

AVA

‘We mustn’t forget that we here at Mount Saint Michaels are a community,’ Mrs Bryan’s triangular eyebrows are serious below her slick, gelled-back hair, ‘and when one of our community members takes a fall we must band together to pick each other up.’ She pauses. ‘This tree is to act as a reminder of that.’

Then she clears her throat but I don’t hear what she says next because I’m screaming. My body jumps out of its seat and my mouth erupts with a yell so violent that I kind of scare myself.

‘She didn’t fall, she died,’ I shout, ‘she’s dead.’

A rolling wave of about seven hundred heads tumble to look right at me. ‘And a tree? Are you serious? She hated nature,’ I shout up at Mrs Bryan, who is muttering into the microphone for students to take their seats. I feel angry in a way that I’ve never felt before, every

single one of my internal organs trying to whiplash out of my body like a rabid security dog, and it's because of what they say about her. Or don't say. It's what they're not saying that pisses me off the most. The past six months I've been able to mainly keep my cool but today when they started talking about the stupid plaque on the stupid piece of concrete next to the stupid fucking tree that's taken them all that time to plant, pretending all like, I don't know, pretending like it's an achievement, pretending like they give a shit—

I couldn't take it anymore.

'And if you're going to talk about her, at least say her name.'

There is an avalanche of whispers and giggles all around me as Mrs Bryan, yelling now, attempts to calm the hyper masses. I'm stuck in the middle of a row and as I clamber over the people next to me I'm muttering like a crazy person. That kid with the spiky fringe pinches me on the arse and I spin and whack his chest, spitting, 'Are you fucking serious?' into his face and I'm pretty sure I see genuine terror fill his tiny blue eyes. When I finally get to the aisle, to the centre of the heaving groups of students, quieter now but still all staring at me, I freeze.

Do something, Ava. I look at Mrs Bryan, who is staring at me like she wants me dead, and I just start to laugh. *Say something, anything, Ava. Stop laughing.* But I can't help it. I become very aware that I must look like a straight-up lunatic, but I don't care.

I run my hands through my hair, shaking my head

as I address the whole auditorium. ‘You know what the most insulting part of it all is, though? It’s the choir singing that stupid Miley Cyrus song about climbing a fucking mountain in her memory, cause that would’ve made her want to kill herself all over again.’

The auditorium erupts in laughter and cheers as I give Mrs Bryan the finger with both hands, spin on my heel and march to the back of the room and straight out the two big double doors. I hear them slam behind me.

Way to go, Ava.

I promised myself just this morning that I’d try and be one of those quiet, unassuming girls who blend in. I even scrawled the words *be beige* on the back of my hand in black texta as a reminder. Ever since I’ve come back to school, people have been staring at me, whispering and pointing about as subtly as a sledgehammer to the face. I considered making a shirt with the words, *My best friend just died soz if I make you uncomfortable*, but we ran out of printer ink. Anyway, it seems that leaping out of my chair and screaming at the top of my lungs achieved the same effect.

I’ve only been back at school full time for a month, a few weeks part time before that, and only because I had to. If it was up to me I’d never have come back. I’d have just left with some grand parting gesture like painting a big dick on the oval with grass killer or something. But Mrs Bryan and the other teachers lost their shit about Year Eleven and missing work and my dad was running out of excuses to hold them off any longer. The last few weeks have just fused into a blur

of me struggling to pay attention or just wagging. Or zoning out when people monologue about how they know how I feel because when their nanna died or when their aunty died or when their fucking dog died they felt blah blah blah. But none of them know. It wasn't my nan or my aunt or my pet that died, it was Kelly. It was my best friend. There aren't words for how it feels and I don't want to talk about how it feels anyway because everything since it happened, everything right now, is really, really shit and there is no point at all in quadratic equations when my whole body aches with this terrible numb sadness.

It's like life is actually moving slower. I thought school went slow enough before she died. Now it feels like time died right along with her. What makes it worse is that they all act like they're pissed off with me, and with her. They're pissed off with her because it happened and they're pissed off with me because I can't get over the fact it happened.

But it's only been six months. That's nothing.

I reckon I'm going to feel like this for the rest of my life.

