

river's edge
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TITLE PAGE

Title of thesis : 'River's Edge' (a young adult novel)
An investigation of youth suicide and its relationship to
the struggle for the meaning of human existence.

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ABSTRACT

The high incidence of violent suicides by young males is well documented. But why does a young man choose death? Why does he choose darkness over light?

My thesis investigates by way of a novel, the problem of youth suicide and its relation to the meaning of human existence.

There were two subsidiary aims of the thesis. First, to establish an intimate narrative tone. Second, to explore the technique of 'magic realism' which David Lodge defines as 'when marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative.'

Due to the method of analysis and the interactive nature of a novel, conclusions were not cut and dried, as my Afterword suggests. Answers were discovered creatively, not clinically or empirically. Nevertheless, the important role of parents, the healing nature of story, the need to seek one's spirituality, the ability to express one's own feelings and to have and show compassion to others - all emerged as the main answers to the problem of youth suicide and its relationship to the meaning of human existence.

Who knoweth if to die
Be but to live.....
And that called life
by mortals
Be but death?

Euripides.

A week ago Lou had been alive. Alive and kicking. Heart beating, brain ticking, lungs pumping, all organs perfectly OK. Everything fitting into everything else, like the rhythmic swing of Max's body paddling, the blade of the paddle reaching out and pulling through the water, moving the craft through the mist and the glassy eddies.

Lou's parents had chosen a small chapel in St.Kilda, miles from anywhere. Well, miles away from his home and from his friends, which is probably why they chose it. Max's dad drove him to the chapel to see Lou's body laid out, because he thought it would help. At that stage, Max wasn't sure what would or wouldn't help, so he went along with the idea.

He sat down next to the coffin and there Lou was. He didn't appear to be sleeping. He appeared to be dead. His longish face shone like mother of pearl through the make-up. He had a suit on. A suit!?! Max had certainly never seen Lou in a suit. Must have been his poor mum's idea. This was her great chance to create her dream son, all done without any possibility of an argument.

Max reached out and touched Lou's forehead, touched the ring with his graffiti tag engraved on the silver band. The fingers looked like creamy plastic, reminding Max of the little army men scattered over Woody's bedroom floor. To the touch, Lou's skin was like lukewarm clay. Not clammy, not icy; just a place where warmth used to be.

In the silently echoing chapel, the outside light refracted through stained glass windows. Stone pillars sat smugly on either side of the aisle. Straight rows of empty pews on finely polished boards. And except for a faint smell of incense and old candle wax, the chapel smelt cold.

Max began to talk to his dead friend. He chatted away for some time before he accepted that Lou was not there. His body was just a husk. What his spirit had occupied for a while. For Death was more than no pulse or the lack of a brain clacking away inside. It was a lack of spirit. Max saw that not a skerrick of Lou remained there in that shiny mahogany box.

For Max at that moment, the only remaining thing was memories.

Max grabbed his canvas satchel and headed out the door. As he left, he called back over his shoulder, ' Won't be long. Just going out for a walk. Back in an hour or so.'

The night was black as the ace of spades. Wind was rushing and rattling up from the river, dressing the night in a dark velvet cloak. Max walked quicker than he felt like walking, with the wind at his back buffeting the bag full of cans. Leaves had begun to gather in the deep gutters lining the rough bitumen street. Rodents and other small animals scurried in their makeshift tunnels of rotting leaves.

'Eat up boys. Better get big and strong before one of your own mob eats you.'

He threw a rock at the base of a fat old plane tree, making a ringtail leap in the air, claw the trunk and race up the tree into green darkness.

Max often wondered what his father thought he did on these late night roamings. Knock over service stations? Steal women's knickers off clotheslines? Meet girls and roll with them in the mountains of leaves, down there on the chilly banks of the river? He thought Dave probably knew. It wasn't too difficult to guess when the bottom of his wardrobe looked like an ad for Berger paints.

'Funny. He never says anything about it. Never asks one question. Don't think he even approves....well, I know he doesn't. Heard him one day, with a mate.'

Of course, Dave did know but he didn't think about it much. If Max came home too late, then he'd say something. But usually the telly was on and there was little talk at that hour.

Fathers and sons. Those two were like dancers approaching each other, sliding out onto a polished yellow dance floor, gliding inexorably to a swirling pas de deux, then, a fraction, a sliver of time before they were to touch, twisting their bodies sideways past each other, leaving behind the scent of lost chances.

Max turned off the main road and walked towards the railway line. Up the track the crossing bells were clanging in the night. He stood at the pedestrian crossing, hands resting on the white railings and felt the rumble of the train in the earth as it gathered speed out of the station, heading for the bridge over the creek. A bright light picked up the steel rails stretching out in front of it.

Before he was aware of it the train was upon Max, throwing its light and thunder into the night. His face striped by the light of the carriages, the smell of electricity and dust in the air. His eyes transfixed by the flashing wheels spinning along the line.

And then, there was only the gusting wind and the scraping of a loose sheet of corrugated iron.

He watched the trailing light of the last carriage and looked across the tracks to the vast cement wall that ran next to the line. Three-dimensional slabs of paint covered most of the surface. Murals of wonderment on canvases of stone and mortar. Pieces of graffiti.

Blue faces with eyes like blowflies stared vacantly. Streaks of aqua ran down to a flared and menacing nose. Small grey gremlins sat on shoulders, whispering into bulbous ears. Orange flames licked down and around until they ended in jumbled words painted in yellow and violet.

At the end of this urban gallery was a half finished piece - black and red snakes with thick white paint daubed along their bodies, heads reared back, ready to strike into the midst of angled words with hidden meanings. Along the bottom ran the Big Dipper emerging from a gaping mouth belonging, more or less, to a decaying head.

Max picked his way through the onion grass and the scratching stems of dying scotch thistles, till he reached the spot where he and Lou had been standing a short time ago, a long time ago.

'This cost us eighty bucks, mate. Thought the least I could do was finish it. Make it the masterpiece we wanted it to be.'

He started with purple - royal purple, so dark it melted to black. A black that stood up and hit you in the face. Layers of paint sprayed up against the wall, the spray moving sweetly and quickly, forming shapes, letting loose clouds of colour with the purple letter of the piece submerged in swathes of green and blue.

Max stopped to look. Stopped to listen. It paid to keep an eye out. This end of the wall was next to a broken down dead end street, packed with grimy Victorian single terrace cottages and square, cheap and solid factory buildings, all bathed in a flickering neon street light.

He looked up at his work. 'Well Lou, this piece is no throw-up, no quick tag on a window.' Max stood there next to the

line, absent-mindedly shaking his can, the noise of the marble rattling off the factory wall. He zipped up his padded flannel jacket.

'Just a bit more to do.'

He began again, feeling confident with the can in his hand, the warmth of it heating the metal. On the left of the painting was a sloping 'U', its tips disappearing in huge fields of green. As he painted, the 'U' started to seem like Lou smiling. Smiling? That would have been rare. Lou smiling was like sightings of the Loch Ness monster or escaped black panthers roaming the mountains. Lou had a sense of humour, even told jokes, but his internal workings hardly ever reached the surface.

But Max had seen Lou smile. Because Lou smiled when he was painting. When he was a writer with many cans of colour, Lou would beam.

The spray cans needed to be shaken every few seconds now and Max was wondering how long he'd been out. That was the beauty of being a writer. Your concentration was so focussed that every part of you, thoughts included, fitted together like a landscape. And time didn't matter.

'We're spray can warriors, Lou. Spray can writers - one of the best. People are going to marvel at this. Trundling to work on the train, feeling grey, mouths to feed, wives and husbands to hate and there, one minute from the station, a great fucking masterpiece.'

Max heard his last words shouting somewhere in his head, echoing down the ratty little street.

'Keep it down ya fool. Somebody will ring the cops and then we'll be up shit creek. We'll be caught. You'll be caught. Do you want to be caught, Max? Well, do you?

He felt something touch his face. A lukewarm breeze coming up out of the gully. When the wind stopped for a moment he could hear the faint trickling of the creek under the bridge.

He stared at Lou's name on the wall and wondered if he should write RIP. What did that mean anyway? Ripped? Ripped off? Rotting....rotting in purgatory? Half way between heaven and hell? And if heaven was 'up' and hell was 'down there' did that make earth purgatory? Were we in a half way house and Lou somewhere else?

He tossed a can into a bush. 'Geez, Lou. We're not writers no more. Not writers together anyway. This is the last one we can really call ours - our piece.'

He moved back to his handiwork, touching up the top edge of his dead friend's name. The purple letters were buried in a mass of colours that intermittently sprang to life as the jittering streetlight moved rapidly between light and dark. Purple pulsed in the night like a beating heart as Max tried to find the outline. He upended an empty tin drum, upended it

and climbed onto the makeshift platform, ready to place the final touches to the piece.

Holding his can aloft, he was Michaelangelo in an urban Sistine Chapel. The colours surrounding and covering Lou's name receded and purple oozed out towards him, looping and rolling like a wave waiting to be caught. He floated, feeling the swell blossoming, gathering him in the power of its foaming curling lip, taking him to the point where it was no longer an option to drop off the back into the throbbing sea behind.

The wave bent its body and the writer was away, sliding into the life and smoothness of its journey. Edging forward, he moved in front of the tunneling wall, reaching out his left hand for balance, skimming his fingers along the ever-encroaching roar of water. The purple spray from the wave enveloped him, the letters welcoming the nourishment that fed them. They sang to him like a siren, moving to the lilt of some timeless rhythm.

Max sprayed. He was possessed, floating and swirling in front of the wall. On the barrelling wave he swept the can over and into Lou's name. In the depth of that bleak night Lou's eyes stared out at his mate on the wave, a melancholy gaze asking for nothing but to be complete.

'I was your friend, Lou. I was your mate. You're supposed to talk to y' mates. You know - talk to them. Not pretend that

everything's OK - she'll be jake mate. Why the hell.....
What the hell were you doing?! Not saying nothing. Did you say anything?? Did you say something I missed? I know you had worries - maybe even big worries but not so bad that you had to walk away from us and leave a bloody gaping hole in our life. My life's got a great fucking hole Lou. I'm down here spraying like a bastard on a night that looks like a banshee and you're-not-here! I know you're looking at me mate and maybe from where you are, I'm freaking out about nothing. But I don't just want your eyes, mate. I want you. Not a place where you used to be.'

In the belly of the wave Max didn't hear the crunch of the car rolling down the tiny street. Tunnels of light searched their way in the darkness. Criss-crossing beams tried to find their quarry.

Then the wave melted away and Max found himself lying in a ditch of scotch thistles. He could hear the mutter of two railway cops, debating whether they could be bothered walking up the tracks. He closed his mouth in an attempt to silence the noise of his pounding blood. Raising himself on his elbows, he could just make out the two men in suits, flicking their torch lights along the wall.

The cops began to walk to where Max was hiding. At the same time the crossing bells began to clang. He could feel the

rumble of the coming train in his body and he prayed that the cops would stop walking towards his lair.

The train pulled out of the station, past the bells and the red flashing lights. Distracted by noise and light, the cops switched off their torches. Max saw his chance. Crouching low, he bounded across the track in front of the train. The driver blared his horn as he saw a black shape roll into the bushes on the other side.

Gathering his wits, Max jumped up and ran towards the bridge. Too late. The silhouetted shape of the train went past in an instant, forcing him to scurry on hands and knees to the shadow of a tree that towered above a grey, rickety wooden fence. In the gloom and the light behind them, he could see the two men, one as fat as his Uncle Sid, the other round-shouldered and thin faced.

'~~Ab~~^ott and Costello', thought Max.

'What's this?' the ferret faced cop said, putting his light up at the piece on the wall.

'What's what?'

'There. Up there. Right at the top. Long way up - on the left. See the letters. Wet as a baby's arse. He must still be around.'

'What's it say?' Fatman asked, crunching over the thistles and crackling grass to take a closer look.

Max could just make out his work. Forgetting the danger for a minute, he admired the flow of his strokes, the deep purple of Lou's name.

But the cops weren't focussing on the night's work. Their torches were trained on the bare wall next to it.

'Jesus, Frank, it's a long way up. How'd he get up there? He'd have to have a ladder somewhere - hidden maybe.'

There was a clank as one of them stumbled over the fallen metal drum. Fatman cursed, then realised what he'd fallen over.

'Here it is, Frank. Here's his ladder,' he cried, raising the barrel like a trophy.

'That's not it', Frank said, irritated at his partner. 'Have a look at that writing. Must be fifteen foot up.'

'Well, what'd he do? Float? In any case, where's the little bastard that did it? He must be close by.'

And he waved his torch aimlessly at the scrub on the other side of the track. Max pressed close to the tree, its corrugated bark biting into the flesh of his cheek.

'What's it say, anyway?' asked Fatman.

Torch beams slid up the wall past the purple of Lou's name and came to rest on two clear lines of words, beautifully painted and outside the borders of the main piece.

'You should have talked to me

I'm supposed to be your friend.'

'What the fuck's that supposed to mean?' whined Fatman.

'It means the kid who wrote it must be around here somewhere',
said Frank. 'Look! It's dripping. The paint's dripping.'

He glanced over his shoulder at the old oak tree, its branches
cut back from the power lines.

'It's a fucking long way up, Frank. Let's go. The little
arsehole's probably at home by now.'

Fatman began to shuffle his way back to the street, feet
crunching down on piles of empty cans in the scrub that
glinted like cat's eyes in the flicker of the night.

Max found himself standing up, his eyes transfixed by Frank's
light on the wall, drawn by words he did not recognize. Like
an amnesia victim holding a friend he couldn't remember.

'You should have talked to me', he said. 'I'm supposed to be
your friend.'

'What's that?! Who's there?'

Frank's spotlight whipped around to find a young man, one hand
balanced against the tree, his mouth agape, a dark face
surrounded by black hair.

'There's the bastard, Frank', shouted Fatman, rushing towards
the line.

The light held Max like a spotlight rabbit. For a second. For a
minute. For an hour. And then he was off, rushing and
scrambling and falling, pounding his way towards the one track
bridge, Fatman baying like a hound while Frank jogged along

behind, keeping Max on track, laughing and whooping Fatman on, turning Max into their quarry.

The single track bridge stretched out across the gully. The creek ribboned its way fifty feet below. Max hit the bridge with Fatman lumbering and cursing behind him, both of them with adrenalin banging away in their bodies. One desperate to escape, the other to capture. Sharp irregular pieces of blue-metal stone cut into Max's runners, making him stumble just as he began to pull away. Fatman loomed towards him and Frank, some way behind, bellowed, 'That's it, mate. You got him now. Hold him until I get there!'

Max was scrabbling on all fours, the blue metal slipping underneath him. Fatman's laboured breathing kept puffing away like a steam train. He was gone, done like a dinner if he didn't do something.

He stumbled to his feet, with the cop still hot on his heels, puffing short bursts of hot air into the cold. Max couldn't remember how the rock came to be in his hand. Maybe he'd clutched it as he fell or maybe his unconscious had thought it was a good idea at the time. At any rate he was holding a grenade-size piece of rock.

The big cop was gaining on him again. The spurt of adrenalin that had got Max off to a flying start had gone, replaced by fear pulling at his legs and weighing his body down. The fear

produced panic and he faltered for a minute. Half turning his body, he flung the rock in the direction of Fatman.

A howl came out of the darkness, like a cat with its back legs broken.

'Jesus H Christ!' Fatman cried. 'Jesus, you little arsehole. C'm here, you little prick! I'll get you, mate, and then we'll give you a hiding.'

Frank had picked up pace but by the time he reached his partner, Fatman was running again, shrugging off Frank and his words, charging along the track like a wounded bull elephant. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Max had hoped that the rock would give him time. Time to reach the end of the bridge, dive through the wire fence, sprint over the soccer field across the highway. In fifteen minutes he saw himself at home having a cup of coffee.

But the rock had only spurred Fatman on. And now there was an even greater danger.

Two eyes flashing at him from the opposite end of the bridge.

'Train', yelled Frank as he spun on his heels, racing back to the safety of the scrub.

Max ran at the oncoming train that had just picked up him and Fatman in its lights. Ran faster. Ran straight at the thundering metal giant as it reached the start of the bridge.

Let's go, Max. Let's get out of here! We can do it, boy. We'll beat the train and Fatman. Just don't stop thinking. You can

run and think at the same time, can't you Max?! It's just like patting your head and rubbing your tummy. Think, Mate. There's a big bastard behind us and an even bigger one in front. Now's not the time to be playing chicken with trains, Max. Think! For Chrissakes. Think....think about where.....it's along way down....There! There , Max. Go, mate. Dive, boy. Dive!'

With the train only twenty metres away, he hurled himself onto the metal floor of a safety cage. Max cowered at the back of the cage as the train blared its horn at him for the second time that night. The lights blinded him. The screeching and sparks from the wheels encased the night like a coffin, the brakes clamping and biting.

A great bulk of flesh fell into the cage, crashing into Max. The train slid and squealed along the rails, past Max and Fatman, bathing them in a crazy dance of shadow and golden light. Then it came to a halt.

Passengers gawked into the night. The train driver clambered down from his cabin. Frank was screaming into the night for his lost partner.

Max and Fatman sprawled together on the metal grate. Fatman was the first to recover. He grabbed Max by his jacket and climbed to his feet, twisting the jacket tighter, lifting Max up onto his toes, pressing his balled fists into Max's windpipe. His face was so close that Max could have read his

mind. But what was on his mind was clear to see on his face. A two inch gash was dribbling blood just under his cheekbone and his nose was swollen like the nose of a punch drunk boxer. Anger and exhaustion distorted his words.

'We're going to take you back with us, mate. You won't believe what we're going to do with you, you little fucker!!!'

The last words sprayed into Max's face. He could taste the spittle on his lips. Fatman released one hand and smacked it into the side of his face.

'That's just the smallest taste, mate. Our little graffiti friend. Our little fucking vandal. You nearly killed me. What'd you think you were doing, running at the train? What you want to do, kill yourself?! If you're so fucking keen, why don't you jump off? Here! I'll give you a little help!'

He pushed Max against the metal rail, bending him backwards, out into the night. His hands bunched at Max's throat. Max wanted air. He needed air. He needed to gulp it down like water. Blood spots danced in his eyes; the metal rail bit into his spine, his temples pounded like a voodoo drum.

He heard a voice or voices, running feet, more voices. His head was as heavy as a load of bricks but his body was becoming lighter than angel wings.

'Oh Christ mate. You're alive. I thought you were gone for all money,' Frank panted, holding onto the rail of the bridge.

'At least you got the little cocksucker. What're you trying to

do? Kill him?' He gave a laugh that ended in a convulsive, hacking cough.

Max felt like his life wanted to jump out of his head. Just wanted to jump out and run away. He could see Fatman's face, redder than any paint, his bulbous nose and blood trickling down the side of his mouth.

'That's what I'm going to do, Frank. Help him do what he wants to do. Isn't that right my little graffiti writer?'

He edged Max further over the railing. Frank reached out, grabbing Fatman's arm. 'C'mon, mate. You can't do this. You can't just shove him over. He's only a kid.'

The momentary pull gave Max the split second he needed. He pushed down with his legs, vaulting backwards, away from Fatman's grip, flipping himself over the railing and out into the darkness.

'Jesus Christ', yelled Frank. "He's gone! Jesus Christ, mate, what've you done?! You mad bastard.'

Fatman stood with his hands outstretched, gripping thin air, tasting his own blood curling into his mouth. His mouth opened and closed like a dying fish, flapping its soundless death on a deserted stretch of sand.

'You better get down there', the train driver said from behind them, flashing his torch down on the bushes and silent little creek below. 'It's a long way down there - a long way down.' His voice trailed away, away onto the train tracks, away into

the scrub, away to some foreign words painted on a lonely wall.

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Max hung in mid-air like a river eel on a line, gripping the rung as if it was life itself. It felt icy cold in his warm hands and his left hand was becoming clammy as he writhed and twisted, trying to bring his feet noiselessly to the rungs of the ladder. There were voices above him, a light swinging past and then feet walking back along the line. He heard a match strike. He smelt a cigarette.

In the distance the crossing bells were still clanging their insistent message and the train still hissed patiently on the bridge. Max's foot grabbed a rung. He eased the weight of his body onto the ladder, clung there and sucked air into his lungs, filling them to the brim with life.

Fantastic, Max. You thought! You CAN think. You bloody ripper, mate. What an act to follow. Now, that's really something!.....But no time to tarry, boyo. They're going to come down here and we don't want to be stuck here with their torch lights up our arse.

Max heard the cops at the end of the bridge, trying to find a path down the slope of the gully. He released the hand gripping the top rung and began to swing down the hundred or

so rungs that led to the gully floor. He'd done it with Lou a hundred times before but never at night. Never after having been nearly throttled to death by a bleeding cop.

The voices spurred him on. The men were scraping and stumbling through the bushes. Their torches firmly fixed on their feet, allowing Max a few minutes of darkness. His throat was sore and his temples ached like a hangover. All he could think of was getting down the ladder and getting away.

Near the bottom he slipped, speeding his downward journey by a few seconds. Then he regained his grip and dropped lightly onto the river rocks strewn along the bank. Bounding across the creek, he smelt foam and froth, built up and trapped in tiny eddies. He slipped on the mossy rocks, clawed his way up the bank and crossed a gravel path. Then he climbed the other side of the gully, until he reached the low overhanging branches of a stunted tree, leaving the ladder and the creek and Fatman far below.

He watched for some time as they poked their torch beams here and there, fossicking for the body of a dead boy. Hardly a word passed between them as they moped around, lights fixed on the ground.

