

## Chapter 1 – The Parade (Friday)

I was still in Bridie’s bed when I woke up. So was Asa, spread out like a starfish, but Bridie was up, clicking around in the kitchen. It was a great room, Bridie’s room; big and airy. It used to be Rita’s and the Reverend’s long ago; a room where secrets were whispered and, I suppose, we kids were conceived. Now, with them gone, it was still the cosiest corner of the house.

I rolled out, bumped my feet on something and looked down to see the memory box. And dropped beside it was a letter, much folded and faded. ‘Hello!’ I thought. ‘You must be the one that made her cry in the night!’ And I popped it open for a read. Why not? As far as I knew, we’d been through all the letters together heaps of times before, so it wasn’t like I was snooping. This, however, turned out to be one I’d never seen.

It was dated June 12, 1994 – just a month before Asa was born – from the Reverend to Rita. Rita and Bridie and little two-year-old me were all in Brisbane that June, and had been since Christmas, staying with someone who I obviously couldn’t remember because I was too young and Bridie couldn’t remember because it was lost in her ‘blank spot’. Neither of us even knew why we were in Brisbane, beyond the obvious possibility that Rita might have had trouble with the pregnancy. Typical Asael – uncomfortable, even in the womb!

Anyhow, I read the letter through twice, getting more puzzled and more annoyed each time. Because apart from the expected

‘mum-and-dad-newsy’ stuff (sermons he was writing, neighbours he was visiting, a commendation of Bessie Crampton, who was just starting her long period of caring for the McFarlane family) beyond those things, I had no clue what it was about!

*‘As for our “problem”, (the most confusing bit said) no one understands your bitterness more than I. I can only give you the same answer I’ve given your mother (Rita’s mother – that’s Gramma Grace, who got murdered) who, I might add, continues to storm about the town like a wild thing. (Amazing to think we once had someone in our family who could ‘storm about like a wild thing’!) Of course, there’s no denying the terrible nature of this deed! And our longing for retribution cannot be questioned. But you are not here and don’t see Sugar Town as I do.*

*I’ve battered the congregation for months now, as you’ve asked, and you of all people, Rita, know the power of my pulpit. No one mistakes my message. I preached from Romans this week: ‘They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh, but they that are after the Spirit do mind the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death.’ And I do believe that, in response, the people strive with their individual souls. But the striving yields nothing. As a community, they’ve closed ranks on the matter!*

*Johnathon Cranna (of all people) has been to see me! I know he’s never been part of the congregation. I’m not even certain that he’s a believer! But he’s a young man with an undeniable understanding of the town. He confides in me that the people are at their wits’ ends with my demands. They are, he assures me, doing everything in their power to atone, and he warns that that effort must be enough for now. (As an example, he has organised a commission for a beautiful new blue gum cross to be erected over the church’s entryway!)*

*I think I must believe him, Rita! In no small part because I know that God tests and tries his vessels in many ways. Surely*

*this test is as much for the people of Sugar Town as it is for us! Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour? So we must pray for our neighbours, Rita, and also for ourselves, that we all may achieve His mystery.*

*And my decision is this. We will take it as a sign of blessing that God has blocked out both the memory of the past and the understanding of the present. We will raise this new child – yours and mine – to be strong; to hold his faith high above the swirling waters. And the rest, we will leave to God, who makes all things happen. I tell you this plainly, Rita, as I have told your mother. I will not further alienate this congregation by continued recriminations. You are to stop asking it of me. This is our cross to bear and bear it we shall. Reconcile yourself to it, Rita.'*

The letter finished with another Biblical quote: *'If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for battle? Corinthians 14, 8,'* and ended with, *'Yours in the strength of God, Jacob.'*

Okay, well, bits of it I could guess at. The 'new child', obviously, must be Asael – Asael, yet to be born, yet to be named. The 'blocking out the memory' thing had to refer to Bridie and the cross that Johnathon Cranna organised is still there, over the church. And the snotty, arrogant tone was, in my mind, authentically the Reverend. So yes, some of it did make a kind of sense. But the stuff about the 'terrible deed' and the need for 'atonement' meant nothing.

It had become increasingly strange to me, how Bridie nurtured her delusions about the Reverend; like he was the biblical Jacob – wise, righteous, noble and beyond questioning. Not the one who stole his brother's blessing but the one who fought a fight with God. It was a fight she seemed to think he'd not yet abandoned, even though he'd clearly abandoned us. Us and the whole town!

How could he be beyond questioning for my sister when, for me, questions were all he was worth?

I took the letter to the kitchen and dropped it on the table.

‘What’s this?’

In response, she told me that she’d had her old repeated nightmare: the whole ‘little girl and big doors and terrible weight and pushing the pain away’ thing that we’d already talked about ad nauseum heaps of times in the past. And the new bit – the voice: ‘Reconcile yourself to it, Rita.’

‘I don’t know! It’s not like I recognised the voice! But the words reminded me of the ending of this letter. So I dug around in the memory box and found it. That’s all. Just a coincidence, I expect.’

I was totally good with it being a coincidence. Frankly, I was over her dreams and couldn’t wait for the day when she was too. But the fact that she’d hidden a letter from me was something else! I mean I knew that her memory was full of holes but that didn’t give her the right to create holes in mine!

‘Okay well, I’ve never seen this letter before! Why’s that? And what’s all this stuff about a terrible deed and atonement? What’s all that about?’

‘I don’t know, Ruthie! Some old argument going on in the town back then.’

‘A family argument? Is that why we were in Brisbane? Were they splitting up or something?’

I kept picturing Rita being pregnant up to her ears, away from home and getting these heart-breaking, self-important messages from her husband.

‘Of course they weren’t splitting up! They were in love – deeply in love – having another baby! He’s a strong man, Ruthie, and those words... they’re just the language of his calling, that’s all! For goodness sake, where do you get these ideas?’

‘Gee, I don’t know, Bridie! I guess I get them out of my over-

active imagination! And now and again from family letters that've been hidden from me!'

I suppose I went overboard a bit. I accused her of being sneaky and untrustworthy and not giving me credit for having any brains at all. I insisted that I had a right to know what quarrel had occurred between our parents and the citizens of Sugar Town and she insisted that, if such a thing once existed, it no longer did, so it no longer mattered. Dredging up the past, she said, was no way to complement the present.

'And anyhow, as you well know, Ruthie, I don't remember those times! I don't know what those references were about! Which is probably why I didn't bother showing you the letter! Okay? Because I knew you'd blow it out of proportion! Anyhow, I thought none of this mattered to you!' She stomped. 'Little Miss "Who Cares"!''

'Well you thought wrong... Missus "Why Ask Me?" And I'll thank you, in case you get the urge again, not to make any more choices for me! I'm thirteen! I'll blow whatever I like out of proportion! And you're not my mother!'

Long story short, we got side-tracked and plopped into the pit of our own ongoing quarrel; me wanting to be treated more like an adult and her adamant that I needed to 'enjoy my innocence'.

'Innocence isn't enjoyable, Bridie! It's humiliating!'

'Oh, don't be so dramatic! If old letters and old quarrels are all you have to worry about in life, Ruth, you should be counting your blessings!!'

And of course, her telling me that it wasn't important only convinced me that it was extremely important!

'Put it back in the box,' she demanded, 'and forget it! Like I have!'

I didn't bother pointing out that forgetting it like she had apparently meant having it thoroughly lodged in your dream-

memory. I stomped off but halfway down the hall I thought of a last word and went back. She was still sitting at the table but had her hands folded in prayer. (She's the Reverend's daughter, through and through.)

'Dear Lord,' I heard her say. 'I'm still here! Still in the same place.'

She scrunched her eyes and ground the heels of her hands into them. That wrung at my heart a bit, I must say, and I decided to keep my last word to myself. Or, more properly, I guess I just re-directed it, adding my own little conclusion to her prayer: 'Still without expectations.' Just in case the Big Guy was open to sarcasm.

