

Another Day in Hell

and other stories

JENNY PAUSACKER

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ANOTHER DAY IN HELL

The other kids in my street just went to school but I went to Hell. That's Helvellyn Girls Grammar School, of course. Not the most exclusive girls' school in Melbourne - Hell took anyone who could afford the fees - but it was a cut above the local state school, which was where I used to go until Dad started making a fortune out of his Kandykane factories and decided to send me to a place where I could meet some nice girls from good families and make contacts that would help me for the rest of my life.

Which shows how much he knew about it.

I didn't mind the teachers at my new school: they weren't any better or worse than my last lot. But lunchtimes were - well, they were hell. My form was basically run by Heather Wilmot. (Tall, good at hockey, slightly spotty, talked about how her mother knew everybody who was anybody in Melbourne). Although Heather was having a bit of competition from a new girl called Sue Sanders. (Long blonde hair, long eyelashes, long legs, talked about her horse and her tennis lessons and her skiing holidays in Switzerland.)

It took me a year to worm my way into Heather's group. A year and a lot of money, in the form of Kandykane chocolate bars that I passed round at lunchtime; expensive pens and gold chains that I handed over to anyone who admired them; huge novels with gold writing on the front and hot sex scenes in Chapter Fifteen that I lent to my eight new best friends. It was hard work but it had to be done. You couldn't be seen eating lunch on your own. Well, not unless you were Pen Georgiou.

Pen Georgiou was small and scruffy, with a round face and a blank stare and a halo of frizzy black hair. She was there on a scholarship and believe me, that went against you at Hell. Heather's group had a complicated scoring system where you got points for coming from an upper crust family, being beautiful, being good at games, being rich and being a suck, in that order. Being smart counted for something but on a different scale, out on its own. And that's where Pen was too - out on her own.

Our form room was upstairs in the Constance Smythe Wing, a small old red brick building that was due to be demolished as soon as the Helvellyn Girls Grammar School Building Fund had raised enough money. (Dad was waiting for the right moment to make a big donation - he rather fancied the idea of a Theodore Kane Wing at Hell.) Every lunchtime two thirds of the girls used to scurry off to meet their friends from other forms and Heather's group used to stroll out to the tiny courtyard in between Smythe Wing and the rest of the school. Half of the courtyard was grass, screened by a semi-circle of bushes, and the other half was asphalt. The group always settled themselves on the grass, Heather Wilmot at one end and Sue Sanders at the other. Pen Georgiou sat by herself on the asphalt and read, a different book every day.

One Friday we were all following Heather to the grassy side of the courtyard when she stopped beside Pen and whisked her book out of her hands. '*The Outsider* by Albert Camus,' she read out. 'Sounds just like you, Pen. Honestly, can't you think of anything better to do?'

'I'm stuck here,' Pen said with her blank stare. 'I might as well make some use of the time.'

'Why don't you try to mix a bit more? Your mother and father probably sent you here to learn proper manners.'

Pen shrugged. 'Yes, but they don't know what you're like.'

She stretched up and grabbed the book while Heather was still staring. For about twenty seconds I thought someone had actually managed to score a point off Heather but then, in the nick of time, she started to laugh. All the others joined in, giggling their way across to the grassy circle. I glanced back just before I reached the bushes but Pen was already turning the next page of her book.

'Poor Pen,' Heather said as she flopped down onto the smoothest patch of lawn. 'That dreadful frizzy hair. And she really ought to try and lose some weight. Her parents should never have let her come to Helvellyn, you know. She's out of her depth here.'

She looked straight at me while she was speaking. That was how they did it at Hell. They never actually said, 'How embarrassing to have a father who owns factories' or 'You're out of your depth too, Mara Kane.' But they let you know what they were thinking, all the same.

Still, I don't give up easily. I looked straight back at Heather and said, 'You're right, Pen probably is out of her depth,' to show her that I didn't think I was in the same league as Pen.

Then we all started talking about parties. Parties were the big status symbol that year. Sandy Farrow had a pool party. Alison Shepherd had a disco machine and dancing. Heather had gone one better, as usual, and provided half a dozen genuine Camden College guys for us to dance with. And my dad had taken the whole form to the latest all-singing all-dancing musical with supper at a fancy restaurant. (We'd spent ages planning it, after I realised how many points I'd lose if I invited the group to our house in the outer suburbs.)

'It's been a wonderful year for parties so far. Wonderful,' Heather sighed and then she swivelled towards Liz Banks, a wispy girl with transparent skin and eyes like a startled possum. 'Oops, sorry, Banksie. I forgot. We shouldn't keep talking about parties all the time, not when you weren't able to have a proper party.'

As Banksie started to twitch, Sue Sanders scrambled to her feet and hurried away. I'd noticed that Sue never joined in when Heather was picking on the other kids, even though it would've been an easy way to rack up some extra points. I admired her for that, even while I hated her.

It might seem strange to waste time on hating Sue, when I had somebody like Heather around to hate. But the way I saw it, Heather Wilmot was a fact of life, like the weather. If she started to get on your nerves, you could always bitch about her spots or her bossiness or the way she always came bottom of the form in maths.

Sue Sanders, on the other hand, was the ideal Helvellyn girl - classy and beautiful and athletic and rich and smart - which made her a hell of a lot harder to take. I'd had to work like crazy to get a toehold on the outside edge of Heather's group but Sue had swanned straight into the centre. She was Heather's second-in-command already and she could probably be the leader next year, if she wanted to.

Mind you, Heather didn't seem to have the faintest idea that Sue was a serious competitor. She didn't take any notice of Sue's exit; she just leaned in closer and patted Banksie's arm.

'Personally, I think it's lovely that you wanted to spend your birthday with your family,' she beamed. 'My mother says your parents are being very brave about their financial problems and she really admires the sacrifices they've made to keep you at Helvellyn ... Oh dear, I haven't upset you, have I?'

'No,' Banksie muttered. 'I'm just - I've got - a stomach ache.'

She scurried off after Sue, leaving Heather to gaze after her with fake concern. With Banksie gone, we went back to the topic of parties and with

Sue gone, we spent a lot of time speculating about what her party would be like. Alison Shepherd hoped that Sue would take us riding and Sandy Farrow guessed, rather grumpily, that she would have a pool party - she was obviously worried that Sue's pool would be bigger and better than hers.

'No, I think Sue's party'll be something truly special,' Heather said in a moment of rare generosity. 'She *is* lucky. I wish my birthday came in the second half of the year.'

She gazed down thoughtfully at her outspread fingernails and then she rose and strolled off as well. (Lunchtime was like that: we only had one toilet in our old building, so we did our best not to crowd into it at the same time.) For a couple of minutes there, we didn't have either of our leaders to keep us on track but before anybody could panic, Sue Sanders turned up again with a question for Alison about the inter-school tennis tournament. That occupied another five minutes, after which Sandy went off and Heather came back and the discussion switched to sport in general. Heather boasted about how she'd scored the winning goal in the hockey match and Sue leaned back modestly and let Alison sing her praises, which was typical of both of them.

'Yes, our form's doing pretty well this year,' Heather summed up. 'Me at tennis, Sue as hockey captain ... and apparently good old Mara might even win us the Tidiness Prize, after slaving away as our tidiness monitor. It must run in the family, Mara. Someone told me that your mother used to be,' she paused for effect, 'a cleaner.'

I sat there in silence for a moment, trying to calculate whether I had any points left at all. Then I blinked hard and the circle of smirking faces vanished. All I could see was Mum's hands, their leathery skin and twisty veins, with two diamond rings blazing on either side of her worn-thin wedding ring. If I tried to defend her, I'd look as though Heather's putdown had got to me. If I said nothing, I'd look as though I was ashamed of Mum. A classic no-win situation, as usual. My turn to get up and saunter away.

'Thanks for the reminder,' I said casually over my shoulder, almost bumping into Sandy. 'Better make sure the form room's looking neat when Miss Edgar drops in for Maths. Can't afford to make a bad impression on one of the judges for the Tidiness Prize, can we?'

But five minutes later, alone in the form room, I drew my arm back and hurled the duster at the blackboard. It thudded to the floor, leaving a pattern of white claw marks behind it. 'I hate you,' I said to the rows of desks. 'I loathe and despise the whole bloody lot of you. I'll get back at you some day, just wait and see.'

After that I felt much better. I wiped the blackboard clean and went to dust the desktops. It was nothing, really. Nothing that mattered. Just another day in Hell.

That was Friday - like I said, a fairly typical sort of day. On Monday, however, something unexpected happened. Sue Sanders came back from the weekend with a completely different personality.

Normally she sped round the school with her long gold rope of hair bouncing on her shoulders, talking to everyone and taking an interest in everything. But now she sidled, she kept her eyes down, she didn't say much and when she did, she spoke in quick breathless gasps that seemed to be apologising for making any sound at all. Even her plait looked thinner and lankier and mousier.

We were all worried but none of us knew what to do about it. So we had to wait until Heather finally noticed the change and asked what was the matter.

'Nothing,' Sue mumbled in that tone of voice that really means, 'Something big.'

Heather scowled at her. 'Come off it,' she said. 'Do you think I'm stupid? You've been flapping round like a wet hen all morning. It's obvious that you're upset.'

When she took a step forward, Sue skittered away until she was literally backed into a corner. She clenched her fists and lifted her head. There were two spots of pink on her pale cheeks.

'Of course I'm upset,' she burst out. 'Wouldn't you be upset if you invited everyone to a party and you waited and waited and nobody came? I just wish you'd tell me what I've done to turn the whole form against me. Don't give me the silent treatment any more. I can't bear it.'

Naturally enough, no one could think of a thing to say. We all gazed at the floor, except for Pen Georgiou who went on watching Sue with her blank stare. Finally Heather spoke on behalf of the rest of us.

'A party?' she said. 'You asked us to a party? I didn't get an invitation, Sue.'

'Neither did I,' Sandy chipped in.

'Or me.'

'Or me.'

With each repetition Sue's shoulders relaxed a bit more. 'You didn't?' she said, frowning. 'But I left the invitations on your desks at lunchtime on Friday. It was meant to be a surprise. They were in coloured envelopes - red and blue and yellow and -'

'Green?' Pen Georgiou asked and Sue nodded.

'Yes, green too. How did you know?'

In answer Pen held up a torn scrap of green paper. 'Found it sticking out of the empty desk next to mine,' she said briefly.

She flung back the lid of the desk and we crowded around her. Stared down at a mess of coloured confetti: envelopes and invitations neatly shredded into hundreds of tiny pieces.

While we were still staring, Miss Edgar strode in. Pen slammed down the desk lid and we all tried to behave like diligent maths students but it was hard to concentrate on the lesson. Everybody kept glancing round furtively or signalling sympathetically to Sue or whispering to their friends whenever they got the chance.

In the end Miss Edgar gave up and dismissed us five minutes early but even then we just waited beside our desks, fidgeting with anticipation, until Heather said, 'Listen, everyone, this is serious. Somebody stole Sue's party invitations and ripped them up. It was a terrible thing to do and we've got to find out who's responsible.'

A collective sigh shivered around the room. We were all relieved that Heather had taken over. And I think we were all secretly excited by the drama of it, as well.

'I'll be in charge of the investigation,' Heather went on. 'Our first job is to identify the major suspects but we'll need to start by getting our witnesses together. Pen Georgiou, you'll be important there.' She checked and added tetchily, 'Pen? Pen, where are you?'

Sandy Farrow darted over to the front door of the form room and peered down the stairs. 'She's out in the courtyard, reading,' she said, sounding as incredulous as if Pen was deliberately missing the best TV show of the week.

'All right then, go and tell her to come back.'

The minutes ticked away. Before long I began to wonder whether Pen was actually going to make a fool of Heather by refusing. Then suddenly Heather said, 'On second thoughts, maybe we'd better go down there. It'll be easier to recreate the crime scene if we're sitting in our usual places. And besides, we could get into trouble if one of the prefects finds us in the form room at lunchtime.'

Nice tactics, I thought. Heather wasn't the leader of the group for nothing. She knew how to cover up when there was rebellion in the ranks.

We trooped down the front stairs and over to Pen, who was reading *Waiting for Godot* while Sandy watched in frustration.

'Would you like to come and sit on the grass with us?' Heather asked politely and Pen grinned.

'As a matter of fact, I'm starting to prefer asphalt. But don't worry, I'll come.'

It was a tight squeeze on the semi-circle of lawn, because there were twenty five of us where eight of us usually sat. We crowded together, knees bumping, and Heather positioned herself at the front of the group, like a

teacher confronting a class. She patted the grass beside her and Sue Sanders went to join her. Sue had made a quick recovery, once she knew that she hadn't lost her rating in the popularity polls. Too bad, I thought vindictively, wishing she'd stayed upset for longer.

Heather cleared her throat. 'We have to accept that we're all under suspicion to begin with,' she said portentously. 'As you know, there are only two ways of getting into the form room. No one could've climbed in through the windows, not when we're on the second storey. The thief had to use the stone steps on this side of Smythe Wing or the old staircase at the back. So we can't even discount the girls who went off to eat lunch with their friends somewhere else in the school, because they could've easily sneaked around and crept in by the back way.'

She looked at us sternly. Most of the class wriggled nervously and some of them tried to catch Sue's eye, as if they were hoping that she would defend them against Heather.

'Hold on,' she objected, right on cue. 'You're going too fast, Heather. Some of us have got alibis - for example, the ones who were sitting on the lawn for the whole of lunchtime.'

'That's right,' Alison Shepherd said with a grateful glance at Sue. 'I was here from start to finish, and so were Mary and Carol. The only people who left were Sue, when she went to put the invitations on our desks, and then Banksie, Sandy, Mara ... and you, Heather.'

'Thank you, I'm aware of that,' Heather said crisply. 'As I said before, we're all under suspicion - except for you and Mary and Carol, if you want to be pedantic about it. I'm also prepared to admit that Banksie, Sandy, Mara and I are the prime suspects at present. If you think that disqualifies me from running this investigation, Alison, I'll be happy to stand down and let you take over.'

'Oh no,' Alison blurted, looking thoroughly intimidated. 'No, it's fine by me, Heather.' Then she added with a last spurt of defiance, 'But Pen Georgiou's in the clear as well. You probably couldn't see her from where you were sitting, because the bushes were in your way, but I was in a direct line with her and I can swear that she never moved. She had a good view of the front steps too, better than any of us.'

'Yes, I've always known that Pen was a vital witness,' Heather snapped. 'Still, she's hardly a hundred per cent reliable, considering that she had her nose buried in a book.'

'I kept an eye on things, all the same,' Pen said mildly and Heather flashed back, 'Prove it!'

Pen shrugged. 'Well, Sandy went to the dunny to change her sanitary pad - I noticed the bulge in her blazer pocket. And you collected your cosmetic

bag from the lockers under the stairs, so I presume you were going to slather some more makeup over that pimple on -'

'All right, that's enough,' Heather said hastily. 'I think we're all satisfied that you're a good observer, Pen. Perhaps you can cut this whole procedure short by telling us exactly who went up the front steps.'

Pen Georgiou aimed one of her blank stares at me. 'I can't tell you anything you don't know,' she said. 'I only saw Sue and Mara.'

It occurred to me, a bit belatedly, that there had been an unexpected glint behind Pen's blank stare. A glint of warning? I'd been keeping as quiet as possible but now I said, in the steadiest voice that I could manage, 'Yes, I went up to tidy the room before Miss Edgar arrived. That narrows things down, right? The invitations must've been taken somewhere in between the time Sue left them there, near the start of lunchtime, and the time when I came in, at the end of lunchtime. Which seems to indicate that the thief must've used the back stairs.'

I was quite proud of my logical reasoning but Heather looked dissatisfied. 'That's a nuisance,' she grumbled. 'It's a pity we didn't have another Pen Georgiou standing guard on the back stairs. But you know what it's like behind Smythe Wing - just the path and a few bushes and the gate that opens out onto the main road. No one ever goes there at lunchtime ... so I'd have to agree with Mara that it's the most obvious way for somebody to sneak into the form room.'

For the last ten minutes everyone else had been focussing on Heather, Alison, Banksie and me but now the suspicious glances were directed fairly evenly around the group. I was starting to relax when Roberta Lewis, one of the girls with friends in another form, waved her hand in the air.

'Wait a minute, Heather,' she called out. 'You're talking as though we could've pretended we were going to meet our friends and then come creeping back to play that nasty trick on Sue. But how were we supposed to know that Sue had left the invitations on our desks? Like she said, it was meant to be a surprise. Nobody could've planned to do it.'

'True,' Heather admitted. 'There's only one problem with that. It leaves us right back where we started.'

After that nobody said anything for a while. Heather examined her fingernails; Sue Sanders stared at the sky. Pen Georgiou, who had perched herself on an ornamental boulder at the back of the lawn, was studying the group like a scientist in a laboratory full of rats. And everyone else shifted uncomfortably, looking from Heather to Sue and back again.

'It's a shame you left straight after school on Friday, Sue,' said Roberta Lewis, breaking the silence. 'If only you'd hung about for a while, you probably would've realised that we hadn't got your invitations.'

Sue smoothed her long plait. 'Yes, I know. But I had to dash off, because my father had booked a taxi to take me into the city. We were having dinner at the Windsor, to celebrate my birthday.'

There was a murmur of approval from the girls around me, mixed with a bit of envy. Obviously the Windsor was the right place to go for a birthday treat. I made a mental note to tell Dad about it later.

While the others were still admiring Sue, Alison Shepherd stuck her hand up. 'Listen, I've just thought of something,' she said. 'Shouldn't we be checking on any of the kids who wandered off from our group on Friday lunchtime? I mean, we know what Sue was doing and Sandy was only gone for a few minutes, so she wouldn't have had time to get up to the form room. But Banksie was away for ages, and so were you, Heather.'

She watched Heather closely, looking pleased with herself. Alison was one of Sue's main supporters and she was clearly enjoying the chance to take a few digs at Heather. It worked, too. For the first time Heather lost some of her buoyant self-confidence. She bent her head and rubbed the spot on her chin, thinking fast.

'Pen,' she said abruptly, 'did you keep track of the people going in and out of the toilet?'

'I saw you go out and in,' Pen said, choosing her words carefully. 'As far as I know, you just went straight to the dunny and back again.'

To start with, Heather simply looked relieved but then her eyes narrowed. 'And Banksie?' she asked. 'What about her?'

'No,' Pen said reluctantly.

'No?' Heather prompted, leaning forward.

'No, Banksie didn't go into the dunny at all. She went round the side of Smythe Wing, past the bushes near the gate. I lost sight of her after that.'

Everyone turned on Banksie, like sharks that had just smelt blood, and she gazed back with round, frightened eyes. I was sorry for her, in a way, but I was mostly glad they weren't looking at me like that.

'Banksie had a motive,' Heather announced. 'She got terribly upset because we happened to be talking about birthday parties, remember. My guess is that she went up to the form room to cry in private, noticed the invitations and decided to ruin Sue's party as a kind of revenge.'