'Only a matter of time', thought Max.

He crawled up the rest of the slope, without feeling the sharp stones or the broken glass embedded in the dirt.

The lights of the train shone along the line, catching the polished line and the thousands of fine metal shavings flecked in the grime and dust of the track. Finally they came to rest on a painted wall where words sang of sorrow:

*'You should've talked to me
I'm supposed to be your friend.'*

A pea soup fog was rolling thickly up the street. Like a wet blanket on a good party. Sadness lay outside the window, breathing on the panes and yet when the fog touched your face, soft and damp, it was as refreshing as cleaning your teeth.

The lime green leaves of the plain trees filtered through enough light to make Max open his eyes a touch, blinking dimly out through his window. The warmth of his bed held him in its cosy oven. Held Max until his mind filled to the brim with thoughts of Lou talking, Lou walking that swagger, mucking around, arguing, lying about sex, raving about tits and arses. He swallowed and immediately felt the bruising of his windpipe and Fatman's fists at his throat. He remembered the ebbing away of his life on the bridge last night and thought of Lou's last breath. What was that last breath like? What was Lou's last thought in that millisecond between life and death?

Here he was, thinking about poor dead Lou and feeling like shit, and before he knew it he was lost in his own mind's sea.

'That's it. Enough of this crap.' Max pushed the doona back and rolled out of bed. He put on yesterday's jocks and trackpants, kept his red T shirt on, put on his old sneakers, pulled a thick jumper over his black, curly head. 'Should've been called Heathcliff', his mother had always said.

'Probably still says it,' Max thought, digging the sleep out of his eyes. His eyes were bloodshot and his body felt hot.

He took another peaceful look out through the window. Picked up his paddle from the corner next to his bed. Stepped softly on the polished floorboards of the hall, turned the handle of the front door and clicked it quietly behind him. Out onto the verandah and into the sweet smelling fog.

He had tried to turn Lou onto paddling, canoeing, kayaking, anything that floated on rivers. But Lou wasn't interested.

'Too bushie for me, Max', he'd say. 'Too many flies, too much like hard work, mate', saying the words in his slow way, keeping the number of words to a minimum. 'Just keep me in the city. Burning rubber, smelling smoke, cigarettes, billboards, trains and brick walls.'

'Stay in the city, mate. Stay in it! I'm not asking you to go join a commune and milk cows, for Chrissake. Just go paddling.'

'Where ya gonna spray, Max? Tell me that! On the water?! On the tree trunks?'

'There's a bridge up near the paper mill. You could do a job there, on the pylons.'

'Give up on me, Max. It's too much like fresh air and clean living.' Then Lou would finally light the cigarette he'd been fingering and blow the smoke up into the blue sky.

'Truth is, Lou', Max would say, 'even if I knew of a brick wall running along the river for a kilometre, you still wouldn't try it.'

'That's right! You're absolutely right. Now, enough of this shit talk. I finally got to talk to Mary. Geez, is she the original space cadet. She's either dreaming or talking like a fuckin' machine gun.....'

And on it would go. Sitting in Max's bedroom or on the collapsing brick wall out front or sometimes, just to make Max happy, Lou would lie beneath the plane trees and together they would ramble the afternoon away.

Paddling was nearly everything to Max. School was OK; something to do between weekends. Girls were great. You were desperate to see them; you'd decided not to go out spraying or with your mates, just to see a girl. Then you'd tire of her, make an excuse and wish you'd gone and done the other thing.

Getting pissed. Yeh, well. So. You did it and then talked about it until next time.

Smoking dope. Pretty funny sometimes. But you fell asleep too much and missed the end of the video. And dad used to smoke,

knew about you choofing as well but didn't ever mention it. So where was the rebellion in that?

Doing graffiti. That came close. The sweeping colours, the arching spray, tags, bombing trains gave Max a rush he'd never known. 'Like having a girl for the first time', Lou would say. 'I wouldn't know about that', Max would say. And Lou would leave it alone.

Paddling had been in his veins since birth. Max's parents, before they split up, took him on short trips, long trips, even a camping trip once, on the Glenelg.

Photos of Max in canoes and kayaks spilled out of every album they had. When little Woody came along, the trips stopped. Nobody was sure why. His dad and mum only agreed on one thing about the split. Six and a half years after Max glided onto this planet, they had Woody, a baby brother, 'cosmic kid', mum said, thinking he'd save a marriage already coming apart at the seams. And, either because his mum and dad had lost their way or because you couldn't take two kids in a canoe, the paddling trips stopped.

But Max kept on paddling, getting his own kayak when he turned thirteen. 'Just to help your hormones settle down', dad said. 'Give 'em something else to think about', and then he'd laugh out loud while he fixed tea for the three of them.

So why had he tried to convince Lou, the yellow fingered city boy, to step into a canoe and slip into water world?

Because he was a friend. Lou could be relied on. He could shut his mouth. You could talk about absolutely anything and say the stupidest, crappiest, most innocent sounding things and Lou would treat you as though you were Einstein, emerging from the tram holding aloft in his hands the final draft of the theory of relativity. Birds' droppings or God.....it was all the same to Lou.

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Max stood on the mound of packed mud and clay, scatterings of autumn leaves, a lacework of brown, yellow and green.

Each time he came down to the river, this was his ritual. To stand, kayak hanging sideways, in his left hand, long and heavy like a dog waiting patiently on a lead, waiting for the command to slide into the river.

In his other hand was his pride and joy, a lightweight carbon paddle, black as his night paddlings, black from one blade to the other. He held it upright like a knight's lance, there in the dewy morning, at the beginning of a fog filled day.

Max would suck in the air until it reached the tips of his toes and the top of his curly black head. He was about to edge down to the stillness of the water when he heard - no, not heard. He felt something. Sensed a prickle on the back of his

neck, as though something lay around his shoulders like a shawl.....

He caught his breath and waited for another sign, standing in the quiet. He tightened his grip on the shaft of the paddle and knocked his kayak against a stump, sending out a hollow thump across the water.

Let's go ,Maxie boy,

'Yeah, let's go', said Max, setting the kayak on the mud and then sliding it into the water, where it lay peaceful and waiting, there in the calm. Placing one hand on the right edge of the kayak and the other on the left, he eased himself into the cocoon of his boat. With the paddle held along the length of the kayak, he pushed it sideways out into deeper water and then, another ritual, he sat swaying his body from side to side, rocking to get his balance, watching the currents catching the dangling leaves jiving with the slippery water.

The fog showed no signs of lifting. It was Sunday but the fog had no intention of going to church. It didn't have to. It was a chapel in itself.

Max heard the lonely-hearted cry of the plover long before it skimmed into view, with its mate not far behind, tracing the path of the river from upstream.

And thoughts of Lou fell around him as the mist fell around the river and box gums, fell like a kid's favourite blanket, wrapping itself around the scene. Leaving a tunnel of cream

opening up before Max and his kayak, welcoming him home, asking him to follow, to enter and rest, to enter and ask, enter and be held.

Yes, Maxie, time for us to go.

Up ahead lay the curve of the water, trunks and branches reaching over the river and up to the sky, imploring the heavens about something or someone, looking for all the world like a Hindu goddess. 'Wouldn't mind a woman with eight arms', his father would say.' Then I'd never have to hound you two boys to wash up. Or cook. Or mow the lawn.'

On these early morning trips the yawning, stretching, beefy gums were pure poetry. Each leaf a word, each branch a verse. Living poetry. For as the twigs and leaves fell weightlessly to the waiting currents, new growth would push out with all the vigour of a new born baby, crying out to be part of it all.

Just past the Tarzan ropes with the ghosts of barefoot, squealing, falling children clinging to the air, the river emerged into a straight of uncluttered sky and currents which, if you read them right, would let you power upstream, allowing you to feel the stretch of your muscles and the strength of your belly.

Max stopped paddling. He let the kayak glide on the glass-topped river, cleaving the mist.

'Wonder if Nick'll be there?'

It was the question he always asked. Some days not caring whether he was or he wasn't. Other days he'd desperately want to see him, to talk. Those days, Max was like a baby longing for his mother's breast.

Nick's camp lay on a small island in the middle of the Maramingo River. To the untrained eye, the only evidence was a slack steel wire that emerged from a small olive green tree on one side of the island. A short derelict jetty ran from the same side, the walkway made of cracked broken slats from packing boxes. There were twice as many spaces between as there were boards, making the whole construction appear quite unused and inhospitable.

As Max slid past the rushing of a small creek, he heard the familiar sounds of the flocking crows: 'gwar-gwar-gwa-r' varied at times with the softer, more angelic end call: 'wa-a-h', that seemed to float away in the air and be embraced by the mist.

The water around the island was always slippery. When he dug in his paddle, it seemed to have no substance, no resistance at all. If you didn't balance your body correctly, the magical eddies could throw you, making your heart race, your mind think of the icy bath that could sometimes await you. But it

was difficult water for another reason. To move forward, you pulled your paddle backward through the water, away from the direction you were going. In slippery water this didn't work. Neither did floating in the middle of it waiting for something to happen. The water would either flick you out of the circle or leave you there, bobbing around aimlessly and unbalanced.

The only way to deal with it was to move smoothly and strongly into the centre, reach forward and dig your blade into the other side, pulling, easing you into the maze of exposed roots in the mud beneath a leaning box gum.

This is where Max was that morning after the bridge, the morning after the words on the wall. It made sense. The left-right movement of his shoulders and arms were like the graceful steps of a ballroom dancing routine. The paddling movement became a meditation.

The warning calls of the crows usually appealed to him but today they just got up his nose. The slippery water spun him around and out, very nearly tipping him into the dark of the river. He floated out from the bank of the island and sat in his kayak, holding onto a small rock a couple of metres from shore. 'Nick.....Hey, Nick!', he yelled, his voice was swallowed in the fog and trees. The crows, who had been rising and falling and bickering in the trees, fluttered and settled. 'Nick! It's me - Max.'

A single crow let out a single cry and then all was silent.

He's not there Max. You can't force him out, mate. He's only there when we see him. Keeping on calling out won't change anything.

'I just wanted to, y'know, see him. Tell him what happened. Maybe one of his stories. I dunno. Just wanted to, that's all.'

Let's float back downstream. Have a rest. A moment of peace.

So he let the current take him under leafy branches, brushing past clumps of water grass, using his paddle to steady the boat. He passed under the Wangrabelle Highway, massive brick pylons holding up a towering bridge, the slap of the cars of the early morning commuters echoing on the water.

The pylons were graffiti targets. Old names and years daubed up high on the bricks, ancient memories of Old Testament style floods. Lower down were the colourful tags and swirls of graffiti artists, teams of boys and girls painting some kind of meaning into their lives.

In the dead of night they would abseil off the bridge, only the darkness listening to the clink of the carabiners and the slip of their yellow nylon ropes. From the paper mill next to the river, green light like the wash of a thin watercolour fell into the night. The hissing, steaming noises from the factory sounding like a team of captured wild horses.

Pushing out from the sides of the steel platform, they would swoop down, feet landing flatly on the vertical sides of the pylons. And then with a few small bounces off and down, the artists would reach the perfect spot. They would pull out spray cans from canvas bags hanging around their necks and shoulders and go to work. Beautiful yellow loops and blue splashes. Fat dark red circles outlined in black, sat in the middle of their work, hypnotising Max.

'Gee, Lou. Would've loved to have done that with you. We hit a lot of spots but we never, we never did this.'

The tears began to flow, moving softly downstream with the lament of a crow bouncing off the bridge.

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He'd had many dreams on the river, most of which he couldn't remember. Some were daydreams, some were of revenge, some of love some so deep they only came when paddling and breathing became a symphony or a riff that could take you to the stars. At the end of a rare canoe trip, his little brother Woody had said that he felt like he was the water and the water was him.

One of Woody's many comments.

There was this one dream, however, that Max could always remember. He'd dreamt of being able to stand upright in his

lighter-than-air kayak, arms outstretched to the banks, and float gently downstream. Balanced.

Like Leonardo DaVinci's Man, Max. One of the great drawings. A curly headed man stands with legs and arms apart in the middle of a circle. Looks like a compass, mate. And the bloke's got more than one set of arms and legs, too. But geez, he could draw well. Now that was a picture of balance.

#####

Max slid his kayak into the rubber slings nailed to the back wall of the house. He had a hot shower and then lay on his bed. He heard his father wake up and curse the cold weather. He heard the rustle of a newspaper, the tearing of toilet paper, wiping his bum, the flush, the cistern filling and then the shower running over skinny feet and down the plughole.

'Havin' breakfast, Max?' Woody, hair fair and straight as his brother's was black and curly, poked in the bedroom door.

Max gazed straight ahead. 'I'll come in a minute.'

'Come on. I'll give you some of the jam I made. It's good.'

Woody's jam had been a weekend activity with one of their dad's girlfriends. Her name was Naomi and she had it bad for the father. She was also into Buddhism. Homemade jam and Buddhism somehow go together like the Vatican and the Pope, peaches and cream, John Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe.

Naomi told Woody it was wrong to capture lizards and ants and butterflies. She bought him a book on ants, with stories of their amazing strength and purpose, social organisation and will to protect and survive. They started an ant farm together. Woody wrote about it for a month in his school journal.

"I know your jam's good, mate. Just leave me alone. I'll be out soon."

Max picked up a pillow and hugged it to his face. He heard his door open again, knew it was his father and said, 'I'm alright.'

'OK mate. Just checking.'

Woody and Dave were in the kitchen when Max walked in. His father was making lunches at the bench.

'What'll it be today, Sir? Lightly munched snails, sprinkled with garlic sprouts on a bed of moutarde grainee?'

Woody grinned. 'Not today, Dave. I feel like fried ants sprinkled with shredded butterfly wings.'

'Don't let Naomi hear you saying that', Max said. 'She'd probably reckon you're eating your relatives from a past life.'

'Ah, the Max has come to life', Dave looked gently at his oldest son.

'Yep. Back in the land of the living.....' and the rest of the sentence fell like a cold pancake onto the kitchen table.

The table, made of oregon, was one of the spoils of war when the divorce and settlement came through. Although it wasn't ever really a war - it was one of the more amicable separations. Dave stayed in town with the kids and Meg moved up to a Victorian coastal town. Brown's Beach was isolated, beautiful and mysterious. Large and small rivers, heathland cliffs, mountains, the rolling and rushing surf, dunes with plaited marran grass looking for all the world like a man with a hair transplant.

Meg had two jobs, one at the abalone co-op and another in the video shop. She was an easygoing person who only wished to avoid anger in her life. Not that she didn't have a backbone. She did. But she was afraid of anger and hate-filled words, something she learnt no doubt, in the last six months of her marriage.

So Dave got the oregon table. It had been a wonderful place to sit around. Every now and then some of Dave's mates would come around on a Friday night, get a bit tanked up, maybe a little stoned (if they wanted to remember their youth) and play cards, listen to music and watch TV. Sometimes Max's mates would be there. Once a girl called Jodi turned up in Max's life but after a couple of love bites, she disappeared from the kitchen table.

Dave's girlfriends came and went. There was always something exotic, eccentric or mad about them. Cathy, the one before

Naomi, was into numerology. She was a nurse, like Dave, so they always had plenty to rave about. She shuffled numbers like a pack of cards.

One Sunday afternoon Woody was playing in the lounge room with his plastic soldiers. Max was trying to finish an assignment, thinking about the run he and Lou would do that night.

Cathy said: 'You know Dave, if you add both our birth dates together and multiply that by the number you come up with when you subtract my age from your age, the result is a ruling number 7.....which luckily, we both have. And if you do that with my ex's numbers, you arrive at a ruling number 3.....and historically and astrologically 3's and 7's have never got on well. What's your ex-wife's birth date , Dave?'

'Don't remember', said Dave, getting up to find a beer.

And that was the last time Cathy's face was seen at breakfast around their kitchen table.

Lou, of course, was often there. Max knew almost nothing about his family, except that he was the only boy. His older sister had run off to another state looking for work and escaping her parents. Lou hadn't seen her for four years and his parents didn't talk about it, which meant Lou wasn't to raise the subject. His father worked in an office in the city somewhere and his mum was a primary school teacher. His parents would go

to work, come home, eat tea, watch TV, go to bed, get up, go to work.....

About the only thing that Lou ever mentioned was his father's television watching habits. 'He comes in at night, takes off his tie and puts on a jumper. He switches on the telly, reads the paper, eats his tea, then reads a book, all the time the TV's blaring away. Oh yeah, and when I come in he nods at me and I nod back.'

Lou spent many nights sitting around the oregon table, his long hair, always unkempt, falling over his face. A face that always appeared to be puzzled - in school or out, he seemed perplexed. Apart from when he was with Max, Lou was quiet, often answering others' questions with a smile or a quizzical look.

That face hovered in Max's brain, while Woody and Dave chatted away.

'Want some jam, Max?' asked Woody. 'Want some, Dave?' he asked his dad.

Woody's habit of calling their father 'Dave', rankled with Max. The reason for this escaped him but it was probably to do with the obvious friendship between the two of them. They joked around. They both liked football: watched games, footy panel shows, videos of their favourite grand finals. Dave put up with and even encouraged Woody's constant stream of whacky

reflections and questions about life, the cosmos, ants and sex.

'Max?'

'Yes, Woody?' Max replied, lifting heavy eyes from the knots and grain in the wooden tabletop.

'Maybe Lou's still around.'

Dave, with his back to his two sons, slowed his slicing of the bread.

'He's probably gone into another world, just like ours - maybe exactly like ours.'

'Yeah?' said Max lifting his face to look straight into Woody's bright eyes. 'Where's this parallel universe? Next door?'

Dave placed the bread knife on the bench and looked out the kitchen window.

'Maybe....maybe we go in and out of different worlds and just don't remember it.' Woody fidgetted with the jar of jam. 'Lou might be spirit in a next door world - starting all over again.'

'Yeah. And he got there by walking into the back of his bedroom cupboard.' Max almost regretted his snipe but not enough to stop him. 'He's probably riding on Aslan's back right now.' He caught his dad's eyes looking at him but he was on a rapid he didn't want to leave. 'Yeah, Woody. Lou's hanging onto the bloody lion's mane. Instead of lying in a bloody box, stiff and hard and cold.....'

'.....and dead', his father said. Max stared into Dave's face, his eyes lost at sea. His face shadowed by the rushing storm clouds.

'.....yes, and dead' and Max let the storm out a little. Head falling to the table, nose squashed against the wood, puddles of tears running into pools, while his father put his arms around his son's shoulders and buried his face into the nape of his son's neck. There in the warm toast filled air of the kitchen.

To be held, to feel cosy, to be so young again that your hand could still be encompassed by your father's. These moments are few, Max . They smell of lavender and roses and fresh cut grass;. It's like a bakery at four in the morning, like the wind-whipped spray off a silver rapid.

Dave squatted down next to Max. 'If there was something that could fix it for you, I'd do it or buy it or say it.....but I don't know what it is or where it is.' Looking across at Woody and then back to Max, he smiled, 'Unless of course, it's Woody's jam.'

The next day was like all the others that flowed into weeks. The memory of Fatman and the night on the bridge was fading. Dave slowly stopped asking him if he was alright.

Max's father had been a nurse for about ten years. Max was expected to stay home and look after Woody every third week when Dave had night shift at the hospital. On one of these nights he and Woody were alone in the house eating take-away in front of the telly. Max never talked much to Woody; there was something about Woody's mind that reminded him of a minefield. He stuck to questions and commands. 'What do you want for tea Woody?'

'Have you had your shower yet?'

'What time did Dad say you had to be in bed?'

'Don't switch the channel mate. I'm in charge of the remote.'

Or, on this particular night, 'Don't let those bloody ants out of your farm Woody. They're not like bloody dogs, y'know. You can't take them for a walk.'

Woody ignored most of his brother's remarks but this one set off pictures in his head of large black ants with small dog collars around their necks, being jerked back and told to 'heel'.

'They're really interesting, Max. They've all got a job to do and they just get on with whatever they have to do.'

Max stared fixedly at the television.

'And they help each other. Whenever danger's around they grab their eggs - '

Max tossed the remote onto the coffee table with a sigh. 'And whenever one of their mates breaks a leg, they cart 'em back and eat them. Great friends to have, I must say, Woody.'

His little brother was not to be put off. 'Yeah well. That helps to keep them going. They don't seem to worry about dying. Just accept it. It happens to all of them. To us. Dave says that's the only thing you can rely on - that and birth. He says everything that lives has to die.'

Max got up from the couch. His chest was heavy and his breathing felt constricted. 'Geez , Woody.....'

The TV droned on. Some crook was caught, his pregnant girlfriend fell in love with the copper, the cop couldn't handle the idea of bringing up another man's child (especially the child of a crim), they both parted sadly wishing it had happened in another time, another space.

Woody kept his older brother in the corner of his eye, nervously sliding his fingers along the top of his ant farm.

'Max. You know, coming back as an ant wouldn't be all that bad. What do you want to come back as, Max?'

'A younger brother,' replied Max. 'Then I could get my own back. You better go to bed. And don't forget to switch off the telly.'

Walking along Wellington St was the best part of the school day. Vietnamese shops. Hundreds of them, with their boxes filled to the brim with dripping moist vegetables, yellow

marrows, lime green bok choy, Chinese broccoli with pale yellow starlit flowers, thousands of baby red chillies twisting like worms, waiting to take your breath away. Nodules of tanned ginger, bulbs of garlic tinged purple, styrofoam boxes of dark brown nuts, chunks of Chinese cabbage, dark green slugs of zucchinis and lemon grass lying with their subtle scent in shallow wicker baskets. The smell of the spices and packets of dried mushrooms blended with the salty tang of wooden boxes full of dried fish.

