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Four Stories: Feral

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Four Stories: Feral

Abstract

Feral: one of four stories published in *Current Narratives*, 4, 2014.

Feral

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Will Lindley, circa. 1965, eats an apple by the old watering hole.

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Amy Evelyn Lindley
Born Gawler, South Australia 12th November 1907.
Nineteen Hundred and Seven.
Grandson William Lindley
Born 17th March 1959
Nineteen Fifty Nine.
(St Patricks Day)

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It's late afternoon. He rides his bike through the small town, methodically working the pedals, panting his way up the hills, and flying down the other side, recklessly.

He reaches the top of the last hill, legs turned to jelly. Bracing, he lets the momentum take him, until whoooosh, he's flying, and the wind whips his hair and tugs at his shirt. The bike has no brakes, and the sheen of sweat he had built up is gone by the time he reaches the bottom.

Sometimes, he feels more complete on two wheels than on his own legs.

Cycling slowly down the road, he turns into the cracked concrete driveway and dismounts. He carefully walks the bike to the back of the unit, out of sight of the road, and leans the red frame against the chipped paint of the wall.

Minutes later, he sits at the kitchen table, legs swinging wildly from his perch on the chair. The glass of milk is half-gone by the time his grandmother puts the milk bottle back in the fridge.

Looking down, she notices his worn boots are covered in red dust.

'Take those off,' she says pragmatically, wiping down the kitchen bench with an old sponge. 'You'll tramp dust all over the place.'

Obediently, he leans down, small fingers struggling with the frayed laces. He pries one knot loose and slips off the boot. The soles are worn away in places, but still heavy, and it lands with a soft thud on the linoleum. As he slips the other off, the woman stoops to pick them up.

'What's this?' she asks, pointing to a piece of cardboard in the heel of his shoe.

Oh. That. He shrugs.

'It's to stop the nails from sticking in too much,' he says.

He offers an explanation:

'They hurt when I run.'

She pulls out the compacted piece of cardboard, revealing the wide, pointed end of a boot nail. Her eyes flick to his face. At first he thinks he's in trouble - he's always in trouble these days, it seems, and instincts make his heart beat a little bit faster.

'Does your dad know about this?' she asks him softly. Her small wiry body is charged, like a cat with its hair on end.

He nods his head. He had never seen his Grandma so angry.

The glass on milk sits on the table, forgotten.

His shoulders twist like a cat's. The wood grain drags against his clothes as he pushes and wriggles through the narrow gap.

Suddenly, darkness. Blackness, and a damp, musty smell. He's in. He stands still in the middle of the room, eyes blinking. Scanning the room, he begins to make out the twisted shapes of rope in the darkness.

Squinting, he spots what he first thinks is a giant cowhide, spread out on the wall. No, not a cowhide - a crocodile skin. But it's easily the size of a bull. He walks quietly up to the creature in awe. Its skin is patterned in plates, like armour. As his eyes adjust, he reaches out to caress a yellowing tooth. The knobs studding its back are the size of peaches. He's never seen a creature so big.

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He's a little sorry for it. Maybe if it had been smaller, and faster, and more wiry, it would have escaped.

But this wasn't what he came here for. The sea-scouts camp is interesting, but it sits on the ground level, and the idea of what lies above is far more intoxicating.

His sandals coax hollow notes from the metal staircase as he climbs further up. The metal staircase hugs the walls of the water-tower, and he climbs the sides of the rounded building quickly. By the time he opens the hatch, his shirt is clinging to him with sweat. With a struggle, he pushes open the manhole and crawls out into the light.

He can see the whole town from up here. Tiny squiggly lines and little dots. The churning water underneath him thrums with a low whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.

He lifts up one side of the hatch, and the throbbing grows louder.

The water is inky black, and unsettlingly cold. His shirt is still clinging to him from the climb up. His toes wiggle in his sandals. He feels a shiver run through him.