'Maybe,' said Pen Georgiou. 'But that motive could apply to anyone, especially after the big build up about Sue's party.'

Sue bit her lip. 'Come on, Banksie,' she said kindly. 'I'm sure there's some explanation. Tell us what you were really doing.'

A flood of scarlet washed over Banksie's transparent skin and ebbed away, leaving her paler than ever. 'No!' she yelled at the top of her voice and then she bolted.

‘Oh dear,’ Heather said with relish. ‘I’m afraid she must be guilty, after all. That’s as good as a confession.’

We watched Banksie stumble across the asphalt. She hadn’t gone far when Marion Jessop, the prefect on yard duty, hurried over and stopped her. As we all ducked our heads guiltily, Marion said, ‘Hello, Liz. Are you feeling better today?’

Banksie muttered something in reply and the prefect went on, ‘Remember, you can always come to me if you’re having problems. I was worried about you on Friday. You looked so -’

Before she could finish, Heather jumped up. ‘Excuse me, Marion,’ she said in her best form captain’s voice. ‘I wouldn’t interrupt if it wasn’t really important but ... did you see Banksie at lunchtime on Friday?’

‘Yes, I did, as a matter of fact,’ Marion said coldly. ‘I found her behind the bushes by the fence, crying her eyes out, and I sat with her for most of the lunch break. Liz isn’t the sort of girl who tells tales but I could make a pretty good guess at what was going on. A word of warning - we’re not too keen on bullies, here at Helvellyn.’

She gave us a swift, fierce glare and marched away. Heather took Banksie’s arm solicitously and led her back to the group. ‘You should’ve told us,’ she said. ‘Why were you being so secretive?’

Banksie shook her hand off with an angry twitch. ‘Leave me alone. I just wish you hadn’t dragged Marion Jessop into this.’

‘But it was for your own good. You had an alibi. That’s something we needed to know.’

‘So what?’ Banksie said sullenly. ‘I don’t care.’

She sat down at the edge of the group with her back turned. Heather looked puzzled but it seemed pretty obvious, to me at any rate. Banksie had a crush on Marion Jessop and she hadn’t wanted anybody to know. If I’d been her, I would’ve felt exactly the same. Heather’s definition of the word ‘information’ was ‘something you can use against people’.

I was so caught up in thinking about Banksie that it took a while to notice that the temperature of the group had changed again. Things seemed much chillier all of a sudden, at least where I was sitting. I tuned in hastily to find Heather saying, ‘So, Banksie, could you see the back stairs from your bush?’

Banksie nodded.

‘And did anyone go into the form room during the time you were there?’

Banksie shook her head.

‘Interesting,’ Heather said thoughtfully. ‘That seems to leave us with Mara as our only suspect.’

I’d been waiting for that to happen, of course, but even so I was surprised at how sick and hollow I felt. It was the expression on all their faces

that got to me. They weren't disapproving or angry or malicious or excited. They were just relieved - relieved that Heather wasn't pointing the finger at somebody they liked.

Nothing for them to worry about now. No need for anyone to worry about Mara Kane, who was plump and clumsy and ignorant and didn't fit in. I was an even better choice than Banksie. Even more of an outsider.

I hate you. Loathe and despise the whole bloody lot of you. I'll get back at you some day, just wait and see.

'Mara had a motive too,' Heather pointed out helpfully. 'Her family's - well, they're not our sort of people, which must be hard for her sometimes, I suppose. It's no wonder she turned against Sue, when you think about the difference between the two of them. But it was silly of you, Mara. You didn't need to be jealous. We don't care about other people's backgrounds - honestly, we don't.'

The girls on either side of me shifted away, in case I contaminated them, and stared at me reproachfully. 'What are we going to do?' said Sandy Farrow with breathless excitement. 'Should we tell the principal about her or will we work out our own sort of punishment?'

As I blinked at her, still unable to speak, Pen Georgiou sat up straighter on her boulder. 'Hang on a second,' she commanded. 'There's one more thing, before you call out the lynch mob.'

'What?' Heather asked impatiently and Pen said, 'Sue?'

Sue Sanders rose to her feet and took a few steps backwards, until she was leaning against the wall of the courtyard. For the third time that day, she changed her personality in front of us. The ideal Helvellyn girl was gone and so was the unhappy waif. Instead she suddenly reminded me of James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, her thumbs tucked into the belt of her tunic, her hips tilted forward and her head tilted back.

'Okay, Pen,' she said. 'You're right, this has gone far enough. I can't stand by and let Mara take the blame. Not when I ripped up those invitations myself.'

'But why?' Heather asked after an endless silence. 'Why did you do it, Sue? I can't see why anyone would deliberately destroy the invitations to their own party.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake,' Sue said irritably. 'I never intended to have a party in the first place. I couldn't let any of you come to my house and I didn't have any other alternatives. I know the kind of turn that you lot expect and my folks couldn't possibly afford it. I couldn't even afford those invitations. I shoplifted them from the fancy newsagent down the road.'

Alison Shepherd burst into tears and everyone else looked stunned. 'So you're not rich?' said Roberta Lewis.

'You don't have a pool?' said Sandy.

'You weren't really going off to meet your parents at the Windsor on Friday?' said Heather.

'That's right,' Sue said with a grin. 'I'm a scholarship girl, just like Pen, except that I was better at hiding it. I made up the sort of stories that you wanted to hear. And I rang for that taxi myself, so I could make a quick getaway after school and dodge any questions about the party.' She glanced around the group and added, 'Still, none of that will be a problem to any of you. Like Heather said to Mara a minute ago, you don't care about other people's backgrounds. Do you?'

In the silence that followed, the eyes of almost every girl in the form turned trustingly towards Heather. Her face went blank for a moment and then she said, 'Yes, but you lied to us, remember. Of course we would've been sympathetic if you'd been honest with us. But you *lied*, Sue. We can't possibly forgive that.'

Sue smiled at us: the same golden smile as ever. 'Very neat,' she remarked. 'Pretty much what I expected,' and she swung around and walked away.

For a while everybody seemed too shocked to speak. There was none of the excitement they'd felt when they thought Banksie was the thief and none of the relief they'd felt when they thought it was me. I tried to feel pleased that Sue had finally got what was coming to her but for some reason I didn't seem to be able to hate her. Not any more.

'How - how did you know, Pen? Alison Shepherd asked finally in a shaky voice. 'About Sue, I mean.'

Pen Georgiou slid down from her boulder. 'I've got a funny way of looking at things,' she explained. 'I don't automatically assume that the popular girls are always innocent and the unpopular girls are always guilty.' She paused and then added, 'Besides, I saw Sue slipping out through the gate to the phone box in the main road. That helped me to make up my mind.'

'Not fair,' Heather said accusingly. 'You never told us that Sue rang for her own taxi.'

'Neither I did,' Pen agreed and she turned and walked away as well.

The minute she'd gone, Sandy Farrow leaned forward and thumped me on the back. Alison Shepherd caught my eye, smiling tearfully, and Heather announced, 'That was a most unfortunate mistake on my part, Mara. But I must say, you're taking it really well, just like a true Helvellyn girl. Why don't you come to dinner at my house tonight, to make sure there's no hard feelings?'

She patted the grass beside her and I stood up slowly. For the first time since I'd come to Hell, I had Heather where I wanted her. If I played on her guilt, I might be able to take Sue's place in the group. I'd be able to learn how to fit in and make contacts that would help me for the rest of my life. With a bit of luck, I might even become the new leader in a couple of years.

Still, I hadn't forgotten who'd helped me when I was about to be turned into the group's scapegoat. So, instead of walking straight across to Heather, I swung away in my turn. I wanted to go and thank Pen Georgiou but as I looked out through the bushes, I realised that, for once, she wasn't sitting by herself and reading.

This time her book lay on the asphalt at her feet and another girl sat next to her. It was Sue Sanders. They were talking together at top speed, their eyes alight, their mouths curved in identical smiles, their hands gesturing extravagantly.

For one wild moment I thought I might even go over and join them. But then I remembered how much I'd hated being an outsider and how hard I'd worked to get the approval of Heather's group. I'd have to be crazy to give that up, I thought as I went to sit at Heather's side.

Crazy, right?

SURVIVOR

This is how it started.

Me, looking through a window.

A Saturday afternoon window. Pale winter sunshine, making window-shaped squares on the brown carpet.

A woman with a white stripe in her hair, a bald man, a girl with curls and a boy with the straightest hair ever, all sprawled on the carpet. They were playing Monopoly that Saturday. But they could've been playing cards, doing the crossword or trying to guess the answers to a TV quiz show.

They loved games.

They were supposed to be my family, only I didn't feel like I was part of them. Yeah, right, I know some kids wish they were adopted - but I really am. One minute, I was living with my mum, in a hobbit house at the end of a little street lined with stumpy plane trees. Next minute, my mum went into hospital and I had to go and stay with this cousin of hers and then.

And then.

Go on, Jodi. Say it.

Then my mum was dead and I had to stay with the cousin and his family forever. I had to go to a different school, as well. No one was mean to me. But they were all new. Mum and me only used to see Cousin Ted and his wife and kids at Christmas. Now I saw them all day, every day.

So it felt good when Bree Hooper walked up to me after class. 'Want to come round to my place on Saturday?' she asked.

'Yes,' I said and on Saturday, round I went.

Bree showed me her supersonic CD player and her Silicon Fish CDs and her poster of Jed Johnston from Silicon Fish and her cupboard full of clothes and her mum's make up.

'Want to dress up and dance in front of the mirror?' she asked.

'No,' I said.

'You're boring,' Bree told me. 'I should've asked Mai. She likes dancing.'

We stared at each other for a while and then I said, 'I better go now.' Bree didn't say anything, so I went back to Cousin Ted's house and looked through the window. Two choices. I could walk into the house and start playing Monopoly with the others. Or else.

Or else.

Go on, Jodi. Do it.

I did it. I walked away from the window, out the front gate and down to the cross road.

The cross road goes four ways at once. A bus to the north and the south. A tram to the east and the west. I had five dollar coins in my pocket, so I tossed one of them. Heads, the tram. Tails, the bus.

Tails.

I tossed again and caught the bus to the north. That took three of my coins. The bus jolted into the city and out the other side. The houses got bigger. The street got wider. Every time the bus opened its doors, a wind blew in, smelling salty.

Oh, great. It looked like I was going to the beach.

Wrong. When the bus stopped for the last time, I couldn't see any sand. Just a giant concrete slab with a tin roof, sticking out into the sea. Forklifts trundling around. Huge metal containers, high as a house. And ships. Long naval ships. Big white ships. Small dirty ships.

Okay, not the beach. The docks. That was just as good.

I walked right down to the end of the pier, counting the ships, reading their names, checking out their flags. A Greek flag and an English flag. An American flag and a Chinese flag. One day I could step onto one of those ships and sail away.

One day.

On my way back, I stopped to draw a picture of the Chinese flag. A man came up behind me.

'Pretty ship,' he said.

I didn't say anything. My mum told me not to talk to strange men.

'Pretty girl,' said the strange man. 'How about I buy us some chips? We can sit by the sea and feed the gulls. You'd like that.'

I looked at the chip van. I shook my head. I scooted over to the van. A mum and a dad and two kids were standing in line, so I stood next to them, like we were a family.

When I turned round, the strange man was still watching me. I bought some chips with my last two dollars. The family headed for their car. I followed them. The strange man followed me.

Help!

Then I noticed a bus, waiting at the bus stop. I ducked past the family and ran, faster than fast. The driver checked my ticket. The bus jolted off. I sat in the back seat, eating chips, watching the strange man get smaller and smaller.

Sweet.

I'd seen ships and tricked a strange man.

I'd had an adventure.

'Bree Hooper asked me to her place again,' I said next Saturday.

'But we were going to play our new computer game,' said Lucy. (She's the curly girl. My un-sister.)

Cousin Ted frowned at her. 'I'm glad you're making new friends, Jodi,' he said. 'Here, I better give you some pocket money.'

He gave me a twenty dollar note. Amazing. Mum only ever gave me ten dollars. I stuffed the note into my pocket and went straight to the cross road. No coin to toss. But it didn't matter. I caught the bus last week. I'd catch the tram this week.

The tram rattled east into the city and stopped at a big market. The front half was packed with stalls selling fruit and vegetables. The back half was clothes and ... all kinds of stuff. Rings. Shoes. Bumbags. Carpets. Kittens. Watches. Lollies. You name it, someone was selling it.

I bought a shiny pink apple and wandered round, munching the apple, watching the people. Like, for example, this guy who was the last of the punks. Green mohawk. Skull t-shirt. A safety pin in his ear. And a red-faced baby in a pusher.

The baby's face was red from yelling. The punk sniffed it and said, 'Yuck. You stink.' He dumped the baby on an empty table and started changing its nappy. Only the nappy pin wouldn't work ... so he took the safety pin out of his ear and stuck it into the nappy.

Oh, gross. But cool too, in a way.

I was still grinning at the baby when I saw the poster. A woman with a unicorn, walking through a forest. My mum had that poster on her bedroom wall. I don't know what happened to it.

'How much?' I asked the man on the stall.

'Seventeen dollars,' he said.

I counted my money three times. But I still only had sixteen dollars. I wished I hadn't bought that apple.

'Fifteen dollars, for you,' said the man on the stall.

He rolled up the poster and put a rubber band round it. I bought another apple and ate it on the tram. Don't ask me why, but I didn't want to put the poster in the bedroom I shared with Lucy. So, when I got home, I sneaked down the side of the house, into the back garden.

There was an old bungalow at the end of the garden. Somebody used to live in it, ages ago. Now Cousin Ted kept his gardening stuff there. I pinned my poster on the wall. Then I sat on a bucket and looked at the woman and the unicorn.

Cousin Ted thought the bungalow was just a garden shed.

But I thought it was a really special private place.

Next Saturday, Edmund said, 'Want to play Scrabble, Jodi?' Then he said, 'Hang on, you're going to Bree's place, right?'

(Edmund's my un-brother, if you can't guess.)

When I said, 'Yes,' Cousin Ted gave me another twenty dollars. I went back to the cross road. I looked to the north and the east. It felt like I could see straight across to the docks and the market. The city was a map and I was the biro drawing it. Two more roads to go. I went 'eeny-meeny-miney-mo' and caught the bus to the south.

The last stop was outside a mall. Hundreds of shops - dress shops, food shops, music shops. Hundreds of smells - doughnuts, people-sweat, air freshener. Hundreds of noises - muzak, kids screaming, a fountain tinkling. And people, people, people everywhere.

It was too much. I only lasted half an hour. After that, I staggered back to the bus stop. The bus wasn't due for twenty five minutes. I watched the clouds for a bit. Then I spotted some little shops on the far side of the road.

The middle shop sold secondhand clothes. Not sad old clothes, though. Fun stuff like fuzzy pink jumpers and striped socks and red leather jackets. I fell in love with this green glitter cardigan.

The woman behind the counter smiled at me. 'Go on,' she said. 'Buy it.'

'It's cool,' I said. 'Only Cousin Ted and the others stare at me, if I wear that sort of thing. My mum loved bright clothes. She used to make costumes

for plays. Sometimes the actors came over to our house, to try on their costumes. It was like a party. Other times, there was just Mum and me. That was nice too.'

'Was?' said the woman. 'So your mum ...?'

'Died,' I said. 'I went to the funeral. They don't bury people these days. They cremate them and put the ashes into a wall. I reckon burying would be better - like putting a blanket over them. But nobody asked me.'

I went on staring at the green glitter cardigan. It jumped off the rack and into my hands.

'Can I give this to you?' the woman said. 'Please. I'd like to.'

'Th'ks,' I said.

Then I raced out of the shop, before I burst into tears. Luckily, the bus was waiting. I flashed my ticket at the driver and sat down in the back seat, hugging my new cardigan. I hadn't talked about Mum to anyone, ever. Now I'd blabbed the whole story to some woman I'd never met before.

Weird or what?

When I got home, I sneaked down the side of the house and peered through the window. My un-family were sitting on the floor, playing Scrabble. Cousin Ted was wearing a dark brown jumper. Cousin Marg was wearing a light brown jumper. Lucy was wearing a dark brown windcheater. Edmund was wearing a light brown windcheater.

Yeah, right. I headed on to the bungalow and left my green glitter cardigan on a shelf, underneath my poster.

In my special private place.

Next Saturday I put on my green glitter cardigan and went down to the cross road. This time, I knew where I was going. I caught the tram to the west and got off, three stops before the end of the line.

I walked down a little street lined with stumpy plane trees, counting the houses. The big house where John and Terry lived with their two dogs. The little house where Mrs Filippi lived with her fifteen cats. And the next house was the hobbit house where.

Where.

Go on, Jodi. Say it.

The hobbit house where I used to live with my mum.

Mrs Filippi was sitting on her front verandah. Four cats were lying around, next to her chair. She had a tiny white kitten on her lap.

'*Bon giorno*, Jodi,' she called out. 'So sad about your mum.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Can I say hello to the kitten?'

'This kitten is very sick,' said Mrs Filippi. 'I find him in the back lane. See, runny nose and weepy eyes. I give him special milk from a tin, out of a baby's bottle. But I think -'

'No,' I said. 'You're wrong, Mrs F. He'll be all right.'

'Maybe,' said Mrs Filippi. 'You like to hold him for a minute, Jodi? Wait here, while I get you a nice glass of lemonade.'

I didn't wait, though. I took the kitten and the bottle and I ran back to the bus stop.

Mrs Filippi thought the kitten was going to die.

But I knew I could save him.

I bought a tin of milk from the corner shop at the cross road. And I rang Cousin Ted's house from the phone box.

'Hi,' said Edmund. 'Who is it?'

'It's Jodi,' I said. 'Bree Hooper asked me to sleep over at her place. Tell your dad I'll come home on Sunday morning.'

Then I sneaked down the side of the house and hid in the bungalow with the kitten. He was so little. His eyes were still shut and his ears were still folded. I could see his pink skin through his white fur.

'You need a name,' I said. 'I'll call you Survivor, same as this show I saw on TV.'

I sat on the bucket and held Survivor on my lap. After a while I found Cousin Ted's garden fork and banged a hole in the tin of milk. I filled the baby's bottle and pushed it into the kitten's mouth. Survivor sucked hard. His nose turned bright pink. His tiny ears went flick, flick, flick. His tummy got nice and round.

'Good kitten,' I told him. 'Good Survivor.'

When his tummy was full, Survivor went to sleep. He slept for hours. It got dark and then darker. I went to sleep too - but I woke up, just before I fell off the bucket. There were some matches and a candle on the shelf. I lit the candle, put it in the bucket and sat on the floor with Survivor.

'Time for your next bottle,' I said.

Only Survivor wouldn't suck the bottle this time. I talked to him. I shook the bottle. I stroked his fur. But he still wouldn't suck. Then I shook the bottle again and spilled some milk on my hand. Survivor poked out his pink tongue and licked up the milk.

'Oh, clever kitten,' I said. 'That's a smart idea.'

