

## Title Page

Thesis Title: Food, Water, Shelter, Fresh Air ... and Stories;  
Teachers' Creative Writing in the Classroom

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This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Education (Research), in the School of Education, Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development,  
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## Abstract

This thesis takes the form of a written analytical exegesis (30%) followed by a novel (70%), entitled Frank Davies' Amazing Frog Catapult, to satisfy the requirements of this degree.

The contention of the exegesis is that the meat of writing lies in the creative nature of how a text comes to be constructed, the journeys that ideas may take and the maturation and realisation of characters along the way. In doing so, this exegesis highlights how classroom English teachers, as a profession, could benefit from adopting the methods that writers use as they develop their art. In an era in which the My School website publishes school achievement in terms of quantified, NAPLAN style data, educators need to ensure that creativity is being nurtured, rather than discouraged.

Following the exegesis is the novel itself: Frank Davies' Amazing Frog Catapult. It is aimed at the younger end of an adolescent audience, probably from Grade 5 through to Year 9. Frank Davies' Amazing Frog Catapult is set in a fictional location, Laconia Heights. The unfashionable prospect of an 'urban sprawl' setting appealed to the author because this in fact is where he and his students live. Laconia Heights isn't a real place, yet it is depressingly easy to find. It looks like lots of places around Melbourne - complete with ridiculous, or at least wildly inappropriate, names. Initially, the story was intended as a stinging allegory of the way that we Australians ostensibly and regularly approved of the imprisonment of asylum seekers - young, old, able-bodied/minded or feeble. Without losing this original intent, Frank's character, however, began to define itself in a slightly different direction as the writing progressed. Characters cannot operate in isolation from their environment. They are influential and have influence on their surroundings, be it ecological, sociological or physiological.

Equally, characters are in turn influenced by their environment. It is an awareness of the interaction between characters and environment – both physical and social – that informed not only the novel but also the direction of the exegesis.

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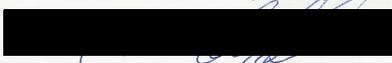
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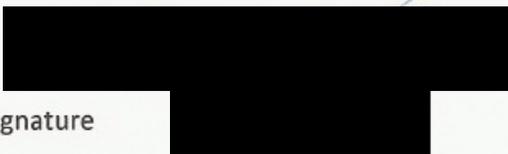
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## **Food, Water, Shelter, Fresh Air and Stories; Teachers' Creative Writing in the Classroom**

### **Introduction**

The contention of this exegesis is that the meat of writing lies in the creative nature of how a text comes to be constructed, the journeys that ideas may take and the maturation and realisation of characters along the way. In making this claim, I wish to highlight how classroom English teachers use methodical, planned and scaffolded approaches to writing and how, as a profession, we could benefit from adopting the methods writers use towards the art of writing. In an era in which the My School website publishes school achievement in terms of quantified, NAPLAN style data, the notion of teaching to the test, which, in the case of creative writing, ignores ideas, drafts, revisions and editing in favour of one, finished piece, how are educators ensuring that creativity is being nurtured, rather than discouraged? The searching for, and delightful discovery of words and the crafting of sentences to form an unforgettable paragraph would seem a worthwhile pursuit, one worth supporting. To promote the learner's exploration of language is to facilitate a human being's inclination to carry out communication, the basic function of language. Arguably it is the complexity of language that separates us, as a species, from other species.

Words are at their most powerful when they have a reason for being and this is especially true in narrative. Fortunately, the impending National Curriculum places value on narrative as both a vehicle to create and to transmit learning. Put bluntly: 'They (students) create their own narratives, drawing on their experiences with literature.' (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2009). The incoming National Curriculum speaks to the complexity of the English language at a word, sentence and text level; further stating that learners build up the knowledge of writing and interpreting narrative (and other concepts) when they listen, speak, read, view and write.

In examining issues such as literacy, pedagogy and creativity, this exegesis focuses on elements of story writing from a teaching, learning and writer's standpoint, and is divided into sections accordingly. Furthermore, my own experiences, reflections and resulting questions and observations on the writing process of my first novel: Frank Davies' Amazing Frog Catapult, are discussed.

Section one introduces the notion of the influence of place, setting and situation. By examining my novel during its writing and redrafting I discuss the importance of the environment (setting) on both characters and story, and the unique influences which in turn helped to shape and create the story. I also include some of the experiences I encountered when I trialled various phrases and ideas from my novel on my own year nine students.

Section two provides a brief discussion of the use and study of narrative and its significance for teachers as more than a 'text type'. Clearly, a novelist values narrative; this section outlines pedagogical reasons for promoting narrative in an educational setting.