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When I get to Kelly's house, I open the side gate and walk past the bins into the backyard. Lincoln is sitting on the floor of the patio in nothing but his jocks.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

Lincoln jumps. Sees it's me and relaxes. 'Mum's on my back cause my clothes smell like smoke.'

‘So?’

‘So now they don’t.’ He takes a deep drag of his ciggie.

I kick him with my foot and sit next to him. ‘So smart.’

I watch the little movement of his chest as he breathes. His brown skin pulled tight over the muscles in his chest. There’s no denying he is hot as. Not like normal handsome though; more like weird model handsome, like he could be in a surf shop catalogue wearing board shorts and no shirt for sure. He’s got a sharp jaw and big brown dramatic eyes which you notice because his hair is always shaved super short.

Lincoln and Kelly’s mum, Tina, has been really aggro since Kel died. We used to get on really well. She was pretty much my mum. But maybe a month after the funeral I started to get this feeling she couldn’t stand to be around me. Dad reckons it’s because I remind her of Kel. Says it must be real hard for her, which I get, but I just miss her, miss all of it, the way everything used to be.

I can only come around now when she’s not home. If Tina found me here she’d freak out, and if she found out about Lincoln and me I think she’d completely lose it. I don’t want to upset her, but I can’t help it. I like being here, the smell of their house is so familiar to me, like coconut oil and lavender and dust all mixed together. I know where they keep everything in the kitchen, and where to step on the wooden floorboards so they don’t creak. I feel less crazy when I’m here, which in itself is

crazy because everything at their house at the moment is absolutely nuts.

‘You weren’t at school,’ I say. I notice now when he’s not around; I never used to.

‘Nah.’ He pauses for a second before he says, ‘But I heard you were.’

Of course he bloody did. I exhale loudly and turn away from him, rubbing my forehead with my hand.

‘You want to. Talk. About it?’

‘Lincoln, you don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Nah. But do you?’

‘No,’ I say quickly. I don’t want to talk about it now because I’m going to have to keep talking about it. I’m going to have to go through it with Dad, and the principal and the school counsellor and every dickhead kid at school that looks at me like an idiot for the next few weeks. I take the cigarette out of his fingers and inhale deeply. There’s a long silence before either of us speaks.

We’ve always got along, but we were never friends. I mean, I was pretty much here every weekend since I was about four, and I went on most of their family holidays. But Lincoln was just always the cool older brother, fixing bikes or playing loud music or drinking in the garage with his mates.

When we were younger we would spy on them from the backyard. We figured if we knew what boys talked about when girls weren’t around then we’d be better equipped to talk to them when we were around.

When we were in Year Nine we started to go to the same parties and I think that freaked him out a bit. Kel

would hook up with his friends and he'd flip out about it, real protective, and him and Kel would fight about it and he'd say, 'That's just the way it is, Kelly. I'm older therefore I know better.'

But Kel wouldn't have taken that from anyone and especially not Lincoln. She made up this rule that he wasn't allowed to hook up with anyone in our grade and she wouldn't hook up with anyone in his and both of them were keeping their end of the deal until the night we all went to Stuart Gillespie's eighteenth. Lincoln really wanted to hook up with Amanda Higgins, who has massive boobs. Like porno massive.

'Fuck the deal, Kel, Amanda's so up for it, ay?'

Lincoln said standing right in front of Kel shifting his weight from one leg to the other like one of the netball girls so Kelly couldn't get past.

'You're a pig,' Kelly scowled.

'Come on, just this once?'

'If you hook up with Amanda I'm going to pash...'

she looked around the party scanning the guys. 'Tom Greig.'

Lincoln scoffed loudly. 'He's a dick.'

'You're a dick,' Kelly snapped back.

Lincoln groaned, looked over at Tom Greig, who was cheering as some other guy skulled from a bottle of vodka. 'Fine,' he mumbled as he walked away. Then he turned back and looked right at me. 'And who are you going to hook up with, Aves?'

I just stood there stunned. 'No one,' I mumbled. 'No one.' This time trying to seem more confident.

‘Yeah.’ He paused. ‘Probably not that many guys here who’d hook up with you anyway.’ And then he walked off with Kelly yelling at him to get fucked.

