

1

The front wheel slams into the track. Hold on now, keep the bike steady and I get ready for the big one. Not even Shawn Houser has attempted Killer's Gully. This'll show them. No sense of danger, Gran always says. She worries too much. The guys are throwing taunts now. Led by Shawn, of course. Hoping I'll fall off. A few of the girls are cheering. Mei Pham won't be; she'll be watching, quiet. It won't matter to her if I do it or not. But it matters to me. Can't explain it, like there's a wild stallion coming, a leader of the herd, it's thundering and I have to do this or I'll be trampled into the dust.

Here it comes. The gully. I clench my grip; pull up on the bars; the ground falls – hey! I'm flying! For one beautiful moment I feel the rush, the awesome silence of hanging on nothing and then the fear hits, as the other

side of the gully reaches up to grab me in midair. I force my eyes to stay open; the jolt of landing jars right up to my neck, but I've done it! I'm still on, skidding sideways towards the gate of the oval. Even Shawn's got little to say amid the screaming of the girls.

'Joel Billings!' Hush falls. No one's noticed Mr Sherman. 'Ms Headley wants you in her office.' Mr Sherman doesn't sound smug, not like the looks on some of the guys' faces. He even looks on the verge of saying something; to warn me, maybe? It won't do any good. Trouble follows me like a blowfly buzzing over a sheep's backside in summer, and is just as hard to shift.

'Bilious, Bilious – go spew, loser.' Shawn Houser starts in on me as I get off the track. I can't remember if riding bikes in the paddock at lunch is forbidden. Knowing my luck, I expect it is. What if I run home? Nah, I've already been suspended once this term. The look on Gran's face did more than all the crap Ms Headley spat out.

This time I manage to pass Shawn without trying to rearrange his face. Not so this morning. Why can't I ignore Shawn? His head's as empty as a sink without a plug. Today it started with maths. So I'm no great shakes at maths, worse than Prescott even. And I try, honest. But it's like Shawn knows how to press my buttons, how to get me to look up, to think of something else so I can never remember what we're supposed to be listening to. In the yard it's the same. I don't always bite but today I

did when Prescott started in on Mei. She'll forever get bullied; she never fights back. She doesn't laugh enough either. Sometimes you just have to or you go crazy.

'Sure, I'm short,' I said to Shawn on one of my better days. 'What of it?' Shawn didn't make anything of it that time. There was no challenge. But he loves it when I start throwing things. I always feel like I've played into his hands.

'What happened this morning?'

'Miz?' Jumping dolphins! I'm in the office already.

'This morning, Joel! The principal sounds calm. Counselling mode.

I fidget a bit on the seat. It's a wonder they don't write my name on it.

'This morning, Joel! How can Ms Headley sound so quiet after saying it more than once? Ms Colby starts hyperventilating as soon as I walk in the door. Before she has to repeat *anything*.

Ms Colby broke up a fight between you and Shawn by the equipment! Ms Headley waits, eyebrows hovering like little McDonald's arches. I wonder how she gets them that high. It looks tricky. I try it too.

'Joel! Concentrate. Tell me about this morning?' She's getting more specific.

I lick my lips. Why isn't Shawn here anyway? It always happens like this. It's not fair. I'm the one caught flipping out so I'm the one who gets sent to the office. The

principal's starting to lose it. Her fingers drum on the desk. She stops it and starts smiling. It looks painted on, meant to be encouraging.

'Umm! What can I say without it sounding like I should have known better? Even sticking up for Mei doesn't seem such a great thing to do once it's on the inside of my mouth ready to be said.

'I fought Shawn,' is all I say. Why doesn't the principal say, *Der! I know that?* I would have. What self-control adults seem to have. That, and power. The power to expel. The power to put that worried look on Gran's face.

'Joel?' Ms Headley reins in my attention again. 'This is happening too often.'

'He said things.' My voice sounds a mumble even to myself. I know what will come next. I mouth it to myself.

'Do you think that's the best way to solve a problem, Joel?'

I shake my head. But only for Ms Headley. Fighting does work – for a while. I glance up at Ms Headley again. She looks willing to be understanding *this time*.

'I want you to tell your teacher if you find things difficult, Joel. Retaliation is not the answer.'

For once I don't argue. I know how the land lies in the principal's office; you keep quiet and maybe there'll only be one lunchtime spent in the focus room.

'And by the way—' I'm at the door before the principal calls me back. '—Mr Sherman says you jumped the gully

in the paddock. Says you did a good job, too. But it'll be an after-school activity from now on – with parental supervision. Do you understand, Joel?'