I headed back to her room, intending to do as she'd asked, but somehow I found myself detouring into my own. There were, after all, other people I could talk to. Kevin Truck, for example. I knew I'd see him later at the festival and I knew that, if I mentioned the quarrel and he knew anything about it, he'd share. This 'terrible deed' that had split my parents and that the town had had to atone for was not going to stay a secret! Not if I had anything to do with it!



Harvest Festival weekend! Kev says you have to beat your conscience with a stick if you're going to do Harvest Festival properly. Flog it into submission. It's the only way, he says, a person can celebrate the area's blessings while staying quiet about all the things they've personally gotten away with. So that makes it less surprising that everything came to a head that weekend. Right from Bridie's dream re-discovery of the Reverend's letter, to who showed up in the travelling carnival, to the town's reactions to Queenie! Consciences were already sore and bloodied.

Sugar Town's Harvest Festival weekend starts off shortly after dawn, in the park behind the hospital, with the marshalling of

the parade; just about the most deadly serious ‘fun’ thing you could imagine. The years that the parade comes off well are positive years for Sugar Tonians. The years it doesn’t quite, are like the dog has peed in the soup.

The thing is, of course, that you can push east as hard as you like, and some things’ll still find a way of going west. The 2008 parade, for example, looked exactly like every other parade since Ned Methusala’s 900th birthday. It had a stack of cattle trucks; each with at least one crapping big Brahman on board, because everybody loves a cow. It had tractors covered in fresh-cut sugar cane, because cane is our bread and butter. It had a fleet of semi-trailers, loaded down with four-metre long papier-maché wrenches and giant thrones made of paper daisies that the oldies in the nursing home folded by using their dentures or whatever. Because everyone loves colourful, fun things and also old people. It had bands and Brownies and Boy Scouts, Lions and Rotarians and kung fu fighters, volunteer firemen and guys with baggy britches and red balloon noses.

It had everything it was supposed to have, including, most importantly for my family, the most beautiful girls in North Queensland. It’s a celebration of fertility, right? What would be the point without beautiful girls? Which is why Bridie, who filled that bill so well, every year since she was sixteen, had dug out her little homemade signs, dolled herself up and put herself forward for Harvest Festival Queen. Not that she ever expected to win! It was just that even her public shilling for money for the Reverend’s ministry was part of what was expected in our annual parade. She had to be there. And even when we were fighting, Asael and I had to be there with her.



‘Wake up, Rosebud. It’s after eight.’

‘After eight?’ Asael said, popping out of sleep and fumbling for his glasses. ‘Holy cow, why’d’ye let me sleep, Ruthie? Is she gone already?’

‘Don’t get your colon in a twist, Hanky Boy! It’s your turn for the shower so get your bony butt moving!’

And then, because he’s a nervous little character and I like to help him exercise his demons, I added, ‘Better make it a cold one, As! Driving through those crowded streets is gonna take some alertness!’

‘I don’t feel so good, Ruthie! Maybe you should do the driving!’

Wetting himself with anxiety. The fact was that he was slated to be the one new element in the parade; for the first time playing a central part in Bridie’s display.

‘No fear, Buster. You got the training, not me! Anyhow, you gonna die, what better way to do it than on a big old Harley, eh? There’re bikies who’d die for a chance to die like that!’

Character building, I call it. Anyhow, Bridie came into the room before I could take it any further and put a thumb against his chin.

‘Don’t listen to her, she’s in a mood. Show me your tongue.’

He lolled it out, scanning her face all the while, checking her while she checked him. ‘You’ll be fine. A good breakfast is all you need.’

She pushed him away but he reached for her arm and held on. ‘When you were up early, before, in the shower, Bridie – were you sick?’

‘No, As, I wasn’t sick. I told you. I just had a dream that needed to be washed away.’

‘Me too. I had one too. I dreamed of Mum!’

‘Did you? Well, that was nice, I suppose. Was it nice?’

‘Nice’ isn’t a word Asa would ordinarily settle for but about then, I decided to bring the tension in the place down a notch. I gave him a ‘don’t push it’ glance and, knowing what was good for him, he didn’t. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I guess.’



‘Well then. Good.’

She was looking around the room like maybe she’d counted us and realised someone was missing – the Reverend, for example. Maybe he’d any moment pop out of the closet. She’s told me that sometimes, ages ago when there was just her and me and Asa and the Reverend in the house – and Bessie looking after us – sometimes she’d creep into this room in the morning, to wake him.

She liked to remember it as a sweet thing, but I bet she was scared crapless every time – in case he’d gone missing in the night, like Rita and Grandma Grace. Which, of course, is a version of what he did in the end. ‘Reconcile yourself to it,’ he’d said to Rita in the letter. It had taken a little longer to say it to the rest of us but that’s what we’d had to do, nonetheless, to Bridie’s endless bafflement.

‘Well,’ she said again to Asa, as though saying it a second time somehow summed up the situation. ‘That is nice, then.’

I could see she was still upset from our quarrel plus probably anxious about the day’s coming events so I pushed Asa off toward his room and nudged the door shut. I wanted her un-distracted and focused for a minute; not to apologise, but to explain that, even though I didn’t cry with her any more, this ‘memory box’ stuff did actually have some importance for me. Not in the ‘How-sad! I-wish-it-could-be-like-it-was!’ sense, but in the ‘curious about history’ sense. Kind of on a par with learning how Rasputin seduced the empress.

Her special dress was hanging on the closet door and she set about pinching off invisible bits of fluff. How many Festivals had that dress seen by then? Six? Seven? It was the prettiest thing she owned and she kept it just for parade day.

I fiddled at making her bed, giving her a chance to settle before starting my little talk, and she had the nightie half over her head when the door squeaked back open. Asael’s eye appeared around

the corner, she dropped the nightie back over her bum and we both turned on him, fists propped on our hips.

‘You’re supposed to knock, Asael!’ I snapped. ‘You know that! You’re too old to be... !’

‘I wasn’t peeping! I just wanted to be sure... that Bri’s all right. That’s all! You’d tell me, wouldn’t you? If you were sick? I’m old enough to know, you know! Than be left in the dark!’

‘Oh, for Pete’s sake, not you too!’ Bridie snapped. ‘Listen! Both of you! Once and for all! I’m not hiding anything. I’m not keeping anything from you. Either of you! You have to stop... expecting things from me. Stop... suffocating me! I can’t be your...’ I thought she was going to say ‘mother’, but she didn’t. ‘I can’t be your everything. Okay?’

‘Why’re you mad? I told you I wasn’t peeping! Are you an’ Ruthie fighting?’

As I said, a clingy, obsessed little dude. I felt for him though; really. I mean, except for his obsessions and his phobias and his illness – and a pair of mismatched sisters – all he had was the knowledge that, if family history was anything to go by, he’d turn around one day and find himself utterly alone in the world. Same fear Bridie grew up with and look how she turned out!

She sighed, with a kind of weary finality. Then she relented. He was still such a boy – narrow and bony, and for his age, short. The top of his head was at Bridie’s mouth level. She held him at arm’s length, straightened his glasses on his face and pushed his hair from his forehead.

‘No, no. I’m not mad. In fact, just the opposite! I know you do it because you care. But you don’t have to fret, As. Honestly. I’m fine’ Ruthie’s fine. We’re all fine. Nobody’s fighting. Why would we be, after all? We’re family!’

‘We heard you in the night, me ‘n’ Ruthie. You got the memory box out after your shower. That’s why we came in. We weren’t s’posed to look there anymore, I thought! Because of the cryin’ ‘n’ all!’

‘Yes, well. There wasn’t any crying. Did you hear any crying? You did? Well, maybe there was just a little then. I just... sometimes I get a little sad, you know?’ She glanced at me and I gave her my best ‘time to get over it’ look. ‘But you’re right, Asael. You’re absolutely right. There’s been too much crying in this house!’