She quickly spun back to look at me. ‘He didn’t mean that, Aves, he’s just trying to piss me off. All the guys here’d be lucky to make out with you.’ Her face cracked with her enormous teeth-filled grin and I couldn’t help but laugh. She leaned her forehead on mine so her eyes kind of mushed into one because she was so close. ‘You’re the most beautiful of them all,’ she whispered and I just nodded. She always knew exactly what to say. Always.

Right after it happened Lincoln and I started texting, mostly about the stupid shit that people would say or do, and then we started hanging out and then we—

Well, yeah. I figure he’s the only one who really actually gets how I feel. Kind of. I don’t even know if I like him like that, even now, after everything that’s happened between us.

‘Wanna get stoned?’ Lincoln asks. I shake my head. I don’t. ‘Wanna...’ he pauses and looks at me with his big brown eyes and takes a deep breath, ‘root?’

‘God, Lincoln,’ I shake my head, smiling. ‘Who says root?’ He doesn’t move his hand, he leaves it lightly on my neck and he smiles at me.

‘What do you want?’

I exhale again and lean my head on his shoulder, he lifts his arm and puts it around me. I feel Lincoln

kiss my forehead and I gulp down the large lump in my throat. Lincoln looks at me, right in the eye and neither of us moves for what I reckon is a whole minute. We just sit there looking at each other. I've never been able to hold eye contact with anyone but it's like with Lincoln I'm not even nervous. Not like how I feel with other guys. I've had boyfriends and that, nothing serious, but it was always Kel who would make it happen. She was confident, especially with people she liked. She kissed whoever she wanted to kiss and she'd make whoever she liked like her back. She'd also make whoever I liked like me. It was a pretty sweet pay-off.

There's very little we didn't do together. We even lost our virginity on the same night, in the same house, pretty much at the same time because that's what we'd planned. Ahmed was a sweet Muslim boy who had just graduated from our school and I thought he was the loveliest. He played first violin in the school string quartet and he was going to uni to be an engineer. We'd talk online most nights about homework, life, our future and stuff and when he saw me at school he'd always make an effort to say hello to me. He didn't really go to parties so I didn't see him much outside of school. His best mate Jack played rugby. He was a big dude, really funny and really sweet; he'd turned eighteen right at the beginning of Year Twelve so he'd instantly become one of the most popular kids at school because he'd buy everyone's booze on the weekends. Kel liked Jack and so we all shared a bottle of Galliano and Kelly asked Jack to show her his

room, which left Ahmed and me alone in the lounge room frozen, neither of us able to work out what to say until finally he muttered, ‘Do you want to see the spare room?’

I nodded and we walked up to the hallway in silence. The awkwardness was agony so as soon as we got to the spare room I kissed him so we’d have something to do and we wouldn’t have to endure the silence any longer. We didn’t really talk while it was happening, we just did it. I don’t know why, probably because we thought we should, because Jack and Kelly were in the other room doing it, and it was easier to just do it than explain why we hadn’t. It was fine. I mean it wasn’t bad, it just happened. Nothing like in the movies where it’s crazy romantic or passionate or anything, just quick. A non-event, really.

With Lincoln it’s different. It’s better. It’s fun. Most of the time.

‘Hozana sent me the video of you today,’ Lincoln laughs and I look up briefly before burying my head into his shoulder, mortified. My crazy-lady outburst online forever. Great. ‘I cracked up laughing when you gave Mrs Bryan the finger. Zana zoomed in on her face and it looks like she’s actually gonna spew.’

I groan. ‘Do I look completely mental?’

‘Nah, you look cute as,’ he lies. I smile, whacking him on the leg and he grabs my hand and squeezes it.

‘They just make me so mad.’

‘Yeah, Aves. I know.’

Flirting with Lincoln makes me feel better about

what's about to happen. Maybe he feels the same way. I don't even know if he likes me. I mean he must a little, but not like that. I just know that when I hang out with Lincoln everything else doesn't matter as much. What happened at school today doesn't matter. What my dad will say later doesn't matter. Being with Lincoln makes me forget how messed up everything else is. Or maybe 'forget' is too strong, maybe he just makes me feel something other than shit for a bit. Like I used to feel when Kelly was still alive. Which is weird because this never would've happened if Kelly was alive.