I nod again. *Parental supervision*. Well, that cuts me out very nicely, doesn't it? Gran wouldn't come to the paddock to watch me half-kill myself. Bike jumping's definitely on her list of the unhealthy and dangerous.

2

Clunk. My toe comes in contact with aluminium. Something very satisfying about kicking a can around.

'Hey!'

My head shoots up. Who's got it in for me now? I turn on my Al Capone squint and stand my ground on the jetty as the girl catches up to me. Attack is better than lying down to die like Mei always does. 'What's wrong with kicking a can?' I throw in a swear word. That usually makes people leave me alone.

The girl doesn't flinch. She even smiles down at me. Now that she's closer she looks older than I thought. She's an adult, that's for sure, but adults never smile at me like she's doing, not first-off. They always look cross or worried like they're deciding how best to pull me into line. This woman's face is almost relaxed; her brown eyes

showing interest, not annoyance. 'Did I say something was wrong?'

'N-no.' I don't let down my guard. No smile either. People have to earn that.

'Why should there be then?'

How can I answer that? Except there's always something wrong. She just doesn't know. That strikes me as funny somehow and without meaning to I grin back. It'll be interesting for once to have someone who doesn't know.

'Want to come with me, Joel?'

'Where?' I study the gold earrings stacked up on her ears as she points down the jetty with her rod and I wonder how she knows my name.

'I'm going fishing.' She grins and holds up a tackle box. 'Mr Houser in the shop said you'd know the best spot?' Hope grows in her eyes as she waits.

I struggle not to say the first thing my brain thinks. 'It's too early,' I blurt out instead. She looks at me, one side of her mouth stuck between her teeth. Her eyebrows go up. They look funny, like they got burnt off and she had to draw them on again.

'Really?'

I fight down this feeling of disgust. It rises in me sometimes as if I'm on a boat in a huge swell. She doesn't know *anything*. But then I decide it's a change, at least. 'Never mind,' and it's just like talking to Mei. 'By the time you get set up, it'll almost be time.'

As fishing goes, it's a disaster. I have to rig her whole line and share some of my gents with her. She hasn't even bought bait. She doesn't know what a swivel is; can't even tie a half-blood knot. I try to show her but her fingernails are too long. She can talk though. 'I came yesterday? For my holidays? I'm Zoe Trenwith?' She looks at me like I should know her but I've never seen her before in my life. I screw up my face a bit like I'm making an effort to follow. 'I go to uni in Adelaide now?' She tells everything in questions so that when she finally does ask a real one, it catches me by surprise.

'You have a mum and dad?'

I shift my face away, staring out to sea. Man, did she ever hit the minefield. Mum and dad – they must sound comforting words to most kids: *Oh no, I'm lost but here comes Mum and Dad*, or *I need sneakers, Mum and Dad*, or *Hey, I feel rotten – Mum and Dad, give us a hug*. Nah, for me those words are real hollow and lonely. Shawn used them a lot when he didn't know. 'My dad'll beat yours up. Your mum's a witch.' And when he did find out, it was: 'My dad would've beaten yours up. Where is he? He musta been a wimp.' All my problems come from my dad running away. Now I have to fight his battles as well as my own. It just isn't fair. If I had a dad it'd fix everything. He'd fix Ms Colby, always pimping to the principal, and Shawn Houser. Ha! A dad would put Shawn on his ear. I'd get more respect, maybe concentrate better.

I wouldn't have to be watching for who was attacking from the side. Then there's the fishing competition . . .

'So where do you live?' Zoe's just like all the other adults in town. Wanting to know everything.

'With my gran. Over by the reserve.'

'With your . . .' and I see it straightaway – the pity in her eyes, the not-wanting-to-ask. At least she's old enough not to. Kids are different: 'With your *gran*? Why? Where's your mum?' And the looks on their faces say everything their words don't – something weird, something wrong. In this town everyone has a family. Shawn's the worst, of course. 'So what'd ya do, Bilius, to make them go away?' Mei's not so bad. She often asks me to her house.

'You can come to my place!' Zoe puts a hand over my reel so I have to stop taking in line, have to listen.

'Heh?'

'To visit. I'm staying at the caravan park.' I don't smile. It's nice of her but she won't like me for long; something will go wrong, for sure. It always does.

3

The track through the reserve is cool; the trees would be great for ambushing at night – sometimes I imagine it's me, camouflage on my face, gun at the ready. I hold my rod like it's an M16 and manoeuvre my bucket through the gate and let it swing shut. I manage the back door in the same way. Our place is kind of cool too. One of the oldest cottages in the town with an ancient stone wall. A lighthouse keeper used to live in it years ago.