Section three examines contemporary teaching methodologies for the writing and comprehension of creative writing. These are 'the Seven Steps' the 'Socratic Circles' and the 'Writer's Notebook'. Included in this section is an explanation of why it is important for teachers to write with their students. It is no accident that Frank, the main character in my novel, makes active use of a journal. The journal he uses is very similar to the Writer's Notebook outlined in this section.

Section Four presents a critical reflection of a range of 'literacies' in which students are active participants. This is set against a background of evolving and expanding communication options and the subsequent implied rights and responsibilities in a contemporary democracy. I also consider the links between being literate and being human.

Section five outlines why teachers should write with their students and how the practice of doing so is rewarding for both student and teacher. I also outline the notion of writing for one's students, comparing the teaching and expectations of reading with teacher's attitudes to writing.

Section six is a personal reflection on the inspiration, cultural influences and writing/redrafting of my first novel: Frank Davies' Amazing Frog Catapult. Following section six is the novel itself, reworked and now complete. It is aimed at the younger end of an adolescent audience, probably from Grade 5 through to Year 9 (sometimes referred to as the 'Middle Years'). As with any work of art, however, its audience is likely to be wide and varied.

## **Section One: The Notion of the Circular Influence of Place, Setting and Situation**

Grunewald (2003), discusses a convergence of pedagogies; namely Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, with what Gruenwald refers to as a pedagogy of place. Grunewald connects Freire's situationality (becoming conscious of one's situation in terms of time and space and, in doing so, taking action to change one's situation; this act making one human, even more human) with a deep understanding of the role that place exerts on and is changed by its inhabitants, or those who occupy that place. In defining a place-based pedagogy, Grunewald underlines the need for acknowledging the role that place (or setting) has on human beings; in other words, how humans influence and are, as a result, influenced by their context. This cycle of pedagogical influence (of place on people, people on place) is 'needed so that citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit' (Grunewald, 2003, p. 4). As I will explore later, this notion, that place is influential on people and at the same time is influenced by people was directly reflected in my work on my novel Frank Davies' *Amazing Frog Catapult* and the situation leading to the development of this story.

In the wake of the cultural crisis following the events of September 11, 2001, I found myself with a powerful opportunity to plant a seed of thought in a text I had begun to write. Although the message of humanity I wanted to send into the world (one examining cultural awareness, racism, identity and environment) was abundantly clear to me, the story I wanted to tell, although taking shape, was not.

The story began with an idea of portraying a suburban setting, which in my mind, mirrored the world that challenges many communities that are seen to be 'springing up' in growth corridors around Australia. Questions arose as to the influence of setting, or 'the world' my characters would inhabit. How would these characters influence and be influenced by their surroundings, and to what extent

would they be defined contextually? What creative processes were now at play in regards to the way that the developing story was being influenced by the intended, young adult audience? How would this influence the setting and the characters, especially as the work was redrafted?

To a large extent affordable housing dictates where people live, the implication being that once I had decided on the setting, the socio-economic background of my story was at least strongly implied. The characters of my story were thereby sentenced to whatever fate one could (rightly or wrongly) apportion to them according to the cultural, social and economic conclusions imposed by their setting.

An early draft of the fictitious suburb 'Laconia Heights' was scrapped in favour of a more recognisable, realistic one. The houses I'd described were a mix of the houses I knew from my childhood: 'Queenslanders', stilt houses made of timber with large spaces underneath, and with living areas upstairs. These were blended with houses one would encounter more widely in Australia: 'brick and tile', single story, modest. The original blending did not convey the meaning I eventually sought.

My idea for the setting was evolving, but left in its original state would have been vaguely recognisable to its audience, if at all. In order for readers to identify and thereafter empathise with my characters and their stories, they would surely need to recognise the setting. Another powerful reason to make adjustments was mirrored by Kate Grenville in her follow up account to *The Secret River* - *Searching for the Secret River*.

'How puny and little-minded all those plans seemed from the perspective of this ridge-top, in this vast room made of leaves and air. How presumptuous I'd been, thinking that this was my story alone, to pummel into shape as I saw fit, a story I understood enough to force into the form I

wanted. The breeze had picked up. The bunches of leaves whipped against each other, whipped at the air. The place was speaking. It was a language I didn't know, but even so, I was starting to understand.'

(Grenville, 2006, p. 170)

Grenville was still getting to know the setting her characters would soon inhabit. She accomplished this by visiting the community around Wiseman's Ferry, The Hawkesbury and by meeting locals, listening to stories and by revisiting locations with fresh eyes. Even then, Grenville outlined that the story she had in mind was not hers alone. It belonged to her characters, their world and perhaps to the locals who had trusted her with their stories and secrets.