'Come on,' Lincoln raises his eyebrows at me and stands up. He doesn't say anything as he leads me through the sliding door, up the hallway, past Kel's closed bedroom door, into his room and onto his bed.

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It's dark by the time I get home.

'Where have you been?' Dad shouts from the kitchen the second I walk through the door.

'Kel's.'

'Ava!' Dad appears with a tea towel over his shoulder and a scowl on his face. His floppy grey hair bounces as he shakes his head, 'I thought we agreed you wouldn't go there.'

'Yeah we did, but Lincoln wasn't at school today so I wanted to see if he was okay,' I lie, and watch Dad's face as it crinkles into a smirk.

'Bullshit, kiddo.' He turns and walks back into the kitchen. I kick my shoes off and follow him.

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My mum left us the first time when I was about six months old, she dropped me in the reception area of Dad's office and left. We didn't hear anything from her for like two years when she just showed up on our front stairs in a panel van. She hung around for a bit and then left a note on our coffee table that said, 'I'll call you,' and pissed off overseas.

That was her longest stint away because we didn't actually see her again until I was nine. She'd write post-cards from Paris, Berlin, Lithuania, Egypt and she'd never sign them Mum, always Barb xx. Never any regularity; just whenever she felt like it.

Her and Dad fell in love quickly, got married and had me all in like twelve months. She must have just been in one of her manic phases, where she comes across all flighty and free spirited like a real gypsy. But on her other days, her low days, she's dark and moody, she lies and she is mean.

My relationship with my mum is nonexistent, really. I think about her like you do a distant relative. I feel like I know her based on what my dad has told me or from these quick bursts of interest she shows in me. We don't have anything in common apart from genes. I reckon if I met her and didn't know her I still wouldn't like her, and I'm okay about it.

I've seen what she's done to Dad and I used to really care, wanted her to be around, didn't understand it. I still don't but I guess I've just gotten used to it. I haven't seen her for a year; she's living in Darwin. She

got married to some guy with long hair and sent me a photo. She never had another kid.

‘What’s for dinner?’

‘Don’t change the subject. You had a shit day?’ He’s got his back to me, stirring whatever is on the stovetop. He says the last part like it’s both a statement and a question. Like he knows I had a shit day, but like he also wants to know if it really was a shit day.

‘Did school call?’

‘Yup.’

‘Why didn’t you call me?’ I ask.

‘Because I knew you’d tell me about it.’

He’s right, I will. I’ll tell him about the stupid speech and my ranting. I’ll tell him about storming out and going to Lincoln’s. I obviously won’t tell him what Lincoln and I spent most of the afternoon doing, but he’ll get the idea. Dad and I have always been able to talk but before there’d always be parts of the story missing. We were on a need-to-know basis and to be honest, there was a lot of stuff that Dad didn’t need to know. Like I’d tell him I was going to a party but I wouldn’t tell him I would be drinking. I’d tell him I was going out with a guy, but I wouldn’t tell him I was going to stay at his place. Don’t ask, don’t tell—it worked for us. But since Kel died we really talk, like no bullshit talk. I tell him what’s going on and he listens and he tells me what he thinks and very rarely does he get weird.

After dinner, after we’d sat at the bench talking

about the day, he says, ‘What about Lincoln?’

He reaches over for my plate. I haven’t really eaten much of the spag bol he made, just kind of pushed the pasta around the plate. He looks at it and furrows his brow.

‘What about him?’

‘What’s going on there?’

‘I dunno,’ I say, and I *don’t* know. I don’t know why every time I see Lincoln now we hook up. I don’t know why we get stoned. I don’t know why, when we see each other, we pretend like nothing has happened and I don’t know why we never talk about Kel. I don’t know.

‘Just—’ Dad stops himself. ‘Just be careful.’

‘Yeah.’ I bite my lip and the usual wash of guilt floods my body.

‘You need to think about the fact that things aren’t...’ he pauses and breathes in, searching for the right word. ‘Things aren’t typical right now. Lincoln is navigating some pretty big things and he might just... he’s not himself.’

