I look out the window. It’s raining. Again. I press my face against the glass and breathe. The window fogs in the shape of a continent with more penguins than humans.

‘Antarctica,’ I whisper.

With my index finger, I draw an emperor penguin on the glass and step back to admire my artwork.

‘That’s a fairy penguin, not an emperor,’ I murmur.

In the wardrobe, my choices for school are:

• Black t-shirt and blue shorts?
• Black pants and the shirt with the warrior queen fighting the dragon?
• Jeans?
• Overalls? What was mum thinking!

I select black pants and a plain black t-shirt. I hope it fits with my school uniform policy, which is, ‘Wear
whatever you like as long as it doesn’t have negative images or advertising slogans’.

Is black negative? I put on white Dunlop Volleys, just in case.

Hanging on the wall above my bed is a poster of a long-haired bearded man standing in front of a religious cross. An orange-coloured aura radiates behind his head. In the foreground, a flock of worshippers kneel.

My parents don’t like me having a religious idol on my wall. They tell me we’re atheist, which sounds like someone with a sneezing disease. Dad says it means we don’t worship false gods.

So, to make Mum and Dad happy, I call the dude on my wall, Trevor. At my old school, every Friday morning was devoted to learning about Trevor and his buddies. I went to the religious instruction class even though my parents gave me a letter saying I didn’t have to go. I left the letter in the bottom of my backpack.

Trevor is my friend. I tell him my problems, of which there are many, and he listens and does something much better than my parents. He doesn’t offer an opinion. He stands with his arms wide open, palms out, as if he’s saying, ‘Whatever you choose is fine’.

My name is Jesse James Jones. Call me Jesse. Don’t call me triple j. I’m not a radio station, I’m an eleven-year-old boy.
Trevor looks down on me with understanding eyes. It’s pretty tough going through life with a name that people make fun of. ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow—’

‘Mum! Jesse’s talking to himself again!’ yells my sister Beth, from the next room.

‘Jesse.’ Mum’s voice from the kitchen is reproachful, as though I’ve been caught doing something sinful.

Trevor’s eyes plead with me to turn the other cheek.

‘Easy for you to do, Trev. You’ve had lots of practice. Over two thousand years of understanding and tolerance.’

‘Mum! Jesse has an imaginary friend!’ Beth calls.

‘And you never had a sister as annoying as mine. You were an only child,’ I add.

Trevor looks as if he understands. I feel a presence in my room.

‘Jesse,’ the voice is soft and caring.

‘Hi, Mum.’

She stands in the doorway wearing a flowing linen dress with lots of beads around her neck and stacks of bracelets on her wrists and ankles. Her dark hair is tied back in a ponytail. In her hand, she holds a slice of watermelon.

‘Jesse,’ she says again.

‘Mum.’

‘Jesse.’

‘Jesse.’

Trevor stares.
‘Jesse, you don’t need an imaginary friend,’ she glances toward Trevor. ‘You’ve got us.’
Beth calls, ‘Mum, have you stolen my yoga pants?’
Mum smiles and walks to Beth’s room.
‘Beth,’ she says.
‘They were here yesterday! They can’t just—’
‘We don’t have ownership in this house, Beth. You know that. What’s mine is yours and your’s mine.’
This is code for Mum saying she had no clean clothes for her yoga class yesterday, so she took Beth’s pants.
‘I don’t see Dad racing into Jesse’s room to wear his shorts and t-shirt,’ answers Beth.
‘I don’t mind if he does,’ I venture.
‘Shut up, Jesse.’
‘Beth, we don’t use such language in this house,’ Mum’s voice drips with patience.
‘Fine. I’ll walk outside and scream, “Shut up, Jesse”,’ Beth argues.
‘You know what I mean, Beth. We’re a,’ Mum searches for the right word, ‘a collective. We make decisions together. We share.’
I fear Mum and Dad haven’t thought through this philosophy. Trevor and I can foresee the day Beth gets her driver’s licence. She’ll start demanding equal access to Mum’s Volvo. Some serious readjustments will need to take place in the democracy of 12 Wellington Drive, Banksia.
Mum walks down the hallway into her bedroom and returns with the yoga pants. She tosses them into Beth’s room without saying a word.