I dripped some more milk into my palm. Survivor held onto my fingers and drank the milk. He seemed to like that better than the bottle. At any rate, he started purring. (Well, buzzing. He was too little to purr properly.)

It felt really special. This tiny thing, pedalling on my hand. His paws were smaller than the top of my little finger. I leaned back and looked at the woman and the unicorn. I listened to Survivor, buzzing like a bee. And I went to sleep again.

When I woke up, the candle had almost gone out. Survivor was fast asleep on my hand. At least, I thought he was asleep. I bounced him, to wake him up for his next drink, and then.

And then.

Go on, Jodi. Say it.

No. I can't.

This is how it ended.

Me, digging a hole in the garden with both hands. Breaking my fingernail on a stone. Crying. Digging faster. Hearing voices.

Cousin Ted's voice, saying, 'Jodi! Were you hiding in the shed all this time?'

Lucy saying, 'I knew you weren't really going to Bree's place. Mai's her best friend now.'

Edmund saying, 'I told Lucy not to tell Mum and Dad. But I thought you'd always come back home.'

Cousin Marg saying, 'We were really worried, Jodi. You're one of the family. You know that, don't you?'

I shook my head and went on digging. After a while Edmund said, 'Got it! This is a game, isn't it? Will you nod, if we get the answer right?'

I nodded.

'We're trying to do our best for you,' said Cousin Ted. 'Do you believe me?'

I nodded.

'But you still don't feel like part of our family?' said Cousin Marg.

I shook my head.

'That's because family means you and your mum, right?' said Edmund.

I nodded.

'So you don't actually hate us?' said Lucy.

I shook my head.

'You'd just like to have a day off every now and then?' said Cousin Ted.

I nodded.

'But it could be dangerous, wandering round the city by yourself,' said Cousin Marg. 'If we make some rules, will you stick to them?'

I nodded.

‘Plus I reckon she ought to have the bungalow for her bedroom,’ said Edmund. ‘Would you like that, Jodi?’

I nodded.

‘And can we help you bury the kitten?’ said Lucy. ‘I’ve got this special chocolate box. It’s green and shiny, same as your cardigan. You could have it, if you want.’

I nodded three times and then turned round. My un-family were standing in a row, smiling at me. I reckon they were pleased, because they’d guessed right. Like I said before, they love games.

Cousin Ted got his spade from the bungalow and dug a really deep hole. Lucy tucked Survivor into the shiny green box. Edmund covered the box with a blanket of earth. And Cousin Marg said this poem about Jellicle cats dancing by the light of the moon.

‘Goodbye, Survivor,’ I said. ‘You’ll never be a cat but you were the best kitten.’

After that, they all hugged me, even Edmund. Then we went inside and played Scrabble till two o’clock in the morning. Lucy and Edmund were rapt, because they’d never been allowed to stay up that late before. I was pretty rapt too.

They’re not my family. But they’re the next best thing.

THE EXPERIMENT

Experiment. It's a funny sort of word. Mostly, people talk as though experiments are a bad thing. Like, if you experiment with drugs or experiment with sex, you're doing stuff you're not supposed to do, right?

But the science teacher at my new school, Mr Spiridopoulos ('Call me Jim'), gave us a long rave about experiments this afternoon. He said: 'Experiments can change the world - and you don't need a big laboratory full of fancy equipment, either. Picture some kid back in the stone age, messing around with two sticks and noticing how they get hot if he - or she - rubs them together. And next minute we've got warm fires in winter and cooking and making clay pots and -'

'Burning people's houses down,' Big Mack yells from the back row and everyone laughs.

Not me, though. I was busy thinking about experiments. Sometimes you need a special project and this sounded like a good one. Jim reckons that scientists usually start small, trying things out on rats before they try them on people. There aren't any rats where I live - 'one good thing about this place,' Mum says - but hey, no problem.

If Jim's right, you can be a scientist wherever you are.

Where I am is a rundown caravan park in the middle of nowhere. Six blocks of houses and a lot of small bony hills, green when it rains, brown when it

doesn't. They call it Hopetoun - same as three other towns in Australia - but No-hope-town would be better. We're stranded here because my dad got his arm caught in a hay-baling machine and had to be rushed to the hospital in Milston, forty kays away. Otherwise we would've moved on ages ago.

I hate being stuck in one place. My school's in Milston too and most of the kids from my class live there. I've got nothing to do and nobody to do it with, except my sister Brittany, who doesn't count. Only three other vans in the park and one of them's falling to bits.

Mr Solomon, the old guy who runs this dump, has the oldest caravan but he sleeps all day and reads all night, so I haven't seen him yet. The Parkers have the biggest caravan and I've seen way too much of them. They're old as well and they talk non-stop, if they catch you. Still, Mrs Parker told me about the really old guy who used to live in our van. Ninety when he died. Funny accent. Big parcels of books and magazines from all over the world. Strange chemical smells leaking out of the van's windows.

So maybe he was a scientist too. The most interesting person in No-hope-town ... and he's dead. Typical. This whole town's dead, anyway.

Mrs Parker reckons the really old guy actually died in our actual van. For a while I wondered whether he was still haunting the place, after I looked in the mirror one morning and saw a wrinkly old face staring back at me. But no such luck. The mirror's as old as everything else around here, too misty and spotty to work properly. And besides, scientists don't believe in ghosts.

If I'm a scientist, I'd better think up an experiment soon, before I die of boredom.

I started my first experiment today. It was hot, as usual, so I was sitting outside with my science homework on one of our folding chairs. I could hear Mum and Brittany yakking on endlessly inside the van.

Britt (who worries about everything): 'Not sausages again. I need to lose weight. I'm too fat.'

Mum: (who sees the bright side of everything): 'No, you're not, Britt. You're a lovely-looking girl. Just right for your age.'

I was getting ready to yell 'Shut up' when I heard a slithery, rustling sound somewhere near by. Britt had left a magazine on the other chair and the pages were flapping in the wind. Only there wasn't any wind. Mrs Parker's washing was hanging dead straight and the paper in my folder was as flat as road kill.

That got my attention. I hitched my chair closer and held my hand out, to see if I could feel any movement in the air. The pages stopped turning and my finger landed on a photo of the latest supermodel. Tall and thin. Legs like

sticks of dried spaghetti. A stomach that curved inwards instead of outwards. Arms that never got any wider than her wrists.

Yes! My experiment!

I zapped into the van and said, 'Britt, can I cut this picture out of your mag? Take a look at her. Is she a babe or what?'

Mum peered over my shoulder and said, 'Too skinny' but I said, 'No way. She's perfect.' Then I dodged round Mum and went to find my Stanley knife, leaving the supermodel on the table in front of Britt.

I wasn't in any big hurry, because I wanted to give Britt time to think. So I mucked around for a while, flicking through the TV guide, pulling faces in the mirror. For a nanosecond there, I could've sworn the mirror winked back at me, which just shows how old and blurry it is. A bit spooky, though. I grabbed my knife and went skidding down to the kitchen area.

When I got back, Britt was frowning at her arms and pinching them. I sliced the supermodel out of the magazine and stuck her on the noticeboard above the table. We had sausages for tea but Britt just kept cutting them into smaller bits and hiding the bits under her mashed potato. And the minute Mum turned her back, she tipped the whole plateful into the bin.

There you go. My experiment's working already. It mightn't sound like much but scientists start small, remember. Look at Isaac Newton and the apple. Or Benjamin Franklin and -

Huh? What am I talking about? Who are they?

I stayed behind after science class to ask Jim a few questions. He reckons Isaac Newton invented the law of gravity after an apple fell on his head and Benjamin Franklin figured out some stuff about electricity by flying a kite in a lightning storm. I suppose I must've read about them somewhere and then forgotten it. Maybe I always wanted to be a scientist but I was waiting for the right time.

This is the right time, for sure. While I was putting my Stanley knife away, it fell down the back of the drawer. I pulled out the bottom drawer and groped around but no knife, so I thumped the plywood - and it moved. Somebody must've made a special hiding place. After I'd hammered at the plywood a bit more, I stuck my hand into the gap and dragged out eighteen dusty black notebooks, full of diagrams and spiky handwriting.

I can't read the notes, because they're written in some other language. But they're the really old guy's notes about his experiments, I know it. I lined them up along the top of my built-in drawers and I'll put my notebook at the end of the row, with my notes about the Britt Experiment.

A scientist's workbench. Feels good.

THE BRITT EXPERIMENT

- 30th Sept: Read out article from paper about how most kids in this country are overweight. B said no to ice cream.
- 1st Oct: Called B 'fatso' 12 times. Mum: 'That's cruel.' Me: 'Not if it's true.'
- 2nd Oct: Apologised for calling B fatso. Said it's not her fault that she needs to eat twice as much as everyone else. B dumped dinner in bin again.
- 3rd Oct: B ripped supermodel off noticeboard. I found skinnier supermodel and pinned her up. Stared at her all through dinner.
- 4th Oct: Mum's birthday. B's present - a card saying she'll do the cooking for a week. Salad and grilled chicken for tea.
- 5th Oct: More salad.
- 6th Oct: Ditto.
- 7th Oct: Ditto. Told B that Big Mack almost asked her out, except that he doesn't like fat chicks - but who does?
- 8th Oct: Found B stuffing chocolate biscuits into her mouth. Laughed. B said I was horrible. I said she was a guts. Big argument. B so upset that she threw up.
- 9th Oct: B told me she'd lost 5 kilos. I said, 'Yeah? You don't look it. Maybe the scales are stuffed.'
- 10th Oct: Mum cooked dinner - chops and chips - and made B eat it. B went to the toilet block and made herself spew.

I thought I'd be pleased about all of this but I wasn't. Oh sure, Britt throws up after every meal these days, so I proved you can change people by experimenting on them. But it was too easy. I wanted more of a challenge. Not just a stupid little kid like Britt, something bigger and harder.

I walked over to the mirror and stared into it. The face stared back. I'd seen it a few more times over the last ten days, so I was used to it by now. Long pointy nose. (Mine's snub.) Eyes that focus and won't let go. (Mine wander all over the place.) Mouth that tugs down at the corners. (Mine's straight or smiley.) Smooth skin, instead of the wrinkly skin I'd seen at first, as if the face was getting younger.

'Okay, what next?' I asked but, of course, the face didn't answer. It was just a game I was playing, because there was nothing else to do.

There's never anything to do around here. I hate this town. I miss Dad. It's hot. The heat gets into your brain and muddles it. I need a new experiment, to help me think.

We went to visit Dad again last night. While Mum was fussing around, getting ready, I flicked through a newspaper that was lying on the bench. I was eating a cheese-and-raspberry-jam sandwich and a red blob dropped onto the paper. I wiped it away and read:

'Scientists say that the mind can be just as important as good medical care, in helping patients to recover from serious health problems.'

It sounded interesting, so I kept on reading. These guys had done an experiment where they went round the hospitals, comparing people who thought they'd get better with people who felt miserable and hopeless, and the people who thought positive got out of hospital way faster. Yeah, right. As experiments go, it was pretty obvious. I could've dreamed up a better one myself.

Forty kays to Milston. Plenty of time to think. When we walked into the ward, Dad was propped against a stack of pillows with a cast on his arm and tubes poked into his wrist. But he grinned at me and ruffled Britt's hair and said, 'How's things? Hope you've left some room for me in that van, because I'll be out and about in a week.'

All the thoughts rattling round my brain came together and turned into one big thought. My next experiment. A genius idea. Those scientists in the paper hadn't gone far enough. They'd just asked people how they felt. But what if they'd actually told them they wouldn't get better?

I started straight away. 'You're looking terrible, Dad. What do the doctors say? ... Do you reckon they're serious or are they just trying to cheer you up? ... Oh wow, you mean your body could still reject the skin grafts? That's heavy ... Better watch out for infections too. Hospitals are great places for picking up really weird diseases.'

Mum butted in every now and then with 'Don't worry, love, you'll be okay' but I just kept going. I'm good at this sort of thing. By the time we left, Dad was looking sicker than before. Way sicker.

As soon as we got home, I headed straight for the mirror, to tell the face I was doing a big-time experiment on an adult now. But from the look in its eyes, I got the feeling it knew already.

Just joking, right? I know the face isn't really real.

Next time Mrs Parker cornered me, I asked her what the really old guy's name was. She said, 'Yo-harn Shmit' and then she explained that it was spelt J-o-h-a-n-n S-c-h-m-i-d-t. Apparently, people told him to call himself John Smith when he came to Australia but he didn't see why he should have to change his name, just to suit them.

John Smith. The most ordinary name in the world. So the really old guy was ordinary on the outside and extraordinary inside. Like me.

I'm thinking faster and better than I ever thought before. For example, I realised I couldn't experiment properly on Dad, unless I saw him every day. I asked Hung Tran why she didn't use the school bus, like the rest of the Hopetoun kids, and it turned out that she got a lift with her mum, who works in the Milston hospital. Perfect. Next minute I'd arranged to visit Dad after school and come home with the Trans.

I worked on the Dad Experiment for a week but in the end I had to admit I wasn't getting anywhere. There were two major problems.

(1) Mum dropped in every morning, before her cleaning job in Milston, and talked Dad into seeing the good side of everything.

(2) One of the volunteer hospital visitors kept poking his nose in all the time. Dad couldn't stop talking about him. 'Dave reckons I'm a fighter ... Dave reckons I've got the right attitude ... Dave reckons I'm tough as old boots.' After a while I started to hate Dave, even though I never actually met him. I just saw his back once, when he was chatting to a doctor at the far end of the ward. He was old, like most people round here, but there was something really solid about the way he was standing, as if nothing could ever shake him.

So it looked as though I'd have to give up on the Dad Experiment, unless Dave dropped dead and Mum suddenly turned into the sort of person who sees the down side of everything. My first failure. It was kind of depressing.

That night I started hunting through the black notebooks, hoping they'd give me some ideas. I couldn't actually read the words, of course, but I looked at the diagrams. Some of them were pretty weird, like this picture of a woman with a huge stomach and her legs strapped together. It made me feel shivery and dry in the throat, the way I felt the first time I saw – I mean, pretended to see the face.

I got up and went over to the mirror. The face wasn't there, to start off with, so I rubbed the glass with my sleeve and looked again. While I watched, my nose seemed to get longer and pointier. My eyes focused. My mouth tugged down.

Johann Schmidt smiled at me and told me what to do next.

I'm Johann Schmidt's apprentice now, learning to do experiments like he did. For the last week I've been making notes on scraps of paper but it's time I copied them into my notebook. Scientists have to be organised. Johann Schmidt always wrote everything down. Here goes.

THE MUM EXPERIMENT

Number of times Mum's said, 'Nice sunny day' and I've said, 'Yeah, this van's like an oven': 15 and still counting.

Number of times Mum's said, 'Things'll get better soon' and I've said, 'You wish': 13 so far.

Number of times Mum's said, 'It's a funny old life' and I've said, 'A lousy old life': at least 10 times.

Number of times I've read out a sad story from the paper: 34. (Approximately 5 per day.)

Number of times I've called out, 'Mum, listen to this' when there's a sad story on the TV news: 13. (Approximately 2 per night.)

Number of times Mum's said, 'Do your homework' and I've said, 'What's the point? I'll just end up unemployed, like Dad': 7. (Once every evening.)

Number of times Mum's said, 'I worry about Brittany' and I've said, 'I can see why': 12.

Number of times I've said, 'Do you think Dad's arm'll ever work properly?': 6. (The first time, Mum said, 'Of course.' The sixth time, she said, 'I don't know, Ty. Maybe it never will.'))

Number of times Mum's said, 'Come on, Ty, give us a smile' and I've said, 'There's nothing to smile about': 11.

Number of times Mum's screamed, 'Tycho, stop being so gloomy. I can't handle it' and I've said, 'Mum, I'm just telling it like it is': 5, on full volume.

Number of times Mum's said something cheerful and positive and I've just stared at her blankly: too many to count. (This turned out to be the best idea of the lot. Mum sits there, wondering what she said wrong, and works herself into a total state.)

After a week of this Mum went to the doctor in Milston and got some pills to cheer her up, only they slowed her down instead. She rang the people whose offices she cleans and told them the job was too much for her. And she couldn't even be bothered taking us to visit Dad last night. She just sat and stared at the TV, watching all these shows she usually hates.

So I've done it. A proper experiment on an adult. A complete personality transplant. I've changed Mum into the sort of person who sees the down side of everything.

Brilliant, hey?

Up one minute, down the next. That's life in No-hope-town. We had a mini-debate at school yesterday, about whether experiments were a good thing or a bad thing - me on the good side, Big Mack on the bad side. Jim had given us some articles to read but I didn't need any help. I just told the class how scientists can change people's lives by doing experiments.

I wanted to tell them about my experiments, only the face said it wasn't a smart move.

Then Big Mack got up and started rabbiting on about this experiment in America ages ago, where scientists sprinkled plutonium on kids' cornflakes in some orphanage, to test the take-up of radioactive iodine. The kids didn't know about it till years later, when they started dying or getting major thyroid problems. Big Mack said that was wrong. He said some experiments were cruel. He said scientists have to think about what they're doing, same as the rest of us.

No way could Big Mack have worked that out for himself. He must've got it from Jim's articles. I thought Jim was a great guy but it looks as though he's secretly against science.

Just wait. We'll show him.

The only problem is, I have to think of another experiment, because the Mum Experiment and the Britt Experiment suddenly fell to pieces. When I got home that afternoon, Mum was tidying the van and singing sixties songs at the top of her voice.

She said, 'Mr Solomon dropped in for a cuppa and we ended up talking for hours. What a life he's had, Ty! Much worse than anything that ever happened to me - but he can still find time to think about other people. He says Britt's been getting thinner and thinner lately. I'll have to do something about that.'

I don't believe it. Mr Solomon wrecked my experiments. Now Mum's back to thinking positive and Britt's started eating. I changed them, for a while at least, but there's no proof of that, not like if Mum had gone completely mental or Britt had starved herself to death.

Not that I actually want Britt to die or anything. She's basically okay, even though she's a pain. It's just that - oh, I don't know - experiments are important . More important than people. I'm sure ... almost sure of that.

It's hotter than ever. I'm getting muddled. I hate being stranded in No-hope-town.

I need to talk to the mirror again.

Okay, Hopetoun's small but that isn't all bad. When you think about it, a small town's kind of like a big science laboratory.

Yep, that's right. I'm working on a new experiment. I didn't get any ideas from the mirror, maybe because Johann Schmidt's face has got so young by now that I can't always tell the difference between him and me. But after I'd stared at the face for a bit, I flung myself on the bed, stuffed my Walkman plugs into my ears and hit the switch, only my hand must've slipped, because I found I was listening to this politician, instead of my usual music station.

She said Australia was having problems and she knew why. Too many Asians were migrating here. They were different. They were taking all the jobs. It was freaky to walk down the street and hear people talking in another language. She said that real Australians weren't going to put up with it any longer.

I didn't get it at first. I mean, look at Hopetoun. Some Vietnamese business man bought up one of the old dairy farms when the owner went broke and turned it into a market garden, growing lemon grass and other Vietnamese stuff. He used to bus these Vietnamese workers up from the city every day but after a while a bunch of them decided to come and live in the town.