Sitting down on the edge, he peers down. He can't resist.

Turning around, he grips onto the edge, white knuckled, and lowers himself in. His stomach does flips.

The water is numbingly cold, and the current tugs strongly at his shorts and sandals.

On top of a water tower in the middle of a city, a ten-year old boy dips himself into 100,000 galleons of cold inky terror, thrilled and thrumming with adrenaline.

Consequences of Neglectful Supervision

'Though less dramatic and visible than physical child abuse, neglectful supervision practices play a critical role in children's development. Neglectful and inattentive supervision is a significant predictor of injury and trauma in young children (e.g., Erickson, Egeland, & Pianta, 1989), but the results of neglectful supervision practices on middle childhood and young adolescent children are less clear.

There is suggestive evidence, however, that neglectful supervision exerts powerful effects, and also interacts with other factors such as deviant peer association in producing significantly higher rates of antisocial behaviour, delinquency, alcohol, tobacco, and substance abuse, and early sexual intercourse and related STDs.'

Bank & Burraston, 2001, Abusive Home Environments As Predictors Of Poor Adjustment During Adolescence And Early Adulthood, p 200

The blooms are huge. At least as big as his thumb. Maybe even the size of his big toe.

And the tree was heavy with them. The branches, buried beneath pillows of yellow, sway gently in the hot wind.

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The vivid golden colour is too much. He has to look. It's the colour of butter - no, of canaries! No! Was it the colour of an egg yolk? He had once seen a hen eat its own egg, and the yolk inside had been strange and pale.

But this wattle tree is somehow yellow *and* golden at the same time.

The tree sits just outside of the school grounds, on the main road. It has to be seventy, eighty years old at least. From his seat in the classroom, Will has a perfect view.

On one of the clusters, a small brown bird hangs, nearly upside down. His head darts, left, right, up, down. His tongue moves so fast, it's almost invisible. He seems to be checking the blossoms for quality - like a production line worker - rather than feeding on them.

SMACK

The ruler catches him on the knuckles. It stings like billy-o.

'Eyes front, Mr Lindley.'

Rubbing his hand, Will snaps his eyes back to the board.

'Can I assume your inattention means you have the answer?'

He squints his eyes at the dusty chalk scribbling; it looks like math.

'No Sir. Sorry Sir,' he chants, casting his eyes down.

A pause.

'Stand on your chair.'

Will looks up warily.

'Stand on your *chair*, Mr Lindley.'

He pushes himself slowly to his feet. Uneasy, he carefully places one foot on the wooden seat and glances up at his teacher. His face is calm and unreadable. The whole classroom is paying close attention as he lifts himself up, and straightens up, legs pressed tightly together.

'What is the answer, Mr Lindley?'

'I don't know sir,' he says in a clear voice.

'On your desk.' The ruler swings menacingly in his hands.

'Sir?'

'How many times to I have to say it? On your desk!'

He scrabbles up onto the laminated chipboard, hurrying to obey.

'The answer, Mr Lindley.'

Again, he frowns at the equation on the board. He can see a two, a five, a division sign, and an...*a*? His eyes flick over it.

'I don't know!'

'I don't know, *Sir*.' the teacher corrects.

'Chair on the desk, and you on the chair. Standing.' Old Bullwinkle seems almost bored by this point.

Wobbling, he slowly stands up, arms out ready to catch himself if he falls. He feels the cool air from the ceiling fan on the back of his neck, and suddenly realises the game he is playing. Locking eyes on his teacher, he straightens out his small frame as much as he can. He locks his arms against his sides, and defiantly lifts his chin a little. The fan cuts the air above his head with a solemn, rhythmical whoosh.

'Now. What *is* the answer, Mr Lindley?'

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The steel legs wobble underneath him.

I've got no flaming idea, otherwise I would have answered you before I got on the chair! he thinks.

'If I knew I would tell you. Sir.'