‘They’re dirty!’ says Beth.

‘They’ve been worn once.’

‘No-one else at school has to share clothes with their mother,’ says Beth. ‘Crystal and Jade get to buy whatever they like at the shops.’

Beth’s five best friends are Crystal, Jade, Ruby, Sapphire and Amber. If you have a rock for a name, you get to go to the shops whenever you like.

Beth can’t go to the shops, as our family, the collective, has gardening duties every Saturday morning. I’m growing tomatoes from seeds. They’re lined up on my bedroom window, waiting to grow. So far, one of the eleven pots has sprouted. Only it doesn’t look like a seedling, more like fungus. Perhaps I’ve been watering them too much?

Beth is in charge of loose-leaf lettuce. She plants, she waters, she nourishes with Charlie Carp plant food, she pulls off dead leaves and she harvests. Mum tosses the lettuce leaves into a salad and, at dinner, she never fails to pat Beth on the wrist and say, ‘We’re eating the joys of Beth’s labours’.

Beth has taken a vow of abstinence from all things green for the next few weeks. She says she wants to go on a black diet, which consists of Coca-Cola and charred meat.
Mum and Dad’s gardening duties are the fruit trees and the watermelon patch. Dad’s looking after the plum, pear and peach trees and Mum’s tending the watermelon. Every morning, she feeds slices into the juicer, with ginger. She says it’s good for blood pressure and circulation.

Dad’s harvest hasn’t been as successful. So far, we’ve eaten four plums which had a strange red-yellow flesh, but were tart and juicy. Beth pulled a face and threw her plum, half-eaten, into the bush next door. When Dad looked unhappy, Beth said she was making an offering to nature. Dad cheered up and suggested we all throw our seeds next door. I think he secretly hopes some more plum trees will grow. I saw a rat there yesterday, slinking around. I’m not sure a black rat is a native species, but he certainly looked well-fed.

‘The least you can do is drive us to school,’ Beth says. ‘That way my pants won’t get any dirtier walking.’

‘Clothes don’t just accumulate dirt from being worn, Beth.’

‘Jesse’s do!’

It’s true. That’s why I wear black. The kids at school are starting to think I’m an emo. When Hunter called me that on Friday, I thought he meant emu, so I corrected him.

‘Emo the Emu!’ yelled Hunter.

Everyone laughed.
Not because it was funny, of course. Simply because it came from the mouth of Hunter Riley. I’ve only been at school for three months, but I soon learned that Hunter is the class anarchist, law-breaker and the boy most likely to set the record for continuous lunchtime detentions. I’ve heard rumours of Hunter being suspended twice last year. Skye Delaney said he’d been caught smashing the heads off sunflowers with a golf club. Anastasia O’Brien said Hunter had been suspended for shaving Mrs Tomkin’s cat. Skye said she’d heard her mum talking about neighbours’ garden hoses being tied around the exhausts of parked cars. Everyone keeps away from Hunter, just in case.

A few weeks ago, Hunter came to school with a new haircut which I secretly called the starving mullet: mohawk on top, long at the back and shaved around the sides. He looked like a nature strip on the Benson Freeway. I didn’t say this aloud. Making fun of Hunter is forbidden, in fear of atomic wedgies and twisted arms. Strictly speaking, making fun of anyone at school is not allowed, but Hunter does what he likes. And what he likes is being rude.

I expect to arrive in class today to be greeted with calls of ‘Emo the Emu’. Which is better than my last nickname ‘Jesus Freak’. All because I happened to mention religious instruction classes at my previous school.
I tried to explain about Trevor, but it was a losing battle. Now I know how the Mormons feel, walking from door to door, trying to get everyone to enlist and start worshipping their imaginary friend; trying to convince the world that Mormonism is more fun than watching television or playing football or having barbecues or swimming at the beach.

Trevor doesn’t try to convert anyone. He just hangs there, on my wall, listening.