I rest my elbows on the bench and rub my temples with my knuckles leaning into my hands.

‘That’s just it though. That’s how I feel when I’m there.’ I look at Dad standing at the sink. ‘Myself.’

He looks at me for a really long time. His lips move like he’s about to say something but he doesn’t, he just nods.

‘I hate it, Dad.’

‘I know.’

When I was little I was never allowed to say I hated

anything. My dad hates the word hate. So if I really didn't like something I'd have to say that I immensely disliked it. 'I hate broccoli,' I'd say and Dad'd go, 'No, you don't hate broccoli, you immensely dislike broccoli.' Obviously, Mum and Dad had a confusing, messy, just-shit relationship, mainly cause she was a bitch. He hated her. Not so much anymore, he's moved on, but he hated her then and he had reason to. He knows what real hate feels like; the rage, the intensity, the vile anger that blacks out everything good and real, eliminating even your sense of yourself. He had felt that. So, the way I felt about broccoli was very different to the way he felt about my mum. By setting that as the bar, the way my dad felt about my mum, I suppose I've never really hated anything.

Until now. I hate what Kelly did. I hate that she left me on my own.

GIDEON

I write poems.

But there's no way to say that without sounding like a dickhead. I've tried. I spend a considerable amount of time trying not to sound like a dickhead. That's what my life is—trying to not sound like a dickhead and overcompensating for moments when I'm positive I do sound like a dickhead, like right now. I'm pretty sure I sound like a dickhead right now.

I write slam poems.

Saying this doesn't work either, mostly because people don't know what slam poetry is and when they ask I just end up rambling about the origin and evolution of spoken-word poetry around the world. In case you were curious a surefire way to look like a dickhead is to be a lanky white kid babbling about the revitalisation of poetry in America in the late 1980s.

This is why, instead, I choose to stay quiet in most public situations and why I choose to write rather than concern myself with real-life conversations, because it's easier. You can fix your mistakes; even delete things entirely. You can make yourself sound smart or artistic or a whole array of other descriptive words. One of which is not dickhead.

I wriggle the too-tight knot of my tie and stare at the back of the cubicle door. Try to catch my breath and calm myself down. I've worked myself into such a tizzy thinking about what questions they're going to ask me that I'm about four laboured breaths away from being murdered by my own internal organs. I'd like to avoid that. I stare at the print ad on the back of the door and wiggle my toes. I don't know why wiggling your toes is meant to help but that's what the parental unit always tell me to do. So I do. I think it's meant to make me focus on something other than the impending doom that looms like a shadow in my periphery. *Don't focus on the shadow*, I repeat over and over again. *Don't focus on the shadow. Don't focus on the shadow.* Focus on wriggling your toes. Focus on the ad.

Compartmentalise. Good.

With my toes wriggling madly inside my tight brown leather lace-ups, I stare at the ad, at the lady in the short black skirt and red high heels. She's standing over some guy in a suit who's sitting down on the floor with an expression of cartoon confusion on his face. The lady in the heels rests a broom on his chest and

there is a caption in big swirly red lettering: *Don't get swept up with nerves. Be the man she wants you to be.*

It takes me a couple of minutes to work out that it's advertising erectile dysfunction spray. But staring at her collarbones and the extremely perky boobs that poke studiously above her strapless top confirms a couple of things for me. Enough things to make a list:

THINGS I KNOW RIGHT NOW: A LIST

1. I'm having a bit of a panic attack.
2. I have a slight erection.
3. I don't need to call the number on the poster for men who suffer erectile dysfunction.
4. I write poems.
5. And, evidently, lists.

I close my eyes and try and think of breathing, just breathing. I try not to think about how stupid all of this feels, how stupid I feel. All of this because of a stupid job interview. A stupid job interview at a stupid menswear store where I would've had to help men like the ones in the picture who probably do need erectile dysfunction spray. At least I don't need the erectile dysfunction spray, silver linings, although I wish there was such a thing as just plain old dysfunction spray. That'd come in handy right about now.

I feel my heartrate drop from the spheres of catastrophe and land somewhere in a realm closer to normal and I read the caption again.