'I'll just be a minute,' he says. 'I've just got to iron your brother's uniform for tomorrow.'

'Sure. I'll just set up the recorder,' I say.

'No rush papa,' I call out after him.

The ashen hair pops back behind the doorframe.

I've been allowed access to 'The Den'. The room is already small, and surrounding me are endless piles of - well, junk. Broken kites, stacks of 'Cosmos' magazines, tins of shoe polish, broken TV remotes, taped back together with red duct-tape. A hand-carved trophy bearing a bronze football boasts:

'Best and Fairest
William Lindley
1971'

A few photo-frames sit atop a bookshelf. The inhabitants quietly surveying their chaotic kingdom. I guess this is what happens when you grow up having nothing. Everything becomes valuable.

There's only one chair - a tawny corduroy armchair, and it sags under my weight as I take a seat.

I reach out for the recorder - I'll need to do a sound check first, and the batteries need replacing. Grabbing the bag, I lean back deeply into the chair.

Suddenly, and before my very eyes, the piles and piles seem to suddenly shift. Under my gaze, straight lines begin to emerge from the chaos.

I sink back further into the chair, wrists dangling limply from the ends of the armrests.

It's as if the stars have aligned.

Everything I could need is within arms reach. Tweezers, scissors, magnifying glass, all lined up on an industrial-strength magnet, stuck to the back of a filing cabinet. On the other side, next to the mini-bible, there's an empty, distinctly mug-shaped spot on the coffee table, marked faintly with coffee rings.

From this spot, and this spot only, everything makes sense. Everything has its place, and is - in a way - as carefully ordered and curated as any museum.

I feel like an intruder.

The gas bill hasn't been paid. Again.

He knows, because Deborah was muttering under her breath as she fixed dinner.

'That god-damn father of yours. I swear,' she breathes.

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It doesn't matter that the impromptu dinner on the table is cold though. Dad still isn't home from the pub.

Eventually, the noise of his truck pulling into the driveway spurs them into action. Andrew and Kim stop bickering and scramble to their places at the table. Dropping the tea-towel she was holding, Deborah hurries over and settles herself into the brown vinyl of the chair. Will stands in the hallway, hesitant. He wishes he'd taken his bike and gone earlier. But there was no time now.

'William!' Deborah hisses.

He runs to his seat and hops in the chair just as the front door opens.

The figure in the doorway doesn't sway. It doesn't stumble. It doesn't slur. It stands stock still and surveys the family.

Arthur is a large man. He's always had too much stomach, and never enough neck, Will thinks. He catches a glimpse at his father's thick new moustache. He looks more like a walrus than ever.

Arthur moves towards his family. The energy in the room is electric, crackling.

Reaching the table, he leans over, his bulk supported by fists on the grainy wood.

He looks over at the hastily prepared meal, and back at his family.

The children won't look him in the eye. Will focuses on the meal in front of him, but his peripheral vision is sharp and he is alert. The smell of beer is strong and yeasty and is turning his stomach.

His own god-damn children.

How dare they be afraid of him. His chest rises and falls. His eyes fall on the cold cuts of ham and left over potato-salad.

'What the fuck is this SHIT?' he bellows.

His knuckles grip the underside of the table, and he flips the table with the power of a freshly-castrated ram.

Will is already out of his chair by the time the plates land on the floor. The crack of cheap ceramic and the tinkle of glasses ring out. He casts an anxious glance at the floor to see if any of the food has survived. He'd missed out on lunch again today.

She breathes in sharply. She was hoping this wouldn't happen.

Food Insecurity

'Food insecurity is defined as limited or uncertain access to enough food to meet basic needs for household members at all times... These definitions capture both the availability of food and the anxiety or concern regarding limited food availability. Food insecurity has been associated with negative consequences for children in the first 3 years of life, including worse caregiver-reported health, more hospitalizations, a higher likelihood of developmental risk, and behavioural problems.'