People usually leave Hopetoun, instead of moving here, so the No-hope-townners were pretty pleased. The Vietnamese families bought houses and shopped in the shops and almost doubled the size of the Milston school, which meant that the government didn't close it, like they'd been planning.

'They're lovely people,' Mrs Delgado from the supermarket kept saying. 'They saved this place.'

So I figured everyone would laugh at that politician, if she turned up in Hopetoun. But according to Johann Schmidt, most people don't bother to think for themselves - they just think and say what the rest of the world is thinking and saying. He reckoned it would be dead easy to turn the other Hopetouners against the Vietnamese.

He reckoned we could do it in a month.

THE HOPETOUN EXPERIMENT

STAGE ONE: Offered to do the shopping for Mum. Went round Hopetoun, telling everyone what the politician had said and making notes on how they reacted. Mrs Bowden, from the dairy farm where Dad was working, doesn't like the Vietnamese - but she doesn't like anyone, so nobody listens to her. Then Mr Macnamara who runs the newsagent went red in the face and told me how his brother got wounded in the Vietnam war. His shop's always busy and people generally stop to talk to him. Plus he needs a new paper boy.

CONCLUSION: Target Mr Mac.

STAGE TWO: Started delivering papers for Mr Mac. There's always something about the politician in the paper, so we chat about her every morning and some of the customers join in. Had a big argument with Mrs Delgado on Friday, because she said no one with any brains would listen to the politician and besides, things were different around here. Half the customers sided with Mrs Delgado and half of them sided with Mr Mac. But I reckon they would've all been on Mrs Delgado's side last week, before they started listening to Mr Mac and me.

CONCLUSION: Doing okay - but need to prove the Vietnamese are a problem round here.

STAGE THREE: A Vietnamese guy called Phuoc Nguyen got elected to the Milston council. I went round Hopetoun, saying things like, 'They've only been here for ten minutes and now they're taking over' and 'We were here first.' When I said it to two of the Koori kids, one of them said, 'We? Funny, I didn't know Ty was a blackfella,' and the other said, 'Yeah, I thought he was one of those whitefellas that came here way after our mob.' So that was a mistake but most people seemed to agree with me, apart from Mrs Delgado. She said it was great that Phuoc Nguyen wanted to do something for Milston - and after that everyone started agreeing with her instead.

CONCLUSION: Target Mrs Delgado.

STAGE FOUR: Told Mr Mac we shouldn't let the Vietnamese talk in their own language, because they could be saying all sorts of rude stuff about us. Came out of the newsagent and saw

Hung standing there. She said, 'Oh! That was you, Ty. I didn't recognise you. Your face looked different' - and next day Mrs Tran said they couldn't give me a lift home from the hospital any more. Got upset (I mean, I don't believe that garbage, I'm just doing an experiment) but then realised I could use it. Went into the supermarket, acting sad, and Mrs Delgado said, 'What's the matter?' Told her the Trans had stopped me from visiting my sick dad. She said, 'Oh dear, that's not nice' and looked really confused and worried.

CONCLUSION: I'm a genius.

SUMMARY: At the start of this month no one ever said anything nasty about the Vietnamese but now people slag on them all the time. Mrs Bowden's rapt, because everyone's listening to her for a change, and even Mrs Delgado's having a few doubts.
So Johann Schmidt was right.

By the end of the month things had got so bad that Phuoc Nguyen drove over here specially to see Mr Mac. He said he was worried about all the anti-Vietnamese talk that was going around and Mr Mac said it was a free country, which meant he could say anything he liked. He started shouting so loud that people could hear him out in the street. They came crowding in and stood there listening - the Vietnamese on Phuoc Nguyen's side of the shop, the other Hopetouners on Mr Mac's side.

I hid behind the postcard stand and watched. It was unreal. Mr Mac had totally lost it and Phuoc Nguyen was trying not to shout back but I didn't think he'd last much longer. It looked like Johann Schmidt and me had split the town in two.

Then this guy strolled in and looked round and said, 'What's going on?' Another old guy, someone I'd never seen before. Clean white shirt. Bald brown head. Sad dark eyes.

Everyone went silent, except for Mrs Delgado, who started explaining at top speed. The old guy listened for a while and then he did something really strange. He undid a button and rolled up his shirt sleeve. There was a tattoo on his wrist, a row of numbers, as old and blurred as my mirror.

'Oh, Macca,' he said sadly, 'I didn't think you were like that.'

Mr Mac was staring at the tattoo and looking sicker than Dad. 'Mate,' he whispered, 'I'd never say anything against you or your people. My dad was

one of the first soldiers that went into the camps after World War Two. He saw what they did to your lot and he never really got over it.'

'Well then, don't let it happen here,' said the old guy.

He turned and walked out. Mr Mac swallowed hard, said 'Sorry, mate' and held out his hand to Phuoc Nguyen. A sudden buzz of voices, the old Hopetouners and the new Hopetouners all talking to each other again. But I couldn't listen properly, because I was focusing on the old guy's back.

There was something solid about it, as though nothing could ever shake him. Something familiar, too.

Just before the old guy disappeared, Mr Mac yelled out, 'Sorry, Mr Solomon.' I heard this click inside my head, like things were slotting into place. Dave, who had wrecked my experiment on Dad. Mr Solomon, who had wrecked my experiments on Britt and Mum. The old guy, who had wrecked my experiment on No-hope-town. They were all the same person.

Johann Schmidt whispered, 'After him, Ty' and I sidled out of the shop. I followed Mr Solomon back to the caravan park, waited a few minutes and knocked on his door. He let me into the van, smiling and saying, 'Hello, you must be Tycho. Hot, isn't it? Would you like a glass of lemonade?'

I opened my mouth and a deep, growly voice came out. It said, 'You thought you'd won, didn't you? You played judge and jury and locked me away in this prison-town till I died. But I'm back, Solomon. I can't and won't be stopped. I'll always keep coming back, no matter what you do.'

Mr Solomon stared at my face for twenty long seconds. Then his eyes went even darker and he clutched his chest and collapsed. I backed off so fast that I bumped into the table. A book and a magazine fell on the floor next to Mr Solomon, so I picked them up and started smoothing the bent pages.

The first thing I saw: a black and white photo of living skeletons lined up beside a barbed wire fence, with numbers tattooed on their wrists. The second thing I saw: a paragraph about the scientists who did experiments in the death camps to see how much pain human beings could stand. Dumping people in baths of icy water, tying pregnant women's legs together: and worse. The sort of thing some little kids do to dolls or puppies or spiders, before their parents explain why it's wrong.

That was in the book. The magazine had a list of all the scientists who'd worked in the death camps, plus stories about how people had tracked them down after the war. Someone - Mr Solomon, I suppose - had scribbled an extra name in the margin.

Johann Schmidt.

I wasn't thinking faster or better any more. I was just an ordinary kid again, ordinary and scared and sick. Still, it wasn't hard to work out what had happened. Mr Solomon must've known Johann Schmidt from the death camps. He tracked him down and spent half his life guarding the guy, to make

sure he didn't try anything else. When Johann Schmidt died, he probably thought it was all over but Johann got away from him and started his experiments again.

And I'd let him do it.

When I finally managed to look round, Mr Solomon was still lying on the floor. His face was yellowy-white and his hands were freezing. I rubbed his fingers for a while but it didn't help, so I left him there and went racing across the caravan park, yelling, 'Mum! Quick! Mum!'

By the time the ambulance turned up, I was over in the barbecue area, burning Johann Schmidt's notebooks.

I haven't seen Johann Schmidt's face in the mirror for two weeks now. I go to the hospital every day after school and sit with Mr Solomon. It took me a while to convince the Trans that I'd changed but in the end Mrs Tran said I could get a lift home with them, the way I used to do.

Mr Solomon's still alive but he can't speak or move or even open his eyes. They reckon it helps if you talk to people when they're in a coma, so I do. Another experiment but a good one this time. I tell Mr Solomon I'm sorry. I tell him I didn't mean it. I tell him I'll never do anything like that ever again.

But today, while I was sitting next to Mr Solomon's bed, I zoned out for a bit. When I surfaced again, I realised I'd been wondering whether I could make everyone in Hopetoun hate the Koori kids - or Mrs Delgado - or Jim Spiridopoulos. So that's why I haven't seen the face for ages, because Johann Schmidt isn't in the mirror any more. He's in me.

Please, Mr Solomon, please don't die. I need you. You have to come back and stop Johann Schmidt from taking over.

You have to help me stop myself.

A QUARREL IN THE STREETS

*Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated,
the energies displayed in it are fine....*

John Keats

Half way home from school it suddenly hit Viv that someone actually did win Tatts every week. She was getting really excited working out how she'd spend the money when it was her turn: and then she was eyeball to eyeball with Big John, shoulder to shoulder with Smasher, half way to tripping over Bru's foot and getting comments from Keith and Stavros in both ears.

'She's throwin' herself at ya, Johnno.'

'Give her what she wants, the moll.'

'Piss off, ya bastards,' yelled Viv in a rage and she revved away down the street.

'I hate them,' she announced loudly and marched off to her room before her mum could ask, 'Who?'

Maybe there had been someone else in the kitchen after all, because Soula opened the door cautiously a few seconds later, her shiny brown eyes as round as a possum's.

'I'm in a bad mood,' growled Viv, sticking her head back under the pillow.

'I can see *that*. Oh wow. You got a new Cam & Cam poster.'

Viv sat up. The pillow bounced into her lap and she flung it away. 'All right, hey?' She studied the poster proudly. 'One of my cousins nicked it for me, from the record shop where he works.'

‘Well. I’m s’posed to be asking if you want to come and have a watch of their new video. All the kids are over at our place now – all the girls, anyway. Stavros reckons Cam’s a poof and Cam’s a leso.’

‘Who cares what that creep thinks?’

Viv stormed out and Soula only caught up with her as she clattered into the Spiridakises’ back room.

‘Someone’s in a bad mood,’ remarked Kelly Connor.

Aphrodite, Soula’s older sister, gave a lift of her neatly plucked eyebrows in Viv’s direction. She said pointedly, ‘We already watched the video once, cause the Donovans had to split.’

Viv ignored Aphrodite in her turn. She swung her hands onto her hips. ‘I’m bloody sick of those guys,’ she told them. ‘Always hangin’ round on the corner, carryin’ on, tryin’ to get at you.’

Kelly’s light blue eyes glared back from under her thick fringe. ‘Yeah. That Smasher grabbed my bag the other day, half my books fell into the gutter and got wrecked.’

‘They think they’re big heroes with their whistlin’ and callin’ out.’

‘Oh, I dunno,’ said Aphrodite. ‘I mean, if they didn’t whistle, you’d wonder if you looked like a dag or something.’

Viv grinned for the first time in fifteen minutes. ‘You reckon you ever look like a dag, Aph?’

Aphrodite thought about it for a moment, studying her rosy fingernails. ‘No,’ she said.

‘Well, then. What d’you think about it, Soula?’

Soula looked at her sneakers. ‘They say names.’

‘Yeah.’ Viv was remembering. ‘They sure do. Y’know what? We ought to do something. Stop ’em.’

‘Like how?’ scoffed Kelly.

‘Bet I could think of something... What about this video, then?’

A swirl of neon night and music, and Cam & Cam. (Camilla and Cameron – Viv always had to think twice before she could get their real names.) They scuffed down the street in jeans, looking ordinary, then stepped into phone boxes, side by side, and – pow! they were in full leathers, patterned with sharp studs and jagged slashes, their yellow hair as pointed as a knife.

‘Changing their gear like Superman,’ Kelly pointed out, in case they’d missed it.

Cam & Cam flashed through the city, casting black shadows against the windows of happy TV-commercial families, stepping between the fast car and the skinny cat, the desperate mother and the crying child, the gang and the young girl hurrying home.

Then they were zig-zagging across the rooftops in tight silver, like menacing moonbeams, still singing about pleasure and danger. Everyone gathered in the streets and screamed, 'Stay!' Outlined against the rising moon, Cam & Cam looked down severely. The moon lifted itself above the rooftops and Cam & Cam went with it. They were the shadows on the moon.

'They're the greatest,' said Kelly loudly.

'Cam in leather,' gasped Aphrodite. 'And Cam in that silver thing.'

'I like it when they save that little kid,' whispered Soula.

They sat in silence for a moment, waiting till they felt ready to watch the clip again.

'Hold on,' said Viv. 'I've got it. We do it to them.'

'Bloody brilliant,' said Kelly, 'only who's "them"?'

'The guys. We stand on the other corner and hoon at them.'

Silence again. Well, at least they hadn't said it was a dumb idea.

Thirty seconds later Aphrodite said, 'That's a dumb idea. They'd bash us up, or – anyway, I wouldn't want to say things like they say.'

'Scaredy cat,' jeered Kelly. 'I remember you bawlin' your eyes out a few weeks back, cause of what they said in front of Nick.'

'I don't like it, any more than what you do. But it's how things are, Kell. You just got to learn to live with it.'

'Not accordin' to Viv.'

Their eyes swivelled onto her. It was a bit much, like having to be Cam & Cam combined – but all the same her brain was spilling over with ideas. Viv started talking.

'What about the Donovans?' said someone after a while. 'We should tell them it's on.'

'Are we really gonna do this?'

'We need to plan it a bit more first,' Viv said firmly.

So there they are, hanging round on the corner of a No Through Road like a pack of yobbos. At first it feels pretty awkward, nothing to do except shuffle your feet and shove your hands in and out of your pockets and feel as obvious as a streaker at a VFL match. The guys start chucking a few comments from the other side of the street, so that's something to giggle at for a bit, and then it seems like everyone's chatting away about nothing in particular.

'Nah, I wouldn't go to the moon, not if you paid me. All shut up in a capsule, and just to stand on another old bit of rock – no thanks.'

'Well, I'd like it. I wish they'd hurry up and organise it.'

Every now and then someone'll take time out and lean against the Batemans' fence and watch the clouds or the old dog sleeping in the middle of

the tree with tiny orange fruit outside the trendies' house. When you're only in the street to go to school or run messages or muck around, you don't really see the street. Turns out you can have a lot of fun, just hanging round.

So they didn't notice Big John till he was right in front of them.

'Whadda yous reckon you're on about, anyway?'

Somehow that sounded really funny. They giggled lazily till Viv strolled forward and said, 'Just hangin' round.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'How come you never did it before, then?'

'Never felt like it before,' said Viv, real cool. While Big John thought about it, she looked up at the glowing blue sky and whistled the start of Cam & Cam's first hit. In fact she whistled right through whatever Big John had to say.

'Huh?'

He planted his broad muscley arms on his hips. They must be real heavy to lift, thought Viv. Big John repeated slowly, 'Just don't start any trouble.'

'We won't if you don't.'

'Right then.'

He paused, thought, went slowly back to the other corner.

By tea time they feel like they own the place. They know that Stavros and Keith have an eye for the girls and Big John checks all the time to make sure he's still the boss and Smasher does what he feels like and Bru does what everyone else is doing.

They know that the Batemans' dusty orange cat keeps appearing in the weirdest places and the Connors' old dog always knows when there's a car coming and the supermarket ads are delivered by an old woman with a pram and the woman from the trendy house sits outside in the car for five minutes when she gets home.

They own the place. They'd planned to watch the video again but they don't in the end. They're having too much fun watching the street.

Next day after school Viv and Kelly rocked up to the corner first, grinning at each other.

'What you so pleased about?'

They looked at each other and grinned even harder.

'Ya dogs,' yelled Keith and all the guys started barking derisively.

Aphrodite strolled along into the yips and yelps and her dark eyes widened.

'They weren't doin' that yesterday.'

'I reckon they're getting' madder,' said Kelly, still grinning.

Aphrodite pulled her jumper firmly down like a shield. Then she leaned hard against the wooden fence.

'We got a right to be here, same as them.'

All the same, when Soula came along, she started fussing over her and going on about whether Soula should go back home. The guys were really getting into it now, yelling names across the street.

'So what?' said Soula. 'The boys at school, they know more worse words than that.'

And she started yelling worse words back. Aphrodite really went off her face then.

'What if mum heard you? I'd be in big trouble – me, not you, *kaki kopela*.'

'Ah, all right,' shrugged Soula and she strutted back to Aphrodite's side, looking pleased with herself.

When they looked again, the guys had vanished. So they settled down, lolling around, swapping news. The Donovan girls came along and told them all the gossip about the big kids at school – who was going with who, who hated who and why. Then there was a sound like a storm wind sweeping down the street; and the front wheel of Keith's bike was cutting a path down the middle of them.

He glanced back over his shoulder as he went, eyes hotter than his red hair.

'Sluts.'

'Reckon we should go and watch that video now?' asked Aphrodite nervously.

'No way. They're trying to run us off the streets,' said Kelly between her teeth. 'My bloody brothers.'

'Run us over, more like,' Viv joked grimly.

'Ah, he wouldn't've done it on purpose,' objected Eileen, the oldest Donovan girl. 'My dad, he says kids on bikes are all over the footpaths nowadays – reckons he nearly gets killed on an average of once a day.'

'Great. Cause that's what this lot's trying to do to us.'

And they all jumped in different directions as Bru tore through them, laughing like a maniac. Then the two Connors did a BMX war dance in the middle of the road, yelling across at each other.

'Reckon they were scared?'

'Reckon they nearly wet themselves.'

'Not so tough as they thought, eh?'

'Hey, Big John, we're over here, mate.'

All the girls'd been looking at Bru and Keith. No one'd been watching the corner. So Eileen went flying one way and Kelly the other, while Soula crashed to the ground under Big John's big boots.

Aphrodite sprang up and caught at the back of his hair. 'Don't you hurt my sister,' she hissed.

Big John whirled around, bunching his fist; only then Smasher came marching along behind him and he knocked Aphrodite out of the way, along with Carol and Mary Donovan.

But Viv was planted firmly, looking both boys in the eye. They hesitated, turned to each other, then stomped off to join the Connors.

The girls drew together. Secretly, under cover of Viv's back, they checked their wounds. Gravel rash, a few cuts, bruises for everyone tomorrow. Worst of all, they were scared now. Worse than that, it was no fun any more. They didn't own the street, after all.

Keith and Bru traced triumphant patterns down the road. Big John and Stavros and Smasher yelled and barked and whistled, sprawling all over the corner and each other, laughing loudly every time they caught one of the girls' eyes.

And the girls stood there with tight blank faces. It was just like going past the milk bar up the street, with about fifty boys on bikes out the front. It was just like walking home after dark. It was just like having to go through the Practical Studies area at school.

It was just like all the times when you were well and truly stuck in the boys' world and the only thing you could do was not let them see that you cared.

'That pig Stavros,' Aphrodite exploded when at last they were sitting round in the Spiradakises' back room.

'He didn't hurt us,' Soula pointed out.

'No, he's a coward as well as a pig, our brother,' stormed Aphrodite. 'He knows we can fight him and beat him. But those other boys, y'know – I'm scared of them.'