Don't get swept up with nerves, be the man she

wants you to be.

But that's just it, attractive woman in your incredibly short skirt: you want me to be the kind of man who has erections and knows what to do with them. A guy with a nice haircut and some sort of muscle tone who isn't intimidated by anyone or anything, especially not job interviews.

I put the toilet lid down and sit. I'm not that guy. Not even a little bit. I'm the kind of seventeen-year-old guy who gets nervous most of the time, who uses words like 'tizzy' and who works himself into tizzies over dumb things like job interviews, or any situation for that matter, that require him to talk about himself. I'm the kind of guy who gets turned on by an image of a beautiful woman but who'd rather hide in his bedroom alone than ever have sufficient interactions with beautiful women so that he could ever be turned on by them in real life. I'm the kind of guy who has panic attacks in toilets.

I look at my watch.

I'm the kind of guy that ends up being late to job interviews. The kind of guy that because they're late they just won't show up to job interviews but will tell their parents they did. The kind of guy who will tell his parents that the job interview was fine, who won't tell his parents he missed the job interview altogether because of things like panic attacks or erections or because he got stuck in a toilet cubicle thinking about what kind of guy he is.



‘Which means that life is...’ Robbie, my therapist, asks and I shrug. I’ve been seeing Robbie since we moved here. He was the fourth therapist I saw. The other three were old, frustrating or patronising. He wasn’t. Robbie looks nothing like a ‘typical’ therapist; he’s a bit fat, has a beard and he’s clinging eagerly to a pony tail despite going bald. He wears jeans and t-shirts. He’s the reason I got into poetry. He is like no one I know.

When I first met him he told me picking a therapist was like picking a girlfriend or a boyfriend. I immediately liked that he didn’t assume anything about my sexuality, because I figured that would mean he wouldn’t assume anything else about me. All I’d ever experienced up to that point was people assuming things about me because of what I said or wore, because my mums were gay, because of my scars. Robbie didn’t. He still doesn’t. He told me he wouldn’t be offended if I didn’t like him or if I didn’t come back, because some things just weren’t meant to be.

‘So, Gideon, this is where we get to know each other a bit,’ he chimed, resting his hands on his big belly. He stood up and got two cans of Coke out of the tiny fridge next to his desk and placed them on the coffee table between us. Tick two for Robbie. For the last few months my mums had been obsessed with my diet. No sugar. None. They even made our own toothpaste because Mum had read something about the amount of sugar in commercial toothpaste. Thankfully this phase

didn't last too long, but that can of Coke was like the first hit of smack for an incarcerated drug addict. The point is, the Coke was a gesture, and one that made Robbie cool in my sugarless thirteen-year-old brain.

We spent the rest of that first session just talking about what celebrities we thought were hot. I told him that I wasn't really attracted to any of the women in *Friends* and he told me I'd never understand. He made me laugh. Tick three for Robbie. He didn't ask me once about antidepressants or self-harm or depression or hospitals or bullying or my feelings. Unless they were my feelings about *The Simpsons* versus *South Park*. *South Park*, obviously. Robbie picked *The Simpsons* and then scoffed about how he had t-shirts older than me.

Four years later Robbie is still my therapist.

'And that means life is...' he smiles and asks again. I am so used to this conversation, but it doesn't make it any easier to answer. I already told him about the toilet-cubicle incident, which admittedly he'd laughed about before he told me that I'd dodged a bullet by failing to land a job in menswear.

'Life is the same. But...' I pause, and Robbie raises his eyebrows waiting. 'I'm over it.'

'Explain.' A touch of alarm sounds in his voice.

'Not *life*. No. Shit, Robbie. I'm just over everything being the same.'

'Okay.'

I take a deep breath, and stare at the old movie posters on the wall.

'I'm bored,' I finally say without thinking, and as soon as I say it it's like I've shone one of those giant spotlights on my feelings. I'm bored. I'm so bored of everything, of being careful, of being nervous, of overthinking everything, of locking myself in toilets.

'The worst quandary of them all, my friend,' Robbie puts on a weird accent. 'They say that death kills you, but death doesn't kill you, boredom and indifference kill you.' I look at him and he smiles. 'Who said that?' he asks.