Every week morning, Max would pass by the Tan Dai grocery and glance at its small bronzed Buddha sitting in the gloom at the back of the shop, fat red earth sticks of incense sailing their aroma out onto the street.

Water splayed out in front of him, the woman shopkeeper intent on hosing off anything resembling dirt. He stepped off the footpath, dodging the spray. Horns of the morning traffic warned him off, reminding him of the other night, Fatman's blood and spittle, the sour stink of Fatman's armpits, the fall into darkness, the screeching train staring him down, sucking him in, its lights rushing up the line, searching for those words.

Max continued to work his way along the crowded footpath, words simmering in his brain, going to school on a Monday morning.

'The words.....those words on the wall....they belonged in my brain. They were meant to remain in my mind. Silent. All wrapped up. Mine. 'I thought you were my friend'.....Yeah mate, I thought you were. But you didn't hang around, did you? Great friend.....but you were, weren't you? My friend? It's just you didn't talk much. Some of the kids even thought you were mute. You know that, mate? Deaf and dumb. Dumb - no talk! Dumb - stupid! You weren't either of them mate. Just locked up in yourself. God! Imagine the pieces locked away in your brain. Should go to the cemetery and ask for your head. Two heads are better than one, eh.'

Max laughed out loud and startled a man with a vinyl shopping bag standing in front of a Chinese restaurant, its steaming windows hung with naked red glazed ducks.

'I'll tell you another thing, Lou. It was bloody scary the other night. Bloody scary. But I wished I could have seen Fatman's face when I jumped out of there. His face already looked like a balloon but his eyes?! Imagine, stuck out like a dying toad.'

Loud hooting laughter burst out of him. Breaking into a run, he laughed all the way to the road that led down to his school.

The school's main attraction was that it lay next to the Maramingo River, the same river that ran along the end of Max's street. He had often dreamt of paddling to school for

the sheer joy of it but other kids would have thought he had tickets on himself. Besides, The Falls were halfway between his house and the school. They were nothing like the Niagara or Victoria Falls but still, going over the two metre drop in a lightweight kayak wasn't something you'd do if you had any choice about the matter.

'Ah, School! How I've missed you.'

Max smirked at his cynicism. He was building up some defences and he knew it. Dave had let him have a week off school so this was his first day back since Lou's death. Since he was not sure how he felt, he had no idea how to act.

But it's cool, Maxie boy. I know. He's here one day and gone the next, gone to who knows where. It's like he's walking with you right now, mooching along at your elbow, not saying anything, smiling every now and then at your comments. God, what a time we had. Remember climbing down onto the top of that carrier truck? Hanging onto the rails, having to wait for about eight blocks before we could climb down the back and get off. Those trucks could do with a nice piece, eh Max?! Whoa, what a time! But now you're worried about the geeks at school. The kids who hate you will say nothing - unless they're complete arseholes. Then there'll be the professional soapie stars who can barely remember what he looked like, probably didn't know his name until now, they'll be looking forlorn and rushing off to the girls' toilets or sick bay to weep their

crocodile tears. And then, my boy, there'll be the ones who loved him and they'll have a hole in their life where he graced them with a smile walking down the corridor or standing in line at the canteen. He was your silent type, Max, and silence has its own seductive charms.

School was school. Old, yellow, two storey and brick, built in three sections. It could have passed for a rope factory or knitting mill but it was a school of about a thousand students and eighty teachers. And on this day, a decision had been made. A decision not to dwell on the subject of death.

'If it's raised by the kids, discuss it by all means. I suggest we watch out for signs of high drama and any insistent talk of suicide. Suicide might help to keep class sizes down but it certainly won't attract new customers - just joking. Anyhow, let's just let matters die down. And Miss Turner, watch out for that Max boy, Max Fairchild. The dead boy was his best friend. Oh, and Miss Turner! Would you mind steering away from poetry for a day or two, until things.....'

Max sat in the classroom, rolling his ruler around in his closed hand, staring at the feet of the students sitting opposite him at tables arranged in a horseshoe. The teacher was late. Teachers could afford to be late to senior classes and this class was more docile than most. It was theory for Home Ec. 'Materials and technology in Food' was its official title but the kids called it 'cooking'. Max had taken it with Lou. They needed an extra unit, so they took it because it

looked - not so much easy, as relaxed. In any case, you got to have a good feed at the end. That was a big plus.

Around the room kids were doing their normal catch-up session. There would be hushed conversations and then surreptitious looks over their shoulders at the friend they were excluding. Terry Griffiths over there, drawing his eight hundredth car for the year, picking at his flaming red pimples. Silvana reading her fiftieth book. Chris, Mark and Tien checking off their footy tips, belting Mark on the arm because he only picked two winners. Guy and Kirsty, heads together, having not so much a dialogue as an array of insults, taunts and vicious gossip. It didn't pay to overhear or get too close.

There was Mai, a Vietnamese girl, doing her homework, putting a hand to her head to think for a moment, and then glimpsing Max through her black, black hair. She looked at him, looked for longer than Max found comfortable, and then Miss Turner walked in.

Miss Turner taught English and Home Ec. 'These days teachers teach anything,' thought Max. 'Next she'll be teaching astro physics.'

'Morning, ladies and gentlemen.' Janet Turner looked steadfastly at Chris, Joe, Kirsty. Anywhere but at Max. 'Now. Where were we up to? We were looking at grain and cereal products and the effect of different types of flour on things like bread, pastry, thickeners, sponge cakes.' Janet rolled her gaze over the class, realising that wheat or any other

topic remotely connected to her subject was irrelevant. She forgot the admonitions of the meeting before school. Forgot them or ignored them.

'But before we get on with things as though everything's normal, I'd like to say how sorry we all are about the death of Lou Petrocelli. Dealing with the death of a friend, somebody you're used to seeing day in and day out not being here anymore, well.....' She perched herself on the edge of the desk. It's, it's more than difficult.' She stood up, clasping her hands before her. 'My own mother died two years ago and I still sometimes forget. Something happens and I go to the phone to ring her and tell her the news.'

She halted. Terry looked hard at his drawing. Silvana ran her fingers over the cover of her book. Max's stare remained, stuck on the floor. Guy looked at Max, like he was searching for something, a clue, in his face.

'Sometimes I even begin to dial and then, and then.....' Janet Turner didn't know how she had arrived at this point and wasn't sure where she was headed. She wanted, somehow, to say a few simple things to help. Especially to help Max but here she was again, lost in her own mother's death.

'Look. I wanted to say a few simple things, but if I was to be honest, there's nothing simple about death. And nothing simple about life, for that matter.....Would anyone like to say something?'

Mai looked softly at Miss Turner and then at Max. Chris folded and unfolded his tipping sheet. Tick, tick, tick. Max could have looked anywhere but he didn't. The rhythmic roll and flick of the ruler in his hand continued.

'How'd he do it, Miss?' Guy fashioned his face into something approximating sincerity. The students swivelled, looking at Max, and then a voice dropped into the soft pit of silence.

'I think it's one of the saddest things I've ever heard.'

'Yes it is, Mai.' Miss Turner was anxious not to allow the silence to be too empty.

'To tell you the truth, Miss, it's so sad I don't even feel like being here. I mean, what's the point?' Mai's voice was barely audible.

'Do you want to leave, Mai? Go and have a walk outside?'

'How come she gets to go?' Kirsty blurted out. 'Geez, Miss - I mean, we're all sad but you gotta keep going. You can't just fall in a heap.' Her words fell with a thud. 'Well you do,' she continued. 'In any case, he shouldn't have done it. You know. He did it to himself. It's a sin.'

'Some people think so', Miss Turner said.

'I think that's bullshit', said Max.

'Whoa, the ghost who walks', laughed Guy. 'For a minute there, Max, I thought you had old Lou's disease.' He mimicked a zip being done up over his mouth.

Hey Max. This bloke. He's a real prick. I didn't know he was that bad. What'll we do to him? C'mon, let's snot the bastard.

Let's spread his nose. He's got no respect for anything, Max. Unbelievable! Hey, mate? Are you there?

Max tapped his ruler on the desk in front of him. 'Doesn't matter how he did it. He did it. That's all. '

'So why'd he do it?' Guy was feeling slightly braver.

Janet Turner had been lost in her own sea of sadness but was startled back into being a teacher by Guy's question. 'That doesn't concern you, Guy. I think it would be a good idea if we went on with our work. Why don't you continue with the revision I set you last week.'

'I was just discussing it Miss.'

Guy's face reddened. Max thought that at that minute he bore a striking resemblance to Fatman.

'Yes, well', said Miss Turner, turning to her desk. She wondered whether the morning's cautionary note had been right after all.

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Max ambled his way out of school at the end of the day, scuffing his runners on the loose gravel of the asphalt playground. Most of the students had left. He had waited behind in the toilets to avoid the stares and whispers.

He walked without knowing, heading towards the small gate at the end of the school. Walking through mounds of dead leaves, he felt a presence, a soft even tread just behind him. Mai

drew next to him, casting an awkward look at him, murmuring something, then walked quickly past. He watched her quicken her step, watched Mai's black black hair falling down her shoulders.

'Mai!'

She slowed and half-turned, lowering her head.

'Yes?'

Max wondered what it was he wanted to say. 'That was good today. What you said.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, - it's kind of obvious, isn't it?' she said. 'I'm young, he was young....and it is the saddest thing.'

Max stood forlornly, his bag slung over his shoulder, feeling the stale smelling afternoon wind that came off the river. Nearby a crow flapped its meaty wings, settling on the remains of a discarded lunch.

'Waste not, want not', Mai said.

'Right. Well then, I guess.....'

'Oh yes. I guess I'll see you tomorrow then.' Mai turned away and continued walking.

There was a rush of tyres behind Max. A hand clipped him over the back of the head as a bike brushed by.

'Getting on with slant girls now, are ya, Max?'

Guy continued peddling and laughing, his bulky frame leaning this way and that, swerving from kerb to kerb. Max stood and watched. Watched Guy. Watched Mai dawdle along the path.

He felt lost and he felt stupid.

#####

The cracking melody of a wattlebird woke Max up. A crow sounded down the street. It never seemed possible to see the hermit any other time than in the early morning. A few times he'd seen Nick in the late afternoon but that was rare. 'It was worth it', thought Max. 'Most times anyhow.'

He settled his kayak in the water and pushed out from the bank, almost too keen to get going. The plovers shot past. 'Set your clock by those birds!' He settled into the swing of his paddle, the river as gentle as mulled wine, the kayak slipping through the water like it was skating on cream.

'Max. Where do y'go when you go paddling? Why don't you take me with you one time?'

'Where would you sit, Woody?'

'We could take Dad's old canoe. C'mon Max. Just once. I promise I won't say all that stuff I say.'

'What stuff?'

'You know. That stuff you hate!'

'I should take him', thought Max. 'Maybe once - Nah! He'd go on about the water and him being one.' He laughed. 'Maybe even try and walk on water.'

Nick's island came into being. Ahead of him, bamboo grew out of the muddy shallows. The paper thin leaves rustled and rattled against the stems. A thin coil of smoke rose from

behind an immense rain barrel that lay on its side. At one end, hessian bags draped over the opening of the barrel, leading onto a makeshift platform with a ladder leading down to the ground.

Coiled fencing wire ran around three sides of the island, roughly tied between metal poles. A small patch of gravelly sand ran out into the tan water. A sandbank had formed since he was last there. Max preferred this landing to Nick's jetty, which was so ricketty it was likely to dump you in the drink.

He leant back, raising the nose of the boat and sliding up onto the sand. Easing himself out, he stepped into the shallows and grimaced as his feet slipped in the icy water.

'Hey Nick!', he called . A nest of crows rustled tetchily in the trees. 'Nick! You there? It's Max.'

Nikolai Ivanovich pushed aside a hessian bag. 'Smell the coffee, did you?' He stood there with a kaleidoscope of cast-off clothes covering his body. A navy blue track suit with white stripes down the arms and legs, another red track suit jacket, the top of the pants rolled into a sausage that circumnavigated his belly and finally, thick green socks jammed into blue and white runners that were too small for him.

As Max sat at the fire, Nick moved around, stirring his brewed coffee, the pot nestling on the coals.

'What is the news, my friend?'

'You wouldn't want to know.'

'But how do you know what I want to know? Tell me.'

'Lou died. You know, my friend Lou.'

'Lou's dead?'

'Killed himself, actually.'

'Your friend, your good friend, did that?'

'Yep.'

'Not a kind thing to do.'

'Guess he didn't feel all that kind.'

'They tell me you feel quite calm when you are about to suicide yourself.'

Nick's sentences and the way he pronounced some words indicated some distant past in some distant land; but where that was, Max wasn't sure and Nick seemed to avoid any details of his life story.

He poured the coffee and dumped a spoon full of sugar into it.

'But they say that about the drowning too, as well, but I nearly drowned once and I was not calm, let me tell you. I was thrashing around and beating at that water, saying "You not going to get me. You not going to have me for supper!" No. I was not calm.'

He sat down opposite Max, a thin veil of smoke between them. Breaking off a crust of bread, he leant forward to give it to a dark black crow limping in the dirt. 'Here you are, you poor little bastard.' It hobbled forward like it was taking

communion, stuck its head forward and snatched the morsel from his hand.

'That's right. Even though I treat you well, you still not sure, are you, you poor little bastard.' He glanced up at Max.

'So - what is the matter? You sad? You lost? You lonely?'

Max looked at him.

'You angry? Maybe you angry?'

Max lost himself in the heat of the white hot coals, pulsing in the heart of the fire.

'Well?' Nick asked.

He slurped his coffee. 'Maybe I am, but y'know, it's not just.....well nothing's fair. His death - it just doesn't make sense to me. I feel like I'm lost in a forest of cobwebs, mist all around. Sometimes it's like I'm lost but I don't care. Don't give a shit. The webs are soft, make me feel numb. Like my body's got no contact with the outside world.'

The disabled crow hobbled around the fire, his family of black sentinels observing from a distance. Nick snatched up the bird, and enfolded it in his hands, letting it nestle on his lap to feel the fire's warmth. He placed a finger under its beak, lifting the head towards him.

'Ah, my little crow bird. Have you been worth saving? And now that I have done this thing, does that mean I am responsible for you for the rest of your life?' He looked through the smoke at Max. 'When I lived with the Chinese, they taught me that. If you save something, give it life, then you are responsible for it for the rest of life.'

The hermit's stories were dotted with references to other lands and other people but it was useless to press him for further details. And, who knows? thought Max. They could have all been lies. Indeed, Nick's whole life could have been a lie.

'What do you think of that, Max? I save him and now I've got the ugly little bastard for life.'

'That's a bit rich, coming from him', thought Max. 'He's not exactly a film star himself.'

The fire crackled and the sap hissed. Nick's cheeks were wind flushed. His hair was thin and flaxen; so light the wind would whip it across his face and into his eyes. His eyes so light and clear you felt you could dive into them and swim forever. They were his best feature, for the rest of his face showed the ravage of time and a life lived alone. Deep red cracks tore at the corners of his mouth. Most of his teeth were rotten brown stumps except for one long narrow tooth in his lower gum that jumped and jittered around as he spoke.

'So you don't have my problem, eh?'

'What's that?' Max said, pulling his gaze away from the small crow in his lap.

'Your friend - he is dead, so you don't have to look after him.'

'It feels like I do. And maybe that's what shits me. Maybe I should've saved him. Maybe I could've helped him get his life back.'

'He doesn't blame you, Max. He doesn't blame you. You can be sure of this.'

'I'm not sure of anything at the moment', he said, swirling the dregs of his coffee and tossing them into the fire. The fire sizzled and snapped.

Nick stroked the nape of the bird's neck like he was patting a dog. 'I knew a monk once. He told me that all life was an illusion and the only thing that kept him glued together was contemplating his own death. It was the only definite thing in his whole life.....Ah but I don't know. It's a strange thing to do. To give up your own life voluntarily.'

Max shrugged. 'Yeah, but you did that. You gave up your life, everything.'

'So you think that all this'- Nick waved his arm around his island, over the fire and finally rested his hand on his chest, - 'all this is like death?'

'Well, not exactly but you had a choice. Lou didn't.'

'I had a choice, did I? What are you now, Max - a mystic who can tell past and future?' Nick smiled his mad toothless grin and stood up, placing the crow on his old kitchen chair; another trophy he'd fished from the river. 'Maybe I did have a little choice but if you choose killing yourself, then that's the end of choosing. It's your last choice.' The crippled bird hopped off the chair and busied itself with the remains of an old can.

'Well my friend. Time for you to go. The mist is lifting and you'll miss your chance of leaving.'

He said this at the end of every meeting. As though the island was a Brigadoon that would vanish at the fall of the first warm rays.

The kayak pushed out, the river eager to have the craft back where it belonged. A little downstream, Max looked back at the island, where the mist rose and fell like an ocean and sunrays dragged the cold from the river in thin wisps of steam. The lights from the paper mill glowed hazily. On the bridge traffic was building.

He lugged his boat up the front steps as his father pulled up. Dave locked the car, glancing at Max over the roof.

'Early morning paddle, eh?' he asked , a ring of irritation in his voice.

'Yep.'

'Where's Woody?'

'In bed, I guess.'

'Who's looking after him? You get a baby-sitter in, did you Max?' Dave walked towards him, stopping at the bottom of the steps.

'I thought you were home. I didn't bother to look. I didn't know you were going to be late home from your shift. Anyway, the kid's nine, not nine months.'

If Dave was honest, he would have explained that the reason for his lateness and irritation was two complicated deliveries and a Charge Sister who dumped her stress on the staff.

'Max! I rely on you to hang around when I'm on night shift to make sure he is alright.'

'Well I do - normally!'

Max weighted the last word, hoping his father would back off. But Dave was not about to do any such thing. He kept right on coming.

'Some night^s there's babies being born every hour. I can't say to a woman whose baby's head has just come into view, 'Hang on love. Have to go now. Otherwise my boy won't be able to go for a bloody paddle. Sorry love. But he comes first.'

Max stood with his kayak resting on the ground. he turned his head away, Dave's words punching and bruising him. 'I don't normally do it. Just didn't think.'

'What about 'sorry', Max? You can't even be bothered to apologise. You know, whether you believe it or not, I miss Lou too. I've cried a few tears m'self but your moping is like a lead weight on the house. You've got to get on with your own life - nothing's bringing him back. Wandering out at night, not saying anything at home, on the river early in the morning. Where have you been!!!? To see that old bloke up the river, whoever he is, whatever he is. Well, I hope he gave you good advice, Max.'

Max looked blankly at his father, as though Dave's face held nothing for him.

Dave continued. 'Did he tell you what Lou did was stupid? Did he tell you that you had to get back on your bike and stop driving us crazy?'

The morning was still and melancholy. 'Can I go in now?' Max asked.

Dave sighed and brushed past him. 'Yes - go inside, go where you like, do what you like. You will at any rate.'

#####

There was a call over the PA for Max to come down to the Principal's office. So he tripped on down there, knocked, waited, heard 'enter' and lo and behold, standing in the office was a huge bloke in a suit, with a purple cut under his eye and bruising around what used to be the man's nose.

Fatman glanced at the stitches under Max's eye. 'No need to introduce us, sir. We know each other, don't we son?'

For some reason Max had been able to think quickly and clearly since his latest dice with life. He put on a perplexed expression and looked at the Principal. 'Do we? I'm afraid I don't remember, Sir. Am I supposed to know you?' He smiled a helpful smile. Fatman breathed menacingly, his face expanding and turning red, his nose throbbing.

The Principal, Mr. Davidson, decided to assert his own authority.

'Detective Gillespie is looking for a young man who was involved in an incident recently - at the trestle bridge up near Claire Station. That's quite near where you live, isn't it, Max?'

'Yes, Sir, it is. But what's that got to do with me?'

Gillespie sat down. Max looked around for a chair.

'I think you can keep standing', said Mr Davidson.

'What it has to do with you, young man, is that the detective found your student card in the bushes underneath the bridge. It was right where the incident took place - a matter of graffiti and an assault on a policeman, Detective Gillespie.'

Max didn't dare to glance in the direction of that gash and that nose. His heart was thumping like a man buried alive, beating his hands on the lid of his own coffin. His palms began to sweat, the clamminess spreading to his armpits.

Fatman handed over the card, his face contorted into a hate-fills-his-heart scowl.

Max looked at it. The card was his. What could you say?

'It's my card, sir, but that doesn't mean I was down there. I mean', and then, thanks be to Dave, he plucked a sentence out of the air, 'I mean, most nights I have to stay home and look after Woody, my little brother.' He tried to look like a neglected but responsible child and added, 'Dad does a lot of nightshift.'

'Maybe you were there on one of your nights off?' said Fatman, moving his bum around on the chair.

'No, sir. I usually go to the movies or a club. And that's not many nights these days.' Again he shot a sincere smile at the Principal and continued, 'Because I've got so much study - you know, school work.'

This was one of the worst lies he'd told in that afternoon inquisition. He often sat in front of his homework, books open, pen at the ready, but not one ounce of work would be done. He would simply sit there and dream his life away.

Fatman leaned towards Max.

'Maybe it was one of those lucky nights where you didn't have babysitting and homework. There was nothing on telly and you weren't having a dinner party!'

Max glanced up briefly, catching sight of the man who had tried to murder him, not so long ago. His mind spun back to colours of purple and green and words on cold walls.

'Well, Max? Answer the detective. Was it you?!'