The mechanisms linking food insecurity with negative consequences for children include both nutritional pathways (compromised with both the quantity and quality of food available) and non-nutritional pathways (increased anxiety and stress related to the

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inconsistent availability of food). Thus, food insecurity threatens children's physical and psychological health, serving as a form of both physical and emotional neglect.'

Jenny, C., 2011 *Child Abuse and Neglect: Diagnosis, Treatment and Evidence*

The light streaming in the window is warm and golden. The colour of a pat of butter. In a couple of hours, the sun would be overhead, and the tin roof will bake the small brick unit like a christmas pudding. For now, particles of dust float lazily in and out of the sun's rays.

The room is carpeted, and footsteps are muffled here. A small, wiry boy bursts through the back door, slamming the screen door behind him.

'Grandma?' he calls.

'In here,' a voice calls from the bedroom.

'Is this the right one?' he says, his words entering the room before he does.

He proudly thrusts a fistful of green weeds out in front of him.

'Let me see.'

She pinches the fine seeds in between her two fingers, checking them over. The green, herbaceous smell of the crushed steams fills the bedroom.

'Yes, that's right. But only put the seed heads in the cage - not the grass.'

Gripping his harvest tightly, he runs out to the front balcony. A warm breeze ruffles his hair as he leans on the iron handrail, pulling out the pieces of grass and tossing them onto the lawn below.

He moves close, freckled nose almost touching the bars of the cage. Ignoring the cut on his lower lip, he purses them and blows. But no sound comes out. He frowns. He was sure he had it yesterday. He licks his dry lips, and tries again.

A half-strangled note escapes his lips in a rush of air.

The yellow bird in the cage jumps suddenly from perch to perch, excited by the noise.

He frowns; draws in another breath. He purses his lips, and a note rings out in the air, rising clear above the humming noise of the highway in the distance. The canary flutters its wing frantically, and trills back a reply.

Smiling, he pushes the sugar weed in between the bars of the cage.

He nibbles his own piece with two front teeth. The taste is mild, sweet, and green, and he decides he likes it.

The small yellow birds peck at their treat. Discarded husks fall from their beaks to the newspapered bottom of the cage.

He feels safe here.

Dad picked the black crayon. The little stick in its colourful wrapping looks ridiculously small, clenched in his fist.

Will pulls Andrew closer to him. He isn't sure what's going to happen next. This was weird.

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Arthur pulls the hallway door shut with a bang that makes his little brother jump. He brings the crayon to the door at head height, and starts... drawing? A thick black line snakes out from underneath his dad's hand. The lines curve and bend, and reach right down to the floor. The marks are shaky, but as he steps back, the intention is clear.

It's an outline of his step-mum.

Arthur is pacing back and forth on the orange carpet. Hitting a wall, kicks the cabinet and the glasses inside rattle. He walks back to his masterpiece, squares up, and takes a punch.

His fist hits the door with a solid thud. He pulls back, aims, and releases another blow.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Over and over and over. The door finally gives in, and the thuds are joined by the crunching, splintering noise of wood breaking.

The outline is covered in blood. His father's fists are a mess of chewed-up flesh. Deborah places her hand on her daughter's shoulder, unable to tear her eyes from her doppelganger.

Thud.

Thud.

Kim shakes off her mother's grip silently. She walks cautiously forward, and puts two hands on the back of a kitchen chair. Looking over her shoulder, she steps backwards, dragging the chair behind her. The metal legs scrape on the linoleum.

Will watches in horror as the eight-year-old drags the chair closer and closer to their raging father. She stops a metre away, and turns the chair towards her father. She is shaking.

'Dad?' she calls. One hand rests on the back of the chair; the other anxiously fingers the hem of her dress.

'Dad, what are you *doing*?'

Arthur turns around, nostrils flaring. His eyes widen, and take in his small, frightened daughter. His hands drop to his sides. A bead of blood rolls off his fingertip and hits the floor.