'Gandhi?'

'Close. Iggy Pop.'

'Who?' I ask and he throws his pencil at me.

'I want you to think about small risks, safe risks, things that are going to push you out of your comfort zone. Sometimes the smallest things are enough to spark a fire or set you on a whole new path or some other wanky metaphor, yeah?'

'I need to get a job,' I nod. Robbie is right. Robbie is always right.

'What kind of job?'

'Anything. I need cash.'

'For illicit substances, booze and ladies of the night? I know all about you youth,' Robbie chuckles at his own joke. 'Well, let's talk about your CV.'

'Lanky, introverted, awkward poet with big hair and questionable fashion sense requires well-paying job to fund awkward, introverted activities,' I say.

'So, something in customer service then?'

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‘Gideon, you need to settle this argument,’ My mum, Mandy, is standing on a ladder in the lounge room holding the iPad up to her face. Her blonde bob swishes as she she turns the screen around and my sister Annie pokes her tongue out at me. I drop my schoolbag and give her the finger with both hands dancing at her. Mum and Annie are laughing as Susan walks in behind me, copying the double middle-finger dance. She wraps her arm around my shoulder. ‘It’s not an argument, it’s a conspiracy. Your sister and your mother are ganging up on me,’ she pauses, ‘as usual.’

Cue raucous mockery from Annie and Mum about how she’s so hard done by and it’s not a conspiracy and she just has awful taste. The point of the issue is two large squares of wallpaper that have been stuck up above our redundant fireplace.

‘Which one, buddy boy?’ Mum points to both like a game show host. I go to stand by the ladder and ponder two strikingly similar swirling patterns; one is green with silver swirls and the other silver with green swirls.

‘I like the silver one,’ I say.

Susan hugs me. ‘I knew my boy had good taste.’

‘Two against two,’ Mum smirks. ‘Let’s leave them both up and reconvene this meeting in a week.’ She steps down off the ladder and wraps her arm around my waist.

The rest of the conversation is Annie showing us how gross and rainy it is outside her London window.

Annie is two years older than me and she's the smartest person I know. She got dux of the school and all of these scholarships to all these different unis, which she politely declined to go work in a pub and travel around Europe. Annie is fiercely opinionated and political; she loves maths, paints big murals with pastels and funded her whole trip to Europe by joining one of her friends' dad's pyramid scheme when she was fifteen. Annie is super entrepreneurial and business-savvy. When she was eight she ran this serious tuck-shop mob ring at school where she would buy lollies with her weekly pocket money and then bag them up and sell them for a profit next to the tuck-shop. She made a mint. Pun intended. It would've kept going except one of the mums caught wind of what she was doing and the school shut that shit down.

I miss her every single day. My family is a little abnormal in that we all genuinely like each other. Also, my parents are still noticeably very much in love, even though they've been together like forever. They celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary last year so Annie and I threw them a big surprise party in the backyard and they both got really drunk and went skinny-dipping in the pool. So, it was a massive success.

I go up to my room, put my favourite record on the player and sit on the edge of the bed and I start to think about what small, safe risks might look like. Robbie and I talked about a few; handing out resumés to local shops, entering more poetry competitions, talking to

new people. Maybe reconnecting some of the electronic devices I got rid of six weeks ago, all my game consoles, my laptop and my phone.

Not that I really used my phone. You need to have friends to use a phone, and the only friends I have are Norma and Andy. I told myself I'd go twelve weeks without any device. Just to see. It was all sparked by a stupid comment on a photo: a photo at the sports carnival of four people in my grade hugging and smiling and me all tiny and pixelated walking across the oval in the background. Some dickhead jock had then commented with three words:

Whose that kid?

It wasn't the comment itself, really, more the fact that it acted like some kind of skipped stone in a pond of really shit memories of how I used to feel and why we ended up moving. It dredged up memories of all the things that had happened. I don't want to feel any of that again so I got rid of it all. Just to see. And life has stayed the same. Maybe being bored is a good thing. Because what that actually means is that things aren't like they were. And that's all I ever really want, for things to never be like they were.