'I'm not scared of Keith and Bru,' said Kelly. 'Except I never figured out how to get them when they work as a team. Luckily, they fight each other as much as they fight me or I wouldn't stand a chance at home.'

'And Big John and Smasher aren't even anyone's brothers,' said Viv. 'We haven't got a hope in hell with them.'

They all sat, heads bent, and studied their knees or their fingernails or their sneakers or the pattern of the carpet.

'Well,' said Aphrodite, 'wanna watch the video again?'

Cam & Cam, defeating evil, gliding through gangs...

'No,' said Kelly, and Viv and Soula shook their heads too.

'All right then, I'll get some of Helen's stuff and make you up.'

A few minutes later Aphrodite strutted back, cheeks pink, arms piled with silver tubes and golden jars.

'She'll kill you if she finds out,' warned Soula.

'So what?'

Smooth and strange and glamorous and miserable, they sat and watched the video. Kelly's hand kept moving up to her face and pulling back at the last minute. Viv grinned at the way the blusher and eye make up sat on her friend's freckled face like a mask and as she grinned, she felt red grease stretch and crack on her own lips.

The moon lifted itself above the rooftops. Cam & Cam went with it. Shadows on the moon.

'Don't you like it?' asked Aphrodite with her back to them, as she switched off the video recorder.

'Great clip.'

'I mean the make up, ya creep.'

'Hey, course we do,' Viv reassured her. 'It was a beaut idea. I mean, when else would Kell and I see ourselves like this?'

'You got a point there.' Kelly and Aphrodite both looked happier.

'You're really good at it,' Kelly told Aphrodite.

'Looks pretty funny on you, all the same,' Aphrodite admitted.

'Funny!' squeaked Soula and then they were laughing all over the back room, rolling on the carpet, kicking up their legs on the couch, laughing even more as blue shadow streaked into pink blusher and made happy clowns of them all.

'Y'know,' said Viv, choking back the laughter, 'the Donovans were really mad. They'll be back tomorrow, for sure.'

Bumps and thumps. Splinters down Kelly's arm from the paling fence. A punch from Big John, when Viv nearly tripped him, but mostly just hard muscled shoulders thrusting them off balance, into the gutter, out of the way. And words, words, words.

'You're sick,' yelled Carol Donovan as they trailed away after forty five minutes of it.

Viv gets a funny feeling when she's almost at the corner. It's too late.

She's nudged, almost gently, up the alleyway. They don't touch her that much. They're kind of sad and patient as they tell her, in detail, about the kind

of things she can expect if she's on the corner tonight. The kind of things they'd never do to the sort of chick she used to be.

All the time Viv's brain is buzzing away. Come on, Vivvo, this isn't a horror movie, it's broad daylight and you've known these guys most of your life. What's so big deal?

But her body feels sick. It's like she's trying to shrink deep inside herself, away from her breasts, away from the soft triangle of hair that seems to be so important to them.

She doesn't feel anything by the time Big John gives her a squeeze and then a shove that sends her staggering out into the street.

As she stumbles away, Viv's thinking: I got out of school early, this is an ambush. She just wants to go and have a long shower, but she scrambles over the fence, ducks down someone else's drive, and scoots back to warn the others. They go, 'Come on, Vivvo,' at first, but then they take a look at her face. So they smuggle themselves home by the back way and sit round at the Spiridakises like prisoners.

Next morning Kelly's freckles stand out like smears on white paper. 'They kept saying things to me,' is all that she'll tell them.

Kelly and Viv look at each other and shrug. But Aphrodite's hopping mad.

'We don't have to put up with that kind of stuff.'

'Yeah, yeah,' says Kelly wearily.

Soula bursts into tears and they stand there wishing they were all ten years old.

Me and my big ideas, Viv thought over and over. Me and my big ideas.

Chewing dutifully on a tomato sandwich that tasted like Kleenex, Viv moved on. I'll never have another idea in my life.

She was nodding to herself, satisfied, when Kelly raced up.

'Viv, guess what?' Viv shook her head and chomped on. 'It's all on for tonight. We got reinforcements.'

'Oh, no, you don't,' Viv mumbled but Kelly hadn't heard. 'I was talking to these kids in woodwork, and they go, "You need help". So they said they'd come along. And Aphrodite, you won't believe this, she did an essay about what happened and the teacher read it out and there was a big fight and half her class is coming too.'

'They all want to help us?' Viv's eyes widened.

'Well, not exactly. Some of the kids are on our side, and some of them reckoned it couldn't be like Aph said, so they're coming along to see. You got to be there, Viv.'

Kelly's pale face shone with excitement. Viv stirred and stretched and felt her whole body come to life. She reached for another sandwich.

'S'pose I got to, then.'

She knew it was stupid. She knew she was asking for it. But as she had her bag under her desk, and when the last class ended she grabbed her things and ran.

'Afternoon, John. Hi, Bru, Keith. Hey, Stavros.' Viv punched him lightly on the arm. 'Nice day, Smasher.'

'Where do you think you're going, dog?'

'Thought I'd just hang around on our corner for a while. Enjoy the sunshine.'

And she strolled across the road, dumped her bag and leaned there, whistling. The dusty orange cat came and sniffed at her socks. The old dog's head lifted in her direction. The sky spread itself above her, never-ending blue. I needed this, Viv told herself. When they get you down, you got to go all the way up.

The boys were muttering together, looking her way, but Viv could switch off now. Reinforcements, she repeated to herself. *Re-in-force-ments*. It rolled nicely round her mouth. I should learn karate or something, she planned.

Stavros and Big John were arguing. Big John was coming towards her. His steps seemed to shake the street. Viv saw pictures of herself in hospital, totally covered with plaster. She looked at the sky. Her whistling dried up. She glanced at the street, then fixed her eyes on two scruffy kids on bikes.

Watched them ride straight at Big John.

He jumped back at the last minute. 'Sorry,' yelled one kid mockingly. 'Didn't see ya,' grinned the other. They skidded to a halt in front of Viv.

'We the first ones here?'

'Looks like it,' said Viv, letting her breath slide out quietly.

They wheeled Melissa and Sue's bikes down to Viv's place; Viv dumped her bag as well. When they got back, Big John and Keith were leaning where Viv'd been. Kelly and another girl were watching them with interest.

'Look at 'em, Rosa, standin' there like gigs.'

'Greedy lot, aren't they? Got one corner, now they need the other one.'

It looked like Kelly'd got her confidence back too. Big John and Keith, on the other hand, were getting really pissed off. Keith showed it, the way he turned bright red at the drop of a hat. Big John kept it inside more, but if you knew him, you could tell.

'Shut your faces, sluts.'

'How 'bout this, Johnno? I will, if you will.' Viv closed in on the other side, Melissa and Sue right behind her.

Big John was swinging his head this way and that, like a bull warming up for a charge.

‘Got your leso mates along today?’ he growled for starters.

Viv wasn’t quite sure what to say to that one. But Melissa said, ‘Smart of you to notice,’ and Viv, twisting round, saw her rest her arm across Sue’s shoulders.

Sue’s arm came up and twined with Melissa’s. ‘Freaks a lot of people out, so it’s pretty cool of you,’ and then they were hugging. Real close. Just for a second, though.

Things went into slow motion. Viv felt like she could almost hear the thoughts of everyone on the corner. Then there were half a dozen starts of sentences and Bru rode into the middle of them, screaming his head off. Big John happened to be stepping forward at the time, so Bru ran over his foot.

It was the biggest fight the street had ever seen. Kelly and Rosa traded punches with Keith. Melissa had an armlock on Bru and Sue was keeping an eye on them while she yelled at Stavros, who kept going back and forth in the middle of the road. Smasher just leaned against the phone box and watched with an evil grin.

Viv could see it all from her box office seat against the fence, where she held her stomach and gasped while Soula and three of her friends wrapped themselves around Big John’s ankles and kept him away from her for a while.

‘Come on, break it up.’

Fussing away at the head of her class, Aphrodite sounded so like a teacher that everyone stopped fighting for a second. Quick as lizards the girls flicked away and banded together around Viv, who gasped some more. Slowly the boys drew together too, and Aphrodite marched at them.

‘This is *our* corner, if you don’t mind.’

Big John stepped back involuntarily and wobbled in the gutter. ‘Who says?’

‘Who said you could hang round on the other corner for *years*? We never tried to stop you.’

‘What d’you call this, then?’

‘Trying to get our own corner. What’ve we done to you, anyhow?’

‘You giggled at us,’ said Keith hotly.

‘Yeah, an’ you pushed us an’ shoved us an’ called us dogs an’ sluts an’—’ Kelly could go as bright red as her brother. Viv watched them fluff up at each other like parrots.

‘So you are sluts.’

One of the boys came pushing forward through Aphrodite’s crowd.

‘Come on, lay off, Connor. You got no right to call the kid names like that.’

‘She’s my sister, for Chrissake.’

‘Yeah, I *am* your sister, worse luck. But I’m not a slut,’ yelled Kelly.

And then Keith and the other boy were slugging it out together.

Everyone looked round, a bit bored with fighting by now. Sue stepped forward and helped Aphrodite grab the boy’s arm.

‘See, we don’t want to do things that way,’ she explained. Then she grinned. ‘Even if it mightn’t’ve looked like it when you came along. What we want is just to be left alone.’

‘Ah, come on, Johnno,’ said Keith in disgust. ‘Hang round on Cissies’ Corner too long, we might turn into poofs too.’

‘Nothing wrong with that,’ Melissa pointed out kindly, as they stomped back to the other corner. There was a moment of silence and then the street was clanging with voices.

The boy telling Aphrodite, ‘I never realised it was this bad. But I don’t see what’s so wrong with wantin’ to help.’

Aphrodite, hands on hips, going, ‘Well, how does bashin’ up Keith help *us*?’

Keith and Bru and Big John yelling across at them for a while, then giving up because no one was listening, except for this guy with a beard who appeared out of nowhere and started taking notes.

Some of the girls from Aphrodite’s class getting the whole story from Soula and saying, ‘Gee, you’re a brave little kid,’ at intervals.

A boy asking Melissa, ‘What d’you mean, nothing wrong with being a poof?’

Kelly going, ‘Jesus, you’re immature,’ Sue going, ‘No, hang on, Kell...’

Big John and the Connors having a low-voiced argument with Stavros. Smasher walking off.

The Donovans rocking up and complaining bitterly about missing all the fun.

The discussion somehow spreading across the whole street, so that Kelly and Stavros were in one group, Keith and Aphrodite in another, Bru and Soula going hammer and tongs in a third, while Big John hung around scowling at the edges. Viv would’ve liked to be in there herself, sorting out the rights and wrongs of it all —

‘But why pick the corner opposite us then?’

‘If you weren’t against us, how come it was all “dog” and “slut”?’

‘Who started it, that’s what I want to know?’

— but the trouble was, she still hadn’t got enough breath to shout with.

Then the bearded guy came up and explained that he was on the local paper, and did she know the background.

‘You’ve come to the right place,’ whispered Viv.

And she was still explaining when the first car turned into the street and the groups of talkers had to move to make way for it.

'It's Ms Tonelli,' Aphrodite shouted and raced to the car window.

'Thought I better drop in on my way home and see how it all worked out,' the teacher explained.

The kids crowded to her car.

'We're fine, miss.'

'Can we talk about it in class tomorrow, miss?'

'I still can't figure who started it.'

So there's Viv waving goodbye to everyone all of a sudden, like the whole thing'd been her birthday party or something.

'Yeah, see ya ... Sure, same time tomorrow ... Wow, great idea.'

Kelly's off with Melissa and Sue and a few others to this Young Women's Group. Aphrodite's got a date with the boy she's been arguing with. Soula's taken her friends off to watch Cam & Cam. Everyone's disappeared. Well, almost everyone.

Stavros and Keith come sauntering round the corner. They've got their thumbs tucked in their belts. Jesus, even their shadows are streaking ahead of them, ten feet tall, like something out of a Western.

No reinforcements, no cavalry to come and save Viv this time. She even starts praying, first time since she was six, and at the same time she sticks out her chin and goes, loud as her voice can manage, 'So whaddya want?'

Stavros and Keith stand there, looking grim. Their eyes bore into her. Say something, ya bastards, Viv screams silently.

'Jesus, Viv, d'you have to be so aggressive?' complains Stavros.

'You set us up, y'know,' glowered Keith. He leaned back and sighed heavily.

'I keep telling you, I *don't* know. Mind explainin'?'

'Okay,' said Stavros with decision. 'It's like this. It's like —' He drummed at the back fence with his heels for a while. 'You just shouldn't've brought all them in, Viv. Strangers. We could've sorted it out.'

Viv felt the old rage catch at her throat. 'Sure, I remember how you were gonna sort me out, that time up the alley.'

'Ah, well, that. That was Big John's idea. I never thought that was so smart.'

'Oh, it was bloody smart. Put me right off, you did, like Keith and Bru with Kelly. Only some of the kids at school, they didn't think it was right, what you were doing. They came in, we didn't bring 'em.'

'It's not that simple,' Keith stated. 'I mean, you could've hung about anywhere, but it had to be where you could rub our noses in it. Naturally we were mad.'

Viv looked startled. You didn't normally talk about Keith and bright ideas in the same breath, but he had something there. They'd never thought of taking over a different part of the street.

'Fair enough,' she started. Then she remembered. 'But it wasn't just havin' part of the street that was ours. It was stoppin' you lot from hasslin' us all the time, don't forget.'

'But that's what I'm tryin' to tell you,' Stavros cut in. 'I mean, I never meant to hassle yous or nothing.'

'Yeah, yeah. It was *all* Big John's idea, I s'pose.'

'Look, I'm not sayin' we're all pure and innocent, but what I mean is – us lot, we've come out as the baddies. Like, guys from Aph's class comin' up and sayin' things, and you know they've done it too – said "sluts" and "moles" and that.' Stavros frowned earnestly. 'It's just somethin' guys say, Viv. It isn't, y'know, personal. If I'd've known you hated it so much, I would've stopped.'

Viv went off in a dream. Oh, sorry, Stav, if I'd've known you hated havin' your teeth kicked in, I wouldn't've done it. Then she decided, Oh well.

'If we'd said, It hurts, that would've just been one more thing you had over us,' she said. 'You think you would've listened now, after you've got heaps over it. But at the time you would've just laughed in our faces.'

She looked up quickly as she heard Keith laughing. He slithered down from the fence and said over his shoulder, 'Got to pay that one, Stav. That's exactly what we would've done.'

Viv comes charging down the street, muttering, 'It's all too much,' and, 'I wash my hands of it.' She's had a whole day of 'Good on ya, Viv, I'll be there tonight.' The quarrel in their street seems to have turned into the latest craze, and she feels a bit funny about it.

She hangs around on the edge of things for a while, but she soon gets sucked into the row between Eileen and Kelly. Eileen reckons they should move down to the Donovans' front yard, and Kelly reckons that if they're not on the corner, then it's not a protest any more. Then Melissa and Sue rock up with some stuff from the Youth Centre to make a banner. Kelly's happy with the idea of a banner, so they start laying it out on the lawn.

Everyone's not all that crazy about banners, so soon there's a game of cricket and a singalong that starts with 'Girls Just Want To Have Fun.' Soula makes Stavros go and get his guitar, and they sing Greek songs and Italian songs and songs from school and pop songs.

Viv gets jumpy when a slanging match starts up between Bru and Big John and some of Aphrodite's mob, so she crouches down over the banner to hide. When she looks round, Bru's actually waving as he lounges off to join Keith on the corner. (Smasher never showed at all.)

She's pissed off at first, cause they never had that big an effect on old Bru. Then she thinks, Oh well.

And when there's a fight about whether the cricket should be girls versus boys or two mixed teams, she listens and puts her bit in. Next thing, Kelly goes stomping past.

'The poles for the banner – they're too long.'

Viv grabs her arm and looks back at the corner. 'Hey,' she yells to Bru and Keith, 'd'you reckon we could have a loan of your dad's saw?'

'Jesus Christ,' groans Kelly and she groans again when her brothers come back, all bossy and important. The woodwork girls look at each other and decide to let them saw the poles. This time.

'I reckon we got to give them a chance,' Viv apologises to Kelly. After all, they're Kell's brothers, not hers.

'Like they gave us a chance?' asks Kelly.

'Yeah, but we don't have to be the same. And maybe they'll change, now things're different.'

'Some hope!' snorts Kelly.

'Well, *some* hope,' says Viv.

DRESS CODE

The girl is wearing a blue dress.

Out on the sandhills she is wearing a blue dress.

The wind blows the blue dress about. Yanks it to get her attention. Billows it like a balloon. Streams it like a banner. Tugs it up till her knickers show. (But that's okay, because there's no one else out here on the sandhills.)

The wind carries the blue dress behind her like a train; she curtseys to her fairytale prince, then spoils the effect by giggling. The wind twists the blue dress around her like a sari and she glides a few steps across the sand. The wind plumps the blue dress into a crinoline and she becomes an orphan governess escaping from the dark house high on the cliffs. The wind flicks the hem between her legs and turns the blue dress into baggy Turkish pants.

No, hold it. Forget the baggy pants.

She can wear pants in the city, any day of the week.

Here, out on the sandhills, she is wearing a loose full-skirted dress, blue as the sea. She stares across the broken mirror fragments of the rock pools and dreams on.

Odette pulling faces at herself in Jan's bedroom mirror. Odette, wearing laddered black tights, long black top, short green vest, concertina socks, Doc

Martens that had seen it all, a small round cap with faded embroidery on it. Odette, twisting this way and that to check herself from every angle.

‘Our hands are the same size,’ Jan told her, ‘even though I’m heaps taller than you.’

Their hands met in the mirror, palm to palm. Jan loved comparing herself to Odette, drawing up lists of their differences. Odette: round blue eyes. Jan: small brown eyes. Odette: big nose, clown mouth. Jan: small neat features. Odette: rushes in. Jan: holds back.

Every time she got into serious list-making, she found herself wishing she was more like Odette. Odette had style. Her fine fair hair looked as though she hadn’t brushed it for days and yet somehow it always seemed exactly right. Jan could never have got away with that. Her hair only needed to shift a fraction out of line before everyone within reach rushed to tidy it back in place. She’d given up and now wore it in a brisk swoop to her shoulders or pulled into a ponytail.

‘Try a headband,’ Odette suggested. ‘That’d push your hair up on end, make it a bit wilder. I’ll show you how, next time you come to my house.’

She’d done this before, commenting on things Jan had thought but hadn’t actually said. It always left Jan feeling kind of breathless. She gulped down a mouthful of air to fill the empty space under her ribs. ‘Oh yeah,’ she remembered. ‘We’re here to collect some shopping money, aren’t we?’

Odette leaned over her shoulder while she counted the ten dollar notes in her sandalwood box. ‘Wow, you must be good at saving,’ she said. ‘I’m hopeless. Every cent I make by working at Chicken Tonight, I blow on busfares and lunches. Or clothes. Clothes are my major weakness.’