For a while, he does nothing.

Then he drops his weight down onto the chair. His shoulders sag, and he leans forward, head in hands.

The whole family is quiet.

'Abusive fathers experienced more anger and were more likely to express that anger aggressively. They reported more mental health concerns (such as depression, hostility, and paranoid ideation), more stress in parenting, and significantly less empathy for their children. They were also more likely to perceive children's emotional expressions as depicting negative emotions, such as anger and disgust.'

Abusive fathers gave more responses falling in the Anger, Fear, and Other categories, and fewer falling in the Interest category. "Other" responses reported by abusive fathers included "ugly," "snaky," "devious," "deprived," "spooky," and "attitude" (one abusive father said "put horns on that kid" in response to one of the photographs). In contrast, "other" responses provided by non-abusive fathers included "wow," "matter of

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fact,” “don’t know,” “I’ve done something and I’m not sure whether it’s good or bad,” and “is there any expression?”

Francis & Wolfe, 2008, Cognitive and emotional differences between abusive and non-abusive fathers

The truck pulls up, and the passenger door opens before the engine is even off. He jumps out, skinny legs half-buckling as he hits the red dirt. The stench hits his senses before anything else does. It wrenches at his gut, the way a tooth aches. Demanding to be noticed.

He turns his face away from the smell, bringing the collar of his shirt to his nose. Through the fabric, the thickness begins to separate into more familiar notes. Blood, dung, ammonia - even a hint of eucalyptus.

It’s school holidays.

His dad drops down from the truck. He looks down at the boy. His eyes are watering, but he hasn’t thrown up yet, which is a good sign.

‘Don’t get in anyone’s way.’

That was permission enough. He lets go of his collar, and skips off towards the nearest shed. Heat is shimmering off the rusting corrugated iron, and the smell is strong, but the noise coming from inside is loud and intriguing.

He slips through the doorway. His eyes take a while to adjust to the dim light, but the noise is a deafening symphony. The slow grinding of giant engines, the screech of metal, of conveyor belts and saws. The terrified bleats of waiting sheep, the ripping of hides and the mysterious booming language of the Kill Floor workers.

‘I got a Gimmer here. Looks like she’s got a touch of bottle jaw.’

‘Here; the moorit! Pelt should be ok.’

The kill floor is too busy for the ten-year old to focus on any one thing. And the smell is making his head swim.

He finds dad talking to some blokes by the tanning sheds. It looks like business. He weaves in between some empty racks, slipping into the shade of the galvanised roof. Tanning hides stretch along row after row, mile after mile. Great skins, mostly sheep and cattle, stretched out tightly in the heat of the day.

To the side, the men are shoveling rock salt over a cow hide. He looks intently at the fresh hide of a brown creature. The fat and flesh have been roughly scrapped off, and he runs his finger along the fibers of the leather.

‘Will!’ a voice booms out.

He jumps and turns towards the voice.

‘Yeah?’

But before he can finish, something heavy knocks him square in the stomach. He goes flying, and lands in the red dust with an *oomph* that knocks the breath out of him.

Struggling up, he hears his dad chuckle.

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Confused, he looks around for what could have knocked him down so hard. Spotting it, his eyes widen at the sheer *size*. He looks up at his father, whose chuckle ripens into a roar of laughter, and Will can't help the smile that spreads over his face.

A pair of bulls testicles.

'Oh, I could carry more in this!' he thinks, spotting the thin pine-wood box. It's been discarded. No one would miss it.

He puts down the two bricks, he pulls the old fruit box out of the long grass by the side of the house.

The next trip he manages to take five bricks to the back of the house. The barbecue patio will get done much faster this way. Dad will be pleased.

He gets ambitious - three more trips later, the weight of six bricks is too much.

With a creaking, crackling sound, the bottom gives out.

The bricks drop to the ground, and he jumps back before they can crush any unwilling toes.

Bugger.