Max raised his head and looked straight at the Principal, then at Fatman. 'I'm glad you found my card, Detective. My bag was stolen from Claire Station. It had some books and money and my ID in there. I always travel with my ID.' Max tossed a small smile into the room. 'Whoever took it must've taken the cash and got rid of the rest.'

Fatman could feel his nose thumping.

'Did you report the theft?' Detective Gillespie hissed.

Max could feel his heart's rhythm running like a mountain stream. 'Well no. I s'pose I should have. But it wasn't much - and I know how overworked the railway police are.'

Max positively beamed.

Later, he wasn't sure whether he'd only imagined it but it seemed to him that Fatman's nose swelled up like yeast. Fat bubbles began to break out and then explode, a lava of bad blood gushing over his face.

#####

Max walked back home. The Principal had let him cool his heels outside his office, finally dismissing him half an hour after school had finished.

'I'll be contacting your father. You can tell him I'll ring him tonight!'

'Better keep the phone off the hook', thought Max.

Catching sight of Kirsty and Guy sharing a cigarette under the Wellington St Bridge, he crossed the road and headed towards the congested traffic, towards the restaurants with kitchens full of flying woks and sliced vegetables and chickens cut into twenty two pieces. Max breathed in the musky incense and

aromas of spice. Up ahead was the Tan Dai Grocery, his favourite piece of exotica. A young woman with her back to him, was sweeping the path. She wore a black cotton shirt, loose green pants and scuffs on her feet. The autumn afternoon sun shone weakly, saying goodbye till summer.

Max sauntered by.

'Hello', said the girl.

He turned. And smiled a real smile. 'Mai! What are you doing here?'

'I live here. Up there!' She pointed to the windows above the grocery.

'You mean, this is your parents' shop?' He laughed.

'What's so funny?' asked Mai, hurt in her voice.

'Oh - nothing. It's just that this shop is my favourite in the whole street. I was going to take photos of it for Photography - I was going to ask the owners - I mean, your mum and dad - for their permission.'

They stood there. An awkward silence. Trucks roared and trams clanged their bells. A young man in black jeans, flannel shirt and polar jacket with a bag hanging from his shoulder, rooted to the spot. A young woman, black hair falling loosely, almond brown eyes like a placid pool.

Mai's beauty held Max still, like a graffiti artist held in the glare of a train's lights. Her oval shaped face reminded him of the entrance to a tunnel of life and death.

'So?' Mai prodded his feet with the bristles of her broom.

'What happened when you were called down to the office?'

'Oh', nothing much.' Max was having difficulty remembering the danger of the afternoon's interview. It wasn't the fine details of Mai's face, nor the total of any physical aspects. Her beauty lay in her spirit like the light from a burning candle, the glow encompassing heart and soul.

Max smiled, as though he had an endless supply of smiles.

'Nothing really. Davidson had a cop there. He'd found my ID near a place where he'd bee, messed up.'

'How come?' Mai asked.

'Dunno.' He didn't enjoy lying to Mai and yet a small grin hovered at the corners of his mouth.

She shot a bemused, enquiring look at him. 'I heard it was near a big piece you did with Lou.'

Max was startled. 'Where did you hear that?'

'Oh, things get around. Kids were talking about it.'

Max felt vaguely proud and agitated, all at once. 'But how'd they know? I haven't heard anything.'

'Well, you wouldn't, Max. You've been, like, on a holiday. A vacation in your mind.'

After the sound of his name, falling from her lips, like she'd been aware of him as much as he'd been of her, Max had heard virtually nothing. Mai touched him lightly on the arm.

'Did you do it? I won't say anything.'

'I'm not worried about that. It's just - '

He didn't mind telling her. But the events of that night seemed to float away. When he looked at Mai, he wanted to kiss her. He looked at her hands holding the broom.

'You ever been down by The Fall? It's really beautiful. Want to go for a walk there?'

Mai glanced into the shop. Her father was stacking shelves, keeping quiet watch.

'They wouldn't let me.' She brushed her broom over the footpath. 'It's getting late. I have to help my mother with the cooking.'

Max looked at the gathering light of the late afternoon.

'Tomorrow then? Straight after school? It's not far.'

Mai turned to walk inside, then stopped. 'Alright. OK then. Tomorrow after school. Bye.' And she wrapped Max in the soft cocoon of her smile.

'I'll have to tell them I'm working late in the library', she thought as she walked past her father and up the stairs to the sounds of her mother preparing dinner in the kitchen.

This part of the river flowed smoothly. The Spring water from creeks and gullies had settled, filling the river to the brim, making it fat and fast. Max stood by the river looking at the water, the sound of picnickers behind him in the park. A small boy, two or three years younger than Woody, stood at the top

of the muddy grassed bank. He watched Max as he waited at the water's edge, paddle in one hand and kayak hanging sideways in the other.

Max eased himself into the cockpit, pointing the boat upstream, settling, balancing then pushing off from the lapping rocks, pulling hard into the oncoming current, eager to push him back. Max paddled for a few metres, then leant forward and out to the left, lifting his right arm high, perpendicular to the surface of the water, digging his paddle in and dragging it back to the kayak. Spinning its body around and gliding off downstream, the bow sharpening its lines on the steel of water.

The small boy remained on the bank, ignoring his mother's cries to, 'get away from the edge'.

The first rapid Max came to was nothing more than a gravel race that picked him up and sped him on his journey. Wattlebirds gave their hacking cry and whip birds bragged in the gullies lining the steep banks. Thickets of blackberries were home to nests of coiling black snakes. Black wattle trees cast shadows, their weaker limbs broken and hanging. The sun's autumn haze was warm. Shafts of light winked through high branches, making the river glint like a jewel.

Max heard the rapid coming up, felt the water's impatience. He knew this rapid - had fallen out in the middle of winter. It was shortish, with a difficult island of rocks that you had to

kick your boat around and then dig your paddle way out the back and draw it in, centring the boat again, to suddenly shoot yourself out into this pool full of eddies and undercurrents that never saw the light of day.

He plowed his way through this chop and turbulence, swinging the bow in the direction of the chute like a cowboy with an unruly steed. On the left a flat rocky expanse and a small yellow cliff face on the right. The water racing in between. He could feel his blood running, water dripping off his face, droplets of water fanned out on his spray cover.

He aimed the bow to where it ran fastest and hit his stroke like a clock striking midnight. The river pounded along, white funnelling water. Lichen, moss, rocks, mud and clay blurring into one. He arched his body back over the deck, raising his paddle aloft like a knight's lance, letting himself smile to the heavens, letting the river take him until it was spent. Then, in the peace, Max allowed himself to float, just float.

The tunnel had been like a maggot in his brain for a long time. At times its alluring black eye seemed to be warm and welcoming. He had always seen it as a test of skill. Now he wasn't so sure. Perhaps it was a test where skill had no place.

He paddled in circles watching the entrance to the tunnel, the way the water rolled in like a wave of dreams, listening to

the early roar of the water as it plunged down the wave deep into the floor of the cave, bounced back, surged upwards into a pressure wave. Vapours blew from the tunnel, like a door opened on a dungeon. Max kept watch as though it would cease to exist if he turned away for a moment.

Here it is, Max. Here we go - if you want to go? Is this stuff for you, though? Is this a cool thing to do??.....But, if you go, I go. These are the places where it's you and me or nothing. But!and there's always a 'but' isn't there? This one is for you. You make up your own mind, fella. It's not for me to say.

Max floated, holding onto the hanging branches of a willow. His paddle rested on the deck in front of him. He put his hand into the water and felt its pull. 'Quite an old hand for one so young', his mother had said. The coldness of the water flowed over his veins, cooling his blood. He leant his head back and looked at the overcast skies, still and motionless.

Releasing the branch from his grip, he wrapped his fingers around the paddle's shaft. He settled, then headed towards the third eye, a surge of strength in his upper body, shoulders rolling, legs pumping, urging the kayak, urging himself into the roll of water gulping him down like Jonah into the whale.

The mustiness of the air slapped him in the face. The kayak careered down the first rush, nose dipping crazily into the

bottom. Max pulled back, madly paddling backwards, dragging the nose up and hitting the pressure waves that exploded over his craft. Water filled his eyes, blurring the darkness. The rush of water threw him along at the speed of angels in a cavern made for a devil. He collected his thoughts enough to remember to paddle, leaning forward, the blades ricocheting off the wall of the tunnel.

Bats screeched past his face, their sonar barely audible above the echoing crash of waves and Max sucking in air through his dry mouth. The river dipped and rolled. A waiting rock lifted the boat on its side. He thrust his paddle into the wall of granite, pushing himself back on track, back into balance, onto an even keel.

The eye at the end of the tunnel blinked as lazily as its twin. For a second Max lost his concentration. In the gloomy light he pulled too hard, bouncing his kayak off the sides at breakneck speed, feeling for all the world like a pinball in a losing game. Just as the glow of light from the mouth of the tunnel began to pick up the dampness of the walls, Max rolled on his side, his head bouncing off submerged rocks just below water level, battering and pummeling his shoulders and face, until he pulled himself upright again. But not in time for him to escape a savage gash from a rock that felt more like a knife than a blunt instrument.

The sound was deafening. The speed was helter-skelter into the night as the kayak streamed through the tunnel like there was no tomorrow. It veered like a drunk and Max grabbed hold of a ledge while a rat hissed a warning through its teeth, leaping away into the gloom.

The channel of water deepened and slowed for a moment in time, for a blink of a bee's eye. He could see the river falling out of the mouth, cascading through rocks and boulders. He breathed in the rush of fresh flowing river air that was forever locked in battle with this netherworld.

Then the tunnel spat Max out like something caught in its throat. He sailed through the foam, his smile arching like a rainbow, thwacking the wall of water that spun him sideways and backwards, flipping him over like a caught fish on dry land, upside down in the boiling rush of water. He twisted his body, expecting to be released from his watery cocoon, but the power of the rapid held him upside down between two boulders set deep in the riverbed. His boat wanted to be released, pulling at his upturned lower body. But his shoulders and head were caught, captured in a maze of traps fashioned from rocks and thick waterlogged branches.

He was ensnared. The river kept up its terrific flow, the kayak caught up in its speed.

Max was drowning.

God, Max! What in Jesus' name is happening? What have you got us into? Correction - what have we got us into? This is not a calm way to die, mate. The hermit was dead right about that one. This is completely and utterly terrifying. We can't breathe and we can't talk. It's like living in the middle of a thunderclap. Listen! I can't hear myself think. Just look at that foam, will you. And the clearness of the light brown water. See how the pieces of gravel suddenly lift off from the floor and swim past our eyes.

Not calm yet, Max? Tell me when it's calm, mate, because it looks like this is the way we're going to go. Yes Sir, looking more like it every minute. And you know why? Because I'm beginning to feel calm. Check out the light, the way it filters down through all that mass of tumbling water and how something as delicate and defenceless as an autumn leaf can hide behind a rock, not moving, content to rot on the river floor.

What is that colour? The colour of the water, as your arms flap against a merciless foe. But this power's not merciless, is it, Maxie boy? It just is. Here, doing what it does. It would do it whether we were good or evil, down here under the lime brown bubbles, oxygen bubbles streaming past, rushing from our mouths.

You look like one of those gaping clowns at the fair, waiting for a ping pong ball to be shoved down your gob. Except we're

upside down in a rapid from hell, wedged under rocks and a massive black log.

Everytime I think about that one, I get a panic attack. If I could only get back to the light, the lime brown mist. Tie myself to bubble - or maybe Lou. Yeah, Lou could give us a hand, couldn't you, Lou? Help us through, mate, because Max is not too sure. I think he's looking for something. Maybe it's you, mate. Perhaps he thinks you're just lost, asleep in a forest somewhere and he's going to find you and rouse you from your slumbers.

Don't you love the way everything's up close, river dirt, pebbles, funnels of pink spiralling away, deepening pink in the water, cloudy, red clouds, the clouds of Mars, billowing clouds, red blood pouring from under your eye?

The blood startled Max from his trance. Rolling his body one more time, he forced his right hand above his left shoulder to grab the rock and push with all his might, all his life, all his faith. Pushed and rolled with the tethered boat, the swirl of water releasing him as the kayak was righted and then hurled backwards, through the boulders guarding the exit and over a gravel race. As he entered the fast and gentle current, his body collapsed on the front deck of his boat, sucking in air, coughing and spluttering, blowing water out through his nose.

He flowed downstream in the peaceful overhanging light, under the green frond leaves of black wattle, watching his paddle floating ahead. In the mid-afternoon mist of the bend, Max cried so hard that he laughed.

Dave got out his suture box. He dabbed Max's face with antiseptic, gave him a shot and put in three stitches in the gash below his son's eye.

'I must be the complete parent. If you two boys were girls, I could deliver your babies as well,' he said. 'But what did you tip on? This looks more nasty than hitting a submerged log - looks more like a bloody sharp rock.' He touched Max's cheek. 'You're going to feel that for a while. 'You haven't been doing anything stupid, have you? This isn't from a fight?'

A thought flashed across Max's brain. Maybe he should switch stories. But no. Once you started to shift your story around, they were onto you. That's why people stick to the lies they've told, no matter how absurd they might be.

No Dad! Christ! You think I go around getting into fights? I hate 'em. I told you. I flipped! And as I went over I whacked my face on this log, just under the water - you know. Jutting out from the bank.'

'Alright. Just be careful, OK? One death around the place is enough for a while. I don't want my own son's death added to the list.' Dave stood up. 'I'm going out tomorrow night. Could you look after Woody for me?'

Max raised his eyes.

'He's not old enough to be left alone, Max.'

'He thinks he is, don't you ,Woody?'

Woody looked from one to the other but said nothing.

'I don't ask you too often,' said Dave.

'Who are you going out with?'

'What business is it of yours?' Dave was beginning to rile.

Max smiled, wincing as the skin stretched across his cheek.

'Oh, I don't know. Woody and me like to know who you're hanging out with. We have to watch these things, don't we, Woody?'

Woody grinned. Dave finally smiled. 'Despina. Her name's Despina.'

'Sounds like a fortune teller,' laughed Woody.

'OK. I'll do it. But can we have some money for a video?' asked Max.

#####

He had every intention of staying home. Every intention. It wasn't a cold night but it was cool and the moon was in full flight. He and Woody had take-away and a video. Everything was fine.

So what changed things?

Max couldn't stop thinking - about the day, Fatman, Mr. Davidson, bubbles in a pink flowing stream and a fragile autumn leaf, hiding behind a boulder. His mind wouldn't leave him alone. The ordeal had made him exhausted, but the urge to do something, anything, was overpowering.

#####

Max waited until Woody was sound asleep. Then he rode his bike to school and watched while the security guards completed their check and left. He scaled the cyclone fence at the back of the school where the high riverbanks ran down to the water. Crouching, he scampered across to the stairs of the fire escape. The moon was in full bloom, its light silver and chilly. The sounds of his sneakers dully echoed on the metal steps.

The time was 11:50 p.m.

Time to remember Lou.

Max clambered up onto the rails at the top of the stairs. The metal was damp from the mist rising from the river. His fingers gripped the top of the doorframe. Raising himself on tiptoe he could just grab the guttering. His pack felt warm and comforting on his back.

He placed his right foot on a bracket holding the spouting in place, testing its strength. Taking a quick look over his shoulder at the ground, three storeys below, he yanked himself up and pushed down on the bracket, set in crumbling mortar.

At the same time as he heaved himself over the edge of the roof, the bracket gave way. The useless piece of metal fell silently, then clattered onto the ground. On the other side of the river a dog barked. The last bus rumbled over the Wellington St bridge. Max froze, teeter-tottering, waiting for silence to return.

He swung his leg over and rolled onto the iron roof, the cans in his pack digging into his back. Up on his hands and knees, he cautiously peered into the yard and street in front of the school. On one corner of the building in a room below him was a large storage area with no windows to the outside. A nice big blank wall.

Max opened his pack and pulled out blue nylon ropes, carabiners and straps. He looped part of the cord around a strong looking metal pipe that ran down into the roof, then fastened the rope around him and slung his pack over his shoulders. Taking up the slack, he eased himself off the roof and onto the face of the wall.

The harness bit into his body. Pushing himself away from the wall, Max glided out into the night, and then returned, his feet landing softly on the wall. He repeated the movement, landing at the top of the blank canvas. Looking down, he swung rhythmically, legs apart. Wind kissed his face and ruffled his hair.

The can of purple spray was in his hand again. 'The best in the business', Max said and he kissed the metal can as if it was a crucifix, sending up a prayer. Miniscule pieces of mortar fell to the asphalt below, echoing like boulders cascading down a cliff.

Only twenty minutes left before security returned. He pressed his finger down on the button and heard the familiar hiss, like a python ready to strike. To strike down arseholes, strike down sadness. No more unhappiness. What about some joy? All this sadness, what's going on? Drowning myself, walking around like the hermit on my own little island. Where have I been? Been to London to see the Queen. You'd say something like that, Lou, wouldn't you? You were a funny bastard mate but nobody really knew how funny you could be. - Nobody. Let's face it, nobody knew you, except me. I knew you. You were my friend, quiet, quiet and fragile like an autumn leaf. Strong as a bull - nah. Strong as an ant, maybe. But ants don't kill themselves, Lou. They sacrifice themselves but they don't do themselves in!

Mist billowed up from the warm river, a cumulus cloud wafting on the breeze, encircling and encompassing thoughts, sweeping themselves onto the wall.

They all want to know, to get in on the act. They all want to know why. Why did he kill himself? Why? If we knew the answer, I'd still not tell. It's not the details that matter. The

details are clear, the whys and wherefores not so clear. Not so clear? If I was to tell you the truth, the whys and wherefores are murky. And no matter what you do, the meaning of it all just falls through your lonely hands like this bend of mist we're in. Why'd he do it? If Lou knew that, he probably wouldn't have done it.

We could be doing this together right now. I could've told you about the tunnel and blood and autumn leaves, swinging and swaying, laying down paint like we were rich men, leaving vaporous trails of purple, making love to the wall, stroking the piece out. I could stay here forever, swinging on the end of this rope, arms outstretched, touching the outer edges of a circle, reaching for a star. Balancing.

He stood in the shadows, watching the security car patrol down the street. A black bird glided past, following the power lines. Riding along Wellington Street, gusts of wind skittered papers ahead of him. The time was 12:45 am.

The Tan Dai grocery lay in darkness. Upstairs, a small light shone through from a back room.

#####

'Anything wrong with your phone, Max?' He had been outside the Principal's office for most of the afternoon.

'Not that I know of, Sir. Although I think I heard dad saying something about it the other day.'

'Well, after today's little effort, you better tell your father that if I can't get through on the phone, I'll be coming down there in person.'

Max swallowed. 'I told you, sir. That graffiti didn't have anything to do with me. I was looking after my brother. You can check with my father if you like, sir.'

Lying was beginning to grow on him. When nothing seemed certain, truth and lies shimmered like a mirage.

He caught sight of Mai walking down the corridor. He gave her a look that said, 'Don't go. Wait for me.'

'I know what you told me, son! It's not only the vandalism and the police visiting our school. You seem to be a student intent on shooting out of orbit.'

Max looked away, searching for some help in the lines of old school photos that ran along the wall outside the office. Girls in black shorts leaping over hurdles, swimmers turning their heads as they touched the finishing lines, an old teacher in overalls who lived for the school and one day died on the job. No photos of champion graffiti artists on these walls.

Mr. Davidson heaved a lost sigh. 'Very well. Off you go - and don't forget to tell your father. I'm serious, Max!'

He watched the boy traipse up the corridor, asking himself why he'd even bothered to say such an ineffectual thing. Of course he was serious. But Max was serious as well. Mr. Davidson went back into his office wondering if there was a company that could scrub out paint from porous bricks.

#####

Max's head was a whirl after his talk with Davidson. He leapt down the front stairs of the school. No Mai. But when he looked out into the street, she stood under the plane trees, among their fallen leaves.

Max did not know what made him do it. He ran over to her, stood for that second that always seems like an hour, then reached out and grabbed her by the hand. It seemed natural.

'Max. Hello. You in trouble again?'

'No. Yeah. Kind of.'

'Is it about that?' she asked, pointing to the top of the main building.

He turned around, knowing exactly where to look. His belly leapt and a short breath caught in his mouth. He knew the words, more or less. But he didn't recognise the symbol, painted like a signature at the bottom of the words. A tag, only more complete, more like a drawing. A man with arms outstretched, in a pentagram inside a circle.

It was not quite true to say he didn't recognise it. He felt it, somewhere in his body. A naked constellation whirling in space.

'That's the drawing by Da Vinci.' Mai spoke quietly, gazing at the sprayed drawing beneath words written like a poem.

He stepped closer to her, saying, 'How come you know?'

A teacher showed us in Art one day. It's really great. Did you do it?'

This is a simple question Max. Yes or No. But it isn't quite that easy, is it? Because you can hardly remember the words, much less the drawing. Did you do it? Answer the girl, mate!

'I did the words.'

He could feel the warmth of Mai's hand in his. 'You've got hands as warm as hot pies,' his mother would say on cold winter mornings.

'Autumn leaves and ants.'

The tunnel waits for us all

Good luck.'

Mai read 'Good Luck' aloud. 'What's it mean?'

Max blushed. He had an idea of the meaning but it was held in his mind and body, not something readily interpreted by words.

Mai squeezed his hand, peering into his face. 'Well?'

'Oh, something I've been thinking about - and doing.' He smiled at her. 'Anyway, I thought we were going to The Falls.'

Still want to go?'

'Sure', she said.