Beth walks out of her bedroom wearing the slightly worn yoga pants and a halter-neck top. Her hair is dyed purple-black and sweeps across the front of her face. She wears silver rings on most of her fingers and has been contemplating a nose-ring, but she hasn’t told Mum and Dad yet. She’s waiting for the right moment.

‘Beth, you can’t go to school dressed like that,’ says Mum.

‘In dirty clothes?’ Beth answers.

‘In a revealing outfit like that,’ says Mum. Her voice drops to a whisper, ‘Your bra straps are showing.’

‘The only thing I’m revealing is that my parents are too stingy to buy me new underwear.’ Beth walks out the front door before Mum can answer.

Mum looks at me. ‘Jesse, can you tell your sister I’m not driving her to school dressed like that.’

‘She’ll just walk, Mum.’

‘Well, so be it,’ Mum responds.
That means I’ll have to walk as well. I’m not showing any underwear. I’m tempted to pull my pants down a little, homeboy style, to display my boxers, but think better of it.

‘Sorry, Jesse,’ says Mum. ‘I can’t be a party to my daughter dressing like a teenage girl.’

‘She is a teenage girl, Mum.’

‘Don’t be silly, Jesse. She’s fourteen.’ She starts to juice another slice of watermelon, for her blood pressure.

I trudge out the front door and am pleased to see it’s stopped raining. Beth is standing beside the passenger door of the beat-up Volvo. She looks at me, hopefully. I shake my head.

Beth calls out, ‘Fascist!’ to the closed front door.

I follow her out the gate and down Wellington Drive. The clouds gather over Benson Freeway in the distance.

‘Why is she so stubborn?’ says Beth.

I shrug.

‘Do these pants look really worn?’ asks Beth.

‘They look great, sis.’

Beth smiles. ‘You’re okay, Jesse. For somebody who talks to himself.’

‘I’m philosoph … philos … I like to think aloud,’ I say.

‘That’s fine, as long as you don’t start hearing voices and weird—’

‘Trevor doesn’t talk, I told you. He’s a …’
‘Picture on the wall,’ Beth suggests.
‘Sounding board,’ I counter.
‘That’s something Mum would say,’ Beth grins.
‘People talk to dogs and cats and horses and fish don’t they?’
Beth nods.
‘And everyone knows animals can’t understand. Not really,’ I add.
‘Are you calling Jesus Christ our Saviour your pet?’ Beth asks.
‘No!’ I blush uncontrollably at the image of the Mormons, Catholics and Salvos all lining up in our front yard when I’m home alone to try to force me to change my evil ways.
‘Everybody needs someone,’ I mumble.
As if on cue, standing at the intersection ahead is Ryan Blake. Ryan wears really tight jeans, large black riding boots and a stripy t-shirt. He looks like a hipster Where’s Wally.
Beth immediately quickens her step. I get the message and slow down. When Beth reaches Ryan he puts his arm around her shoulder. His hand is touching her bra strap. I look away, in case I send negative vibes back home to Mum. She might do herself an injury while juicing the watermelon.
I look back. Beth and Ryan are now holding hands. I follow at a safe younger brother distance. And talk to myself.
Hunter Riley looks out the window. It’s raining. Again. He quietly slides the window open and leans as far out as he dares. Raindrops wet his hair, roll down his cheeks and drop from his chin onto the corrugated iron roof. He closes his eyes and shakes his head, like a dog under a sprinkler.

From a gum tree near the fence comes the cackle of a kookaburra. Hunter opens his eyes, startled. He spies the bird in the highest branch. The kookaburra ruffles the rainwater from its feathers and opens its beak wide, as if yawning.

‘At least you don’t have to go to school,’ Hunter says.

The kookaburra tilts its head and looks down into the garden. Hunter follows its gaze. A lizard scurries under a rock to safety. Hunter looks back at the bird. Their eyes meet.
‘Ha!’ says Hunter.

The rain falls steadily. Water streaks down Hunter’s cheeks but he keeps his head out the window. The bird swoops along the roof line past Hunter and flaps away to a distant gum tree.

Hunter hears footsteps outside his door. He retreats into the room and climbs back into bed, rubbing his hair on the sheet.

He sees the doorhandle turn and quickly closes his eyes.