She drew him to her and he tucked his head under her chin. She beckoned me to join them, which I did because you have to make an effort, don’t you?

‘Let’s make a pact, shall we?’ she said trying to sound upbeat. ‘All three of us. Let’s promise each other – no more crying over the past.’ I knew that was meant mainly for me and I nearly pulled away out of the group hug. But she held onto me and so did Asael. ‘Hope deferred maketh the heart sick,’ she continued. ‘That’s what Proverbs says. And you know what else let’s promise? To tell only the truth between us! What do you say?’

I guessed that that was probably also meant for me; like an apology for not showing me that letter and a promise, on her part, to do better.

‘Only the truth?’ I challenged, just to show I knew how easy a target it was to miss. ‘Nothing else?’

‘Only the truth! Always! Now, As! Have you taken your medication?’

He rolled his eyes and nodded.

‘Good then.’ She spun us both about and faced us out the door. ‘Go and get dressed, the pair of you. We’ve got a festival to attend!’

Funny, isn’t it, how a simple little animal like ‘truth’ can be so elusive. And yet create such complacency. Nonetheless, working on the belief that false optimism must be better than none at all, I did as she asked, and we all toddled off into the first day of a week that was going to turn that little animal into a monster that would rival even those in Bridie’s dreams.



Experience had taught us that, unless you were into chaos and confusion, the marshalling area was no place to be before at least ten. Later was better. That day, it was after eleven when we arrived, leaving us just enough time to stroll through the park, enjoying the real optimism that underpins so much of country life.



Hiya McFarlanes! Day's half gone awready, did yez know?

'Nother showin' fer the Reverend, eh Bridie! Yer made o' gold, you are!

An' still the mos' beautiful girl this side o' Lord Howe! 'F you aren't Queen this year, I'm writin' a complaint to the Guv'nor!

Hey Ruthie, you up for the excitement? Them Showies got a ride this year... make Tarzan wet hisself, they say!

Talk about wettin' yerself, you lot see the comet?

Wun't a comet, y'ignorant farmer! Was a meteor!

Well, excu-u-se me, Professor Astro! An' my dearth o' educational sophistication! Whatever it bloody was, it was bloody hair raisin'! Wonder where it landed!

Not too close, hopefully. Could be radio-active, eh young Asael? Could be burnin' our bung-holes out as we speak! Whaddya reckon?



If you'd asked me then, I wouldn't have been able to remember a day when I'd felt wary or nervous or even particularly alone in Sugar Town. People seemed to accept us McFarlanes; to trust us and even to like us! Strange, parentless little threesome that we were, we had roots there. And Sugar Tonians, as country people do, had a special feel for roots.

So, despite my embarrassment at Bridie's annual self-flagellation in the parade, it was very warm and nice, walking through the crowd that morning; even with the new knowledge that, once, a quarrel had divided them from my parents! A division behind which Rita had died and the Reverend had planned his flight. I smiled at every greeting, even as, without my inviting them, a froth of questions bubbled in my mind.

For instance, if, as Johnathon Cranna seemed to have promised, 'atonement' had been made, what form had it taken? And were Rita's death and the Rev's leaving then completely unrelated events? Or, had Rita and the Reverend maybe gotten the wrong end of a stick and there was no 'terrible deed'? And had the townsfolk, then, so generously forgiven the false accusations that, eventually, out of guilt, Rita did herself in and the Reverend slunk away in shame? (Too weird for reality?) Or – were all these people hypocritical and two-faced, nursing memories of the quarrel and biding their time, to put Bridie and me and Asael off our guards?

Okay, the last one was a bit over-the-top paranoid. But unlike Bridie, I've always prided myself on being open to all possibilities. In her mind there was no more room for the concept of a division between our parents and the town than there was for the possibility of a division between the two of them! Just as there was no possibility that some of us in Sugar Town might not share her deathless admiration for the Reverend's absenting 'mission'. And she had the gall to call me innocent!

On that note, though, as we chatted our way through the crowd, another possibility occurred to me – another one that, even on her least self-effacing day, would never have occurred to Bridie. And that was that these people were surely no longer a part of the Reverend's congregation! They were part of hers! She could work nine days a week, if she wanted, trying to keep him in their minds, but it was her they were committed to loving and supporting! Not him.



The support I was giving that morning at the marshalling area (and giving very willingly, because I didn't want to get dragooned into taking his place) was making certain Asael didn't bolt for home. So when he started dragging me toward the line of the trees, I conscientiously put the brakes on.

'The Gourd! It's The Grand Gourd, Ruthie! C'mon!'

What to say about Sugar Town's Grand Gourd! It's a pumpkin, of course, but it's a pumpkin in the same way that a palace is a house. The annual selection, the 'Chosen One' – and in some years, none are good enough to be chosen – has to be a gob-smacker! Gi-normous! Chopped in half with its guts removed, a true Grand Gourd becomes two kid-sized bathtubs. Knock on one with your fist and the vibration goes straight back up your arm and sets your ribs to thrumming – almost like the pumpkin has knocked on you rather than the other way around.

Kevin says Grand Gourds have to have drawn their nourishment from the dung-heap of the gods – an image that he appreciates more than I do. But if he's right, back in 2008 the gods were doing their business in a remote corner of Snowy Sutton's back cane paddock, because that year an awesome vine climbed out of the earth there, all on its own. When Snowy's boys stumbled across it, they found it curled around a single pumpkin that stood waist high to an eight-year-old and weighed 260 kilos! They rescued it, washed it, polished it and dared the leading citizens to reject it.

'C'mon Bri, quick! They're taking the cover off!'

And who could resist that? 2008's official Grandest Gourd – on the tray of Snow's new ute, about to be unveiled to the public!

'No, As! You know I don't like all that business! All that excitement over a vegetable... just isn't right!'

'C'mon, please? We're gonna see it in the parade anyhow! Let's see it unveiled! Please! See? Ruthie's coming! Please?'

She might have had her way if I hadn't let the crowd catch us up – if she hadn't been determined to erase the morning's quarrel. In short order, we were right up against the ute, scant metres from the veiled monster itself.

Above us, Snowy stood, arms crossed, looking as smug as a man who has the world's last bunyip dozing under his tarp. He gazed benevolently out over our heads, waiting, demanding our stillness. Then (unaccustomed as he was) he coughed out a blather of rubbish about honour and privilege and the amazing perspicacity of his boys who, to my mind, were about at the outer limit of their powers in recognising a pumpkin, they having barely the brains of a gecko between them.

Nonetheless, he splashed about in his delusions for a bit before dribbling to a stop and getting a nice round of 'get-on-with-it applause'. Then, milking it to the last drop, he edged off the tarp, revealing at last the massive lump of a vegetable. The silence was like that sound you hear when you're underwater in a big pool that has no one else in it! I swear, Bridie could have taken her dress off, turned it inside out and put it back on again without anyone noticing. That's how impressive that Grand Gourd was!

A single soft voice finally ventured, 'Jee-zuz!' and Snowy nodded, wiping away a tear. And that set off an avalanche of cheery noise.

Christ, what a whopper!

That's a cracker, Snow!

Shit a brick, mate! Whadja feed that bastard?

Bloody fantastic!

Miss Universe o' pumpkins, Snow! Jennifer bloody Hawkins!

Give us a touch of that mongrel! She can't be real!



Touching The Grand Gourd is another big Sugar Tonian tradition – kind of a home-grown good-luck thing, like stroking a rabbit’s foot. People even put messages and questions on them when they’re on display at the Showground! Someplace in Tibet, they write prayers on papers then float them away on burning kites; in Sugar Town, we stick ’em on our Grand Gourd! Not that anyone expects a reply, of course. If you asked anyone what happens to those notes, they’d shrug you an answer: they dissolve in the rain, fade to nothing in the sun. Who knows? Who cares?