He doesn't give it another thought until later. It's just after lunch, and the hottest part of the day. The light outside the lounge-room window is white-hot. The kids watch the telly. His younger brother, Andrew, is spread out lazily, one leg hanging over the back of the floral couch. Will is barefoot, standing on the orange tile carpet and shifting his weight from foot to foot, too full of energy to sit.

The faint noise of an argument floats in from the backyard. From inside, he can hear his step-mum bang the screen-door shut. Her massive girth pushes into the lounge room.

'Did you break that box??' she says sharply.

Her neck is flushed red, and her eyes are narrowed in on the young boy standing in the middle of the room.

His stomach drops.

'Yeah, I...' he begins to explain, but that's as far as he gets.

Her mouth contorts as if she smells something rotten. By her second step forward, he moves to throw his arms up in front of his face, shielding himself.

Her fist connects with his jaw with the power of an industrial spring. The sheer force of it launches him across the room, and for a moment he feels weightless.

Small shoulders hit the middle pane of glass. The aluminium frame rattles with the impact, and the window shatters, glass exploding outwards towards the street.

His thoughts are surprisingly clear and calm as he lies on the carpet where he landed. But he can only focus on the memory of a peewee that once flew into the kitchen window. He can clearly picture its black and white frame lying still on the grass below, wings splayed.

He's pulled upwards by his hair. His step-mother's face comes into focus, inches from his own. He notices the sun marks and spots of her skin. She takes him by the shoulders and shakes him furiously.

'LOOK WHAT YOU DID TO THE WINDOW!' she spits at him.

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Andrew stands behind the couch and watches mum shake his brother.

Will's jaw hurts, and his shoulders hurt. He might have a cut or two. But he isn't worried anymore. He notices the look on Deborah's face has changed.

Shit.

He's pretty familiar with that expression himself.

What have I done?

And if he's right, she won't lay another finger on him.

I'm in real trouble now.

At least for the rest of the day.

'...Maltreated children may be less communicative, less warm, and more conflicted in their interpersonal relationships than non-abused children, and they experience more conflict with peers and partners.

Victims of Child Psychological Abuse do not always become the aggressor; sometimes people who experienced CPA are more willing to accept violence in their future relationships than nonabused people...'

Jenny, C. *Child Abuse and Neglect: Diagnosis, Treatment and Evidence*, 2011

'...parental abuse in maltreating households usually focuses on one child...'

Cerezo, *Abusive family interaction: A review*, 1998.

'What's that?'

The man points a blood-stained finger at the bulge in his shirt.

'A lamb,' he mumbles, drawing his arms defensively around the little lump.

'Where'd you get it?' he asks.

'I found it,' he offers.

The man frowns.

'It was in the loading bay, and I...' he trails off indecipherably.

Some of the ewes gave birth right there in the loading bay, hurried to an early labour by a heady combination of fear and hope. Their short lives were in-and-out ordeals; a few minutes of blood, and stench, and fear, and then nothing. They were unwanted; the ones unlucky enough to have been born in an abattoir.

Last week, Will watched a man casually pick a lamb up by its hind legs, and bang its head hard over the rail. Snapping the neck in one quick, clean movement, he tossed it to the side, and moved on to the next.

The warm, living lamb in his shirt squirms and gives a pathetic bleat.

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'It won't live,' says the stranger, and moves off to process the next load of cattle.

'Yeah it will!' Will calls after him.

'It's alright,' he whispers.

He looks down at his lumpy shirt.

A little head emerges from the top of his shirt, and he gives it a loving stroke. He knew he'd have to get it past dad, too. And that would be hard.

But there was no flamin' way he was leaving it *here*.

'You killed him! You killed him! You killed Bobby!' he screams, running through the house in his pyjamas. It had been a cold evening, and he'd been worried about the lamb all night.

He finds Deborah in the kitchen, clutching her dressing gown at the neck, cup of tea in hand.