'Is that you, Joel?' Gran's voice from the kitchen sounds relieved. *Der*, I feel like saying. *Who would it be? Only us two live here*, but I calm down. Gran's okay. She has a way of talking that gives you space somehow, except when she worries too much about strangers and danger. She's the only person I get on well with, other than Mei. Even if Gran tells me stuff, like cleaning up

my room, there's still a choice – I can decide when, or I can choose which part to do first. Not like the teachers at school. They're always in my face, especially Ms Colby, two centimetres away and saying things like 'Now!' and 'I don't like your attitude! Don't argue!' Every day's such a battle, one I can never turn my back on.

Nah, Gran's okay. Some days I wake up and – would you know it? I've done exactly what she's wanted after all but it doesn't seem to stick in my gullet like at school. Maybe it's because she's ancient. She has to be fifty at least. Maybe it changes a person to be that old, although with Gran you can't tell until she turns around. That's when you see the stretch lines round her mouth and eyes from years of smiling.

Gran bobs her head into the laundry. 'Hope you were careful down there on the jetty and didn't talk to people you don't know.'

'Aw, Gran.' She says this almost every day. I know all her advice off by heart like it was fed into my brain when I was a baby. I've stopped asking why. She never seems to be able to explain, just stands hovering like a mother eagle over a nest built too low on the cliff. It's dumb to worry so much. Everyone knows the town's safe. Kids go everywhere by themselves, even at night. Well, maybe not Mei.

Gran's still watching me. She pulls anchor on the stranger stuff and changes tack like a ketch has to before a storm. 'Nice tommies, Joel. How many?'

'Twelve! I know I sound up myself but this is one thing I can do. Gran says it's the only time I ever sit still long enough for my thoughts to catch up with me.

'I'll put on some chips then, matey, while you fillet them.'

I pull up the board we use to gut fish and lay it on the laundry trough. Then I reach for the scaler and the knife. It makes me think of Zoe again. She was really weird; couldn't catch anything, even when she did get a bite. Hers got away; she didn't know how to strike. She didn't want to kill anything either. I had to cut across the bottom of the throat and bend the fishes' heads backwards to snap the spines. Should have seen the curl on her lip. 'Don't they just die or something?' So disgusting.

'How'd you like to flap to death?' I said. That told her.

I scale each fish, then pick up the knife – it's wide near the hilt and thin where it matters; years of fishing has worn it sharp. It was Grandad's and now it's mine. There're a few things that will be mine. Grandad's boat for one. I lay out the newspaper like he always did, ready to catch the rubbish, then I slide the knife's edge under the back of a tommy's head and move it down, slicing off a fillet. I turn the fish over to do the other side. It's not until I nearly finish them all, when I put more paper out, that I see the column.

Connections. Are you seeking someone? Then try our column. I push the fish guts to one side. *A great way to*

meet people or that special friend. Meet voice to voice before you meet face to face. It takes a while but I manage to read how to 'place an ad' and 'how to respond'. This is when I get the Idea. I check all the columns. There doesn't seem to be one for seeking parents. *Male seeking male.* That might work. *Male 33 seeking friendship with same.* Maybe I could ask the paper to make a new column: *Boy seeking dad.* You can't put names in by the look of it, but my dad is out there somewhere. Maybe he'll read it. I quickly finish the remaining fish. Gran comments about the bones in them later. Just my luck she gets those on *her* plate.

'You're in a hurry to start your homework, Joel!' Gran looks back from the sink as I make a dive for my room after tea. I don't answer. This is something needing my undivided attention. Nor can Gran find out. If she nags about talking to strangers in the town, imagine what she's say about the wide world of the *Sunday Mail*?

Now I understand what Mr Sherman meant about rewriting. Damn. Why is this so hard? I've tried writing the ad twenty times. The floor by the bin looks like the classroom when Ms Colby has to talk to someone at the door. Will I ever get it right? *Dad wanted for twelve-year-old boy on Yorke Peninsula. Needs to be tough, like fishing, fighting and fun. Boat licence a must.* Maybe that'll do. I decide to enter it under the messages column. Now comes the hard part. How to actually ring up the *Sunday*

Mail when Gran isn't listening? When she's helping at the museum? I'll just have to come home early from school, say I'm sick. That brings a grin. I'm going to do it! Yey! I'm going to have a dad for the holidays!