The door creaks. Hunter keeps his eyes closed, but knows his mum has entered the room. Ever since his dad left, she comes and looks at him sleeping. A raindrop runs down his cheek. In the quiet of the morning, he’s sure he can hear her sigh. He keeps very still until she walks out of the room and gently closes the door.

After dressing into his school clothes of blue pants and a red skater shirt, Hunter walks downstairs. He stands at the kitchen doorway spying his mum sitting at the table. She stares at a bowl full of apples, oranges and pears. One banana sits on top, smiley faced. An ant crawls along the skin of the banana. She reaches toward the insect and with one finger blocks the ant’s progress. The insect stops, then tentatively moves toward her long fingernail. She smiles. The ant creeps
onto her finger. She stands and walks to the back door, opening it quietly.

Hunter walks into the kitchen and watches his mum on the back verandah. She leans down to a row of pot plants and places her finger close to the leaf of a basil plant.

‘Everyone likes basil,’ Mrs Riley says to the ant. She sighs and looks up at the rain still falling.

Hunter switches on the kettle for his mum’s morning cup of tea. He scoops two spoonfuls of tea-leaves into the pot and when the jug boils, carefully pours the water to just below the spout. Enough for two cups, just the way Mum likes it.

He walks to the cupboard for a bowl and spoon, plonks them on the table and sits, reaching for the Weet-Bix and milk.

‘Good morning, Hunter,’ his mum says as she enters the kitchen.

Hunter spoons half a Weet-Bix into his mouth. ‘It’s Monday, how can it be a good morning,’ he mumbles, a dribble of milk running down his chin. He doesn’t bother to wipe and it drips back into his bowl.

‘But you like school, dear.’

‘Ha!’

‘A boy should like school,’ she adds.

‘Ha!’

‘Thanks for the tea,’ she says. She takes a sip. Hunter finishes his cereal. He looks at the packet
of Weet-Bix, considering. Instead of another helping, he picks up the bowl and carries it to the empty sink. He opens the fridge door and stares inside.

‘I’ve packed your lunch box, Hunter. It’s already in your bag.’

‘Peanut butter?’ he asks.

She nods. ‘And an apple.’

Hunter closes the fridge door.

‘Don’t forget to clean your teeth,’ she says.

‘Why?’

‘So you’ll smell fresh.’

‘I’m not kissing anyone!’ he says.

‘For dental hygiene, so your teeth won’t fall out when you’re old,’ she says.

Hunter doesn’t answer and walks back upstairs.

‘Ha!’ Mrs Riley says, to no-one in particular.
The five mudbrick buildings of Kawawill School nestle at the foot of a long bush track. Each of the buildings is painted a different shade of ochre. In the bush surrounding the school there are swings and cubbyhouses and a climbing gym. There is no sports oval. The only grass is in the central area between the buildings.

Students are dropped at the top of the hill by parents or buses and we wander four hundred metres down the track to the school grounds. At the end of the track is a sign with a ‘Thought for the Day’ handwritten on it.

This Monday morning, I’m standing in front of the sign. It reads:

*Kind words are the easiest to speak.*
A voice booms behind me, ‘EMO!’

‘Hi, Hunter,’ I say, without bothering to turn around.

‘Whoa! Emo the Emu has eyes in the back of his head.’ Hunter slaps me on the shoulder. He reads the sign and then glances my way. ‘That’s bull. I can just as easily call you,’ he looks at my clothes, ‘the Black Assassin as I can call you Emo.’

‘Or Jesse,’ I suggest.

‘Now why would I bother calling you by your real name, Darkman?’

‘Hunter, you are an endless font of meaningless names,’ I say.

‘You said it, Bleakboy.’ Hunter looks me up and down once more, as if he’s storing away another twenty nicknames for lunchtime, then he walks into Doris.

I don’t mean he walks into a person called Doris. Doris is the name of the administration building, in honour of the founder of our school Doris Leadmeir. The primary building is Arnold, named after Doris’s husband, who designed the school layout. Doris and Arnold, the people, are both long dead, but the buildings live on. The other buildings are: Edith, the kindergarten building (Edith Bricknell was the first kindy teacher); Lillian, the high school building (Lillian Roche was the woman who donated land for the school to be built on); and finally, Walter, the toilet
block (Walter C Cuthbert was the first school janitor).