They walked along the path of tan bark that ran down beside the concrete pylons of the Wellington St bridge. Guy and Kirsty were having their regular after school bong. It must have made them more mellow because Kirsty called out, 'Hey, you guys. Where are you going?'

Mai answered, 'For a walk.'

'That's alright', said Kirsty. 'I won't say nothing.'

'They should smoke that stuff all the time', said Max.

They came to the end of the tan bark and began picking their way along the muddy track, through the scrub and reeds that grew down to the river. The water caught the glitter of the afternoon sun: river gums grew on the opposite bank, old and resilient, not giving up for anyone. Walking hand in hand, they felt like god had made their hands as a pair. Gutters of water trickled through the grass into the river. A small breeze blew off the water. Both of them smiled as though their hearts would break, as though they would not, could not stop smiling. Love came down that gully like a draught of lavender haze.

Turning the bend, they heard the faint roar of The Falls before they saw the silver curtain of water flowing like a perfect roll of surf into the pond of froth and foam and stopper, rising back on itself like a dragon devouring its own tail. They jumped across the rocks and ledges until they reached the side of the small waterfall. Standing on a flat-topped rock, they watched broken branches, plastic cups, twigs

and leaves give one last swirl, seduced by the ease of the water before it dashed its brains out on the rocks below.

Max leaned towards Mai. 'See how the water falls then rises and kicks back? There's a ledge of some kind under the water at the base. Does weird things to the water. It's only a small waterfall but it's got a nasty kick.'

He realised how close he was to Mai, mesmerised by the cascading turbulence. Her ear, her cheek, her eyes, her mouth close to his, close to his beating heart, to the dull roar of the water as she slowly turned her face to his, kissing him, holding his arm to steady herself, placing a hand on the back of his neck.

Kissing each other like they had found their own souls.

Sometimes there are walks in silence full of pain. Then there are walks in silence full of contentment. Happy to be.

A while later they found themselves outside the grocery. Mai's mother was at the door, working on the cash register.

'Did you finish your work?' she called out.

'The library's just closed. Yes, Mum. Max helped me. This is Max.'

'Pleased to meet you. Is she a good student?'

Max smiled. He could still feel her on his mouth. 'Oh yes. She's an 'A' student.' He turned to Mai, barely suppressing a grin. 'Don't you talk in Vietnamese?'

Mai whispered, 'All the time. But if I'd said it in Vietnamese you wouldn't have known what I said. Thought you should know the lies I tell.'

He raised his eyebrows. Looked over at the mother and said goodbye-nice-to-meet-you. Then to Mai he said, 'You want to come paddling? I could take you up the river - you could meet Nick. Yeah, you could meet this old guy I know. Sometimes he's a bit grumpy. Interested?'

'Sure', said Mai. 'I don't know how good I'll be, though. I might tip us over.'

'That's OK. You can always swim, can't you?' And he blew her a kiss with his eyes.

#####

Max tidied his room. Washed the dishes, dried them, put them away. He moved on to the lounge room, picking up the papers, toys, mugs of cold coffee dregs, Dave's bottle of whisky, a couple of jumpers, books. And Woody's ant farm.

He was doing his homework when Dave came home with Woody who had been playing at a mate's place. They were peculiarly quiet as they walked up the front steps. Normally you could hear them laughing or Dave listening to Woody say something, like :

'You know when you're thinking something in your head and you think about it for so long that you're not sure whether you've been saying it out loud, so everybody can hear.' The kid was either mad or a mystic or both.

The key turned in the lock. Max kept his eyes on the books in front of him. Woody said a quiet hello, then headed straight for the television. He heard his father pouring himself a whisky. The fridge door shutting. The TV softer than usual. Dave's footsteps treading up the hall to Max's bedroom.

'Thanks for the clean-up, Max.' Dave sat on the end of the bed, swirling his iceblocks, looking for something in the depths of his glass. 'Really, mate, what in God's name have you been up to?'

Max half-turned , looking vacantly through his doorway into the hall, an Indian wall hanging covering a few gaping cracks in the plaster.

'I get two calls today - at work! One I took straight away, because I thought something might have happened to you. The second time I rang back after a particularly difficult birth, a baby born without a right hand. The parents are dealing with all that - they were young too - and your Principal rings me at work to tell me our phone's out of order! Then he tells me about some assault on a railway policeman and about your ID card. The cops had just rung to say they were about to check with me on your alibi. Your alibi?! And, Max, when did you lose your bag? I didn't know anything about it.'

Max stared at the rug on the floor. Dave stared at Max.

'You come home with a gash under your eye. Davidson tells me you've been walking around school like a zombie. And tell me Max'. Dave gulped down the rest of his drink. 'What in God's name - I can't believe you did this. 'Autumn leaves and ants. The tunnel waits for us all. Good luck''. What's that supposed to mean?'

'I told them I didn't do that.'

'Doesn't matter what you told them, mate. It's what you tell me that matters at the moment. I'm worried. What should I do? You're too old to be grounded. You've obviously invented some cock and bull story. The Principal should be OK. But the detective.....'

'Gillespie. Detective Gillespie'.

Max rested his head in his hands. How could things turn so quickly? For the first time in weeks he'd felt good. Felt as though he was worth something. As though life was worth something. Now here he was, hearing a list of his crimes and feeling like jumping off a cliff.

'I must say I didn't like his attitude very much. He was as angry as a bee in a bottle by the sound of him. I heard it in his voice. So I backed up your story about babysitting Woody, whatever night they were asking me about. He just about exploded over the phone - it was like listening to a hissing kettle.' He held his glass out to Max. 'Here. Go and get me another drink. I'm the one who should be holding his head in his hands.'

When Max returned, Dave sipped and then held the glass up to the light. 'What you do, Max? Put half a bottle in here? Figured you'd get me a bit mellow and stop hassling you?'

Max allowed himself to smile.

'Well mate', his father went on, 'can we let things settle down a bit? Can you calm down? I know all this has to do with Lou, but God Almighty - you can't just throw everything to the wind.' He stood up and faced Max. 'I'll tell you, mate. All this graffiti - and don't tell me you didn't do it. Getting into trouble. The cops. It all has to stop!'

The last words bellowed around the room. Next door, Woody hugged an old stuffed rabbit to his chest. 'I mean it, Max. I'm serious this time. I don't know what to do with you. Maybe your mother might know - in fact, if there's any more bullshit, that's where I'm sending you. I'll be ringing her tonight. You should talk to her at any rate. You haven't spoken to her for ages.'

Mum. Up there at Brown's Beach, full of oceans and rivers and eagles. All her wacky alternative friends with mud brick houses, yoga on the beach and Tarot readings. At times, the idea of moving up there appealed to him. But he hadn't thought about it for ages and now there was Mai to keep him in the city. Not to mention this stuff in his head called Lou. This stuff called suicide.

It sat like a goblin on his shoulder, grinning and scolding and chattering, a constant reminder of the point between life and death.

#####

They decided on a nine o'clock start. Mai and Max in his father's old powder blue rapid rider, now a family heirloom, chipped and scratched with a hairline fracture in the fibreglass hull.

'What story did you tell them this time?'

'Working in the library again. Anything to do with study and my parents are happy. I told them the school was opening its library for Year Twelves on Saturday mornings.'

'Won't they check up? Ring the school? Or do they trust you?'

'I don't know about that. But they wouldn't ring up because of their English. They're not confident.'

'Anyway, what's so wrong? You're only going for a paddle.'

Mai stopped to drag her fingers in the water. 'Don't worry about it, Max. You wouldn't understand.' She looked up at the dripping mistletoe hanging in thick clumps from the trees.

'I'll try and explain one day. Let's not talk about it.'

Pulling hard, they slid out and into the hush of the Maramingo. Sleek black water hens with orange red beaks scratched in the mud, only pausing for a minute in their morning ritual as the canoe surged and then glided, surged and then glided.

'He might not be there, you know. The old bloke I was telling you about. This time of the day he's sometimes hard to find. Hard to find the island as well. For some reason.'

'I don't care. This is good enough.'

'Oh, you would care. He's pretty interesting in a mad sort of way. You're the first person I've ever taken to the island. Lou wouldn't go. I don't take Woody and Dad's never seen him.'

Mai smiled. White voluminous clouds with a ring of grey ambled across the sky. They dipped their paddles into the calm current, a soft wind pushing at their backs.

'If your back hurts, reach further out to the front of the boat and only drag it back as far as your body line. Otherwise you feel like your paddle is like a bucket of water.' Max sat at the back, scrutinising Mai's paddling.

'OK. OK. God, you're bossy. It's my first time, you know! I thought I was doing pretty well, actually.'

'You are. You are. I was giving you a few tips, that's all.' He grinned. 'Another thing - I'll say this and then I'll shut up - but it's usually better if you alternate the side you're paddling on. About ten strokes to each side.' Then, to save his hide, he added, 'But you're right. You're doing fine. I don't know why I'm going on like this. I guess I'm a bit stressed. School rang Dad ,and the cops too.'

'Did your father go mad at you? Did he lose it?'

Mai concentrated on the chipped plastic blade cutting into the water. The old bulky canoe moved up the river like a barnacled whale heading out to sea.

'No, not really. He just - well he did kind of lose it. Didn't shout too much, considering. Drank a bit though. He sat on the end of my bed as though he really didn't have an answer.'

'An answer to what?'

Mai stopped and turned around, resting her hand on the deck behind her. Max kept on paddling, staring at her. 'She is really beautiful', he thought. Why hadn't I noticed her properly before?

'Answer? Oh, I don't know. An answer for me. Maybe an answer for himself. He thinks a lot - takes a lot of things to heart.'

'No wonder,' laughed Mai, turning to her paddling once more.

A capful of wind gave them welcome assistance. The air was still crisp enough to chill the tip of your nose. A line of rocks jutted out in a curve. Around the bend the Paper Mill slid into view, looking stolid and ugly with no hint of the mystery it possessed at night. A gaping drain, big as the mouth at Luna Park, dribbled a constant flow of warm water over a dark green mossy concrete shelf. A rat, furtive and erratic, faced their canoe as it passed and then bounded back into the cavernous dark of the drainpipe.

'So who's the man we're going to see? Is he really a hermit?'

Mai felt the muscles in her arms warming, her forearms beginning to ache, blood coursing through her veins. She was aware of her arms and shoulders as if she had just discovered them.

Max stared at her back, her neck. It was good sitting behind her. He could watch for ages, unnoticed.

'I feel as though your eyes are boring into me', she said.

'What are you doing back there?'

'Nothing - just watching the river.'

There were lies. And then, there were lies.

'Yeah. Nick's a hermit. But sometimes he's not there. It's difficult to know.'

'You weren't joking? What happens to him and his island? Does it disappear or do we have to say a magic spell?' She was mocking him.

'You'll see. C'mon, paddle. Otherwise we'll never get there', Max bossed.

Another bend and there was the island. Plain as day, bathed in more light than Max had ever seen. The canoe slid up onto the sand, the hiss and crunch of the waterlogged gravel disturbing the crows who began cawing like a raucous choir.

They found Nick mooching around his camp, cradling the crow.

'I am this bird's foster parent', he started, as though they had been there for hours.

'Hi, Nick', Max said but Mai held back, casting a long look around the camp and the island. 'This is Mai - Hope you don't mind. Can't exactly call you up and let you know that I'd be bringing someone else.' Then, to state the obvious, 'She's a friend of mine.'

'A friend?!' Nick walked over, holding out his hand to Mai, who had receded into shyness. 'How amazing you are, Max. Fancy paddling with a friend. And what kind of friend are you, Mai? A friend who's a girl or a girlfriend?'

Neither spoke. Neither one looked at the other.

'Ah, you don't know yet.' He pointed a finger at Max. 'But I think he is hoping. Here, Mai, come with me. I'll show you my island.'

Max had never seen him like this. It was as if he'd put on the uniform of a tourist guide. He took Mai's arm and guided her along the path, Max dawdling behind. Nick couldn't stop explaining his theories or his philosophies on life. He pointed out landmarks, explained why he had fences, expounded on his 'life line', a thin steel cable that ran from his island to the trunk of a tree growing about five metres up the bank. It was an invention of his, designed to save his life in the event of a flood, and he also had a raft made out of remnants of packing boxes. When the waters rose, he intended to stand on his raft and pull himself hand over hand along the rope to safety, well above the water line.

Mai murmured encouragement. She was having a lovely time. Max considered returning to the half-dead fire but decided to hang around. However, when they found themselves at the dilapidated, matchstick jetty the old man turned to him and said, 'Why don't you go and make us all a cup of coffee? I'm sure your friend could do with one.'

This time Nick was a 'maitre d', ordering the waiter around. Max felt like pushing the old guy into the water.

'Alright. Would you like one, Mai?'

She smiled 'yes' and almost burst out laughing at Max's face, which barely contained his annoyance with Nick.

When he returned, they were still sitting on the jetty, Mai at the end swinging her legs. Nick's charcoal black bird hopped around the base of a giant red gum that housed the flock of crows. Fifty of them sat in the branches, watching, making mental notes of scraps and leftovers to be scavenged at a later date. They were more like a tribe than a flock.

'Thank you very much Max. Most hospitable of you.'

Now Nick was behaving like the landed gentry. He was giving Max the shits. 'The crow, Mai - it is the most misunderstood bird. Look at them all!' He pointed to them, some knocking their blunt nosed beaks on the wood.

'Some people think the big brown hawk and the wedge-tailed eagle are the birds of spirit. They call the crow a scavenger, a tip bird. I tell you - go to Mt Kosciuskou, to the trails

across the Highlands. You know what you find? Crows! Wheeling and flapping. You see how they walk - like an old man with arthritis in his hips. They don't walk as well as other birds. They prefer to fly - and they don't just flap, flap, flap.' Nick moved his arms up and down, mimicking the crows. 'They glide too. They do not attack humans. Once I saw, just along up there, a crow snatch a tiger snake swimming across the river. Its little head wagging just above the surface and whack', Nick smacked his hands together, 'the crow has it in its beak. But that is rare, eh, Max?'

'If you say so', said Max, swishing a stick in the water.

Snake-catching crows, he thought. There's no end to it.

'Yes, I do say so.' Nick was irrepressible. 'So the crow is the spiritual bird for me. It likes to glide but it knows it has to flap hard sometimes to survive. And if crow man survives, then he has the chance to glide - the opportunity, at least. Even my little foster bird might have a chance.' He threw the dregs of his coffee towards the crippled bird. 'What about you, Max? Have you been flapping or gliding? How did you get that gash under your eye?'

Max's fingertips felt the sewn flesh and the raised red welt. He thought of Fatman, Dave, Lou, Woody, his mother. Pictures of the trestle bridge, the tunnel, abseiling down the face of the school. Suddenly he felt very foolish. So foolish that he wanted to unload his story. Not to impress Mai, not to get some attention for himself. The urge to tell them what had been going on came from somewhere else. He was hoping to find

some candle glow of wisdom to help him back, to help him glide instead of flapping.

So he told them. All of it. The graffiti, the school, the cops, everything. Except the words on the walls and the DaVinci man. How could he say anything about that, when he himself didn't know where they came from. And all the time he spoke, he felt as though he was flapping, for gliding had become a faint memory.

#####

The May sun had shifted west, enough to place the island in a mottled shade. Nick was waving goodbye from the tiny beach. The crows squawked above the trees as clouds began to gather. A headwind blew buffeted the canoe.

'You OK Max? Thanks for trusting me - and for taking me. You feeling alright?' Mai kept her head to the front.

'I suppose so. I mean, I'm not going to kill myself or anything.' Since telling them almost everything, Max had pulled a protective covering around himself. A blanket that did not invite further questioning.

'It seems like that's what you've been trying to do. Max, I don't want a dead boyfriend.'

He stopped paddling, resting his paddle across the deck.

'Boyfriend?'

Mai giggled. 'Sorry. Can't you take it? Am I being too pushy?'

'No. No!' He could hardly conceal his delight and why should he? 'It surprised me. Boyfriend eh? Sounds good. Does that make you my girlfriend?'

'Not if you're dead, it doesn't.'

Happiness can help you paddle. Your mind and body, muscles and sinews, well oiled joints, the blood in your veins, all coil together like a braided rope.

'Sometimes you feel like you can go forever, powering downstream all the way to The Falls,' he said.

'Is this where this part ends up?'

'Certainly does. Keep paddling into this wind, Mai. Wind and chop are real killers.'

'Still being the teacher, Max?'

Oh yeah, I forgot. Probably reminding myself more than telling you.'

A light rain began to fall, pin-pricking the water's surface.

'It was interesting, that stuff he said about crows.' Mai was enjoying the rhythm and symphony of their movements. 'My father told me that a crow sat on their boat when they were escaping. Sat on top of the cabin where they steered the boat. He said some people were superstitious, thought the crow was bad luck. But one time they were chased by pirates and the crow flew off. Soon after, the pirate's boat broke down and they got away.'

'So?' said Max.

'So? The crow came back and they all believed it was responsible for making the pirate boat break down.'

'Really?' he said, feeling a genuine sense of awe. 'Did you parents come here like that. Refugee boats and camps in Malaysia - all that?!'

'Yep. So I suppose I can understand why they want me to do well.'

'A crow?' mused Max.

Tiny thin needles of rain began to fall, soaking their clothes and running down their faces. For years after they both remembered the kiss they gave each other, standing on a pile of muddy autumn leaves, rain pattering. The canoe resting in the thick dark green creeper running along the path.

They both remembered their bodies first touch, that first pressure of breasts and bellies, mounds and thighs. The kiss that would glide through their bodies, guaranteed to lift their souls.

#####

For a week or so, life was increasingly pleasant. Dave had spoken to the Principal and the police and officially backed up Max's story, for which Max was eternally grateful. Woody had been happy since he learnt that he was to visit his mother in the next holidays. Max had spoken to his mother on the phone and as usual the conversation had tumbled along nicely.

'No, I don't think I'll come up as well. There are a few things I have to do.'

'Oh. You mean you've got a girlfriend?'

'What do you reckon, Mum?'

Despina came over and cooked a meal. Moussaka and rice in vine leaves. Mai was allowed to go to the movies with Max. He had met her father and, although extremely uncomfortable, had managed to appear not at all like an axe murderer.

Max was riding on a smooth spring current.

Unfortunately, it only lasted a week.

#####

An unknown car was parked outside the house. Although the well-cared-for little white car rang some bells.

Walking in the front door Max heard his father talking to someone in the lounge room. He saw Dave sit forward, looking intently at - whoever.

Max walked in. A black haired woman with grey at her roots and temples, wearing a sensible dark blue work suit, sat opposite Dave. She dabbed at her eyes and smiled wanly at Max. Those eyes. Yes, he knew those eyes.

'Mrs. Petrocelli', Dave said.

'We met once or twice, didn't we, Max? At home. Not as much as he was here apparently.'

Max sat down in an armchair, holding a pillow on his lap.

'Yes. Hello Mrs. Petrocelli. How are you?'

Old habits die hard - boy, don't they! How do you reckon she's feeling? At a rough guess I'd say she's feeling like a seal on an Arctic floe that's just witnessed her cub being clubbed to death. Suicide is bad enough. But your own kid, all blue in the face, hanging gently in the breeze . And they had to stop the traffic so the emergency crew could haul his body up from hanging in mid-air.

This woman feels so bad that she wishes all she felt was down and out. There is no emptiness, no vacuum, no black hole so cavernous or hollow as the something you feel when your own child dies.

It's not the way it's meant to be. Parents aren't supposed to bury their children. Life has its flaws but this particular one is a humdinger. Yes mate, life does have its flaws and they, like silence, have their own powers of seduction. Sometimes for good, sometimes for bad.

So - how is she feeling ,Max?

'Not bad.' She tugged pitifully at her sodden handkerchief. 'Mr. Petrocelli, he didn't come. Couldn't. Can't face it, really. He just sits - doesn't understand. He's a good man but he doesn't talk much. Can't let it out. But he did things for the kids, Lou and his sister, when they were little.'

'I'm sorry', said Max.

'No. You shouldn't be sorry - about Lou's dad, I mean. He never understood Lou or the graffiti and Lou never tried. Well, he wasn't too talkative himself.' Mrs. Petrocelli smiled bravely. 'Like father, like son?'

Dave touched her arm and offered her another cup of tea.

'No, thanks. I really should be going. Thought I should drop over and say thanks for coming to the funeral. We saw more of Lou's friends there than we'd ever seen before. Not that he had many. Although we did meet his girlfriend Mary at one time. She stayed out on the footpath and wouldn't come in. Lou kind of introduced us from the front porch. She was a strange girl. Looked as skinny as a rake. She paced up and down smoking cigarettes like they kept her going. I found all that very hard too.'

Lou's mother caught a sob and swallowed. She turned her head quickly and looked out the window, sitting in a room where her son had once been.

'In any case, I shouldn't keep going on like this. I actually came to give Max something'. She unclipped her large black handbag and pulled out a sheet of paper. 'Lou wrote this a couple of years ago. I'm sure you know about it. You were such good friends. He would have liked you to have it. I didn't get a chance to say anything to you at the funeral. Wasn't in much of a good state really.'

Max held the leaf of paper in his hands, as though it would dissolve if clasped too tightly.

'So there. Drop in if you're near us sometime. I'd - we'd love to see you.'

Max and his father stood outside and watched the little car fume its dismal way up the street. He went inside and lay down. On the bed next to him Lou's piece of writing fluttered in a breeze blowing through his open window.