I expect that’s actually what happens to most of them. But I also expect that some survive the long weekend and that those survivors are disposed of discretely by my very good friend, Kevin Truck, who, when the Gourd returns to being just a pumpkin, hauls it away, to salvage what he wants for use in the Harmony Bell Bakery. Maybe he cooks them up in his scones, like fortunes in cookies! I’ve given him the nudge-wink and offered to help chop it up, just to get a squiz at what’s left. But he says, even if anything was still readable, he wouldn’t. He says the whole procedure is meant to move people’s issues from the inside to the outside – not to replant them in someone else’s imagination.

I was disappointed about that, but not enough to stifle the pleasure of mocking.

‘Fancy being so frustrated, or guilt-ridden, you have to whisper your secrets to a pumpkin!’

‘It’s not a pumpkin, Ruthie! It’s a Grand Gourd! Everyone needs a Grand Gourd sometimes; just to keep their lives in perspective!’

‘Not me! My life’s in great perspective, thank you very much!’

‘If you think it is, it probably ain’t.’

‘Ho! You’re pulling my chain, Kev! ’Cause I reckon, next to me, you’re about the most together person I know! And if there’s two of us, logic dictates there must be others, don’t you think?’

He waggled his eyebrows knowingly. ‘Be nice if you were right, Ru! But if you are, I guarantee it’s going to be only folks who



keep their noses out of other people's business. Only way to avoid the rot! Which is why, as far as we two excellent people are concerned, all the Gourd notes blow away on the wind!



Nobody knows how much of what Kev says that even he takes seriously! But there was really no argument about the depth of the Grand Gourd's importance to Sugar Town. Even before Snowy lifted that tarp, the crowd had been positively light-headed – like we were a band of allies approaching the end of a great quest. Bodies bumping and feet shuffling. Sifting the hundred or so of us, none of us strangers to one another, into a back-to-belly bond.

And when the solid green and cream bulk of that Gourd emerged, well... a dozing bunyip wouldn't have been much more fantastic! That's how amazingly unconditionally 'other' that Gourd was! Like you could easily imagine a huge, slow, alien consciousness lurking inside it! Demanding stillness. Then praise. And finally prodding us into a sort of tidal, surging motion which, because we were locked so closely together, had us rocking in weird, unconscious unison, like a huge self-soothing monster. Despite my impulse to mock and Bridie's to mistrust, even we were in it and a little bit part of it, without ever giving our consent to it.



I almost said everyone was in it there but, of course, the one usual culprit, Asael, was not. As is a great participant from the other side of a keyhole, but he's far too personally obsessed to yield to anything else – even on an unconscious level. Consequently, all that communal awe just meant loss of breathing space to him. In response to which, he began to shrink into a smaller and smaller ball, until he was finally nothing but a whimper, squeaking out from between Bridie and me.

That was exactly the hint Bridie needed. She hooked his

pathetic little arms around her from the rear and, pinching my shirt to make sure I was with them, she turned to face the crowd.

Escape was never going to be easy, of course. Not in the long run; not in the short run. In the long run because their tightly-packed closeness meant dozens of people had to yield just a little bit more. In the short run because the first people we hit were Darryl and Dale Sutton, Snowy's two big bull-necked, Grand Gourd-discovering sons, who wouldn't give space to a quadruple amputee, let alone to Bridie!

Darryl, being the older brother and out of school, I knew then, only by the common consensus, which was that he was stupid as a stick. Dale, slightly the quieter of the two, was still at school, three years ahead of me, making him almost seventeen. Big muscle-head; swoon material for girls with super-simple tastes – much too self-important and 'mature' to move aside for my family! I heard Bridie's murmured excuse-me's and Darryl's honking laughter and I knew we were in trouble. Still, following Kev's very wise recommendation, I put my head down. With every intention of avoiding the rot.

Bridie, of course, with Asael snuffling against her back, felt compelled to speak Darryl's name, asking him personally, pointedly, to please let us by. He made a loud 'go for it' response and I peeped around her in time to see him puff himself up, making it necessary for her to scrape her gorgeous curves against him. I'd've put a finger in his face and a few choice opinions in his ear if it'd been me, but Bridie – avoiding the rot was second nature to her – with Asael's volume rising behind her, twisted herself into the too-small corridor he offered.

In the sudden space, I could clearly see the lust gleaming in Darryl's eyes and the paw that he edged out, to wipe across her breast. And that was totally the end of my communal awe. I thought, 'No frickin' way, you dumbass!' and I pressed Asael in the back, adding what little impetus I could to Bridie's momentum. And in the resulting half-a-person's width that

opened up between him and me, I stopped. I stopped and waited for Darryl's squinty little eyes to fall off her and turn to me. I was working on instinct, but I just knew I was going to catch his eyes with a winning smile and crush his dreams with a knee to the groin. He was big, but my legs were long, my knees were bony and I reckoned, if I took him unawares, I could drop him like a lead weight!

Not the smartest plan, I suppose, but Sutton-stupidity still managed to save him. Because even as I saw him turning – even as I bared my teeth at him – smooth as juice, he spun his big arms out and snatched Asa into the air.

'Come on, young McFarlane!' he roared, bouncing him like a stuffed toy. 'Let's see how ye measure up!'



Guys like Darryl always have so much to prove – big man, no fear, do-what-I-want! Yada yada. And guys like As seem always to pay the price! The price this time began with being tossed up onto the ute, into the big hairy hands of Snowy Sutton to share an instant of silent, mutual confusion! Big old farmer – twice terrified kid! At the end of which, both Darryl and Dale dropped down beside them, having scuttled like a pair of apes up over the ute's cab. So no satisfying knee to the groin; only a glancing view of my puny little brother, imprisoned behind a meaty wall of Suttons.

Anyone who's encountered their own Darryls or Dales knows the sensible thing to do when they corner you. You play dead. Or play the clown! Play anything, so long as it isn't their victim! But a roar of applause went up from that carnival-ready crowd and Asael, possibly thinking that the Armageddon he was always watching for had finally come, freaked! His whingey moan had been pinched off when Darryl snatched him, but now a real wail came out of him – 'Bridie-e-e-e!' His arms began to flap and his legs to churn. Through cracks in the Sutton wall, we could see

him, doing his feeble best to batter his way out.

Fear, of course, when fools are at work, is like nuts to monkeys. One unthinkable thing leads to another and I watched helplessly as all three Suttons, probably for no better reason than to keep Asa from hurting himself, grabbed hold of him – arms, legs, the waistband of his shorts. Asael’s howl rose in volume, threading its way out over the crowd which, in turn, increased its own volume; one sound competing with the other! Even Bridie and I joined in, me shouting at Asa to be still – not to fight them – and Bridie shouting at the Suttons to let him go. Nothing could stop it, though. Even as we shouted, the scenario evolved, the Sutton grip turning into a lift, the lift into a swing and the swing into a plopping of Asa on his bum on top of the Grand Gourd!

The Suttons, of course, if challenged, would’ve said, what’s your problem? Bit of a laugh, that’s all! Liven things up! And certainly the sight of Asael, perched like a horribly terrified, bespectacled little gnome-king on our own Grand Gourd, did that!

Ha ha, what a lark!

Looka bloody that!

Ha ha! Take a bow, young Macca! Take a bow!

With only the occasional: Ya scarin’ the poor little bugger, ya mugs!

And the Suttons jiggled about crazily, like the oversized knob-heads that they were. Darryl especially. His grey little eyes jabbing fiercely down at Bridie. Clearly wishing it was her he’d been able to manhandle across the ute’s deck.

I remember thinking, ‘Only an idiot would get within arm’s reach of you, you maniac!’ Only to look around and see Bridie, scrabbling for purchase on the ute, her chin trembling, her long legs bared and her bum folded out toward the crowd!