'He's dead! He's all frozen, and he's dead, and it's your fault!' he yells. Tears are forming in his eyes.

'Well, he wasn't staying in my laundry, leaving pellets everywhere,' she says, putting down the steaming cup of tea sharply.

'He never left that box! He wasn't any trouble! He was warm and safe there, and now you've gone and killed him!'

She tries to look nonchalant, but the young boy's face is deadly serious, and the hatred he is radiating unsettles her.

'How *dare* you yell at me like that? Do you *know*...' she begins, arms crossed.

His hands curl into fists.

'You're a *murderer*,' he spits.

'Good work this time, Johnson. B-plus,' says the voice.

Mr Martin drops the paper on Johnson's desk with a flourish.

'Watch your punctuation, Hill. C.' he warns.

The essay lands with a soft pat.

He continues down the row, scattering assignments like chicken feed.

Evans.

Pat.

Anderson.

Pat.

Wright.

Pat.

Will sits at his desk frozen. Waiting.

'And Mr Lindley.'

He stops and pauses.

He throws the stack of paper like an insult. It slides across the wood before coming to a halt.

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The lines of blue pen look forced; the words are hesitant and trembling. Scratched out lines dot the page like fuzzy caterpillars.

Will's cheeks burn. He wants desperately to reach out and turn his essay face down.

Mr Martin takes a moment to peer down at his worst student.

'The spastic ravings of a drunken fly.'

The blush spreads over his ears, down his neck. His eyes are fixed at the front of the room.

His next essay would be in block letters, he decides.

The blood pumping through his fists beats a pulse in his fingertips.

He'd write it in crayon.

He wishes his legs would stop shaking.

In red.

There's no time to get in the house.

The whirly-wind is only two houses away by the time he gets to Andrew. The six-year old stares upwards, open-mouthed at the oncoming danger. He can't hear Will's shouts over the noise.

Will drops down on the bitumen, scraping his knees in the process. He pulls his little brother in to his chest tightly.

'CLOSE YOUR EYES.'

They kneel together, heads bent down like roosting pigeons, as the wind tears at their clothes, and sand stings their arms and legs.

Eventually the gale lessens, and Will risks a look. The whirly-wind continues down Dundee Avenue, unperturbed. His eyes are watering, but he can breathe well enough. And Andrew is safe. That's the important thing.

Andrew is safe.

He runs a hand through his silver hair.

On one arm, a wobbly cross sits beside a crudely drawn red-back spider. Over the years, the ink has faded to a soft bottle-green. He absentmindedly tugs down a sleeve.

My father has been embarrassed by these amateur tattoos for as long as I can remember. But 13-year-old Will had thought they were cool.

'You know I missed my uncle's funeral?' he asks me, interrupting my thoughts.

I frown, trying to remember.

'They all were in the fire department... all three of my uncles. I don't know where I was, but I wasn't... I missed it,' he says.

He leans to one side, and rests an arm on the chair. His forearm - four times broken - cannot lie flat. It meets at a point in the middle, like a boomerang. It teeters like a children's seesaw. It cannot be fixed.

My eyes stay on the outline of the metal plates that sit just underneath the skin.

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‘I was really dirty about that. They had a big state funeral for my uncle and I wasn’t there. I hadn’t been told.’

He pauses, eyes cast down. Frowning, his forehead wrinkles like old leather.

‘See what I mean?’ he asks.

‘I always seem on the outer... you know? Like... I always seems to be not quite.. fitting.

‘I wish I could explain it better. I really do.

‘I feel the same here. I don’t... I’m part of this community, I support the football team.. I share their highs when things go good, and the horror when things are bad. But you’re still not part... like you don’t seem to...’

‘Fit?’ I offer.

He looks at me. For a moment, I’m taken back by how much pain is in his eyes.

‘It’s... I don’t know. I *don’t* know. To have... that ...’

He pauses, searching for the right words.

‘... that sense of belonging.’

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