#####

There was a kiosk near the thundering water. The river was fat and full-bodied. People sipped cappuccinos on the outside tables, covered by market umbrellas. Children squealed and giggled, hopping in and out of the rental canoes tied up at the neat, clean jetty like a line of horses tethered to the rail of a corral.

Max noticed nothing and seemingly cared for nothing. In his pocket lay Lou's writing, wrapped in a sealed plastic bag. He could hear the faint rush of water around the bend. On his left, a cliff with a lookout perched on top. The cliff rose and then dropped to a patch of grass that was almost level with the water where it lay calm after the wrath of The Falls.

Max and his kayak knew exactly where they were headed. He kept his eyes fastened on the bow, slicing through the seemingly placid water. But currents were already beginning to quicken, gathering steam in the deeper river flow. No sound deflected his trance, except the rustling of paper in his pocket.

For a second he wondered if a crow would grace his craft with its presence. Then a familiar shiver ran through him as he felt eyes watching from the top of the yellow-rocked cliff. The Falls were only one hundred metres away now. Wind from the blast of the crashing turbulence rushed back through the trees. Yes, Max was coming. He was a runaway train on a track that had been laid some time ago.

You can hear that tumble, Max. Hear those voices? Mrs. Petrocelli's saying nothing - but she's sobbing, isn't she, Max? Heart wrenching, rib-wracking cries wailing their way through our lives. I can see her walking at the top of The Falls. She's young and she's got a fawn-coloured shawl around her shoulders. A cousin sent it out so she would be warm in a Melbourne winter. To keep her warm when she's up in the night suckling her baby. Mrs. Petrocelli cradles her second born as though she and he might die if she lets him slip.

She doesn't want much out of life. Just a family who loves her, children to give her grandchildren in her later years, a son who'll be happy, a son who won't die before her. A son with friends like Max.

Like this young man who's heading for The Falls, who can feel the deceptive calm before the rush, see a branch stuck in the water shuddering and trying to shake itself loose from its purgatory. Bending his body to the task, a line of pain banded around his chest, paddling for where the river ran fullest.

No sense in asking to turn back now, is there? Our boat wouldn't allow it in any case. Look at it! Its black nose snorting at the chance.

The kayak leapt at the water as it folded over the edge. Max felt the overwhelming rush of a torrent of water whose turn had come. For a second the front of the kayak careered into mid-air. Then the bow dipped and Max arched his body backwards, paddle high in the air, trying to keep the kayak as horizontal as possible, trying to save it from certain disaster.

In the blink of an eye it catapulted over the edge. Foam and roar surrounded it. Through the billowing mist, Max thought he felt eyes upon him again.

The kayak was airborne, looking as though it had caught a wave to the heavens. Then its hull smacked into the water at the bottom of The Falls and jolted Max out of his trance. He hit the stopper that rushed down the fall in a concave swoop and then collapsed back on itself, like a skateboarder in a half-pipe.

He was hoping that he could push himself over the lip of the pressure wave but as he hit it, the water went into a reverse curl, looping the kayak up into the air. Upturning it. Shoving Max down into the turbulent prison depths.

He tumbled over and over, seeing the tan brown water infused with millions of tiny throbbing bubbles. The intensity of the moment - being hurled and chucked around like a matchstick in an ocean - gave him the clarity that sometimes comes in moments of Life and Death.

While he was still gulping water down like air, heart hammering in his ears, his hands instinctively moved to the spray cover. Flipping it off, he pushed with all his life's might, ejecting into a murderous turbulence that ripped his helmet from his head and thumped him into the hidden ledge. The ledge he had talked about only a little while ago, as he and Mai stood kissing in the spray. Mai, his girl, his sweet love.

Thunder rose from the bottomless river, grabbing Max in its arms and hurling him through the stopper wall. He was thrown into the river current, floating face down.

This is getting to be a habit, Max. A bad habit. What is it with you? You want some simple answers? You don't even know what your questions are? I'll give you a few answers though. And let me know if I'm on the right track. Let me know if you'd rather be sucking on air than letting this water leaden your body.

I've gotta talk fast ,Maxie, because you don't have much time. Not much time at all.

So, Lou killed himself. Stepped off a bridge with a rope around his neck. You know the details . But you can piece them together anyway you want, to get whatever story makes the most sense to you . You can make up your own story, Lou did! Except his was a story with an extremely unhappy ending - and not just for Lou either. Don't forget that!

What's he got? He kind of talks to you - but not about the real tough stuff that's eating away at him. Nothing happening at school. No safety net waiting for him at home. Not enough love, Max. In times of real strife a boy should be able to land on a bed of cushions. Instead, he was left floating. Floating along without enough love in his world, not enough love in the world. Not enough love for him.

Except from you - and Mary, whatever that was worth because she's probably gone the same way as Lou. Do you want to follow? Did Lou have a good enough reason to set such an example. Did he? No, I don't think so, either. Not good enough by a long shot! There could have been a better answer. He made a mistake, mate. He bought a bad dose. He bought despair and paid a lot for it. He judged the future by what he had in the present. Maybe he bought that he was a no-hoper. Y'know what no-hoper means? (No, don't talk now, because you're too busy drowning.) I'll tell you. It means a person without hope. No hope in the present, no hope for the future. A bad cocktail.

What's happening, Max? Because it's just about nigh-nigh time. Maybe you'll see Lou, maybe you won't. But you know the details, mate. You know why he finished himself off. How he did it. What more do you want? Do you want the answer to the big questions? Why we bother getting up in the morning? Because my boy - I can feel us fading fast in the mist - because perhaps just staying alive is reason enough, meaning enough for you and me, for all of us.

Oh ,come on , Max. Can't you find it in yourself? I feel like the coach at three-quarter time. I can feel the claws of death on your back, piercing your flesh. Big arms are wrapping themselves around you hauling, heaving your waterlogged body up and out into sweet pure air. Yes, you're coughing and spluttering and spitting blood. There's a crimson flow trickling down from your head but you're lying on grass and somebody's working on you, working on you, working on you.....

#####

The Charge Sister scanned the record sheets that were clipped on a metal board, then hung it back on the end of the bed.

'Your son is sedated, Mr. Fairchild, but he's perfectly alright. No fractures. Concussion, a bit of hypothermia and shock. It was mainly the water he swallowed but somebody had expelled most of that. Can I get you a cup of tea, Mr. Fairchild?'

Dave and Woody stood by the bed. Max lay as though there was little life left in him, lolling his head from side to side on the pillow. Dave stroked his son's head. Woody stared at his brother, transfixed by the paleness of the face and the darkness of the hair.

Max half opened his eyes. 'Hi'.

'Hello, mate,' Dave said. 'You sore?'

'Yeah, pretty much.'

'Tired? Too tired to talk?'

'Yeah. More tired than sore. Can hardly speak. Sorry.'

'Don't bother saying sorry, Max. Just get well. I rang your mother. Told her you were OK, more or less. I'll ring her again tonight. Soon as you're well, you can take a week off school and go up there, if you like. Mum thinks it'd be good. So do I. She'd love it and you could get away from us. '

'Dad.' Max raised his hand to stop his father's babbling.

'Sorry. Sorry, son.'

'Max, tell us about going over The Falls. The nurse says.....'

'Shut up Woody. One of us blathering on is enough. You want to go to sleep? We'll go.'

But Max was already in a bottomless pit of sleep.

His father and brother did not leave immediately. They sat there for some time in silence, Dave drinking his cup of tea,

Woody sipping his hot chocolate. #####

Janet Turner came to visit, bringing him a book of poetry by Dylan Thomas. Mai came to visit, giving him a book of street poetry.

'What is this?' Max asked. 'Book Week?'

Mai sat clasping his hand in hers. She looked down at the starched sheets. 'Thought that was where your graffiti was heading? Can I kiss you?'

He glanced around the room. 'Yeah. Why not! To tell you the truth, I'm hanging out for it.'

Her kiss brought back memories of damp black earth and the tangy smell of autumn leaves.

'Max?' Mai pulled back and looked at him. 'Will you promise me something? That you'll stop doing this stuff? I don't understand. Well, I kind of do but not really. All I know is that it's killing you. It's killing me too and I bet it's killing your dad.'

She looked so hard at him that he felt like she was plumbing his depths. Mai let go of his hand and stroked his face, saying, 'So - what set this off?'

'What do you mean? The Falls?' Max asked almost innocently.

'What else?'

He sighed, expelling a gust of air that seemed to come from a distant canyon. 'Mrs. Petrocelli came to see me. She gave me a piece of writing Lou did a couple of years ago. It was about graffiti - what he felt like when he was doing it. I didn't even know he'd kept it. Must've been about the only piece of

work from school that didn't end up in the rubbish bin, except maybe some of his artwork. She just handed it over. I guess it must have set something off in me - something snapped. Mad I guess!'

'Where is it now?'

An icy paw clutched at Max's heart. 'I don't know. It was in my pocket.' He pulled himself up in bed and stared around the room. 'My clothes have gone. Where are they? Mai, go ask the nurse! Quickly!'

'Will you calm down, Max! Have you looked in here?' She opened the drawer of the bedside cabinet. 'That's where they usually put your belongings. Is this it?' Mai asked.

She held up the plastic bag with Lou's writing in it.

'Oh God! Thank God for that.' Max looked at Mai and put his arm around her waist. 'Thanks, Mai - thanks heaps.'

'Can I read it?'

A strange wave travelled through his mind. 'I suppose so.'

Hurt passed across Mai's eyes. 'That's OK. I don't have to.'

'It's not that I don't want you to, Mai.'

'No, really. It's fine. Listen, I've got to go. The library's open late but not this late. See you tomorrow.'

She kissed him softly but quickly and vanished from his bedside like a duck disappearing into a pond. He lay on his side, gazing at the dull yellow of his cabinet, wondering why he couldn't bring himself to allow her to read the bloody thing. A nurse arrived and asked him if he'd passed water or had a motion and then said, as an afterthought, 'Oh, that old

gentleman who rescued you came by and asked us to give you this note.'

She handed it to Max. 'Are you comfortable?'

'Yes - thanks.' He could not take his eyes off the note.

'Excuse me - what old gentleman? Who saved me?'

'Didn't give a name. Seemed to know you. Difficult to tell how old he really was. Down on his luck, I'd say. No teeth and a dirty track suit. D'you know him?'

Max nodded and unfolded the paper. It was one page with one continuous paragraph. 'Didn't know he could write', thought Max.

Max,

I guess if you are reading this note you must be OK. I am glad you are alright. I must tell you that I am going and that we will not see each other again. I told you the story about the person who saves another person, they must take responsibility for the one they have saved. For the rest of their life. We are connected but I cannot take on that heavy load. I know that it should not be a load, but it is for me. (See Max....you thought I was perfect.) You wouldn't want me to carry you and you don't need it. Never mind, memories are enough. Like the memory of your dead friend. So goodbye my young friend and try and stay away from the life-threatening situations. They kill you in the end no matter who is keeping an eye out for you. And you know what I told you about crows.

They knew something was up - something bad. Crows? They know things.

Goodbye and good luck,

Nick.

Max looked out the bus window, sending a sad smile to his father and Woody. It was late morning and buses were lined up to take people to the four corners of the earth. In a cloud of blue fumes his bus roared into life and turned into the traffic, heading for the Northern freeway, leaving Dave and Woody waving on the footpath.

He stared vacantly down on the cars and motorbikes streaming past below his window. Traffic and roads and dirty smoke - they didn't interest him. It had been one of the big differences between Max and Lou. Lou had liked motorbikes, factories, chimneys. An urban artist at heart.

'Just can't get him out of my mind. If only it would let up for a bit. Let me off the hook. Get this cattle prod off my back.' Max fingered the pages of Lou's writing, resting in his lap. 'For once I'd like to have a chest that feels light - to get rid of this metal band. Everybody thinks I'm driving them nuts. They should try being in my head for a while, then they'd know what nuts is!'

'I beg your pardon?'

A voice jolted him out of his reflection. A middle-aged woman sat next to him, dressed the way people that age dress for travel. Neat and comfortable but not so casual as to appear informal.

'I thought you said something?' she asked again.

Max blinked at her, searching for some words. He wasn't sure what thoughts had slipped out of his mouth.

'Probably just dreaming. I'm pretty tired.'

'Well, there'll be plenty of time for sleeping on this trip. Where are you going?'

'Brown's Beach. I get off at Venice and then my mum picks me up.'

'Oh, you're going to see your mother. How nice. I'm off to see my son. Him and his wife just broke up. Thought I'd go and cook him a few meals. They live up in Bairnsdale - well, she doesn't live there any more. Took the kids and left. Not sure where. I don't want to be bitter but it's hard when your own children are involved. You'll know that one day, when you have kids.' She opened a flask and poured herself a cup of milk coffee. 'Want some?'

'Sure. Thanks.'

'I know you're not supposed to drink on the bus but' - she peeked over the seats at the driver and his rear vision mirror - 'it's a stupid rule and I'm too old to put up with stupid rules!' She smiled at Max, giving him a gentle nudge in the side.

His travelling companion was warm and chatty. She meant no-one any harm. But Max wondered if she could keep talking for the

whole five hours to Bairnsdale. He'd once been stuck with a truckie, travelling up the coast to collect his prime mover from the repair shop, who had trapped Max for hours, regaling him with truck driving stories and showing him photos of trucks and a stream of accidents. He had hundreds of them.

'I forget,' said Max. 'How far is it to Venice?'

'Seven hours. Venice. Now there's a pretty name'. The woman turned to Max, becoming quite animated. 'Italians settled there after the war. Australia's got so many interesting names - Italians, Aboriginal or just plain funny. Have you ever heard of Mad Dog Creek? I just love those names. I do! I suppose you think I'm silly, prattling on like this? Look at you. Your eyes are drooping. You must be so tired. I'll stop.'

'It's OK.' Max said out of some polite habit.

'No, no', the woman said, patting him on the leg. 'You get some sleep.'

He let his head fall back, feeling the vibrations of the bus engines. As he slipped into a deep sleep, he heard his travelling companion murmuring to herself. 'Venice, Mad Dog, Clematis. How lovely...'

#####

Warm early afternoon sun woke Max up. His face felt hot and sticky. He blinked his eyes, lazily gazing out at the flash of trees and white lines, and yawned.

'Well, haven't you had a lovely long sleep? We're nearly at Bairnsdale.'

Max sat up. 'Where are we?' He felt like a man who had been shanghaied and found himself on a tramp steamer, somewhere in the middle of the ocean.

'Fifteen minutes from Bairnsdale. You've been asleep for hours. At least you didn't have to listen to my prattle.'

'I'm sorry', he said.

'Good heavens, no need for that. Caught up on my reading.'

'What are you reading?'

She looked shyly showed Max the cover. ' "The Scarlet Princess." It's pretty trashy - but I enjoy them.' She looked down at the book in her lap. 'Keeps me company, I suppose.' As the bus rolled into a service station carpark, they said their goodbyes. 'Hope you enjoy the visit with your mother. Weather shouldn't be too bad. Nice to meet you.'

The last picture Max had of her was her back disappearing into a rusted out old Kingswood and her son dumping her luggage into the boot. He only caught a glimpse of the son's face. A look of bewilderment and exhaustion. Unshaven and crumpled. In need of his mother's cooking.

'Mother's cooking....' Max wondered if he was in for a never-ending line of old hippie dishes: lentil soup, tofu cacciatore, soy burgers. He laughed to himself and spread out, resting his forehead on the window glass, watching Bairnsdale pass from sight, leaving a grown man crying in his mother's

arms in a kitchen that was used to warmth and perhaps would be warm once again.

She wasn't a bad old stick, was she ,Max? Helping her son out. She liked those names, didn't she? 'Bairnsdale' - there you go, Max. I've just had a flash. You know what 'bairn' means? A baby. And 'a dale'? - like a soft small green valley.

What a picture, Max! A small green valley full of chortling little babies. Now, isn't that reason enough to be alive?

Reason enough for Dave. I know you think he's a bit of an old fool but he gets tears of joy when he helps a woman give birth to a baby he doesn't even know. You can't touch feelings but they're real, all the same.

So what if it is mysterious? Life's mysteries have their own seductive joys - and babies and birth must be part of all that. Here I am going on like your travelling companion but sometimes I think that's the meaning of it all. Then again, who am I to say?

The brakes of the bus let out a wheeze. And there was his mother, Meg. Dark hair going a touch grey, pulled back with wisps hanging untidily down her face. Big straw sun hat, pants, boots, flannel shirt and a hippie vest covered with rainbows, tarot signs, a couple of embroidered names,

including his and Woody's. Like she was still carrying them around.

'Oh, Maxie. How wonderful to see you, to have you here!' She embraced her eldest as though she could still feel him in her womb.

People cry in their mothers' arms. That's a fact. And Max, on this occasion, was no exception.

'Oh, Mum. Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry. I think I stuffed up a bit' and he wept into his mother's jacket.

She held him close to her breast. 'It's OK, Max. Your father and I have stuffed up a few times too. Come on, I'll take you home - get some old hippie tucker into you.' She laughed. 'I know how much you love it!'

Meg's ute followed the winding road home. An abandoned wooden trestle railway bridge ran next to the road until it disappeared into a line of trees. Blackened fingers of burnt gums pointed to the pale blue skies strewn with conical plumes of white cloud. Clumps of lime green foliage wrapped themselves around branches, reminding Max of the arm-length gloves worn in summer months by the Vietnamese women in Wellington Street.

Hurtling little gullies of ferns and trees ran off to the left, full of mist like snow billowing between hills and

blacktopped mountains. Trees on either side of the road leant towards each other, cutting out the light and forming a tunnel of gathering gloom, until at last they emerged from the forest and daylight revealed the seaside country town of Brown's Beach.

The broad inlet stretched out in every direction, enjoying a full tide and plenty of fish. Currents roamed lazily around its shores, lapping on hidden pebbly beaches. Mountain ranges lay to the north, while in the east sandy coastal dunes hid large freshwater lakes. Small creeks ran into the bush, petering out in dark, brackish waterholes. A sea eagle perched high in the branches of a dead native oak, meditating on a full belly of trevally.

Approaching the town, Meg crunched back down through the gears. 'Not a lot of work here, Max. I hang on to both of my jobs. I like them actually. And I'd rather work. But they gave me a week off while you're here. Sometimes small town bosses can be like that.'

It was five o'clock when they pulled up. Finches with red helmets and red beaks hopped in and out of grevillia bushes in the front yard, looking like little gossiping shopkeepers.

Meg's house was a weathered cedar kit-home with steep rooves and piles of wood stacked on the verandah. It was small, just with one bedroom for Meg and an attic bedroom above the

lounge for Max and Woody whenever they happened to visit. On cold nights the heat from the potbelly stove would gather there, the boys sleeping snug as a bug in a rug.

'I've got a surprise for you,' Meg said. 'I've cooked roast chicken and done the potatoes the way you like them - well, the way you used to like them.'

'I still like 'em', smiled Max.

'Good. And don't expect steak while you're here. I can come at chicken and fish but red meat's not on the menu. Still, you won't go hungry.'

'Even cabbages scream, y'know, Mum.'

'Yes, yes. I've heard that one. Now go and get settled. And if you've got any porn magazines, don't let me see them - and don't let my friends see them either!'

'What - they'd drive you out of town?!'

'Hardly. I'm sure quite a few blokes around here would have their own libraries.'

After tea, Meg played some of his and her old favourites.

'Can't listen to Cat Stevens anymore, Max. Ever since he became a fanatic. Never trust a person with blazing eyes. They end up doing what they reckon they're against.'

At about the time Max felt like hitting the sack, his mother leant forward and put her hand on his knee. 'So, are you going to tell me?'

He looked into the fire, red coals sitting snugly in their beds.

'I'd like to know, Max. It would stop me from worrying. I know I avoid a lot of things but.....'

Without taking his eyes off the winking coals and embers, he began to talk. The words spilled out his thoughts and confusions. The river flowed. The autumn leaves fell, floating on yellow train lights in the dead of night, tunnels of madness and purple spray, waterfalls and Mai. And poor dead Lou.

But there continued to be a stopper, like a cork in his throat that would not, could not budge. He didn't tell his mother about the words that had seemed to come from nowhere, painted high on factory walls and tall school buildings. How could he explain when he himself, barely had the thoughts or words to do so?

#####

In the attic that night, with his mother snoring away in her little house, Max took out Lou's writing once more.

Lou Petrocelli

Year 10 Green

English

Topic: 'Something burns within me.'

It's a dark balmy summer's night. There is the coolest of breezes whipping up the dust in the car park. We have spray cans in our bags. A factory wall, clean as a washed blackboard, stands before us. We have no ladder. We are alone. We don't know what to write. But our cans are full and we have a blank wall. It is 11:45 p.m. Something burns within us.

I ask my mate if he wants to start. He doesn't. I raise my hand, my finger poised on the button. Fear gets the better of me for a moment, in the same way it does when you are about to write the first line.

The fear ebbs, then vanishes like a magician's rabbit as soon as I begin. The first spray hits the wall and at the same time any resistance in my head flies away.

I work quickly. Tonight we work in blue and black, rounded swirling fat letters, intertwined and buried in big blocks of yellow. I drew the sketch of this piece in Art and I know it like the back of my hand.

We chose the letters 'ESP' because we think it would be great to be able to do it. But mainly they were chosen because they're great to paint, great to experiment with.

I stop and my friend takes over. Some nights you don't work well together but tonight we are like twins on the same team.

He bends the 'S' around making it look very relaxed. Then I throw the 'P' up, only to bury some of it in thick layers of deep blue. Meanwhile he's busy at the other end ,doing a touch up.

It has only taken twenty minutes.