She looked like a referee who’s blown her whistle only to have

the players offer to jam it down her neck! The look alone should have been enough to tell them they'd well and truly stepped over a line. But some people can't imagine more not being better, and the 'more' that day was to lean their great, round, sunburned faces right in close to Asa's (which would've terrified the crap out of anybody, let alone an already verge-of-hysteria kid!) and to grunt the whole works – Gourd and boy together – up into the air.

Now up to that point, I'd been mostly cringing with embarrassment for As and Bridie and, most of all, for me. But when three men – I don't care how big they are – on the rocking, crowded tray of a ute decide to lift 260 kilos of pumpkin, plus 30-some kilos of hysterical boy, with nothing to hold onto but a slippery curve of polished skin and their steroidal stupidity, that's a cringe of a different sort! Like what fool can't see the catastrophe lurking there? So, while the rest of the crowd hooted with surprised amazement, my embarrassment flapjacked into pure mad. So much so that I yanked Bridie aside and went for those handholds myself!

And that was the instant, between one step and the next – between looking down and stretching up – that something reached out of the air and snagged a hook into Asa's fear.

In a finger-snap, he stopped thrashing! His eyes relaxed and his grimace melted away. His hands drifted to rest in his lap and his lips settled into a firm, almost disdainful little line. He sat up. He looked around with this great 'is that all you've got?' look on his face. It was an Asael that no one in the crowd had ever seen before and, a bit like the Gourd itself, he summoned a blanket of silence, casting it across the whole yard.

It was entirely excellent, if I do say so! Even I stopped, halfway aboard. This was the Asael who, some in the town would soon believe, was capable of communing with the dead! But at the moment, for me, it was the Asael who'd reduced his tormenters to the status of left-over props; trembling under the massive weight

of the Grand Gourd, their demented squirrel grins slipping away. And when he twisted to look calmly into each of their sweating faces – serious as a gun – their eyes took on that bewildered look that cattle get when they find themselves in the race that leads to the abattoir.

A faint hiss escaped from him and his arm floated up over the crowd, with an accusing finger that roved amongst them, targeting individual faces; pausing, lingering, going back, moving on. It was weird enough that people began dropping their eyes and ducking their heads. A couple of throats cleared but between those sounds, the silence was so pure you could've heard a gnat's scratch! And I found myself floating a little inside, wondering how the crazed little obsessive who hid from his dreams in my bed in the middle of so many nights could produce such a seriously spooky aura! Such totally ingenious thinking! 'That's my bro,' I thought! For once, totally cool!

And then I realised. He hadn't produced it at all! The epilepsy had! The epilepsy thing was so new at that stage that, really, only Bridie and I and Doc Dabney knew about it. Even Asael hadn't fully taken it in yet – couldn't be sure – didn't much care what was real and what was a hallucination. And since Asael lying about taking his medication was one more possibility that Bridie seemed intent on being blind to, I was probably the only one in the crowd who guessed he was having a seizure.

Strangely though, even with that – even knowing he was hallucinating – I couldn't help stretching, like everyone else, to see what faces that accusative finger was picking out. From my perch, halfway onto the ute, I could see what he was seeing. But I no sooner began to look than his pointer began to wander; away from faces, way out past the crowd, past the assembled vehicles and beyond the paperbarks at the park's edge. The furthestmost discernible line that you could see was the line where the green of a distant cane paddock feathered up against the hazy blue of surrounding hills. That's where Asael's finger finally stopped.

Toward the mouth of the river. And there was nothing to see there. Not for the rest of us, at any rate!

And then, almost the last thing – second last, really – his lips moved. And a faint little stream of words came out. And I swear there would have been people in the crowd – people he'd pointed at maybe – whose bladders also let a little out! The silence stretched like a balloon blown way, way, way beyond its capacity. And then a small voice in the crowd popped it.

'What'd he say?' it whispered, a question everyone knew was directed at the Suttons, whose neck cords had begun to distend with the effort of holding a load they seemed unable to put down. Their usual vacant glances. Then Snowy grunted out, 'Sump'm 'bout "the place"! Sump'm about whose fault is it!'

And for me, that was the clincher. Everything became as clear as bells! As was pointing down the river toward the mangroves; 'the place' where Rita died! No one figured as highly in Asael's delusions as Rita did. And the 'fault' thing was one of the conversations he most frequently had with her! (Which shows, I guess, how deeply he shared Bridie's psychotic sense of guilt!)

The question and answer cemented everything in place for me but it released the crowd, allowing a little sort of 'Hooley-dooly!' hum to rumble from throat to throat.

'What's he mean?' someone nearby demanded. 'What place? What's he talking about?'

'You're the one he pointed at, mate! You tell us!'

'Me? He did not! 'At was him behind me he was pointin' at!'

'Yeah, so you say! So what's 'at about someone's fault, eh? What's 'at about?'

'How should I know? Was it even us he was talkin' to, d'ye think?'

'No one else here, is there? Lookit him! The kid's makin' the

hairs on me neck stand up!’

‘Someone’s “fault”! Man! On’y thing I can think of is...’

‘Don’t!’

I’d looked around for the speakers and found them, just as the last one cast a warning glance in Bridie’s and my direction.

When I looked back, the Suttons had finally managed to ground the Gourd and were skooching back from it as far as the ute’s tray allowed. Snowy reached each of his sons a tap on the back of the dome and grizzled, ‘Now look what you’ve done, you pair o’ knot-heads!’

I suppose there was a vague chance that I might have just said to everyone, ‘It’s okay; it’s a seizure.’ But I didn’t care to, and I know now the re-awakening of the quarrel between Sugar Town and my family had begun somewhere in those last minutes, with the snatching of my brother and the suggestion of a reason for guilt in the crowd. It wasn’t and wouldn’t be enough to be part of them. Not until someone could explain to me that ancient quarrel and why all the adults in my family were dead or gone or mentally crippled. Until then I and Asael at least – because he was with me – would not be part of them again.

While I was thinking this, a mumble of speculation was shooting through the crowd, all the way to the outer edge and back again, like a Mexican wave, and when I looked to see why, the last, odd and totally inexplicable happening had set itself in motion. A sprinkle of green was floating down in a narrow, luminous column, onto Asa’s shoulders. The Suttons looked up; I looked up; we all looked up. Above us, in the whole, still vastness of the Poinciana tree, a single little branch was trembling so hard that handfuls of its tiny leaves were losing their grip. Just as Asael had! Maybe just as all we McFarlanes had at one time or another.

I looked back into the crowd and maybe it was my imagination, but spaces seemed suddenly to have opened up. That sense of their having been singled out for wonders, of being somehow



especially deserving, was not there any more. In less than a week, in fact, Sugar Town would have its Night of Mayhem, a vigilante camp would be established in the Showground, Asael would no longer be my brother and Bridie's memory would be healed in the most awful of ways. Also, for better or worse, the ghosts and shadows that clustered around me and my family would be gone.



In the meantime, however, things had to proceed by the thousand little steps that everything takes. First up, Asael still sat, gazing serenely into his hallucination. So far, we'd seen seizures lasting anywhere from five seconds to five minutes and this one was shaping up to be a long one. Someone had to fetch him. Bridie pushed at me gently and I went the rest of the way onto the ute; more resentful than relieved; feeling conspicuous beyond belief; not sure how I was going to move him; wishing I could will us to 'out there', on the horizon where he was looking, instead of being the uncomfortable centre of attention in the marshalling yard.

So what followed, though it was an extension of Sutton-boof-headedness, was partly my fault. I should have taken a breath. I should have focused on avoiding the rot. Instead, I was focused on the sudden isolation that I felt. You see? You can't lose concentration. Especially when there are people around who haven't had their turn at being a craphead. Snowy was finished; he'd taken to mumbling to people in the crowd. And Darryl was finished, reduced to licking his fat old wet lips in Bridie's direction. They paid me no mind. But Dale, following some spark of unreason in his dark little recesses, as I edged past him, grabbed onto me like Squid-man and aimed a slathery old square-toothed kiss at my face!