My idea for the story remained a project on the backburner until I was conducting teaching rounds at Newport Lakes Primary School during the final year of my teaching degree. The school's unique cultural make-up of Lebanese, Anglo, Christian and Muslim students provided a workable, identifiable and above all real background, that would allow my characters to emerge. I had a community model, one which I was able to view closely over the period of a year and which to a large extent, would form the cultural and social basis for the story.

Now, as a fully qualified teacher, I have been working in Melbourne's west in a newly formed suburb, Manor Lakes. The area is rapidly growing. Manor Lakes College, where I am currently working is expected to be the largest single campus school in Victoria within the next few years. It is very much the world I had imagined when I invented 'Laconia Heights'. As I have drafted and revised my story I have been able to carefully cherry pick elements of life in a growth corridor for families with backgrounds and situations reminiscent of those in the classrooms of Newport Lakes Primary School and Manor Lakes P-12 Specialist College.

The need to do so is at least twofold. On one hand is the imperative of reader engagement where the author must allow a 'way in' for the reader. Readers must have access to the narrative in order to laugh, cry and commiserate with a raft of characters, most of whom are busy creating the drama. This is part of what Grenville discovered. The other, being that there is a very real social obligation to, as Frank Hardy eloquently opined, 'Write it down for them'. As profiled by Glen Jennings and Narelle Hoadley (accessed 2011), Hardy himself believed his writing (*Power Without Glory*, *The Unlucky Australians*) promoted working class interests and/or the interests of people not readily, or honestly portrayed in print, except for particular effect. The significant gap in the choice of imaginative fiction for young adolescents that seriously and sensitively addresses social class and religion, in the way I have in Frank Davies, is established below in Section Five.

## **Section Two: The Use and Study of Narrative and its Significance for Teachers**

The mind is a narrative device: we run on stories. Stories unite all worlds. It is the compelling nature of stories and their telling that impacts on how we relate to each other, how we define who we are, and how and what we learn. Stories are an entry point for meaning making - a place where learning and life merge. Stories contribute to our development as whole, coherent, human beings (Lowe, 2002,p. 7).

As educators, we are often caught in contradiction. We know that we cannot expect students to develop a love of reading if we, as teachers, do not model this behaviour ourselves, yet we are often called upon to teach material – or to do it in such a way – that we do not really enjoy. There is strong evidence to suggest that, in the teaching of reading, educators as a profession are not necessarily leading by example (Cremin 2007). This mindset to instruction is so common in the teaching of reading and writing it has been likened to the Christian story of the Apostle Peter, who, when implored by a beggar for money, replied that he could not give what he didn't have (Brooks, 2007, p. 178). The 'Peter Effect' (Applegate and Applegate, 2004) characterises teachers seeking to convey an enthusiasm for reading which they simply do not share. Not only is this in contrast to desired teaching practices, it would seem to contravene the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT)'s requirements for Teacher registration: 'Teachers know the content they teach' (2010). This is easily mitigated by discussing our reading habits, talking with students about books we have read, joining in with reading sessions. Our expectations of our students and ourselves as writers should not be any different.

Certainly, there is plenty of evidence to support the proposition that we should be writing and reading with our students. Cremin (2006, p. 418) states that teachers who take part in creative composition alongside their students 'arguably will be in

a stronger position to develop the creative voice of the child'. Writing with students is also a 'powerful support to young writers and enables them to enter new areas of language' (Nicholson, p.12, 2006). Furthermore, teachers must be confident, avid readers and writers to be effective reading and writing teachers (Calkins, 1993, Graves, 1978, Routman, 1991). It is equally worthwhile examining the notion of writing *for* one's students. It is to a consideration of these two aspects to which this exegesis now turns.

It is important for educators to be mindful that intrinsic links can be made between reading and writing. Additionally, discussion and role-play complete a circuit of interrelation that has been identified and exploited in primary and secondary classrooms. Aesthetic reading is a process encouraging students to enjoy the very sound of words and to experience the author's 'voice'. Teaching children to enjoy reading in this way has been shown to assist with engagement and to foster the idea of pleasurable reading (Nicholson, 2006, p. 13) as opposed to 'reading for pleasure', when students read on a more superficial or casual, less-engaged level.