A few nosy taxi drivers slow down and check us out, probably phoning the cops. We stand in the middle of the carpark, a little wind scurrying around our feet. The piece looks good. We shake hands and smile.

What more do you need: a wall, a spray can, a mate and a good dark night?

I don't need anything else.

Underneath, Lou had written a note to his teacher.

Dear Sir,

Sorry it's late. All of this is complete fiction but it makes a good story, doesn't it, Sir? - L.P.

The near-full icy moon sent ripples of light through the triangular window of the attic.

'That must've been one of the few things you ever handed in mate. I'm sorry I can't show it to anybody else but, for the time being, it's mine.'

Max rolled over and tucked his writing into one of his porn magazines. You shouldn't mind being hidden in here for a while, he thought. Not a bad kind of after life.

He closed his eyes with the moon drifting into the room. He had almost forgotten that night in the carpark with Lou but now coloured dreams of blue, black and yellow flooded his mind, as the moon tugged at the oceans and king tides began to run on the beaches and into the inlet.

#####

That morning after he crawled out of bed, Meg made coffee and sat down with Max. 'Tonight's the full moon. A few of us always celebrate it. We have a party. On the beach usually. D'you want to come? It's fun - but you don't have to.'

She smiled at Max, who grinned skeptically.

'I know what you think of your mother's hippy nonsense. It isn't, you know. I mean, it's not nonsense. And it's not really hippy anymore, just alternative. Shit, I hate that word. I don't know, it's just people working things out, living a life that means something to them.'

'It's OK, mum. I'll come. Might as well do the whole tourist trip.'

Meg softly clipped him over the back of the head.

'Cheeky bastard.'

The ute pulled up under the shadow of the ti-trees. Waves boomed on the sand. Six bodies jumped out of the ute. Another car pulled up and then another. With their headlights turned off, the moon glow blazed on the beach.

Max wandered away and watched his mother traipse over the sand, chatting, laughing, running, heading towards the massive tide surging along the shore.

Two fishermen were casting lines over the back wave, searching for the snapping salmon. He plonked himself against an outcrop of brown rock, shadowed from the moon's light. The vista before him made him feel like he was at the movies, front row, the best seats in the house.

Bob, the local drunk, rolled from group to group, veering from person to person. He was a squat man who prided himself on an impeccably trimmed beard which did not match his bedraggled clothes. He stumbled around in the sand, occasionally falling into the rushing shallows.

A man in shorts yelled at him. 'For god's sake, watch yourself, Bob! None of us are gonna jump into that tide tonight, just to save you. Don't want it to be your last full moon party, do you mate?!'

For some reason, Bob decided this was the most amusing thing he had ever heard. He began rushing off to various revellers,

grinning like a man in a fever, repeating the words, 'Don't want it to be your last, do you, mate?' Most people ignored him and began chanting and beating on drums. When Bob received his twentieth rebuff, he decided to sing the words to the rhythm of the chanting, clinking two empty bottles together, drowning out the delicate tinkle of tiny cymbals. Until Meg firmly took the bottles out of Bob's hands.

'That's right, Bob. You don't want it to be your last, so go over there and lie down. We won't forget you at the end of the night.'

'I know, I know. But Meg. Meg! Do you love me, Meg?' Bob's voice was beginning to whine. 'Me and you Meg. You know I've always loved ya. What about it, Meg? I'll stop drinking. I will. Promise.' His babble slipped away into sleep as Meg placed a coat over him.

Max had seen Bob down the street the day before, wandering aimlessly and erratically along the road.

'What's he on?' he had asked Meg.

'Alcohol, as far as I know.'

'Is he always like that?'

'Got worse about eighteen months ago, when his father died. Didn't hardly know him. Before he got like this, he was.....nice.' She looked at Max. 'I went out with him once. I think he had a bit of a crush on me.'

Max covered his eyes with his hands. 'Mum, I don't want to know this.'

'You're absolutely right. We mums - we're just sexless. Not a romantic soul in our bodies.' She pushed him playfully.

Thundering blue waves pounded the beach, rushing waters scampering over the sand, while tormented currents surged along the channel and into the vast inlet. Beyond the reach of the licking silver tide, a fire snapped and cracked as the chanting continued. People drifted off into the night, dancing and swaying to the moon. Phosphorescence sparkled at the edge of the surf. The two fishermen packed up and went home, the lunar festivities not to their liking.

A woman wearing a diaphanous floral dress began to sway, standing in the soggy sand, her feet slowly sinking and disappearing. She began to sing like an opera singer, blasting her message to the stars. Her voice startled Max out of a dream. The woman began to peel off her clothes, tossing them into the sea, while a man, naked to the waist with an eagle tattooed on his shoulder, began dancing and prancing and jumping around her, spouting poetry from a book he held to the light of the new moon.

Max stepped out of his shadowy retreat into the glow of the night. His mother was with the chanters, dancing and bopping on the spot, her eyes closed, smiling a truly wonderful smile.

Further down the beach, at the point where the tide ran to the inlet, a younger woman danced naked, writhing arms, soft

creamy white skin, breasts like opals in the moonlight. She swirled and leapt, arching back and over, her feet leaving soft imprints in the sand.

Max felt himself moving forward. His mother and her friends were raising a wooden chalice to the moon, drinking to the health of the goddess within. Max watched the goddess dancing at the edge of the inlet.

'Come and join us.' A woman called Heather took him by the hand as they picked up a chant that took off over the spray caps and out into the ocean depths. A man in the group, shaven head, old T-shirt and shorts, began to shake shimmer and roll, stroking his hands around the shapes of people's bodies. He worked at a feverish pace as they let him stroke and pummel their psyches, knead and shape their auras.

'So that's what Dad used to laugh about when he said ' 'Let me stroke your aura, Dora' '.

Max laughed and laughed, falling down on the sand, feeling some warmth for a change. He allowed his body to sink towards the cosiness of the fire, the spirit glow holding him in its arms. Around him, the naked dancing girl still whirled and sprang, the opera singer still wailed her song, Bob snored on the sand, out for the count, the chalice kept moving from hand to hand, a few joints blew and Max grinned at his Mum, leaning over and whispering in her ear, 'As good as any place to go mad.'

Next morning Max rolled over in his bed and awoke. A blackbird warbled in a tree outside. He stretched like a cat and felt, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, as light as an autumn leaf. As strong as an ant.

Max and Meg paddled up Blue Dog River, the name reminding Max of the woman on the bus. The sun was shining, a surprisingly warm day. The lapping noise of the old double sea kayak moving through the water gave them both a sense of peace.

'Haven't done this since your dad and me split up. I must be mad. This is wonderful - how could I forget?'

Black cows stood forlornly on the river flats. The grass was still crisp and lime green from the early morning frost. Mother and son followed a channel of water leading through thickets of rattling river bamboo while they were taking a wide sweep around a bend, a flock of black swans rose as one, their flapping wings sounding like applause from an appreciative audience, their awkward slim necks stuck out in front like a compass, water dripping from their airborne bodies. They ascended rapidly, the white under their beating wings repeatedly exposed for a millisecond, creating the effect of flickering strobe lighting in the sky.

The sea kayaks seemed heavy to Max but once they picked up speed, paddling became effortless. 'They don't turn too easy. A bit like a lumbering elephant', he said to his mother.

Meg began to pant as she searched for a rhythm. 'There's a way of doing it. I've watched them in the sea and in the inlet. But don't ask me. You can check it out with Matt - he lent us this. Says you can use his single sea kayak if you want to go off on your own. Your mother's a bit rusty.' Then she added. 'As long as you don't go trying to kill yourself again. Like, heading out to sea or something.'

'I wasn't killing myself, mum. At least, I don't think I was.'

The kayak swished through the glassy water.

'You know, Mum, this is one of my clearest memories of you and dad together.'

'Yes', said Meg. 'That part was good, no doubt about it. But the rest - well....'

They were about a kilometre upstream by now. The sound of the ocean was a bare whisper over the trees and the river was beginning to narrow, the banks covered in coarse waist high grass, a perfect home for long red bellied black snakes. Dead logs lay submerged in the clear brown water, like crocodiles with their snouts exposed.

'The locals call this 'Little Africa'. I've only been up here in a tinnie but they make enough noise to frighten off anything.'

A sandbank jutted out into the river, reminding Max of Nick and his island so intensely that an arrow of remorse pierced his heart.

'Let's pull in here, Max, over there. I need a rest and a bite to eat. I brought us some cookies.'

Eating in silence Max looked up at the other side of the river with its densely wooded hill running steeply down to the water. Small rivulets bounced and gurgled their way down the slopes. Whip birds cracked in the box gums while swallows went zipping and gliding over the tannin coloured water, flitting in and out of the small wattles growing near the edge.

He munched on a cookie wondering about Mai. Where was she? What was she doing? Had any other guys tried their luck and had she discouraged them?

'I haven't been in a canoe or a kayak since the Falls. Pretty mad thing to do, eh ,Mum?'

'Oh yes, pretty mad.' Meg took a swig from her water bottle, rolled up her trousers and paddled in the water. 'If you want to know the truth, Max, it's right off the bloody wall - then again, nearly everybody I know has done crazy things, weird things. Usually because they've got a pain in their hearts. Like you. But maybe we spend too much time on hurt and pain. Let's face it - at any one time you could make a list of all your woes in life and convince yourself that nothing will ever be any good or right again.'

'Like Lou?'

'Just like Lou. And like Bob too. And probably like a lot of people you know.'

A small azure blue kingfisher hopped busily in the muddy bank, amongst the tangled maze of roots that curled in and out of the chocolate brown mud.

'So what did you and Lou have in common?' his mother asked, hands thrust in her pockets, standing calf-deep in the water.

'Not a lot. Graffiti mostly. He hated the bush. Could never convince him to come paddling. He hated swimming too but he was a great artist. If you come down to the city I'll show you some of his pieces. Y'know, dad never liked me doing it much. But he liked Lou alright.'

'Dave can't talk. When the Vietnam War was on he was known as the paint-up specialist. Every week he'd go out painting up anti-war slogans, 'Free such and such', 'US out'. Matter of fact he took you one night. I was out and he was supposed to be looking after you. I nearly killed him.'

'You're having me on?'

'No - it's true. Absolutely true.' Meg cupped her hands against the sun. 'He was rather good at it, though.' She smiled wistfully at Max and reached down into the water, picking up a rosy pink river stone, holding it in the palm of her hand.

'Remember that bloke dancing around Shelley last night - she was the one throwing her clothes into the sea. The bloke's name is Sam. He runs the local fruit and vegie shop. He reckons if you want to paint something, he'd be happy to supply the paint. He's got an empty wall.'

'What's he want - advertisements?'

'Hardly. A painting. Something interesting - whatever you want. That's if you don't mind doing it legally?'

'Really?'

'Yes, really. And that girl you were watching last night - she works there part-time.'

'What girl, Mum?'

'Give me a break. Who are you kidding? The one that made your eyes hang out of their sockets. In any case, she's too old for you and you've already got a girl back in the city. What's her name - Mai?'

Max felt a hot flush and grinned foolishly.

'Oh well, there's no harm in looking, is there, Mum?'

'Not usually. Anyway, she's gone back to the city for a few days to see her boyfriend.' Meg laughed, enjoying her son's discomfort. She tossed the stone into the deeper reaches of the river, sending out perfectly measured ripples to the bank and beyond. A crow's voice, wailed in the bush like a lost child, . Max lifted his head.

About time, he thought.

It was the middle of the week. A wind scurried up the main street of the township. A retired couple wandered along in front of the shops, supporting each other, their arms linked together, commenting on prices and checking their shopping list.

They stopped for a moment, the only audience for Max's work as he stood on a plank of wood resting between two ladders, spraying paint over the wall at the front of Sam's fruit shop. Inside lay small mountains of dark oranges, bunches of parsley and coriander, unwashed red potatoes, stout stalks of celery, all dripping wet. Yellow butternut pumpkins were stacked like wood next to buckets of garlic and ginger and lemon grass, reminding him of Mai. Mai of the long black hair, as sweet as the sandalwood incense smoldering on the counter of the shop.

Don't these people ever stop burning incense? Max wondered. I think Woody's going to like this town. Nothing he said or did would seem weird to these people.

That morning they had received a letter from Woody and Dave. Dave had gone on with a lot of worried nothings and Woody talked about his new batch of jam. 'Naomi must be back on the scene', Max said to his mother and then felt immediately disloyal. Bye, bye, Despina, he thought to himself.

Woody had finished the letter by asking,

'Max, how do you think the old guy, your friend, knew you were in trouble? Do you think it was accidental? He was a long way from his island. I was just wondering, sorry. We hope you are both happy. Dave sends his love,

Love Woody.'

His attempt at a signature was to show the world that he was becoming older. He ended with a PS. - 'I'll bring some jam for you, Mum.'

At least he didn't call her Meg. Max frowned, then caught himself and smiled. Before him lay swathes of purple spray. He had thought all his birthdays had come at once when Sam had given him one hundred dollars to buy the paint.

Good is what you're going to get, Max said to himself, returning with a couple of shopping bags that rattled with cans of spray paint.

He worked rapidly, moving back and forth along the plank, only stopping long enough to shake his cans and reflect on what he was doing. Thin fine jets of black and purple spray swamped the blankness of the wall. Showers of paint buried the greyness. Finely crafted yellow letters flew onto the wall, golden in the weak autumn sun. The words fluttered from his heart and this time he knew them in his mind. This time they came from him and were part of him, neither alien nor enemy, wild, and willing.

At two o'clock Max was finished. He jumped down from his platform. A crow, standing on the edge of a cascading rubbish bin, pecked hungrily at a half-eaten chiko roll.

Max's work lay damp and glistening. Sam emerged from his fruit shop and stood next to him, not to see what he had got for his one hundred bucks, but more to see some of Max's mind.

On the left of the painting a black as sump oil crow stood haughtily, tough and bold, its eyes golden as a currawong's. Against a massive backdrop of royal purple - the best, Lou, the best - Crowman stood, his thick strong beak half-open. And from his mouth poured words that people would wonder about for years.

Splayed across the wall, a line of cursive golden script that blossomed into a lazy dance, coiling down the wall to Max, saying:

He likes to glide but he knows sometimes he has to flap.

Crows?

They know things.

At the feet of Crowman limped a smaller crow, swathed in bandages, and in the corner of the piece stood Max's tag, the Da Vinci man.

Sam shook Max's hand and thanked him, then walked back into his shop, grinning like a mullet as he returned to emptying a box of potatoes onto bowed and overburdened shelves. Max wandered off in the direction of his mother's home, leaving the old couple on the footpath in front of a painting, reading

words that echoed down the street, across grassy banks and out onto the lapping swollen inlet.

In the mid-afternoon of the next day, settled in a single sea kayak, Max waved goodbye to Meg who was standing up to her shins in salty water, sea-grass stroking her feet as the currents moved forward then receded. The craft had a beautiful sense of forward direction, planing through the slightest chop, though he still had little idea of how to quickly or effectively change course.

Small flat islands, covered in sand and saltbush and lush green grass, spread out across this side of the inlet. Home and nesting place for a myriad of water birds, herons, swamp hens, pelicans and pacific gulls. A salt encrusted wind bit at his eyes and at the skin on his face. Pushing the sea kayak into top gear, Max left the islands behind, like posies floating in the wake of a ship. His muscles were beginning to feel well oiled again, his body thriving on its own movement and sense of purpose. Oh, to feel as though some peace was just within his reach. It was enough to make him sing and laugh and cry. Just like he had in bed last night after talking to Mai on the phone, listening to her voice, tasting her lips, remembering a mound of autumn leaves and a kiss that seemed so far away.

The sky was dull and grey, seemingly lifeless. He kept a watchful eye on the wind and sky. If the weather turned dirty he would have to allow a few minutes to rein in his kayak. He had no intention of dying. No matter what he had done in his recent past, no matter what the reasons, this time he was paddling for sheer joy.

He headed for the Lawson Sands, named after the great Australian storyteller who many years ago camped, wrote and got drunk at Brown's Beach. The sands lay only centimetres below the water's surface at high tide but were exposed for some hundreds of metres when the water ran out to the sea. In summer months when the water level was low all the time, red jellyfish would swim in the warmer waters and fairy terns would hatch their eggs on these sands.

A pelican and its mate flew overhead, heading towards land, chests puffed out like self-important matrons. A salty tang whipped his face and tousled his hair. The soft, velvet green water swirled past, curds of frothy foam circling around.

Max looked at the horizon and saw dark clouds gathering. At the same time he realised that the water was becoming unfriendly. The surprising quickness of the change made him falter in his rhythm. He was half way between dry land and the Lawson Sands. Black, brooding clouds brawled over the mountain ranges to the north. Seagulls screeched and wheeled, fighting

their way back to shore. He sucked in the air and smelt rain on the wind.

Turn or go back? Turn or go back? The kayak kept on course, a magnet in those northern ranges. And then he saw it. Bolts of blue lightning, violent zigzags bouncing and ricocheting off the peaks, lighting up the sky, making sailors miles out on the high seas, take off their caps and fall to their knees.

The water began to rise as the wind crescendoed. The chop turned into small waves with no rhyme or reason. A swift gathering current kept pushing the kayak sideways as the rain began to pelt down in thin sharp needles as cold as ice.

Pushing against the flow was proving difficult. Max's heart was thumping and his breath was being reduced to short gasps. If he could turn the kayak more in the direction of the current, perhaps he could trust to luck and go with it. Maybe it would run into a headland, a beach, or dryland.

Desperately he tried to remember the rudiments of turning this sea kayak around. He leaned out to the side, and dug his paddle into the boiling waters, but a wave from nowhere saw its chance and rushed at the unbalanced boat, thumping it on its side, tossing Max sideways and into the seething water of the inlet.

Releasing the spray cover was easy. Seeing anything at all was harder. The rain poured down in thick white sheets, slapping the surface of the water like a scolding parent. In the maelstrom Max lost his boat. He couldn't see it and he knew that without it he was gone - done like a dinner.

But it couldn't be far away. They were both in the same current. Max decided to try and catch the kayak, to swim with all his might, to use the current and chase down his quarry. He struck out, hauling his body through the water like an Olympic sprinter. In the black, overcast sky of the inlet he pounded through the water, on and on, gulping down air and rain and water, his shoulders screaming orders to stop and give up, his body aching and his spirit tiring of the endless battle.

In the midst of that roaring wind and howling gale, Max felt as though he was walking in quick sand. Then suddenly his hand struck the kayak. Lunging and grasping at the sides, he realised in a flash that it was upturned. Blindly he slid down to where the boat narrowed. He threw an arm across the hull and yanked himself onto the boat, pulling his body out of the water until he lay face down, hugging his kayak, running on a current that ran to - who knows where?

But the rain was beginning to ease and the blast of light from the fireworks display on the mountains allowed him to regain his bearings. Though he could not be sure, he felt that they

were no longer in the current. He began to paddle with his hands towards where he hoped the Lawson Sands would be. His arms still ached to their core but the storm was passing and a dull light shone on the inlet. He felt the scrape of the sand before he realised he had made it, made it to his island.

He rolled off the boat and, on his hands and knees, dragged the kayak into shallower water until it could float no more. Rain still poured but lighter now, feeling almost warm in the aftermath of the storm. Forked lightning kept up its crazy dance in the mountains, bouncing off distant pinnacles, leaping into the sky. Max stood ankle deep in water, his feet planted in sand. He held the kayak by its rope and looked at the now visible shores of the inlet, lined with trees drenched by the drizzling rain.

Waves of cold were running up and down his body. His clothes clung to him like a suckerfish. He wrapped his arms around himself, holding his shivering body, afraid of falling apart. How long had he been breaking? How long had he been aching? How long had he held his finger in the dam wall, holding back the mountains of water within?

He cried as if there was no tomorrow and in his tears, face upturned to the rain, Max saw Lou's dark shape walking the shiny streets. A silhouette against the street lights, carrying his canvas bag with a coarse rope coiled like a snake inside, walking with neither a smile nor a frown, approaching

the bridge near the paper mill, treading softly on the steel walkway, hearing nothing, feeling everything and nothing, reaching into the darkness of the bag, feeling the roughness of the cord, wrapping it around the icy handrail, securing it with a knot, winding the other end round his neck, its veins of blood protesting against the tightness of the noose. Then, standing on the top rail with arms outstretched like angels' wings, Lou thinking of.....of what? Thinking of nothing? Thinking of Max? Of his parents? Of dying young? Maybe he thought he was a nice bloke, after all. Maybe he had all his dreams knocked out of him. Maybe he shouldn't have done it.

Is he happy? I don't know. But there's more than Lou's dark shadow in this rain. Those words of his, still tucked in your top pocket: 'I don't need anything else'. What does that mean? Max! I'm asking you a question. 'What more do you need?' Remember that line, Max? Well, we need a lot more - certainly more than Lou was prepared to settle for and got. A bit of soul, Maxie boy, a bit of spirit. It's like we all live in one big old fat soul, Max . We couldn't be separated if we tried. Oh, if you'd just let me take you, let me show you but we all know that never works. But sometimes I wish you could see the whole poem and recognise it not so much for its words but for its shape.

Max sat on his upturned kayak, elbows resting on his knees, hands clasped together before him. The rain pattered softly then ceased.

'Oh God, Lou. I loved you and you were my friend. But, geez, mate, you were a long way from your island. A long, long way....'

He sat on the upturned kayak and talked to his dead friend, five hundred kilometres away. A universe away. A small launch chugged out from the shore. A mother standing in the bow, searching the waters for her son.