I think now, it was kind of kindly intended, if you know what I mean. But seriously! Do any real cranial procedures at all go on in a male's head? Like anything short of an outright, public apology can make up for being a random loser who tosses around

members of someone's family? My mental reaction then was: you big repugnant dozer! On a warm spring day with the air full of ice cream butterflies, I'd still have to be unconscious before someone like you could get away with touching me!

My physical reaction was to pound my little fist square onto his big flat nose. It was a lucky punch, I admit; a sucker punch. And if it'd caught him anywhere else he'd've laughed it off, him being the size of a small elephant and all. But the connection was good and solid enough to bring tears to his eyes. Which, when I saw them, made me smirk right out loud, fair in his face. Which he responded to by slamming his palms into my shoulders, knocking me arse over teakettle off the tray of the ute.

Now, a person can be seriously damaged, toppling off the tray of a ute! Break some bone that only Asa or Doc Dabney'd know the name of! Fortunately for me, though, in retrospect at least, I had the luxury of one particular pair of arms that reached out to catch me.

Gratitude, though, I'm ashamed to say, didn't immediately occur to me. Astonishment did! Followed instantly by madder-than-Hell! I don't know who in my family the 'berserker gene' comes from – maybe Grandma Gracie – but I seem to have it in spades. I lashed out with everything I had – feet and arms flailing in every which direction. Just as Asa's had done a few minutes earlier, only much more so. I'd like to say that every strike was aimed at big gorpy-face Dale Sutton, still up on the ute, looking down on me. But I suspect he was just one in a whole row of mostly innocent people! My parents, my sister, my brother! Even the unknown person who was holding me! Even myself! Why not just break something and be done with it?

But give them their due, those arms hung on for the half minute or so it took for the red to begin to clear from my head. Then I saw that Bridie was there, trying to catch my arms, and Asa was hopping from foot to foot on the tray of the ute beside Dale, who was looking shame-faced and teary, clutching his nose.

So I took control. Willing myself to be calm. Willing myself to breathe. Inhale – exhale. Let it flow away. Background sounds started filtering through.

The parade marshal signalling the need to get on: ‘Wrap it up, Snowy! Time to get that bloody pumpkin out in the street! C’mon, everybody! Chop chop!’

Snowy, ripping strips off Dale – not for knocking me for a loop, but for distracting attention from the Grand Gourd!

Someone behind me, saying my name in my ear. I twisted to see – Johnathon Cranna!

He put my feet carefully on the ground, as if I was a pistol with a hair-trigger, which I guess I was, and I stood there in front of him, shuddering with barely suppressed teenaged stupidity. On any other day, I’d surely have gone back for another shot at Dale on my own behalf. But Bridie and Asa were both clearly distraught! And Johnathon Cranna was there, saying nothing; nothing with his voice and something inscrutable with his gorgeous, knowing eyes.

As I’ve said, Johnathon wasn’t someone I’d ever had a conversation with. But his reputation alone made him pretty imposing and helpless, stupid, childish anger was not what I wanted him to see in me. So I decided that, for the moment, Dale would have to keep! Time favours the patient.

I pulled in that healing breath.

‘Thank you, Mister Cranna. Sorry if I hurt you.’

He shook his head slightly and continued a long, thoughtful look at me – like he was searching for a familiar freckle. I wasn’t sure what effect he was hoping for, but if he was waiting for me to go all weepy or little-girlish, his luck was just as bad as everyone else’s. This was not the day and I was never that girl.

Bridie, by this time, had switched her fussing to Asa, who’d been reduced again to snivelling, so it was kind of a very private

moment between Johnathon and me. Another deep breath. I ran the fingers of both hands through my hair, tossing it back off my face in my best ‘I’m not to be messed with’ sort of gesture, which I only wish would come off as well in real life as it does in the movies. Then I forced myself to meet his eyes. Which, I was gratified to see, widened a little in surprise.

‘I’m all right,’ I said, as flatly as I could, probably as much for my benefit as for his. ‘Really! I’m fine.’

‘Yes,’ he said and, after a long pause, added, ‘I can see that you are!’

Not many words but they came with the start of a really beautiful smile. I glanced around. Dale Sutton was leaning against the ute, sniffing through his damaged nose and staring grimly at us, like the big gormless idiot that he was. I flicked my hair and turned back to Johnathon, giving him what I thought was a look that Bridie might have used to slay men if she’d had any interest in them at all.

‘You can see that I’m what?’

He put his hands in his pockets and leaned a fraction toward me.

‘That you’re a person to be reckoned with, Ruthie McFarlane! Obviously!’

So! That was the whole of the first conversation I ever had with Johnathon Cranna. And I was someone to be reckoned with! Not the scrawny thirteen-year-old girl who lived in my mirror, but someone to be reckoned with! I would have liked to be conversationally reckoned with a bit more by him but the moment was stifled when Asael, who’d heard more than I realised, whined in his quiet little half-defensive way, ‘Don’t call her Ruthie. Call her Genuflecta!’

Then he ducked back behind Bridie’s skirts. ‘I’m just saying!’ he squeaked.

And immediately following that, Snowy jumped down from the ute and killed the moment dead.

‘So! Y’all right, girl?’

He put his big paw under my chin to force my head up. If I’d been a dog, I expect he would have yanked my ears.

‘She’s fine,’ Bridie said breathlessly. ‘Sorry, Snowy! Sorry! I don’t know what got into her! How about Dale? Is he...’

‘Yeah, yeah! Bloody big boof-head! Got nothin’ but girls on his mind, that’s ’is problem! Tol’ ’im to leave the kids alone, eh! Pick someone his own age, know what I mean?’ And he turned to bellow it again over his shoulder: ‘She’s a kid, ye bloody boof-head!’

When I looked back to Johnathon, his eyes had skittered over and parked themselves on Bridie. The two of them nodded briefly at one another, like wary old acquaintances (though I doubted she’d ever said even as much to him as I had just said).

Johnathon made the smallest mock bow. ‘The Reverend’s daughters!’ he said. ‘Always a pleasure.’ And he turned away into the rapidly thinning crowd.

I watched him go. We all watched him go. I fully expected him to glance back – at least at Bridie. Almost everyone has a second look at Bridie. But he didn’t. Not even when Snowy called out, ‘Hey, Johnno! Good luck with the drop, mate! Watch out for them fallin’ comets!’

Johnathon raised an open hand, even as he melted into the crowd which was, itself, melting into a couple of dozen small, busy groups. The irony of things: before noon, he’d be unconscious in my arms.

For the moment, though, no sooner was he out of range than Snowy turned a snarling face on me.

‘And, by the by,’ he growled. ‘Ye got off lightly this time, girl! Might not be no Johnathon Cranna aroun’ t’save yer bacon

next time ye decide to tease them boys, know what I mean?’ He thrust his chin and a finger in my direction. ‘Don’ say you wasn’t warned!’

And muttering swear words under his breath, he stomped away. At the front of the ute, Dale and Darryl were shaking out a banner that said ‘Grand Gourd 2008’. And in small print below, ‘God bless Sugar Town’. I swallowed hard and looked back to the spot Johnathon had filled. ‘The good, the bad and the ugly,’ I thought. What else is there?



I spent the next fifteen minutes sitting under a tree, totting up the various weirdnesses that a day can bring. Apparently on some days, a space thing can fall out of the sky, a lost letter can be found, your brother can be terrorised, you can have your first kiss, (and it can be a slobbery public embarrassment!) and you can get in a hopeless fight that somehow turns out to be your fault! All before lunch! Oh, and you can be publically humiliated in front of the town’s first citizen! Surely there couldn’t be more?