The teachers tell us to use the names of the build-
ings, to remember the founders. The school doesn’t
have a principal. Each year, one of the staff is elected
by their fellow teachers as the team coordinator. This
year it’s Larry Ames. Teachers must be addressed by
their first name. Larry, never Mr Ames.

And here he is now. Larry walks up the path,
wearing three-quarter length bushwalking pants and
a ‘Greenpeace’ t-shirt. He’s also wearing sandals,
which, strictly speaking, students are discouraged
from wearing. Because of snakes. Larry isn’t scared.

He stands in front of the sign, takes off his floppy
hat and bangs it against his knee, as if a nest of spiders
is hiding under the brim.

‘Hi, Larry.’

‘G’day, Jesse.’ He nods at the sign. ‘That’s my
slogan. Pretty good, hey?’ He doesn’t wait for an
answer as he heads off to the high school. Sorry, I
mean Lillian.

Suddenly, dance music blares over the PA system,
which means it’s time to go to class. Each month, a
different class gets to choose the music. This month
it’s year four. Next month it’s year nine, so I’m hoping
for a serious headbanging metal attack. I’m not sure
how Larry will respond. He may write a ‘Thought for
the Day’ to counteract all the harsh vibes the music
will give out.
‘Hi, Jesse,’ says Kate, a girl in my class with curly black hair and braces.

‘Hi, Kate. Thanks for not calling me Emo.’

Kate looks around quickly for Hunter before leaning close and whispering, ‘Hunter is a turnip.’ Kate adds, ‘Did you do your personal assessment tasks?’

That’s what we’re supposed to call homework.

‘Yep. I read a book on the bell frog and drew a picture of it. What was your topic?’

‘Whales.’ Kate winks. ‘I’ve taken a slightly different approach.’ She leads me into our classroom in Arnold and we take our seats near the front. The rest of the class are already seated, except Hunter. He’s sitting on the window ledge. He makes a gloomy sound at the back of his throat when I walk in, like the theme music to a horror movie.

He’s about to say something when Sarah, our teacher, walks in.

‘Good morning, Class 6S,’ she says.

‘Good morning, Sarah,’ we respond together, except Hunter. He times his greeting to be half-a-second behind, like an echo.

Sarah flashes him a tired look and he slowly sits down on his chair. She stands in front of the class and says, ‘Okay. Let’s have a selection of readings from your personal assessment tasks.’