It is very early in the morning and the fog is lifting from the Maramingo River. The weather settles into winter dampness. Mountain ducks with green feathered collars dart in and out, up and down, along the slippery banks. A crow cries out, its question lost in the surrounding bush. Rats sniff and bustle. Swamp hens scratch. Welcoming Max home.

His departure from Brown's Beach was as tearful as his arrival had been. Meg had thrust a bag of sandwiches at him. 'They're ham. I thought it wouldn't hurt to break one of my rules.....for once.' At the steps of the bus Meg had suddenly reached out and grabbed Max's arm. 'I'll come down and see you soon. And maybe Mai's parents might let her come up here and have a holiday.....'

'I doubt it', Max said. 'I gotta go. Thanks mum. I love you.'

Max paddles with the cool sun on his face. Woody and his father had welcomed him home with open arms. Dave knew nothing about the inlet episode and Max felt no need to enlighten him. He wonders why he hasn't told his father that he loves him. He wonders why Woody's questions still give him the shits. He wonders why he now wants to show Lou's writing to Mai. And he wonders why he is paddling in the opposite direction to Nick's island, which probably by now is slowly giving up the fight against hordes of blackberries and strangling vines.

The chill of winter slaps his cheeks, jogging Max's memory. Of rats in dark tunnels; words on walls; dangling off railway bridges; kisses; visions above waterfalls; black crows and being tumbled around and around in a crocodile death roll. Did I want to be rescued? Did Lou? I was just taking risks. Crazy and yeah, maybe suicidal, but I didn't want to die. I only wanted to understand what it's all about. That's all.

A kayak floats gently downstream on a river of dreams. Stories by their thousands run in subterranean currents, leading us and holding us together, telling Max that if he's here for no other reason at all, it is to tell his story. The story of the boy standing in his kayak, legs balanced, arms outstretched across the water, floating his way down the river's edge in the misty winter's sun.

Michael Hyde. 1996. c

AFTERWORD

Youth suicide statistics are extremely alarming. The suicide rates for young males aged 15 to 24 years is of particular concern: There has been an increase in completed suicide of almost 50 per cent for this group between 1979 and 1993. The rate of young male suicides peaked at 27.88 per 100,000 in 1988, while the overall Australian rate for the same period has remained around 12 per 100,000. In general terms however, the suicide rate for both males and females aged 15 to 24 years is among the highest when compared with other industrialised countries.' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995. p3.) Even though such 'objective' informationⁱ may seem insightful, my novel did not spring from such tables of figures. It developed from infancy eight years ago when I visited a student of mine in hospital who had tried to kill herself.

Driving home that night with two of my children, I wondered what was it that was causing so many of our young people to seek suicide as a

ⁱ The question of objectivity and subjectivity becomes quite vexed when examining something like suicide. Einstein declared that both specifically and generally, 'the observer is the essence of the situation' which implies that drawing a line between subjectivity and objectivity is a difficult if not impossible thing to do.

solution. I therefore wondered what the attempt to suicide had to say about young people's desire for meaning in their lives. In other words, the novel is a subjective exploration of an extremely sad phenomenon in our society. While figures are indeed alarming, it is the human condition of young people that I chose as the most appropriate focus for a novel and its audience.

It was a great temptation to ensure that 'River's Edge' fit neatly into the parameters of current debate about youth suicide. There is a great deal of 'objective' material on the question. Indeed, the issue has prompted a mass of national and international comparative data. There are rates of successful and unsuccessful 'attempts' to consider, not to mention causes and risk factors, preventions and cures and government strategies. There is even anecdotal evidence. Government papers, the mass media, including television dramas and popular music are fertile grounds for such information.

Unfortunately, this kind of information reduces youth suicide to facts and figures and simplistic notions. In other words, it fails to grapple with the deeper and human nature of the problem. All too often, mechanical

information simply helps us avoid becoming involved in the striving for an answer to the meaning of human existence.

The leading protagonist of the novel, Max, had a friend called Lou who has committed suicide before the narrative begins. The subject of the narrative therefore, becomes Max's search for the reasons why a young man would choose death over life. This focus however, is not absolutely clear to Max himself. That would have been far too contrived. He is not so much searching for the actual details of his friend's suicide (he more or less knows this already) but becomes unconsciously caught up in the usual eternal questions that go to the core of our existence. The novel uses the issue of youth suicide as a starting point in order to shed some light on such weighty questions as, 'How can we and do we keep getting up in the morning in the face of such a dearth of reasonably satisfactory answers to the meaning of our existence?'ⁱⁱ

As I wrote and researched the novel I accompanied Max on his journey. Using a narrative form to tell his story seemed to be the best way

ⁱⁱ I am perplexed as to why this and similar questions are not voiced more often in secular society. Is it simply a dead-end, never-ending line of enquiry? Something that is so obviously spiritual and child-like that we shy away from it, fearing the smirks and silence of society in general and friends and colleagues in particular?

to explore the inner workings of a young man in crisis who is trying to come to terms with the suicide of his best friend in trying to make some sense of it all. Equally it was an effective way of asking the audience to meditate upon his passage to increasing wisdom and to wonder about his flirtation with Thanatos. Of course this is not a conscious dance with death; it rarely is. In this case it is more an intuitive response to his own life crisis and perhaps the hope that even while in Totentanz, he might find a source of light.ⁱⁱⁱ

I had a clear idea concerning the details of Max's journey but I allowed enough leeway for the story and the characters to head off in directions of their own. American writer, Raymond Carver is fond of saying that there isn't a line in literature worth a damn; it's what's between the lines that counts. Thus I tried to develop a story line, settings and characters that would allow whatever unconsciously lay between the lines to emerge.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Buddhist notion of Life always being accompanied by Death became a silver thread running through the novel. In fact the more I and Max travelled the stronger the Buddhist influences became, pushing me towards further reading in this area and discussions with a friend who had spent many years as a novice monk in Myanmar.

Using the problem of male youth suicide and specifically Lou's death like a pinhole torch, the novel reached out in a widening arc to shed light on the themes and issues of mothers and fathers and their sons, the role of story, maleness, relationships and love, rebelliousness, isolation and union and spirituality. This was achieved via taking Max on a journey where he frequently and sometimes quite unknowingly walks the line between life and death. Like trial by fire as a ritual of mourning, Max puts himself through a number of physically and mentally death-defying tasks involving kayaking and graffiti-ing.

At the heart of these tests is Max's own search for reasons to keep on living now that his friend has gone. It is through the rites of passage that he discovers (as I discovered) the following insights: One, that you do not have to accept the story you or others might have of you, as immutable. Two, that one doesn't necessarily have to judge the future by what one has in the present. Three, that a person must have enough love in their life to make life affirming decisions. Four, that the mystery and joy of birth itself may be motivation enough for getting up in the morning. Five, that the power of story can heal or destroy. Six, that life is often hard work but

this should not exclude the opportunity for lightness. Seven, that life may be enjoyable.

It seems inconceivable that the above could have emerged from a more traditional academic study. A quantitative and academic study is static by nature compared with the dynamic of a novel; a point that will be elaborated below.

A subjective exploration of meaning as only a novel can do, stresses the significance of human emotion and feelings. Biologist, Charles Birch, argues that, 'My feelings are with me all the time. Because I feel, I know that I am. So said Descartes...feelings are what matter to each one of us, moment by moment, and the feelings of people down the ages determine history, age by age.' (Birch, 1995, p.5)

The issue of feelings consistently appears in all the literature on suicide but is only paid lip service. Clinical psychologists all refer to a society which does not encourage the expression of feelings. That the crippled expression of personal feelings is particularly true of men should surprise no one. According to Dr. Brian Tanney (commissioned by the Australian Federal government to investigate youth suicide), 'men refused

to reach out for help and faced a barrier that it's not culturally acceptable to cry or to say, "I'm in trouble." (Pegler, 1996, p6.)

The suggestion that we live in a society that is more attuned to the tangible and obvious is hardly a new proposition but it appears that the aspect of the stunted development of feelings is common to all suicides. The notion of young men 'shutting down' their feelings can be best seen in contemporary novels that deal with this subject.^{iv} Feelings are locked up in journals or mostly in the heads of male suicides. If this aspect of youth suicide is not pursued, better understood or more fully developed then the problem will continue to escalate. Literature in other words provides the opportunity to render insights available to a much broader section of the population than the occasional public revelations of specialist psychologists. In vulgar Freudian terms, it is almost as if the issue of feelings has become repressed by the overt focus upon numerical study.

When young people talk about suicide they themselves repeatedly make mention of 'feelings being bottled up', of not talking about their

^{iv} 'Dance on my grave' by Aidan Chambers (1982) and 'Shoovy Jed' by Maureen Stewart (1997) have leading young male characters who appear to lead a life that is hidden from their friends and family. They both shy away from letting on to the world what's going on in their head. Hal (Chambers) and Jed (Stewart) have never-ending internal monologues going on but have great difficulty in reaching out to others. If their behaviour is seen as peculiar it is not picked up as an indicator of desperateness or going down suicide road – neither of them say "I'm in trouble" and nobody seriously and consistently asks them if they are.

feelings for seventeen years, or that they were sure they were the only people 'feeling like this'. Perhaps the most intriguing comment came from a young woman on the ABC's 'Attitude' program where she explains that when you want to kill yourself it is not so much a mind feeling but 'a whole body feeling.... a feeling from your head to your toes.' (Attitude. 1994)^v

Lou was a young man who had feelings that rarely saw the light of day. Even though we see nothing of his father, we know he is a taciturn figure who knows little or nothing about the inner workings of his son. As Mrs. Petrocelli says: 'Mr Petrocelli, he didn't come. Couldn't. Can't face it really. He just sits - doesn't understand. He's a good man but he doesn't talk much. Can't let it out.'

Lou's family seems lost. His sister has fled the home too and no one has any idea of how to help Lou communicate what he might be feeling. Students at school also have an image of him as a 'silent' young man. Max himself refers to the discussions they have and knows that he is one of the rare people with whom Lou has ever spoken. Max's impassioned words written on the wall, 'You should have talked to me, I'm supposed to be your

^v She goes on to say that 'it's like the Chairman of the Board's no longer you.' (Attitude. 1994)

friend', is a direct reference to how shocked and hurt even the closest of friends can be when their friend commits suicide. The suggestion (or is it direction?) by the school Principal to Max's teacher, Janet, to steer clear of poetry is a ridiculous (but typical) attempt to suppress the necessary and inevitable upsurge of feelings - an example of one of the very things that led to Lou's suicide in the first place.

The days, weeks and months leading to the act of suicide are full of intense feeling. The act is full of feeling. The aftermath is full of feeling. To deal with such an issue in novel form is to pursue this line of feeling and thus places some flesh on the 'objective' skeleton. But as with all investigations where feelings are paramount, real answers are never neat. In fact Lou's reasons are not easy to catalogue. It was certainly not the intention of the novel to provide a list of possible causes like a psychoanalytic case study. Although at one stage in the writing of the novel I was tempted to suggest that Lou had thought he might have contracted HIV due to a sexual liaison with his 'kind of' girlfriend, Mary. This idea was abandoned because its very 'neatness' seemed too contrived to be authentic.

In other words, Max's search for personal meaning is not really centred on the small or large details of his friend's death. Lou's suicide is primarily the catalyst for an exploration and questioning of the value of life itself and a clarification of why he should choose to continue his own life in the wake of the abrupt passing of his best mate.^{vi}

Spirituality as opposed to psyche has inevitably become interwoven through the text. The occasional use of a 'spirit'-companion-narrator enabled the novel to range over many more fields and to more easily reflect on the big questions of life. This also served the subsidiary aims of the thesis: to establish an intimate narrative tone and to introduce an aspect of 'magic realism'. The lines between the two often vanish in the narrative.

In an 'Age' article by Rosemary West, 'Heaven's Door' based on her reflections on her dying mother, she writes: "That's the great lesson for us, their parting gift to us. They take the pennies off the eyes of the living. They talk about love and relationships and they become less acquisitive, less concerned about material things." (West. 1996. p13) Later, West notes

^{vi} 'Shoovy Jed' on the other hand tends to provide a clearer reason for the attempted suicide of Jed: lack of attention to his inner being by a constantly brawling set of parents. 'Dance on my grave' comes closer to my novel in its attachment of suicide to the quest for meaning. However, Chambers too, provides an argument between Hal and his friend Barry, and the worry of sexual identity as possible 'reasons' for Barry's bike crash/suicide.

that Kubler-Ross herself has often been criticised for suggesting we have spirits who come to guide us through our death.

Intangibility and a lack of materialism, runs with Max throughout his journey along the fine line between life and death. His reasons for his self imposed adventures as well as the reasons for Lou's suicide are never clearly defined. However the journey imperceptibly leads to some sense of being at peace. The spiritual aspect is seen most clearly in the voice of Max's spirit who chides and jokes and gives instructions to Max, like an alter ego or 'Jiminy Cricket' sitting on his shoulder: 'Let's go Max. Let's get out of here! We can do it boy.... just don't stop thinking. You can run and think at the same time, can't you, Max?' In one sense, Max's struggle is the opposite of the Faustian pact. Instead of selling one's soul to the devil for material advantage, Max wages war with his own in order to gain equanimity through the insight of experience.

The spirit voice also chimes in with magic realism as words seemingly appear from nowhere when Max ventures out as a graffiti artist. These words come from rivers deep within him and us. The novel suggests that

they are the intangible points that are affected when we hear of young people killing themselves.^{vii}

The spirit is heard in the caw-cawing of the crow that follows the path of the narrative. In European culture and Australian Indigenous culture for that matter, the crow has often been a much-maligned symbol. They are seen as a lowly and practical bird with a great sense of mischief and even the perpetrators of terrible deeds. They are the scavengers who know that if you do not eat and survive, you take the gift of life too lightly.

In 'River's Edge', the crow is closely aligned with the character of the hermit^{viii} who is a symbol of the fight between isolation and union. He is alive and kicking, representing the apparently uncluttered view, the raw edge of spirit. His island is difficult to find, at times shrouded in fog yet at other times sitting there as clear as day.

The hermit is a real person and not the stereotypical soothsayer. His views shift and are muddled. He is both welcoming but rude and clipped in his manner. The hermit and his representatives, the crows, are reminders

^{vii} On reflection, the identity of the 'spirit voice' was never clear to me. From the start it hovered and refused to be nailed down and finally I gave up trying to do so; which suited the novel's purposes very well.

^{viii} The hermit is based on the hermit who was camped on the Maribyrnong River in the seventies. He subsequently died as a result of being assaulted by two young men. His camp was burned to the ground and many of the hermit's cats died in the blaze. As far as I know, he never hurt anyone.

to us of the lack of value in cut-and-dried answers. The novel reaffirms the Buddhist notion that by having some acceptance of uncertainty leads to acquiring some wisdom.

The crow is the feature of Max's last painting in the story. From the mouth of the crow come the words: 'He likes to glide but sometimes he knows he has to flap.' Max's mother, Meg also flaps and glides. She joins in festivals of the full moon but she also holds down two ordinary jobs in a country town. It is the same with her friends. As much as they desire to walk in the clouds they accept the grounded 'reality' of everyday life.

Young adults, who have survived their own suicide attempts, relate to this 'flapping and gliding' concept. 'Flapping' is very much like what they refer to as their 'hard times'. They say they have had 'to persevere through the tough times because you will be the better for it.... you might not want know about it now but you will be, and that will create such a great hope for the future. (Blake. 1996) Which is not as glib as it might sound.

Those who have survived have had 'to re-author their own story.' (Griffiths interview.1996) Some stories we impose on ourselves. Lou for example, buys the story that he is a no-hoper and he doesn't have enough back-up, enough encouragement in his life to resist it: 'The suicidal

youngster is so bereft of encouragement that he sees no possibility of resolving life's problems and takes his life as a final act of revenge and despair, "the end of a long sentence that nobody had read." (Balson, 1995, p12)^{ix}

Other stories are imposed on us. The myth of individualism falsely suggests that one must be able to find all the answers, relying only upon oneself. This response, conditioned by a sense of reality is often propounded by Hollywood films and its adoration of a hero. It implies a fairy tale logic.

The healing as well as the potentially destructive power of story is an important difference between the current material on suicide (both sociological and literary) and this novel. Nick, the hermit who lives by the river is adamant that people should tell their stories as water, as a symbol of narrative and the unconscious concurrently runs throughout the novel. Max paddles on it, loves it, is nearly drowned by it and is literally caught up in a wave of magic realism.^x

^{ix} This is certainly true of Lou and the younger character of Jed, in Stewart's book.

^x 'Story' became a more powerful element in the novel as I drafted it. It is an important difference between 'River's Edge' and the other two novels mentioned above. Since completing the novel, 're-authoring' one's story is an idea that has strongly influenced my teaching of writing to secondary and tertiary students.

The author, C.P. Estes in 'The creation of stories' talks of the healing power of stories: 'It was not stories that had been missing from creation, but rather, and most especially, the soulful humans who could tell them.' (Estes. 1995. p5-9). And J.M. Coetzee in 'FOE' says, '...the storyteller must divine which episodes of his story hold promise of fullness, and tease from them their hidden meanings, braiding them together as one braids a rope.' (Coetzee. 1986. P88-9.)

If beasts and birds feed their young on fish from the seas and fruit from the trees, humans feed their children on words and stories.^{xi} This is what Max is doing by using his mourning and grief in order to search for a story that makes some sense to him. Lou on the other hand, seemed to have had no personal story map at all, which gives rise to the possibility that suicide may be a story that's lost its way.

The role of parents is also obviously significant in the data on youth suicide. Some researchers go so far as to say that 'the power to end the tragedy of teenage suicide is in the hands of the parents.' (Balson. 1995. P12) Both Max's mother and father play a significant role in the novel and even though portrayed as 'alternative' parents. They are loving, responsible

^{xi} Prof. John McLaren told me this wonderful little saying comes from somewhere in The Pacific. I've been unable to track it down so this is about as close as it gets.

and struggling with their own story while trying to help their eldest son come up with his own. Sadly it is not the case with Lou's parents and in particular with his invisible father.^{xii}

The different responses of males to problems in their lives are something that the novel attempts to address. Their preferred violent methods of suicide led me to change the method of Lou's suicide from taking an overdose of pills to hanging himself. Firearms, hanging, strangulation and suffocation continue to be the most common methods of suicide for young men. (COA.1995. p15.) Their choice (there are those, like Balson, who argue that suicide is actually a choice) is possibly indicative of them buying the 'macho' story that suicide has tried to sell. However, the males in my novel are not stereotypically redneck, machismo types.^{xiii}

Max is a sensitive young man who has many masculine characteristics, who falls in love, who loves his mum and dad deeply, who may fight railway

^{xii} The parents of Jed are constantly at war. Barry's father is dead and his mother is smothering. Lou's mother has few strategies and his father doesn't talk. Compare these parents with Max's and maybe Balson's thesis has some validity.

^{xiii} Jed attempts suicide by jumping from a bridge. Barry kills himself on a motorbike. Lou hangs himself from a bridge. The authors of the three novels have clearly read the research. One of the differences between mine and the other two is that Max, by the end of the story, is clearly presented as somebody who is 'getting back on track.' Both 'Shoovy Jed' and 'Dance on my grave' tend to have a despondent air to their endings.

cops, but who also slowly tunes into his spirituality, his 'femaleness' and grieves openly and deeply for his friend and the lack of a real answer.

The hermit is a male who has fled the world and in the end, flees from Max as well. He relates to Max in a very 'blokey' manner but shows sensitivity, encouraging him to 'tell his story'. Dave, Max's father, is a male nurse who delivers babies and provides encouragement and love. He is not a perfect father by any means and often shows his exasperation, anger and bewilderment. Max's younger brother, Woody, asks questions of cosmic significance and has a warm and close relationship with his father.^{xiv}

Both happy and sad men are significant in the full moon festival on the beach. The crow becomes Crowman in the painting that Max does on the side of Sam's fruit and vegie shop. The spirit, when it gets down to it, is male. And 'poor old Lou' is another male youth suicide. The men are all attractive individuals in their own way. They flirt and fight and care for each other and enjoy girls and women as part of their lives. Max has a Vietnamese girlfriend (Mai) who is feisty and loving. They delight in each other's company and it is Mai who provides the full story on DaVinci's 'man',

^{xiv} Both Jed and Max have younger siblings (India and Woody) and both appear to offer some hope and sunshine in the way in which they deal with problems in their life. India sings Elvis songs and wears flowers in her hats while Woody loves the cosmic question, football and humour. They both have 'a lightness of being.'

which becomes Max's 'tag' and the uplifting vision at the end of the novel. They are passionate about each other and soul mates in the making with their ability to love and share their thoughts while maintaining their sensuality. This is a strong image and is united with other images of love and compassion throughout the story.

An elderly woman who is Max's travelling companion on the bus to visit his mother, allows Max to see an act of compassion for a man he doesn't know - her son. Compassion is something Max has forgotten about as he embarks on his grief stricken journey.^{xv} As has been said, Max is not only grieving for himself or for the lack of definitive answers, he also grieves for his dead friend, Lou. Max suspects that Lou, in the core of his being did not want to die and that suicide is so often not a matter of choice.

In the ABC's 'Attitude' program, a young adult says: 'Deep inside they don't want to die, but they're in a trap.' In the novel, Max does not want to be trapped and unconsciously works very hard to be released from his torment. By the end of the story he has gained part of some truths and a

^{xv} If I came to any deep understanding about the way in which we should live our lives, compassion was the only thing that made any real sense to me.

little wisdom. He is not entirely satisfied but at least he now feels that he is no longer caught in the same trap that snared his best friend.

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