Ordinarily, I might have tried to talk some of it through with Bridie, but she, of course, had her own stresses to deal with. Once she was certain As hadn’t been permanently scarred by the Gourd ordeal, she’d become completely engrossed in pacing up and down and straightening her dress at every second step. I even considered having a word with Asael, just to take my mind off things. I would have liked to know, for instance, what a hallucination felt like. But, aside from the fact that talking to him was an act of desperation in itself, he was as distracted as Bridie – snivelling on about the Suttons and the unfairness of how they’d treated him.

‘It wasn’t your fault, Ruthie! They made me go up there, didn’t they? They shouldn’t’ve, should they?’

‘No, they shouldn’t, Asael! But they did! Now, let’s just drop it, okay?’

‘Okay. But Ruthie?’

‘And don’t call me Ruthie. Call me... Perplexia.’

‘Okay.’ He was quiet for a bit, then, ‘Perplexia?’

‘What?’

‘I tried not to be frightened. Like you said – like my name means. But I wasn’t as brave as you. I have to work on that, don’t I? And Perplexia?’

‘What?’

‘I’m okay for the motorcycle!’

He was a sweet kid, in some ways. Probably I should have made more fuss about the seizure. But sweet or not, I didn’t want to have to take his place in the parade. And I didn’t want to miss out on my private time with Kevin either. Happily, I didn’t have to worry about it for long because, at that very moment, Kevin’s lightly decorated old rattler of a Triumph, sidecar attached, came choofing into the park.

‘Am I late?’ he shouted as the engine spluttered into silence.

And even as he spoke, the parade marshal began to bellow: ‘Five minutes, people! Let’s get them girls in place!’

Chaos renewed itself instantly, sparking us all out of thought and into action.



The ‘girls’ were the Harvest Festival Queen entrants, all identifiable by the sponsors’ banners they wore across their chests – Miss Prince of Wales; Miss Combined Sugar Mills Association; Miss Tepperman’s Hardware Services; Miss Jeppeson’s Accountants (Honest to the Last Dollar). Bridie’s banner, which was as old as her parade dress, said ‘Miss Freedom House Ministries’ – the same as the sign Kevin had rigged up on the Triumph.

No offence to Kevin but, as a float, the Triumph was never going to be a winner. While the other girls would be perched up high, on the bonnets of antique cars, on the backs of trucks, on hay bales, in crepe and balloon castles – elevated for maximum, eye-catching exposure – Bridie was going to be tucked down, almost out of sight, in a motorcycle's sidecar. Why? Two reasons!

One was that she didn't really care to be seen as a serious contender for the title, the other girls all being sixteen and seventeen – perkiness personified – while she was an ancient twenty-four-year-old. But more importantly, for the first time, she'd been unable to gain support for a proper, independent float. Every year since he'd left, Bridie'd had a float to help raise money and awareness for the Rev's New Guinea ministry. But that year, for the first time, nobody'd had any 'appropriate' vehicle to spare. Maybe quite genuinely, for all I knew! But Kev's motorbike was her last option.



Watching her fold her long legs into that cramped little sidecar was painful. I had to look away. I couldn't see why she didn't just drive the bike herself; sit up tall and rev the bejabbers out of it all the way up Main Street! At least people who didn't care about the ministry would be reminded again of what a humongously beautiful woman she was! Maybe they'd cough up some dollars on that account!

I couldn't comment though. She'd tried to draft me into doing the driving and I'd flat-out refused. The bike had sorely tempted me but there was no thrill in the world, no cause in the world that could overcome my refusal to be put out there on display. Asa'd tried refusing too but, though he might know the proper names of all the bones, the concept of 'backbone' escaped him entirely. Especially when it came to standing up to Bridie. So he and Kevin had tootled up and down the driveway a hundred times and he had memorised what he needed to know: start, first gear and stop.



The two of them were going through it one last time while she inched herself lower and lower into the sidecar and I looked away, thinking how sad and pathetic it was. The banner that Kevin had rigged up over Asael's head read:

FREEDOM HOUSE MINISTRIES

*'Rev' Jacob McFarlane, Working for Christ in PNG.*

'Working for Christ.' It was an old sign and I still blame it for my picture of Christ, in a hard hat and sweaty t-shirt. The logo on the shirt says: 'Bloody hell, McFarlane! How're ya gonna get the job done if you're off nancying about in the jungle?' (The 'job' being looking out for us kids!)

Hardly a flattering take on my father or on Christ but, as I'd said to Bridie, get one of them to come and set me right, why don't you! We'd argued the whole 'why isn't he here?' thing through so many times that it just didn't matter any more.

'He is what God's made him,' she would say primly, 'and does what God requires. Shall the clay say to him that fashions it, what makest thou? No, of course not!'

She had stock answers like that for most things. Another one was that the Reverend would be with us if he was needed, but he wasn't needed because she was plenty capable enough to care for the three of us. (Probably true at 24, but she was sixteen when he left! Did she acknowledge that? Hardly! Or that she was only eighteen when Bessie left? Not likely! And that, from then on, she was officially, totally responsible for a family that wasn't of her making? I don't think so!)

Another favourite fallback was that whatever the cost to her or to As and me, the cost to the Reverend must have been so much greater.

'To lose part of his family to evil (Gramma Gracie's murder and Rita's suicide) and the rest (her, me and Asael) through the call of God! How could anyone presume to criticise?'

See? I knew her answers as well as she did; so well I could, and often did, fight with her even when she wasn't around! That's because I've got a ferocious memory, which various smart-arse people have told me fits my temperament exactly. For example, I can quote you this entire letter; partly, of course, because it lived on the fridge door for years, so it was in my face every time I reached for an apple. But more so because I, even if Bridie didn't, recognised it as the sly one that set up his expectations for Bridie.

*My dearest children,*

*I begin this letter as a project of faith, knowing that it will, in time, reach you. But when or how, I cannot say. The reason is that I have, at long last, found the courage to leave the general mission at Daru and to direct myself into a more acute and personal ministry. I know you will be happy for me when I tell you that I am now resident amongst, and ministering to, a tribal people deep in the mountains of the Western Province. In the atlas, run your finger up the Fly River and beyond, into the fathomless reaches of the Victor Emanuel Range. There am I.*

*The people in my valley – my people – the Gebusi, they are called – have only the barest interest in western civilisation. That is to say that white people do occasionally pass through – prospecting, surveying, seeking particular stands of timber – even just adventuring. And members of the tribe do, in turn, sometimes travel down the river to Kiunga, where the barge stops. But it can only be done by dugout canoe and on foot so is an arduous task. (As any path worth travelling is bound to be!) I can only promise you that, though the remoteness of these valleys is great, so too is the need of their inhabitants for salvation.*

*I have arranged for your letters and care packages to be forwarded to Wasua and, from there, placed on one of the barges carrying goods to Kiunga. There they will be held until such time as either native or foreign travellers pass through in this direction.*

*I am confident that nothing will linger there for overly long. For my own part, I intend to make my letters of a continuous nature – writing as and when I can until opportunities arise for me to put them into motion in your direction. I am determined to be as thorough and detailed as possible – especially as I know you put them to good use in your fund-raising efforts for the ministry.*

All rife with self-sacrifice and grand ambitions in Bridie's eyes but, to me, there were two key phrases: 'care packages' and 'fund-raising efforts'. About as subtle as a jab with a Gebusi arrow. But they worked on her. They were why she put herself on display in the parade every year – to prod Sugar Tonians into remembering him generously, as she insisted she did and as I utterly refused to do.



'Sure you're all right, Ruthie?' Bridie asked me, as she settled into the sidecar. And to Kevin she added, 'She got in a fight with Dale Sutton!'

'It wasn't a fight! He... took liberties with me! So I clocked him and he pushed me over. End of!'

Kevin blinked at me curiously, but was far too sensible to offer an opinion.

