" Shane shook his head.

We took off down the track. One of my hands firmly closed.

As we went we told Mr Bier about how we had hauled Humya down the same track.

“Humya can be very difficult.” He said.

I laughed, “I don’t think he thought too much of me.”

He laughed too, “Yes, I heard about that. He said you were well versed in scurrility.” I frowned at that particularly confusing insult.

George mumbled, “Well he was contemptuous of just about everything.”

“That’s Humya.”

Shane and I exchanged amused smiles.

“Very” we said.

When we got to the clearing I remembered that the three rocks were gone.

“Will they find us?”

“Yes. George, did you bring them?”

George fumbled in his pocket and pulled out the three stones that were once massive rocks. He handed them over to Mr Bier, who went to the spot they once stood and placed one in each depression.

He said a word that sounded like mating cicadas.

The rocks shimmered for a moment and then grew. Like inflatable balloons they reverted back to their old place, shape and position.

“Excellent” Shane said.

“How much longer have we got?” I asked.

George looked at his watch, Mr Bier looked at the sky and they both said,

“Twenty three minutes” at the same time.

“Well I brought something for old times sake, and also as it is probably Mr Bi... I mean Fumashwar’s last for a while.” And he pulled out a bar of chocolate which was half melted. I remembered eating all

that chocolate last time and being sick. So long ago.

We munched on it silently.

“I have something for you as well” Mr Bier licked his lips on the last of the chocolate.

“Krissey inspired me.”

“With what?”

“Cliff jumping.”

We looked at each other warily.

“How would you like to have one free flight?”

“On a plane?” Shane asked.

Mr Bier smiled sneakily, “no, I mean fly” he held his arms out from his sides and pretended to fly.

“You’re kidding us?” George said.

“Yes” I said, “yes, please.” I jumped in eagerly.

“There are limitations, you can’t fly over sea, you can’t allow yourselves to be seen, and you have to do it at the same time, and only ever the once.”

“Fine” I was dancing from one foot to the other, “how do we do it? Jumping off a cliff?”

“You sound keen” he grinned, “No; the three of you stand in a circle, hold hands, think of me. Then you’ll start to float, when you are high enough” he put his hands out in front of him and did the twitch, like I’d seen him do before, “that will change your direction” a twitch of his head back, “that will make you pull up or stop, and,” he did one forward, “that makes you fly forward. You can’t hurt yourselves. You won’t stop flying till you are on the ground again. Then that’s it, all over. Make sure that if you’re flying you don’t stop somewhere you can’t get back from. Oh yeah, and the only thing is, make sure while you’re up there, to have some fun.”

“Fantastic!” Even George and Shane looked enthusiastic.

“Here” Mr Bier leaned forward and kissed my forehead, I saw a distant boom of thunder and heard a deep magenta colour. He drew away and cocked his head to his side,

“I’ll miss you.”

I nodded, "Goodbye Mr Bier" tears started in my eyes and I brushed them away with the back of my hand. Mr Bier frowned and I realised he could see the words written on my palm. I shoved my hand in my pocket, too late.

He was smiling.

He turned to Shane and George, "Either of you concerned if I kiss your heads?"

They shook theirs, and they both received their gift of flight too.

I saw it first.

"There!" and pointed to the gleam of orange.

Mr Bier looked up at it. I could tell he was pleased, pleased to be going home. It must have been lonely being the only alien around.

"You'll be able to take off your body and have a rest soon" I said. He grabbed my hand and squeezed.

"Will you ever come back?" George asked.

"Yes" he said, "But it won't be for a long time." He looked regretful.

"We'll be gone by then?" Shane said the thought for us all.

"Yes, you will be gone. But maybe I'll check up and see how your great grandchildren are going."

"Will the world still be here for them?" I asked.

"Well" he said, "that's up to you, and up to the world."

The ship was close now. We moved back into the trees until it was settled over the rocks.

"Good luck Mr Bier." Shane whispered as Mr Bier started walking. He walked through the rocks and I could see the side of his face as he stared up into the light. His mouth curved into a smile as he floated toward it. He didn't look at us again. Then within a few seconds Mr Bier was coming down again. Only this time he wasn't the Mr Bier we knew.

With a snap of the fingers the space ship was a fading gleam in the sky. It was gone.

We hurried over to the rocks to find Mr Bier leaning groggily against one.

“I frogot, wha a howwible fing it tis to hafe a borody.” He said. He stretched out each limb shaking it, looking at them with distaste.

“We’ll help you” Shane said.

Getting Mr Bier back to his car was almost as bad as hauling Humya. We couldn’t say much because Mr Bier was having so many difficulties controlling his body. I was worried there might be parts of him he’d lose control of completely. But we managed, and so did he. We looked at Mr Bier, he was like a butterfly just out of a cocoon with only half his wings pumped full of blood, and then at his car.

Shane grinned, “Hey George, wanna give me the keys?”

So Shane drove us back. George was talking non-stop to the real Mr Bier, asking questions and then saying,

“No, don’t answer that, wait till you’ve had some time to adjust. Can I come see you tomorrow? No don’t answer that....”

I sat in the front with Shane and wondered if I should tell him what it said on my hand. But decided it was probably a good idea if I didn’t. I don’t know if he could handle knowing and it might make it awkward.

“When do you think we’ll get a chance to go flying?” I asked.

“You can’t wait can you” he laughed., “I don’t know, finding a place we can’t be seen might be a bit hard. Out bush might be OK.”

“It’d be better than bush bashing” I agreed.

For a while even George shut up and we drove along the road silently. Me looking for police cars and kangaroos, but also looking back at the year, right from when we did the Alone Spot Experiment. So much had changed. I wasn’t a little kid any more, peeved because someone forgot my birthday. I had friends, true friends, one’s that would never go away. I was alive, even if my mother wasn’t, and I was

glad to be. I knew too, that the world was a huge great unknown, one that needed knowing, and saving, and it was partly my job to save it too.

Before I could think about it too much I leant over and dropped a quick kiss on Shane's cheek. He laughed, winked and grabbed hold of my hand.

Page | 71

"Let me guess what it says." he said, and turned it over. ©