‘Clothes, sure. But bus fares – who pays for their own bus fares?’

‘Me and my brother Siggy, for starters. Our folks reckon we’ll have to earn a living some day, so why not now?’

‘Truly? That’s pretty mean of them.’

Odette shrugged. ‘Mum’s writing a thesis. Dad works with homeless kids but only part time. It’s not as though we’ve got pots of money lying around the place. Besides, now I’m an earning member of the household, I get to be a voting member as well – like, I have an equal say in whether we buy a new carpet or go on a proper holiday or whatever. All for the price of a few bus fares.’

Jan was starting to feel breathless again. She’d never met anyone who laid out every detail of their life for you, when you’d only known them a few weeks. It was a pity she couldn’t think of anything startling to tell in return.

‘What’s with the landrover?’ asked Odette on cue, peering out the window. ‘Mum reckons all the yuppies are buying them these days.’

Jan smiled at her gratefully. The one interesting thing her family ever did and she’d nearly forgotten it.

‘Actually, we need a four-wheel drive,’ she said. ‘I mean, it’s not just for going to the shops and that. Mum’s folks left her this little house in the middle of nowhere – more of a shack, really – and the only way you can get there is by driving down some bumpy winding track through the sandhills. You gotta pack every single thing you could possibly need but it’s worth the hassle. Just imagine: an entire stretch of beach all to yourself. Not one other person in sight, anywhere.’

Odette whirled around, eyes bright. Her hand shot out towards the wall, like a kid playing pin the tail on the donkey. ‘That’s it, right?’ she demanded. ‘That’s your beach.’

‘Yeah, my sister took that photo last time we were there. I liked it so much, I got it blown up to poster-size.’

‘Oh, you,’ Odette said. ‘You’re so *organised*.’

She dropped onto the bed, clasped her hands behind her head and gazed up at the poster. Jan stood and watched, fascinated by the way her new friend could get totally absorbed in things. Right then Odette’s face was like a reflection of the blue and gold photo. She breathed with the wind. She soared with the gulls. She narrowed her eyes at the salt spray tossed up by the waves.

‘Beautiful,’ she said and jumped to her feet. ‘Okay, are we going to this famous old clothes shop or not?’

‘We’re going, we’re going.’

Jan closed the front door behind her and tugged it to check that it was properly shut. Odette was already on the other side of the street, nipping a spray of jasmine from an overhanging creeper. She sniffed at the white flowers and tucked them into the buttonhole of her vest.

‘So you definitely saw a kilt in this shop window? I’ve always wanted one, ever since—’

‘Yeah, I know. All those old-fashioned pictures in photo albums of little girls with—’

‘Tartan skirts and twinsets and long white socks.’

‘*Much* classier than the mini-twinsets our mums dressed us in—’

‘Because they hated the kilts and twinsets they had to wear when they were little!’

They laughed at everything and every time they laughed, it reminded them of something else to tell each other. Jan could hardly believe her luck. The other kids at school always frowned and said, ‘Hold on, let me finish,’ but when she interrupted Odette, her friend just got even more excited and cut back in to finish the sentences. It was a buzz. A real buzz.

At the corner they swung wide to let a neighbour through, then jostled together again.

‘Which way, Jan?’

‘Just over the road. Look, you can see it from here,’ and she hauled at the back of Odette’s vest to stop her crossing against the lights.

They sidled between racks of glitter stoles and t-shirts with the logos of forgotten rock groups, along walls so crammed with clothes that they looked like giant over-stuffed cushions. Odette reached straight into the window display, stepped straight into the kilt. She tilted her hips to check the price tag and started doing sums.

‘If I borrow five bucks from Siggy and eat cheese sandwiches for a week, I might just manage. I’ll think about it while we find something for you.’

Swivelling towards the nearest rack, she heaved at the tightly packed clothes hangers and dragged out anything that caught her eye. A Hawaiian shirt, a blue dress, a lime green tank top that sprouted lime green ruffles below the waist.

‘That one,’ Jan said suddenly and Odette blinked.

‘You can’t be serious. I might give it a go, just for a stir, but you – no way.’

‘Not the lime green thingie, ya dag. The beautiful old blue dress.’ Then, put off by her own enthusiasm, she shuffled her feet and changed her mind. ‘Nah, leave it. What would I do with something like that? I’m supposed to be looking for a shirt, anyway.’

‘Ah, come on, be a devil. At least try it.’

She tossed the hanger across and the blue material slid between Jan’s hands, quick and cool as creek water after rain. Without any more argument she ducked behind a skimpy curtain and wrestled with her skirt and windcheater. Stepped out shyly, wearing the blue dress.

Odette nodded and led her over to a narrow mirror, wedged between two racks. ‘See?’ she said.

Jan looked for Odette’s reflection first but there was only room for the dark-eyed girl in blue. Her skin as brown as beaches. Her hair as soft as night. She touched the seven blue buttons and ran her fingertip round the scalloped neck and held the skirt out like a fan. She curtsied to herself.

‘Great,’ Odette told her briskly. ‘That’s settled, then.’

‘Is it?’ Jan said, startled. She’d seen herself in the blue dress now and that was all she needed. She was happy enough to let it go.

Odette had other ideas, however. When Jan came back in her everyday gear, she was over by the counter, explaining in great detail why they’d need separate bags. ‘Because the first time you wear new clothes, it ought to be like a special occasion. And I gotta go off to work, so there’s no point in putting the kilt on now.’

Jan counted out ten dollar notes, feeling a bit lightheaded. As she stepped into the street, clutching a crumpled supermarket bag, she felt so different from her everyday self, that she wouldn’t have been surprised to see

carnival banners dangling from the lamp posts and carnival floats trundling by. Instead, a car slowed by them and a man leaned out the window.

‘Forgot your skirt this morning, sweetheart?’ he leered at Odette.

‘Like you forgot your brains, mate,’ Odette sang out, before Jan’s fists had even finished clenching. She turned back to Jan as if nothing had happened and said, ‘Meet you at the café tomorrow, okay? Going to wear the dress?’

‘Maybe... Yeah, I will. See you.’

The asphalt was springy underfoot, like a trampoline. Jan wanted to bounce up and down, turn a somersault in midair. That Odette, she thought. She breaks rules I never even knew about. Can’t remember when I last spent so much time with just one other person. Probably while I was going out with Theo, a year ago.

But every time she’d left Theo on a street corner, she’d felt hollow and nervous, as though she’d forgotten something she’d never be able to find again. Leaving Odette, she felt full of plans and ideas and energy. That’s the difference between friends and boyfriends, she told herself smugly. Friends are easier.

The girl is wearing a blue dress.

Out on the sandhills she is wearing a blue dress.

The girl and the wind experiment with the dress. Flatten the skirt and it’s a triangle. Hold the corners to make a box. Puff it up into a perfect sphere. Ease out some of the air till it’s egg-shaped, then roll it into a long tube. If all these possibilities could exist at once, there’d be a fleet of blue kites scudding across the sand.

The girl knows she can’t fly away on the wind. She can dream, though, and while she dreams, her hands can go on inventing an entire blue dress geometry. Triangle and square, circle and oval. One shape after another.

Back at home Jan couldn’t convince herself that the day was over. She prowled restlessly from room to room. She opened the fridge door and slammed it shut, she pressed every knob on the TV, she kicked the leg of her desk, she stared out of the big window in the lounge. Finally she gave a decisive nod and made one more tour of the house to gather up her scattered library books. At her bedroom door she hesitated and then turned back, lifting the blue dress off its hanger.

Outside the sky was still glossy with sunshine. The loose dress slipped like silk across her skin, making her aware of every movement. She found herself lifting her head, she found herself drawing back her shoulders.

Walking proud.

And, being more aware of her body, she became more aware of the street around her. She discovered a dozen shades of red in the tiled roofs and a dozen shades of green in the bobbing trees and sleek front lawns. She noticed the old woman on a folding chair, set well back in a corner of her front porch, and she waved to her. She noticed the black kitten, toying with a beetle in the gutter, and she dumped it safely in the nearest yard.

Still smiling to herself, Jan decided to cut across the park, instead of going round by the road as she usually did. She was midway between the sets of goal posts when she stopped on impulse, dropped her bag of books and flung her arms wide. The world tilted. Endless green and endless blue, wheeling in endless circles.

For a timeless moment earth and sky were hers: not to own but to travel freely.

Then she picked up the bag and hurried on. Ahead of her, treetops piled like cumulus clouds around the park gate. As she reached the opening to the avenue, Jane peered cautiously down the long tunnel of trees. No one lurking there, only leafy shadows shifting across the sunlight. Don't be nervous, she told herself. Be Odette.

But before she was halfway down the avenue one of the leafy shadows separated itself out and became a man. Her heart kicked hard at the wall of her chest, then settled into a staccato beat. She remembered the way her mum used to lead her past the corner pub, eyes fixed on some distant point, face expressionless. That carried her onwards for a while, though every now and then her self-control collapsed and the world flickered back into focus.

Sometimes she was sure the man was watching her avidly. Sometimes she was sure she was being paranoid. So he was less than a metre away by the time she knew for certain that he was going to veer towards her and jerk at his belt buckle and slide down his zip.

What did she feel then? Hard to know, given that shock wipes out memory cells as efficiently as an electric current. Did she try to pretend she hadn't seen? Did she try to think up some smart comment, Odette-style? Did she want to shove her knuckles into her mouth and whimper? Did she want to hit out?

At any rate, some instinct prompted her to look directly at him (though she couldn't remember his face afterwards) and to say, 'Excuse me, you're in my way.' Her voice held steady. For those few giddy seconds she expected him to move aside, and he did. She walked on in the same way as she'd

walked past dozens of stiff-legged growling dogs: no faster, though with increasingly longer strides.

But the moment she stepped through the park gate, she started to run. The heavy books slammed against her knees. The blue dress slithered over her body like a groping hand that she couldn't push away. She ran back around the edge of the park. Back through the zigzag streets. Back home.

Odette's got it all wrong, she thought as she leaned against her bedroom door. Rules are important. You should never, never break them. I don't think I want to be like Odette any more.

She undid the seven buttons, one by one. Held the blue dress out at arm's length and let it fall. The hem trailed across her foot like a ripple of water but she kicked it away from her.

The girl is wearing a blue dress.

Out on the sandhills she is wearing a blue dress.

The hot sand rasps her soles, so she walks until she finds a place where the sea has cut a channel across the beach. She presses her heel down hard and watches water ooze out of the shadowy dent to wash the grit from between her toes.

The blue dress lifts in the wind and touches her breasts and arms and thighs. The air around her smokes with seaspray. The dress is misty like the air and the air is silky like the dress. She is wearing a garment of air. It's like walking naked, walking in the blue dress.

Walking on the sandhills, where nobody sees.

Jan in her oldest jeans, baggy at the seat and the knees. Jan in her sloppiest windcheater, covering her, smothering her. Jan with her hair pulled back so tight that her cheeks hurt. Jan with no lipstick and no eyeshadow and no smile, nothing that might attract any attention.

For the entire morning she'd been planning what she would say when Odette asked about the blue dress. Then, as she dodged round the cluster of tables outside the café, she suddenly groaned.

'Wouldn't you know it! She's managed to get one up on me again.'

She could recognise the kilt and she could recognise the layers of raggedy t-shirts but otherwise she might've thought she was staring at someone from *Alien Nation*. The sunlight drew swirling glitter patterns across the dome of a golden skull. Odette had had another of her overnight inspirations. She'd cut off all her hair.

‘Wicked, hey?’ she beamed. ‘Got the idea from Breanna when I dropped into the café after work. She shaved her head last week and the hair’s just starting to grow back – like velvet, only tougher. I couldn’t quite hack going totally bald – I don’t exactly fancy myself as Kojak or a Hare Krishna or whatever – so I just kept snipping away till it felt right.’

She bent forward and Jan dabbed at the soft prickles. She didn’t really want to touch Odette, any more than she wanted to play their old games of backchat and interruptions. Let Odette carry on about her stupid hair till she ran out of steam. Jan was prepared to wait for her turn to come.

Before Odette could launch into another rave, however, a bunch of young guys in speedstripe trackpants jostled past. ‘Hiya, baldy,’ one of them called. ‘You an earthling or a martian or what?’

‘Yeah, come over here so we can check it out, okay?’

‘Get lost, meathead,’ Odette said cheerfully and they surged on, laughing, while Jan swallowed the bitter acid that was burning the back of her throat.

‘Did you get the reaction you wanted?’ she asked and Odette looked puzzled.

‘What are you on about? I wasn’t trying to get any kind of reaction. I only —’

‘Jesus, Odette, spare me. I supposed you think that sort of stuff’s super-groovy. Showing off. Yelling at guys in the street. Well, I’m not as brave as you are. I hate it. I really hate it.’

Her voice cracked. When she swung away to hide her face, the momentum carried her past Odette and on down the street. She pelted along the footpath, lost in a fog of rage, until the arch of an empty doorway loomed up ahead. Jan skimmed the shallow steps, tested the heavy glass doors and flattened herself into an alcove between a fire hose and a display case.

But Odette must’ve been good at hide and seek when she was a little kid. Seconds later she squeezed in beside Jan, plucking at a fold of her windcheater.

‘I don’t understand. What did I do that was so terrible? Or so brave, come to think of it?’

‘Everything,’ Jan spat. ‘You can’t help yourself. You’re always doing things to make people notice you. I mean, just look at your hair. How do you think that’s going to go down at Chicken Tonight?’

Odette giggled. ‘Never crossed my mind. I bet they won’t be too thrilled at having a skinhead behind the counter. Doesn’t matter, though. Breanna’s got another job, so I’ll be taking over her shift at the café after next week.’

Tears of frustration stung Jan’s eyes. ‘Oh boy,’ she burst out. ‘It’s really hard to pick a fight with you, y’know.’

‘Don’t then. I don’t want to fight with you, that’s for sure. I don’t like fights.’

‘Too bad,’ she said. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, everybody’s gotta do things they don’t like. How do you think I feel, with total strangers making comments about us everywhere we go? That might be your idea of a fun time but it isn’t mine. It scares me.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Odette replied, her voice wobbling slightly. ‘I didn’t realise. Fact is, I honestly couldn’t give a stuff what strangers think about me. Half the time I don’t even notice. If somebody I like gets mad at me, though, that’s the type of thing that freaks me right out.’

Jan turned her head away. Even then, she could still see Odette’s reflection smudged across the glass doors, like an old photo that was curling at the edges. Odette isn’t brave and defiant after all, she told herself. She doesn’t break the rules on purpose, like I thought she did. She’s just never got around to noticing that the rules exist.

Why had she ever kidded herself that friends were easier than boyfriends? When she busted up with Theo, everyone kept saying ‘Hey, don’t worry, you’ll find another guy.’ In one way that was a bit too simple but in another way it actually worked.

There was no way of replacing Odette, though. Sure, she could try comparing herself to Breanna instead, or to some of the other kids at school, but then she’d have to draw up a completely new set of lists. And she knew so much about Odette already, all their similarities and their differences. That was the whole point.

Turning slowly, she looked into a pair of round frightened eyes. For a moment she was startled and then she heard the other half of what Odette had said. ‘Hang on,’ Jan exclaimed. ‘You can’t possibly get that upset by a little bit of shouting. Don’t your parents ever have rows and stuff?’

‘Only once.’

Wow, Jan thought respectfully. It must’ve been a real doozy of a row, to have such a huge effect on Odette. But then again, maybe not. Different people got upset by different things. Just like different people were brave about different things.

She pulled down the neck of her windcheater and let the breeze dry the sticky sweat from her skin. Beside her Odette wriggled around awkwardly. ‘Are you still mad at me?’ she asked in a small voice.

‘Not any more. That’s one of our family rules – once you’ve spat the dummy, that’s it. Get things out in the open, then forget about them. Over and done with.’

‘Well then, if we’re still friends, I’ve got a suggestion to make. You look like you’re absolutely boiling. Why don’t you take one of my tops and give me the windcheater? It matches my kilt, anyhow.’

She held out a heavy metal t-shirt: two vampire bats with roses tucked between their fangs. Jan studied it for a moment. Why not? she decided. I don't intend to shave my head, I'm never going to walk down the street in a long shirt and tights and I doubt if I'll ever wear that beautiful blue dress again. But I don't need to look like a dog for the rest of my life, all the same.

The windcheater had a wacky kind of elegance on Odette, just as the t-shirt probably looked totally respectable on her. They grinned at each other and linked arms.

'Y'know, you could always cut the skirt off and turn it into a top,' Odette commented, as they headed back to the café. 'The blue dress, I mean. You really wanted a shirt all along, didn't you?'

Jan felt unexpectedly breathless. Odette mightn't be as brave as she'd thought – or brave in different ways, at any rate – but she was obviously just as good at mind-reading as ever.

'That's a sensible idea,' she agreed. 'Still, I like it the way it is. I reckon I'll leave it.'

She left it in the wardrobe for the rest of the year, until summer came and she had to pack every single thing she could possibly need to take to the beach house. As she hurried to and fro, she was nagged by the feeling that she'd forgotten something important. Finally she went to the wardrobe and took out the blue dress. It sagged down from the hanger, limp and forlorn.

She folded it into a small square and stuffed it down the side of her bag.

The girl is wearing a blue dress.

Out on the sandhills she is wearing a blue dress.

Out on the sandhills, where nobody sees, the girl can be what she wants to be. Sometimes a blue triangle. Sometimes a princess or a kite. Sometimes walking naked with the wind.

Sometimes she remembers the watchers in the city and sometimes she wishes she didn't care about them. But then she'd be somebody else and she's already worked out that this isn't a practical solution. The important thing is to keep remembering that there are always other possibilities. The important thing is to keep dreaming.

Back in the city again, she hangs the dress on a hook at the side of her wardrobe. She doesn't wear it out in the world, she doesn't even try it on when

she's alone in her room. All the same, it's there. Every night as she drifts into sleep it's one of the last things she sees.

And the blue dress flutters through her dreams.

THE PRINCESS IN THE TOWER

Our house was built in this style called mock-Tudor, which meant that it had diamond-shaped window panels by the door, wooden cross beams tacked across the brickwork and a high roof that came slanting down onto the upstairs front room. That was my bedroom. It was little and square, squashed in under the eaves, with little square windows facing the street and little triangular windows facing the houses on either side. Almost like an attic, except that attics are right up inside the roof and my room was at the head of the stairs, sandwiched between my brother's bedroom and my sister's bedroom.

We'd lived in this house for ages, so my room was full of all the things I'd ever owned. My teddy bear sprawled on top of the bookcase, his arm around a stack of CDs, and underneath him were all my favourite books: fairy tales, Tolkien, Isobelle Carmody, Virginia Andrews. A planetarium mobile hung from the ceiling and my father's old computer sat on the desk, waiting for me to do my homework or play the latest fantasy quest game that I'd borrowed from my friend Mia.