The plan for the morning was that, once the parade got moving, Kevin and I would cut through the park and watch the whole kaboodle pass from somewhere nearer The Showgrounds. Then we could meet up with Bridie and Asa later at her donations table. That might sound like I was being fobbed off on Kevin but, generally speaking, I think I'm a positive influence on him. And vice versa. We've a mutual support thing going on.

Nonetheless, as I looked around at the big trucks and the rumbling tractors and the sheer, joyous expectation on everyone's faces... and I saw Asael's hand trembling on the motorcycle's clutch and Bridie fretting over her pathetic years-

old ‘Miss Freedom House Ministries’ banner, and I thought of the questions I’d sorted to get Kevin to help me fret about a past that was so far gone it couldn’t possibly impact on anyone... I couldn’t help but be struck by what a strange sad little group of misfits we must seem to him.

Until that week, I’d never really wondered why he was so there for us. Almost like he was one of us! He was, as I’ve said, the only black man living in Sugar Town which, I suppose, suggested a kind of alone-ness – maybe a sort of parallel? Not that he ever seemed lonely! In fact, he was the most entirely and consistently jubilant, in-love-with-life person you’d want to meet! Which I suppose I’d used as an excuse for never learning anything at all about his family! Where were they? Why weren’t they here? Why wasn’t he with them? I’d never asked because he seemed so complete on his own. Which, now that I think of it, was exactly the un-parallel of us McFarlanes!

Anyhow, as the parade’s last parts moved into place, I was busy formulating questions for him, specifically about the ‘terrible deed’ referenced in the Reverend’s letter and the relationship that had existed between my parents toward the end. And a provocative thought came into my mind. What if there were more letters? What if the letter Bridie’s dream had resurrected was one of lots that she’d kept from me? And I thought, if there’s one that presents a question, why wouldn’t there be another that reveals an answer?

And so, with all the confidence of that thought and Bridie’s same-day promise that there’d be nothing but the truth between us, I smiled and nodded encouragement at Asael’s nervous glance. I gave them the ‘thumbs up’ when the vehicle ahead began to move and I applauded when the band began marching in the saints. I clapped my hands with excitement when Bridie patted his shoulder and shouted, ‘Let’s go, Asa!’ And I began to wave goodbye even before his trembling fingers eased off the clutch. And I lied to Kevin.

‘I’ve forgotten something, Kev! I just need ten minutes, okay? I’ll catch you up in the street. Or at the Showground. In the display sheds. In the Cakes section. Half an hour – an hour, tops! Okay?’

‘Want me to come with you? You need help?’

‘No, no, I’m good, thanks. Really! You go! Keep an eye on them. Make sure Asa doesn’t run up anyone’s backside!’

He laughed and went. He’s a trusting soul, is Kev, and one who’d do anything for you. Even give you space, if that’s what you seem to need.



Bridie never hid the memory box – the Brooks Brothers Sandals box. She just put it out of sight (and thereby out of mind, I suspect). So it was easy to find.

That might have been the first time that I’d gone through it on my own and I remember being struck by how little it actually contained! Some ancient newspaper clippings, a dozen or so loose letters and, at the bottom, a small bundle bound with a perishing rubber band. Virtually everything the Reverend did (or didn’t do) was a sore point with me, but he’d been gone for eight years! Surely there were more letters than this! I spent ten minutes or more going through the backs of closets and drawers, coming up empty-handed and deciding to give it a better look another day.

A quick survey of the letters in the box told me that the loose ones were all familiar, but the bundled ones were not. Yet the franking on the stamps said 2000 and 2001 – the same era as the fridge letter describing his ‘Gebusi people’!

‘Okay!’ I thought to myself. ‘Gotta start somewhere!’ And I put the whole small bundle into my backpack (it being the only place that was safe from Asael’s marauding). Then I put the memory box away and headed back into Main Street.



I'd spent more time than I intended. Either that or the parade had sped to a premature finish because the street was already deserted. There was an ankle-deep litter of paper and streamers and soft drink cans and splattered food bits, all being turned over by stray dogs, but no people at all. I knew they'd be milling around the parking lot in front of the Showground, waiting their turns to get in, so I took my time, looking in windows, dawdling in the crosswalk, picturing the people who'd normally be there – imagining my father scowling his way amongst them.

The air was full of pockets, that day, some bearing the warm closeness of coming summer, others the cool leftover sweetness of departing spring. Thunderstorms would come in a few weeks and drive the dogs howling in circles. I looked up. And in a corner of the sky, I caught a glimpse of a little red dot, moving way up against the blue – Johnathon Cranna and his Tiger Moth!

I wasn't surprised. They were a familiar sight in the skies over Sugar Town, and weren't an uncommon sight in advertising spreads on the pages of local and state newspapers. Promotional stunts were one of Johnathon's gifts to Sugar Town – his way of keeping us from falling off the map. The best stunt, though, was reserved for us alone – the Harvest Festival lolly drop!

When I spied that little spot of colour at the top of the sky, I knew that, for the moment, he had to be sightseeing. The drop, after all, couldn't happen until the crowds had had time to file into the grounds and that couldn't happen until the Grand Gourd was in place on its pedestal, at the gate. And anyway, he was way too high to be thinking of the lolly drop. I tried to imagine lying on the wind like a lazy hawk, looking down on Sugar Town. A small stony island in a green sea. With a Ferris wheel and a loop of colourful tents at one end, and a parade piling up like river-wash against the big green pea of the Grand Gourd.

There's a poem about a guy who doesn't know what turning

to take next in his life. He looks to the sky and wishes he was a bird, 'to whom such thoughts must seem absurd'. That was me, thinking that Johnathon Cranna, in his Tiger Moth, must be the free-est person in the world! No walls, no restrictions, no ties. Nothing to hold him down or in or out. If I was that free, I imagined, I'd take Bridie up and away from all her cares and responsibilities and Asa away from his strange visions and me... back in time, maybe. Back to a fuller family time.



As I watched, the Moth dipped and fell, out past the river and out of sight. I shifted my track into the middle of the empty street and walked slower, scanning between buildings for a glimpse of it. To my surprise, though, it reappeared dead ahead of me, standing on the point of one wing as though it had just spun around the corner out of Mill Street. It wavered briefly, steadied itself and, like a hound on a scent, began a run straight up Main Street. So low that it made the wires sing!

Curious to think I was watching the second-to-last flight that the Moth would ever make.

They passed directly over me, wagging their wings and I instinctively raised my hand to wave. Then they tilted lazily away and I zig-zagged on, working to keep them in view. At one point, they pulled back into a heart-stoppingly vertical climb and I drifted to a standstill, waiting for the long, beautiful arc of their fall. I waited and waited while they continued impossibly on, straight up, as though intent on punching through the blue. In the silence at my end of the street, I could hear the tiny buzz of the engine. I could hear when it started to cough and sputter as Johnathon held it there, clawing and straining through the thinning air. Until finally it gave a popping noise and died!

I shaded my eyes and squinted as, for what seemed an age, the Tiger Moth hung, way up in the middle of the sky! Connected to nothing at all! Inside it, in the ringing silence a kilometre up in

the air, Johnathon was sitting, staring out into space! What could possibly be going through his mind, I wondered? Disappointment that he couldn't keep going? Satisfaction, that he'd gone that far? Was he smiling? Talking to himself or to the Moth? Eating a sandwich? What? What kind of a man was he?

Whatever kind he was, of course, the moment was only a moment. The Moth began to slide tailwards, then toppled over onto its back. So no long beautiful arc! It fluttered like a leaf, and then spiked into the dizzy, frenzied spin of a wounded goose. Eventually, of course, the engine hiccupped into life and the plane became a sort of Earth-Thing once again, skimming the tops of the cane. I wished there was someone else with me, to share my wonder, but there wasn't. I was the only one there.