I raise my hand.
'Yes, Jesse.'
'I didn’t write anything, Ms, I mean Sarah. I just drew something.'
Sarah smiles. ‘No worries. We’ll have a selection of readings and displays of your tasks. Who wants to start?’
Everyone raises their hands, except Hunter and me.
‘Anastasia first,’ says Sarah. She walks to the side window and leans against the ledge, facing into the room. She smiles at Anastasia, who stands and picks up her glasses from her desk. She puts them on before reading her story. Her voice is distant and rhythmic, like the sound of a train going over a bridge.
Anastasia’s story is about a girl finding an injured marsupial bilby in the bush and nursing it back to health. In the story, the main character is called Anastasia and she learns how to communicate with the bilby. They live together in the forest and eat mushrooms and mangoes. One day while foraging for food, they meet a handsome young man called Justin B.
Anastasia blushes, before continuing with the story.
Justin B is a reclusive pop star who’s made his home in the forest to escape the thousands of young girls who scream outside his Malibu apartment. Together, Anastasia and Justin B write a song called ‘One less lonely bilby’.
When Anastasia finishes her story, everyone applauds, except Hunter who coughs loudly.
Sarah looks up. ‘Are you all right, Hunter?’
Hunter grins. ‘I think I need to go to Walter.’
Sarah nods and Hunter walks out of the room, singing, ‘I’m off to Walter, Walter the toilet block’.
‘That’s enough, Hunter,’ Sarah calls after him.
‘No worries, Sarah.’
He’s left the door open. Without thinking, I get up to close it.
‘Thanks, Jesse.’
‘That’s okay, Sarah. Can I lock it as well?’ The class giggles, but Sarah smiles and says, ‘We’re inclusive, remember Jesse?’
‘Would you like to go next, Kate?’ asks Sarah.
Kate stands and confidently walks to the front of the room. She looks at everyone in the class, smiling at me, and in a loud voice, begins, ‘My story is about whales’.
‘Ooh, they’re so beautiful,’ says Skye, from the second row.
Kate ignores her. ‘Whales are mammals that live in the ocean. They range in size from the giant blue whale to the much smaller pygmy sperm whale.’ Kate looks up at Sarah. Sarah nods.
Kate continues, ‘The common minke whale is the main species hunted and killed by Japanese and Norwegian whalers. Hundreds are slaughtered every year.’
'SARAH!' yells Skye.
'Whale meat is high in protein and is lower in calories than beef and pork. It also has a much higher iron content and is rich in—'
'Kate?' Sarah’s voice is quiet.
Kate stops reading and looks at the teacher.
Skye starts sobbing, although I suspect she’s just pretending.
'I thought the personal assessment task I designed,’ Sarah says, ‘was for us to appreciate the gift of nature. You appear to be talking about eating a—’
'Beautiful animal!' Skye interrupts.
Sarah takes a deep breath. ‘Skye. Remember our guidelines about calling out in class.’
'But she’s eating whales,’ Skye responds.
'Not in class she’s not.’ Sarah shifts her focus to Kate. ‘May I ask why you chose this topic, Kate?’
At this very moment, Hunter walks in and strolls past Kate.
'Some animals—’ Kate starts.
'Who you calling an animal?’ Hunter turns and interrupts.
'We were talking about whales,’ says Sarah, waiting a few crucial seconds before adding, ‘not you.’
The class laughs.
Hunter scowls at us all, trying to pick who he’ll pay back at lunchtime. I almost burst a lung holding my breath to stop giggling. But his eyes settle on me.
‘I love whales,’ Kate looks meaningfully at Skye, ‘but they’re eaten by native communities in Norway and Canada.’

‘And the Japanese?’ Sarah asks.

Kate smiles. ‘Actually, Sarah, whale meat is eaten in Japanese schools.’

The class shudders as one. Our canteen, housed at the back of Lillian, serves only vegetarian food. Monday’s speciality is tofu burgers.

‘You haven’t really answered my question, Kate,’ continues Sarah, her voice taking on some of the Skye-anguish. ‘Why did you choose this topic?’

‘Animals are eaten, whether we like it or not.’ Kate looks toward the class for support. Everyone looks away except me. ‘Even beautiful animals like whales and fur seals.’

This is too much for Skye. She scrapes back her chair and runs out of the room, doing a Hunter and leaving the door open; open and gaping like a wound in a minke whale caused by a harpoon.

Kate continues, as if she’s read my mind. ‘The traditional native hunters use harpoons—’

‘Okay, that’s enough.’ Sarah walks quickly toward Kate. ‘Kate, I appreciate your alternative view of the beauty and gift of nature, but perhaps I’ll read your personal assessment task alone at lunchtime.’

‘Make sure you’ve eaten first, Sarah,’ suggests Hunter.
Sarah ignores him, takes the paper from Kate and ushers her back to her seat. She asks Eoin to stand and read to the class.

Eoin stands on his chair.

Everyone laughs. He looks around the room, smiling.

‘Why are you standing on your chair, Eoin?’ asks Sarah.

‘My dad says soundwaves carry further if they aren’t interrupted by stuff.’

‘Thank you for the physics lesson, Eoin. Your dad is correct, but let’s just stand on the floor, shall we?’ Sarah looks sternly at Lance in the back row, who is still giggling. Lance coughs once and falls silent.

‘You may begin, Eoin,’ says Sarah.

‘My story is about a boy called Eoin who lives with the chimpanzees of Africa. Eoin learns to talk to the chimps and they swing from tree to tree in the jungle. Eoin builds a treehouse high in the forest …’

And so it goes until lunchtime. The gift of nature. And then tofu burgers.