There were posters around the walls – everything from teddy bear tea parties to Gothic groups, all in black with white, white faces. And over in the far corner was my cupboard, a grotty old thing from a second-hand shop that my father had painted blue and stencilled with silver moons and stars. My everyday clothes were on the right-hand side of the cupboard, my dress-ups on the left. I had a velvet cloak, made from an old curtain, a crown of twisted gold wire and slippers covered with fat round rubies.

They were a bit small for me these days, though.

I loved my room but at night it sometimes scared me. There were too many windows, too many ways for the shadows to come crawling in. It was all right when my sister went out with one of her fourteen boyfriends, because then my mother would leave the light on for her and I would watch its yellow glow reflected on the red leaves of the plum tree until my eyes blurred and closed. But on other nights, when my sister stayed home, the shadows scuttled across the floor like mice or lurked around the corner of the cupboard or came to stand at the end of my bed, just as I was about to fall asleep.

I had a special torch, the size of my hand and shaped like a plump white dolphin. If the shadows started to frighten me more than usual, I used to switch the torch on and settle it next to my pillow, like a night-light. Then one night my mother spotted it and said, 'Ginny, you know you're not allowed to read under the bedclothes' and after that I couldn't rely on my dolphin-torch any more, not even when the shadows got really scary.

But I was never scared on the nights when my father came to tell me a story.

'Do you want an old story or a new story?' he says. His mouth is serious but his eyes are smiling because he knows what I'm going to say.

'An old story, of course. The old stories are the best ones.'

'All right then, what sort of story will it be? A story about a princess?'

'Of course,' I say again. 'All the old stories are about princesses.'

My father thinks for a moment. Then he leans back on the wooden rail at the end of my bed and begins.

'Once upon a time there was a princess who lived in a tower. When she was very little, the princess had asked for a special room, all of her own, so her father the king built the tower for her above the gate of his castle. It rose high up in the air, with windows all around it and a different view out of every window.'

'What could the princess see out of her windows?'

'Hmm,' says my father. 'Let me think. Oh yes, I remember. Out of the windows on the east side of the tower, she could see a silver tree with hazy purple mountains shimmering behind it. Out of the windows on the west side of the tower, she could see a golden tree with a mirror-bright lake glistening behind it. And out of the windows at the front of the tower she could see a smooth green lawn and a distant forest and a tree with scarlet leaves.'

'A plum tree,' I say with a nod of my head. 'Like the one in our front garden.'

‘Nice try, Ginny, but this wasn’t a plum tree. It was a fire tree, a tree whose leaves were small pointed flames. The princess’s pet cockatoo tried to perch on a branch of the scarlet tree one day and got —’

‘No, it didn’t. The bird *didn’t* get burnt to ashes.’

‘Well, maybe you’re right. Maybe the cockatoo just had its feathers slightly scorched, so that the underside of its wings were palest pink for ever afterwards. Anyway, I still haven’t finished telling you about the princess’s room. It was round, of course, because towers are always round, and its stone walls were hung with tapestries. There were shelves for the princess’s spellbooks – as you probably know, princesses are always good at spells – and there was a crystal mirror on a table by the wall. The princess could look into the mirror at any time of the day or night and summon images of magical adventures.’

I snuggle down deeper beneath the bedclothes and hitch the blanket over my shoulder. ‘Did the princess have a cupboard?’ I ask sleepily.

‘She certainly did,’ says my father. ‘The princess had the royalest cupboard in the entire kingdom. It was midnight blue, with silver stars and moons painted all over it. And what sort of clothes do you think she kept inside it?’

I try to tell him but my eyelids are heavy and my mouth won’t move.

I drift away into my dreams.

My mother teaches Film Studies at one of the universities, which means that our family spends a lot of time watching old movies on TV. I was dozing through some Australian film about mutant cars terrorizing a country town when my mother noticed me and sent me off to bed. As I flicked the switch at the bottom of the stairs the light blinked once, pinged and then died. I went back into the lounge room and asked my brother, who’s the tallest person in the family, to come and change the globe.

‘In a minute, Ginny,’ he said, his eyes fixed on a mutant car with spikes. ‘You’d better find a torch first, otherwise I won’t be able to see what I’m doing.’

I turned on the hall light and climbed the stairs, two at a time. The landing wasn’t lit by the hall light but I was feeling brave that evening so I pushed past the shadows and scurried into my room. The dolphin-torch fitted snugly into my palm. I turned on the switch and watched my fingers glow blood-red in the darkness.

The beam from the torch cut a path through the night. I followed the path to the head of the stairs and sat there, waiting for my brother. Whenever a shadow came too close, I swung the torch onto it and saw it shrink away

into nothingness. After a while I started waving the torch this way and that, forcing the shadows to jump it like a skipping rope.

‘Stop that,’ my brother called from the landing. ‘Do you want me to break my neck or something?’

I held the ray of light level while he balanced on a chair and replaced the globe. The minute he’d finished, I began to play more torch games, whirling the light beam as boldly as if it was a Jedi laser sword. It struck against one of the stair posts and a tall shadow loomed up in front of me. I gasped.

‘Watch it,’ my brother warned, ruffling my hair as he went past. ‘You’ll give yourself nightmares if you’re not careful.’

‘No, I won’t,’ I said, feeling brave again. ‘Not tonight.’

Holding the dolphin-torch steady in front of me, I walked into my bedroom and wondered whether my father would come back to continue my bedtime story.

‘What would you like the princess to do next?’

‘Magic. You reckoned she could work magic.’

‘So I did,’ my father agrees. ‘Very well, here goes. One day the princess decided to cast a spell. She took down her favourite spellbook, which was an enormous old volume bound in red leather with brass corners and a brass clasp. When she whispered a few words, the clasp flew open. She turned the pages till she came to a spell that she’d never seen before.’

‘How come? I thought you said it was her favourite book. I know everything that’s in my favourite books.’

‘Ah, but this was a magic book and magic books are different every time. The princess knew she might never find this particular spell again, so she decided to try it. She read it through carefully and then she ran down the stairs of the tower to pick a leaf from the silver tree, a leaf from the gold tree and a leaf from the fire tree.’

‘Hold on, that’s impossible. She would’ve burnt her fingers.’

My father grins at me. ‘Sweetheart, if you want to get picky about it, the whole thing’s impossible. But as it happens, the princess took a little pair of iron tongs with her and used them to snip a flame from the fire tree. She carried the leaves carefully back to the tower, where she placed the gold leaf and the silver leaf in a heavy bowl, read out the words from the spellbook and dropped the fiery leaf on top of the others. They blazed up straightaway and within a few seconds there was nothing left but a pinch of soft powdery ash.’

‘Big deal. It doesn’t sound like much of a spell to me.’

‘Hold your horses, Ginny,’ says my father. ‘Wait till you find out what happened next. Following the directions in the spellbook, the princess sprinkled the ashes across her pillow before she went to sleep and all through the night she had the strangest dreams.’

‘Not bad dreams?’

‘No, not at all. She dreamed that she was sailing across the sky like a cloud, basking in the golden sunlight. She dreamed that she was swimming like a fish in currents of silvery water. She dreamed that she was dancing between the flames of a huge forest fire. And finally she dreamed that she was walking in the rose garden with her father the king.’

‘That’s nice. I like that. So the spell was a dream spell, was it?’

‘Yes, and more than that as well. When the princess woke up next morning, she found a glowing ball on the pillow beside her head.’

‘What sort of ball? Like a tennis ball or a football?’

My father frowns. ‘Well, maybe I shouldn’t have called it a ball. It wasn’t perfectly round, because it had a slight dent on one side. As a matter of fact, it was shaped rather like a bean, although it was much bigger than a kidney bean or a broad bean or even a butter bean. Perhaps it’d make more sense to say that it was shaped like a human brain.’

‘Or a dolphin,’ I say, reaching out to pat my dolphin-torch.

That night I dreamed I was walking in a rose garden but a week or so later I had another nightmare – the one where I was wandering through a big, empty city full of tall, white buildings that started to crumble and fall and topple down on me. I woke up, choking. I hurled myself out of bed and stumbled towards the stairs.

My mother met me on the landing. She always seems to know when I’ve had a bad dream. I don’t even need to tiptoe into the downstairs bedroom and feel my way along the side of the double bed to wake her up.

‘What’s the matter?’ she whispered, wrapping her arms around me. ‘Tell me about it, Ginny.’

I was scared and shivering in the darkness, so I told her every detail of my dream. She listened and squeezed my shoulder and led me down to the kitchen, where she made us both cups of milky cocoa.

‘Ginny,’ she said, once we were sipping cocoa and munching ginger biscuits, ‘have you been walking home through the cemetery again?’

I looked up startled, wondering how she’d guessed. ‘Did somebody do me in?’ I asked. ‘I suppose it was my stupid brother. Or my equally stupid sister.’

‘Actually, I worked it out for myself. That’s what your dream’s about, isn’t it? Big, white slabs that topple down and bury you like tombstones. Cemeteries always give you bad dreams, Ginny. Remember, your last lot of nightmares was about —’

‘Yes, I remember,’ I cut in. ‘You don’t have to go on and on about it.’

‘Are you sure? I thought you made a promise that you weren’t going to play in the cemetery any more or watch scary videos at Mia’s house. You seem to have forgotten all of that, though.’

I kicked at the leg of the kitchen table until my cocoa slopped onto the laminex. ‘I didn’t *want* to walk through the cemetery, Mum. It’s just that Mia likes to read the writing on the gravestones and we always walk home together and it’s not as if I know anyone who’s buried there and —’

‘And then you come home and have nightmares about it. Don’t you think that’s a bit silly? Can’t you just explain to Mia that you’d rather walk home along the main road?’

‘Oh, Mum,’ I sighed. ‘It’s not that simple. I couldn’t possibly tell Mia that I’ve been having bad dreams, like some sooky little baby.’

‘Okay then, don’t tell her. You’ve got a good imagination, Ginny. You could easily invent a reason for walking home some other way.’

It was true about my imagination. I thought of half a dozen reasons on the spot, from checking out the boys at the Kingswood Hall bus stop to playing on the monkey bars in the park. All the same, even though my mother was trying to help, I knew that I’d miss the cemetery. I liked the old peppercorn trees with their pink berries and the peaceful buzz of the insects in the grass and the mossy slabs of stone where the dead people lay, waiting for someone to remember them.

For a moment I wished that it had been my father who’d woken up and come to meet me on the stairs. He would’ve understood.

‘I want to know more about the magic ball, Daddy. What did the princess do with it?’

‘At first she did exactly what you would’ve done. She carried it around with her wherever she went, taking it out of her pocket every now and then to stroke its smooth surface or admire the way it glowed in her hand. Then one day she went riding in the forest on her white pony and stayed out too late. Shadows started to gather on the path in front of her and when she turned the corner, she saw a forest troll with yellow eyes and mossy teeth and stick-like hands that reached out to grab the pony’s bridle.’

‘Oh, yuck. Go on, quick.’

‘Well, the princess was terrified, of course – even princesses get terrified sometimes. But being a princess, she kept her wits about her. Just as the troll’s skinny fingers jerked hard on the bridle, she remembered the magic ball and tugged it out of her pocket. In the darkness of the forest, the ball seemed to shine more brightly than ever before. A ray of light darted out from it, striking the forest troll between the eyes. The troll groaned and sizzled and vanished.’

‘Yes!’ I say, cheering softly. ‘I’m glad she thought of the ball in time.’

My father smiles. ‘The princess was glad too. And when she got back to the castle, she went up to her room in the tower and thought for a while longer. After she’d sorted through her memories and consulted her spellbooks and gazed into her crystal mirror, she realised that she finally understood the purpose of the magic ball. The ball could destroy evil – it could wipe out wicked creatures like the troll.’

My father pauses dramatically. He’s probably waiting for me to cheer again but somehow I don’t feel like cheering this time.

‘Well?’ he asked. ‘I thought you were keen to find out how the princess could use the magic ball. Aren’t you pleased?’

‘I suppose so. But ... oh, I don’t know. It doesn’t sound like much fun for the princess, that’s all – waiting around for greeblies to jump on her and then flashing a stupid old ball at them.’

‘Come on, Ginny. You ought to know better than that. Princesses don’t wait around. Princesses make things happen.’

‘Do they?’ I say, starting to feel better. ‘Tell me about it, then.’

My father lowers his voice to a thrilling whisper. ‘The princess waited until midnight, when everybody in the castle was asleep. Then she put on her spell cloak and began to prepare the most dangerous spell in her book. She took a black candle and some deadly nightshade and bat’s blood and – oh, all sorts of things. She pounded them and stirred them, she muttered magic charms over them and by the time the dawn light came creeping through the narrow windows, the princess held a flask of dark red liquid that would call all the evil creatures in the kingdom to her tower. Shall I tell you about those evil creatures, Ginny?’

‘Sure,’ I say casually, but my eyes are so wide with fright that I can’t imagine how I’ll ever close them again.

‘There were werewolves and vampires,’ my father breathes. ‘Ghosts and demons and skeletons that shuffled slowly through the cities at night. There were trolls in the forests and giants in the mountains and water-monsters in the lakes. There were the living dead who prowled around graveyards, searching for little girls to —’

‘No! Not them. None of them.’

‘No?’ he teases. ‘Are you positive, Ginny? ... All right, perhaps there weren’t. But there were some very fearsome creatures in the kingdom, just the same.’

‘And they were all waiting outside the princess’s tower?’

My father laughs. ‘Good heavens, no. Evil creatures never appear at dawn. I thought everybody knew that. The princess had completed the spell but she wasn’t ready to use it yet. She needed to wait for the right time.’

‘Oh, I get it,’ I say with relief, relaxing back on the pillow. ‘But listen, how the heck is she supposed to work out when the right time comes along?’

‘She’ll know it by instinct, sweetheart, because she’s a princess. Right now, though, she’s far too tired to worry about things like that. All she can manage to do is to take off her spell cloak and hide the flask where nobody can find it and pull back the bedclothes and tumble into bed and fall ... fast ... asleep.’

Those are the last words I hear that night, because my arms and legs suddenly go limp. My head lolls back, I clutch my dolphin-torch and fall fast asleep.

There were other things in my life beside nightmares and bedtime stories. I went to school. I did my homework. I swapped books and clothes and gossip with Mia. I watched old films on TV with my family. We went driving in the country at weekends, we visited my grandparents, we watched the Moomba parade. We had a lot of good times together.

I knew I’d been lucky with my family. Mia’s older brothers and sisters could be really horrible to her but my brother and sister were usually pretty nice. They let me stick around when their friends came over to our house and they sometimes asked me along when they were going to a movie or a concert. My brother made a leather folder for my English project and my sister helped me choose my clothes.

One day we all went into town: my sister, my mother and me. My sister was looking for a dress to wear to a wedding, my mother was looking for a suit to wear to a job interview and I was looking for some summer shirts and tops. We laughed and joked and gave each other advice.

My mother found a red shirt patterned with yellow flowers and held it up against me. ‘Go on, Ginny,’ she urged. ‘This would really suit you.’

‘Dad’s favourite colour,’ I said, looking down at the scarlet cotton. ‘Yes, I’ll try it on.’

When I came out of the changing room, my mother had wandered off to check out one of the sale tables. My sister grabbed me by the wrist and

whispered, 'Ginny, you've got to stop raving on about Dad all the time. Can't you see that Mum doesn't like it?'

I scowled back, annoyed with her for breaking the happy mood. Oh yeah, I thought. So my mother got jealous. Why should I care?

My father comes to tell me my bedtime story. He sits at the end of the bed as usual, but I remember what my sister said and defiantly pat the bedclothes beside me. My father moves closer. Though it's dark in the room, I know he's smiling.

'Tell me about the princess,' I demand. 'Tell me about her spell.'

'Days went by,' says my father. 'Then on the night of the new moon the princess took her flask from its hiding place. She went to the window and sprinkled the dark red liquid on the smooth green lawn below. After that she waited patiently for several hours, while shadows began to stir in the forest. One by one they sidled out into the open, until all the evil creatures in the kingdom were gathered in front of the princess's tower. All the vampires. All the ghosts. All of the living dead.'

He stops for a moment, giving me time to imagine the gaunt, sharp-toothed, snarling, wild-eyed faces turned towards the princess's window. 'I bet she was scared this time,' I say uneasily.

'Oddly enough, she wasn't,' my father replies. 'At least, not till she looked out across the crowd of evil creatures and noticed a taller, darker shadow looming up behind it. The forest trolls bowed down before it and even the fiercest giants seemed disturbed by its ominous presence. The princess felt a chill of terror run through her body. But she'd summoned the evil creatures to the tower and how she had to go through with her plan. She drew herself up to her full height and —'

'Please, let me say it,' I cut in, twitching with excitement. 'I know what she's going to do next. She'll get out the magic ball and blast them all into infinity.'

'Will she?' says my father. 'You could be right, Ginny. But then again, perhaps this isn't that sort of story. Perhaps the shadow began to move forward, while the skeletons and the water-monsters hurried to shift themselves out of its path. Perhaps, as the shadow reached the tower and lifted its head to look up at the princess, she saw the glitter of a crown in the gloom and she recognized —'

'No way! She didn't recognise him.'

My father sighs. 'Oh, but I'm afraid she did. She recognised her father the king, who had taught her everything she knew. So how could the princess possibly hope to stand against him?'

My father leans even closer. His shadow looms up and falls across the bed and falls across me. His shadow is smothering me. I start to choke.

'But,' I gasp. 'But the king didn't teach the princess how to make the magic ball. She dreamt it for herself. She fell asleep and it was there beside the pillow when she woke up. It's hers, it's all hers.'

And I grab my dolphin-torch and turn on the switch and a ray of light darts out from it. I swing the ray around like a Jedi sword, cutting through the shadows, penetrating every corner of the room.

The room is empty.

My mother heard me choking and sobbing. She came straightaway. I was shivering and scared in the darkness, so I told her every detail of what had happened.

'Oh, Ginny,' she said, sounding as frightened as I was. 'Oh, Ginny, how long is this going to go on for? It's been two and a half years since your father died.'

I've kicked my dolphin-torch under the bed, Daddy, right into the farthest corner where I can't reach it. I've turned out the light and I'm waiting here in the dark, among the shadows. I want you to tell me another story and this time I promise I won't be scared and stupid.

Daddy, where are you?

FOUR HORSEMEN

My name is Louise Vincini. I'm a teacher. But please, don't switch off straight away. I've got something to tell you, something so important that – no, wait a minute, I'm starting to sound teacherly already. And it's not even true. For the last twenty years I've been telling children all sorts of things – from the Italian word for 'cat' to how long the Aborigines have lived here in Australia – but this time I don't actually know what I want to tell you. If anything, I suspect I really want to ask you a question. First of all, though, I'd better fill you in on the whole story.

It began with the busker – or the TV news – or one of my nicest year seven classes. Yes, I think I'll begin by describing the year sevens. A typical inner city mix. Olive faces, pale faces, golden brown faces, sometimes tired and sometimes worried but always shining with that special light you only ever see in the faces of the young. And they loved to talk. I was supposed to be teaching them Italian but we got through the lessons so fast that I never used to mind if they spent some of the time discussing other things.

That's how we came to be talking about the news, of course. Sirin Eker started it. 'Miss,' she said, while I was still putting my books down on the table, 'did you see those kids on TV last night?'

I thought back and remembered street kids, war orphans, two sets of twins whose parents had been killed in a car crash.

'Which kids do you mean, Sirin?' I asked.

'The ones who are starving, okay? With big eyes and their ribs showing and arms like broomsticks. Somewhere in Africa, I think.' Her voice wobbled.

She stopped for a second and then burst out, 'What I want to know is, why do things like that happen?'

'Because of the drought,' George Panopoulos said straight away. 'Weren't you listening? The guy on the telly reckoned the rivers dried up and all the plants and stuff died and the people didn't have anything to eat.'

'Yeah, yeah, I heard him. Only that's not what I meant, dillbrain. I'm asking why we let it happen.'

'Oh, right,' grumbled Matt Brinsley. 'Like it's all our fault,' but before he'd finished, Nhan Tran was already saying, 'Well, there's a lot of food here. People even throw a lot of it away.' And before Nhan had finished, Kayla Cooper was already saying, 'So what? We can't pack up our leftovers and post them to Africa. Everything'd go mouldy before it got there.'

As you can see, my year 7s all talk at once when they get really interested in something. Before long half the class was shouting across to the other half. I was just about to call for silence when Matt Brinsley said 'Anyway,' so loudly that everyone stopped and swung round to look at him.

'Anyway,' he repeated more quietly, 'they're all blacks over there. They don't know how to do things, not like we do. Sending food won't help, because they still wouldn't be able to fix the drought.'

Sirin's round, rosy face scrunched up like a bulldog. 'You're just making excuses,' she growled. 'If we're so smart, we could send them some of our drought experts. Right?'

She glared at Matt and he looked at George Panopoulos for help. 'Calm down, Sirin,' George said. 'Like I told you before, you weren't listening to the program properly. It's just not that simple.'

I sighed and turned to stare out the window. I used to worry about starving children too, once upon a time. I'd asked myself all the questions that my year 7s were asking now but in the end I'd basically learned to live with it. So, even though my heart was with Sirin, I had to admit that I agreed with George.

'You don't care. Just because those kids are on the opposite side of the world, you think you can forget about them.'

I jumped guiltily, wondering whether Sirin could read my mind, but she was still busy glaring at Matt. He ducked his head and mumbled, 'Well, obviously it'd be different if they were here.'

'But we've got people like that here,' Kayla told him. 'The old derro who hangs around the school, for example. The other day I saw him take half a sandwich out of the rubbish bin and eat it.'

'Oh, yuk,' someone groaned. 'How could he do that?'

'You can do anything,' said Nhan. 'If you're hungry enough.'

Silence. I should've started the lesson then but instead I moved nearer to the window and looked around for the old man. He was easy enough to

spot, because of the clothes he wore. Two ragged jumpers roughly stitched together, one half red, one half yellow and both sides stiff with dirt. Then a pair of fancy trackpants, which seemed to have one red leg and one yellow leg as well, although they were so grimy that it was hard to tell.

His two-colour clothes reminded me of the poem about the Pied Piper, who drove a plague of rats out of Hamelin with his music and then, when the townspeople refused to pay him, piped their children away as well. Funnily enough, the old man was a piper too. He played his ancient recorder at the tram stop every night, busking to the people who were on their way home from work.

I hadn't ever looked at him before but now I found myself leaning forward to study his matted grey dreadlocks – his brown skin, weathered and creased until it was as tough as sacking – his unexpectedly bright blue eyes, gazing straight across the gap between us. Although, of course, I couldn't really see what colour his eyes were, not when he was almost a hundred metres away.

Stop imagining things, Louise, I told myself and I strode back to the table. 'All right,' I said, 'open your books at page 87. We've wasted enough time for one afternoon.'

Books thumped onto the desks. Pages rustled. And underneath the racket I heard Sirin mutter, 'But I still thought we ought to do something.'

I smiled at her and said, 'I only wish we could.' Then I pushed the old busker and the starving children out of my mind and started to explain the basic rules about Italian verbs.

I was writing on the whiteboard when the music started. A thin wailing sound that ran up and down the scale, slowly at first but then faster and more frantic. Nothing unusual about that, of course. The old man played popular tunes when he was busking at the tram stop but he often used to sit outside the school and practise his scales. It was no bother to anyone.

At least, that's what I thought to begin with. But then, bit by bit the piping became louder. Before long it was so loud that I could hardly believe it was all coming from one battered recorder. What's more, the notes kept getting higher and shriller, until they blended into an endless, piercing whine. The air shivered. The windows shook in their frames. My ears hurt.

Some of the year 7s buried their heads in their arms. Others hid underneath the desks. Sirin leaned over to cover the ears of little Hung Ngo and Matt kept shouting 'Shut up, stop it' at the music. And I gritted my teeth and squeezed my eyes shut, as if I could somehow manage to block out the sound that way.

The music rose higher and higher and then – well, I’m sure it didn’t actually stop. I think it just soared up out of my reach, like those whistles that only dogs and bats can hear. I waited for a few seconds, to make sure it wasn’t going to come back again, and then finally I relaxed and opened my eyes.

When I looked around, the room was crowded with shadows. Shadows squatting on the floor, shadows perched on the chairs, shadows balancing on the desks. One shadow for every year 7 kid. Shadows with big eyes and thin arms and –

No.

Wait a minute.

Not shadows.

Children.

Dark-skinned starving children.

The room started to spin. I realised I was about to faint, so I sat down fast and dropped my head between my knees. After a while I glanced up, expecting to find that the classroom had gone back to normal. But the shadow children were still there – some slumped and listless, some shaking with fright, others with a faint glimpse of curiosity at the back of their dark eyes. And my year 7s were gathered around them, patting their shoulders and talking in hushed gentle voices.

‘Oh, you poor thing,’ Kayla crooned as she tucked her jacket round the shoulders of a trembling child. ‘Poor thing. It’s so awful. I didn’t realise. What are we going to do?’

‘Take them home, of course,’ said Sirin. ‘They can’t stay here.’

Heads nodded. Hands reached out. ‘No way. Not me,’ said Matt, making a dash for the door, but the others all turned towards their shadow twins and started to help them to their feet. Silently and efficiently they led them out of the room – supporting the children if they could walk, making slings with their hands when the children were too weak to move. Within seconds the classroom was empty, except for one tiny boy who lolled against the wall, staring at me with blank, hopeless eyes.

I held onto the edge of the table and stared back at him. ‘I’ll have to do something about you,’ I told him. ‘I know that. Just let me go out and check on the others first.’

I backed to the door and hurried out into the school yard. Some of the year 7s had set off already and the rest of them were over by the gate, organising a bicycle shuttle service. I watched while they carefully strapped a stick-thin boy into the child-seat on the back of George Panopoulos’s bike. They seemed to have everything under control, so I turned away – and nearly bumped into Matt Brinsley.

For one wild moment I thought he'd grown two heads but when I looked closer, I realised that he was carrying the tiny boy on his back.

'Well, I can't just leave him behind,' he said defensively. 'He's not my responsibility – I don't have to take him home. But I can, if I want.'

That did it. My knees started to shake and my heart felt too big for my chest. All of a sudden I couldn't keep on pretending that everything would be fine. I wanted to sit down on the ground and weep for those skeleton children – and for my brave, loving year 7s.

I stared off into the distance and tried to blink away my tears. After a while I found myself focusing on a rust-coloured blur. As I blinked harder, I realised that it was the old busker, watching from the other side of the street. This time he was definitely too far away for me to see his face. And yet I felt sure that he was laughing at me, all the same.

There was nothing more for me to do, so I packed up my books and went home. I was planning to think about the whole situation after dinner but half way through heating up some Bolognese sauce, I decided I wasn't hungry. I went straight to bed and slept for the next ten hours, with skeleton shadows dancing through my dreams to the sound of soft, mournful piping.

Next morning my year 7s had even more to talk about than usual. They started calling out the minute I walked through the door.

'Miss, did you know that you can't eat when you're starving?'

'It's true, Miss. You're not allowed to give starving people real food. You have to start them off on this special drink made of salt and sugar and water.'

'George Panopoulos found that out from the Internet, miss. He rang the rest of us and told us.'

'But I didn't talk to him till later,' said Matt. 'So I gave my boy some bread and milk and he spewed it straight up again.'

'Oh, gross,' said one of the other kids and Matt shrugged.

'Not really. I can handle it. Used to clean up after my puppy all the time.'

I leaned against the whiteboard, smiling to myself. It's amazing how much difference a good night's sleep can make. Yesterday I'd been in a state of shock – I'd seen the children with my own eyes but my mind couldn't really take it in. And yet today, even though nothing else had changed, I somehow seemed to have accepted that they were here to stay.

Of course, it wasn't quite as simple as that. For one thing, a bunch of the year 7s' parents turned up at the staff room that afternoon. They were angry and upset at first but as they ranted and raved, the old busker began to

play his recorder outside the window – a soft, lilting melody this time, sad and joyful by turns. Before long the parents' faces had relaxed and some of them were even searching their pockets for tissues.

'So you don't actually know where these children came from?' Kayla's mother said briskly. 'Well then, we'll obviously have to take care of them for the time being. Otherwise they'd only be put into a home – and that wouldn't be good for them.'

She headed for the door and the others followed, without any more arguments. The piper played a marching song for them as they strode across the school yard, shoulders back and heads held high with pride.

After that the news seemed to spread around the school fairly quickly. Mr Jago, the Principal, found out that some of the year 7s were staying home with their children, because their parents were out at work. So he fiddled with the timetable and turned one of the classrooms into a room where the children could stay during the day.

Soon it was the busiest room in the whole school. The year 7s spent half their time there, of course, and other kids came to play with the children as well. The Parents' Association brought boxes of clothes and games. Teachers dropped in during their spare periods. And some of the parents who were doctors or nurses came along to give advice on how to feed and look after the children. Everyone was excited when Nhan's boy put on a kilo – worried when Kayla's girl got sick – delighted when George's boy learned to play noughts and crosses on the computer. But I knew that it couldn't last forever, so I wasn't surprised when a social worker from the Department of Youth and Community Services turned up at the school late one afternoon.

She bustled into the staff room, dumped a pile of forms on the table and said, 'Start talking.' I told her the entire story and she listened carefully. Then she smiled and said, 'Sorry, Miss Vincini, I'm not an *X-Files* fan. I'm afraid I don't believe a word of it.'

So I took her to meet the children. They were at home by then, of course, but their families were happy for us to come in and look around. We drank cups of pale amber tea in the Trans' kitchen and watched Nhan and a skinny black boy pulling the strings of a heap of snow peas. We sat in the Ekers' lounge room while Sirin wrote out a list of kids from other classes who'd asked if they could help. We listened in silence as George pointed at the tables of figures on his computer screen and lectured us about how there was enough food for everybody in the world, if only we could work out how to share it around.

There was one nasty moment, when we knocked on the door of the Brinsleys' house. Mr Brinsley listened to us for thirty seconds and then said, 'Oh yeah, that black bastard. I told Matt we've got enough of their sort in this

country already – taking our jobs or having a nice little holiday on the dole. So I kicked it out into the street next day.’

The social worker nodded to herself and scribbled a note on one of her forms. But as we headed back to her car, Matt came running after us.

‘Don’t worry,’ he gasped. ‘The boy’s okay. I rescued him and took him to George’s place – and I go there all the time to look after him.’ He shuffled his feet and added, ‘My dad’s not as bad as he sounds, y’know. He just doesn’t understand.’

After that I was sure I could talk the social worker into leaving us alone – but she came back to the school next morning and told me she’d have to write a report for her department, all the same. She bustled around, weighing the children, asking lots of questions and writing everything down on her forms in nice neat columns. I started to get really worried but over the next couple of weeks, I noticed that she seemed to spend most of her time helping with the children or listening to the piper’s music. I smiled to myself. Somehow I had the feeling that she was never going to finish that report, after all.

Meanwhile the children kept on getting stronger, although they still looked very small and thin next to the year 7s, of course. I loved watching their eyes grow brighter. I loved the kindness and concern that shone in the eyes of my year 7s. In a way, it was one of the happiest times of my life – but as I said before, nothing lasts forever. One morning Mr Jago called me into his office and told me that the girl who’d been staying with Hung Ngo seemed to have vanished overnight.

Hung Ngo was in tears and Mr Jago kept pacing up and down the room. We talked about ringing the police but somehow we never got around to it – maybe because we could hear the piper playing a slow, sad tune outside. Sure enough, next day Sirin’s girl disappeared and a few days later Nhan’s boy went as well. Before long everyone in the school knew what was happening.

The children were leaving us.

I thought my year 7s would be really upset but, as usual, they adjusted much faster than I did. ‘They’ve gone back to their own country, miss,’ George explained to me. ‘That social worker reckons it happens as soon as they’ve put on ten kilos. Still, they’ll have a better chance of surviving now, won’t they?’

‘I hope so, George,’ I said. ‘I really hope so.’

Soon there was only one child left – a little girl called Ama who’d been living at Kayla’s house. Mrs Cooper brought her to the children’s room for a visit one afternoon, when Sirin and the social worker and I were packing the leftover clothes and games into boxes. We weighed her and tickled her and gave her some of the games to take home.

‘That’s funny,’ the social worker commented as Mrs Cooper was leaving. ‘According to my forms, Ama’s put on eleven kilos – and yet she’s still here.’

‘Maybe she isn’t going to vanish like the others,’ Mrs Cooper said hopefully. ‘I wasn’t able to have any other babies after Kayla and I always wanted two girls. Still, I suppose I wouldn’t be allowed to keep her, anyway.’

The social worker cleared her throat. ‘Oh, I think that could be arranged. Why don’t we have a talk about it?’

She dropped her pile of forms into the rubbish bin and walked out with Mrs Cooper. Sirin and I looked at each other and smiled. ‘Well, there’s one happy ending at least,’ I said. ‘Or is it? Ama’s family won’t be too happy if they never see her again.’

Sirin’s smile widened into a huge grin. ‘Relax, miss,’ she told me. ‘Haven’t you noticed how neat this whole business is? If we could check, I bet we’d find out Ama needs the Coopers, just as much as they need her.’

That made me feel better. I followed Sirin’s orders and relaxed. ‘What’s going to happen now?’ I asked, as though she was the teacher and I was the student.

‘Dunno,’ she said with a shrug. ‘But I’ll tell you one thing. Next time anyone tries to say you can’t change the world, I’m not going to let anyone get away with it.’

She gave me a thumbs-up sign and left. I leaned on the window sill and watched her skipping across the yard, until she disappeared into the crowd of kids jostling out through the gate. From the far side of the road the old busker lifted his hand to me in a salute and pushed the battered recorder deep into his tracksuit pocket.

Within a few weeks everybody in the school seemed to have forgotten about the children – although there were Freedom From Hunger posters all over the noticeboards and I overheard Matt Brinsley ticking off a kid who’d said something about ‘filthy blacks.’ But apart from that, it would’ve been easy to believe that the children had never existed. I might’ve even forgotten them myself, except that one evening I had an unexpected visitor.

I was working in the upstairs study that I’d built onto my house. The desk lamp made a puddle of light on my papers but otherwise the room was shadowy and silent. So naturally I jumped with fright when the old busker came shuffling across the carpet towards me.

‘Gave you a shock, did I?’ he said with a gap-toothed grin. ‘Sorry about that. I just wanted to have a word with you about this business at your school. Reckon it’s time we started thinking about the next step.’

My heart was still banging like a drum. I took a couple of deep breaths to calm myself down and said, ‘The next step? Oh no, you don’t need to do anything else. The kids have learnt a lot already.’

‘Not enough,’ the piper sniffed. ‘I only showed ’em what starving kiddies look like. Believe me, it gets worse than that.’

‘Yes, I know,’ I said patiently. ‘But I want to protect my year 7s from that side of life for as long as possible. They’re only children, after all.’

The piper threw his shaggy head back and roared with laughter. ‘Ah, come off it,’ he said, still chuckling. ‘Kids are tough as old boots. They need to be, considering the stuff they gotta cope with.’

He fixed me with his bright, unblinking blue eyes. I turned away and watched the shadows moving on the wall, as skinny and slow as starving children. After a while I sighed. Maybe the old man had a point. If children like Ama had to cope with all sorts of terrible things, then at least my year 7s ought to know about it.

‘Alright, I’ll listen,’ I said. ‘But before you play that pipe again, I want to know what you’re planning to show us next.’

The piper was slouched against the window, gazing out at the night sky. He glanced over his shoulder and said, ‘Ever heard of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse? They were a bunch of old geezers who were supposed to come galloping across the sky when the world was in a mess, so they were named after the worst things people could think of. Death was the leader, riding on his pale horse. Then there was Hunger – but your kids’ve met Hunger already, of course. And they probably know Plague too.’

I opened my mouth to say, ‘Actually, I don’t think the year 7s really understand about AIDS.’ But just in time I remembered that the piper had a special way of making people understand things, so I clamped my lips shut. He twinkled at me, as if he knew exactly what I was thinking.

‘Right-o,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Let’s talk about the fourth Horseman then. His name’s War.’

Straight away my heart went cold. I shut my eyes and saw the year 7s sitting in rows at their desks – the piper starting to play outside the window – and a bunch of bruised, scarred, hurt, bleeding, crippled, desperate children suddenly appearing in the middle of the classroom.

‘No!’ I shouted. ‘Please. You can’t do that. Not to my year 7s.’

‘Oh, can’t I?’ said the old man and he leaned across the desk towards me. The light from the lamp shone up at him, marking the hollows in his cheeks and filling the sockets of his eyes with shadow, like a skull. I jumped to

my feet and backed away, terrified that Death himself was reaching out for me.

But the piper just laughed. 'Calm down,' he said. 'You're their teacher, so I reckon you probably know best. It isn't up to me.'

He opened his hand and let something drop into the puddle of light. Then he shuffled backwards and disappeared into the darkness that he'd come from. I stood there for a long, long time before I finally edged over to see what he'd left on the desk.

It was the battered old recorder.

So now you know the full story and I bet you can guess what I want to ask you. As far as I can see, I've got two choices. I can play the pipe and show my year 7s what war looks like, except that I run the risk of frightening them out of their minds. Or I can lock the recorder away in a cupboard – but maybe that's a waste. After all, if the kids could handle War as well as they handled Hunger, they might even grow up to do something about it.

Sometimes I think about Sirin, telling me she's decided you *can* change the world. And I think about Matt Brinsley who definitely changed his own ideas, with a bit of help from the piper. At times like that, I find myself picking up the recorder... and then I start to shake, because I'm scared by the idea of seeing the children of War. How can I possibly ask my year 7s to face them, when I can't even face them myself?

It's a hard decision, much too hard for one person on her own. I know you can't really give me any answers but it'd be nice to feel as though someone else was thinking about it too. So, whoever you are and wherever you are, please tell me.

What should I do?

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Jenny Pausacker asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

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