Closely aligned with the notion of engaging students to read the narrative form, is the question of how teachers can best use the precious resource of narrative in teaching practice? According to Steven Wolk, there are numerous opportunities to do this. Authors do not write books simply for readers to answer comprehension questions or to do exercises to learn reading skills. Central to living in a democracy, he argues, is the obligation for reading (Wolk, 2009, p. 1). Wolk further argues that young adult fiction can be a powerful tool for teaching critical literacy and certainly with this comes the need to be able to model and instruct specific skills needed for fiction writing (Wolk, 2009, p.5).

Teachers therefore need to gather the 'tools of the trade' in order to teach effectively. For teachers of secondary students, the tools are not entirely different to those of primary teachers. In terms of narrative however, how can one expect

students to confidently construct a reasonable piece of writing if their gentle guide lacks the tools or knowledge necessary to begin the task?

### **Section Three: A Consideration of Three Contemporary Teaching Methodologies for Creative Writing**

In considering the influence of the narrative on students' overall literacy development it is worthwhile noting how the form is presently being approached. The Seven Steps to Writing Success (which I attended in February, 2010) is a popular method of teaching narrative writing in Australian schools. Teachers in Western Metropolitan Region (WMR) – this is where the novel is set - and other regions in Melbourne, Victoria are offered this professional development regularly.

The focus in The Seven Steps is on 'keeping it simple'. Teachers are advised to give the specific instruction: 'no hard words, keep it brief'. The Seven Steps, spruiked via creator, Jen McVeity's web site (<http://www.sevenstepswriting.com/products.php>) uses this simplicity as a major marketing device:

Finally, when all the Seven Steps have been mastered, that's when we put it all together into the complex process of 'writing a story.' We give you a simple step-by-step template to help your child create a great story.  
(Seven Steps, 2010)

McVeity is a former teacher and author of children's books who facilitates ongoing professional development for schools through the program. Professional development using The Seven Steps runs over a single day or days at hired venues and in classrooms followed by between one and five days of student modeling sessions or for parents home schooling their children the modules are available instantly via email through the secure ordering system. McVeity opines the following:

The Seven Steps works on the 'chunking' method. Think how we learn sport in steps. e.g. in tennis - we practise forehand, backhand, serve, volley...So why don't we teach writing in chunks? (Seven Steps, 2010)

McVeity's description is a good one, for tennis. Considering the push for increasing literacy (and numeracy) levels in our schools, the need for teachers to adopt programs addressing the perceived 'problems' seems as straight-forward as the chunking of writing. However, approaches to writing, by writers, are varied. This is why there are writer's camps, workshops and many other drama oriented methods which writers utilise in order to help students appreciate aspects of drama, tension and story/plot.

The chunking of writing has some benefit for reluctant writers, and The Seven Steps is not short of good ideas, but it fails to offer any real substance. Some of the ideas in McVeity's product seem sound:

- Plan for Success: Introduces a visual planner.
- Sizzling Starts: Grab the reader's attention.
- Tightening the Tension: Make it look dramatic.
- Dynamic Dialogue: Let characters move the story forward.
- Show, Don't Tell: Actions speak louder than words.
- Ban the Boring Bits: Get to the interesting matter.
- Exciting Endings: Enthrall the reader until the final page.

These ideas are certainly not new. The idea of visually planning a story has been circulating for some time. What McVeity offers in her program is a very good starting point, with short, non-threatening activities designed to keep students engaged. In doing so, the program relies on the premise that language needs to be kept simple. This deliberate 'dumbing down' of language in any classroom, from early years to year twelve is bankrupting the economy of learning and is arguably the most damning aspect of The Seven Steps.

For many educators (and writers), this approach to writing is far from ideal. Freire recognised this, intoning that:

Teaching kids to read and write should be an artistic event. Instead, many teachers transform these experiences into a technical event, something without emotions, without creativity - but with repetition. Many teachers work bureaucratically when they should work artistically (Freire, 1985).

Writing is a discipline akin to reading. How else are we to instill in students the necessary skills to write and write and write, if we do not extend their writing sessions beyond minutes? How do we impart to our charges that writing a story, a narrative, is not just creating a framework, it is manipulating a work of art, one which is a 'high-order form of language' (Hannell, 2009, p. 14). How do we expose our students to the gift of their language if not by immersing them in new words, and in new concepts and ways of thinking?

My novel began with a feeling of intent, not a skeleton to grow around. Writers approach writing in many different ways. In a letter to W.H. Auden in 1955, J.R.R. Tolkien shone a revealing and illuminating light on the creative nature of writing:

All I remember about the start of *The Hobbit* is sitting correcting School Certificate papers in the everlasting weariness of that annual task forced on impecunious academics with children. On a blank leaf I scrawled: 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit'. I did not and do not know why.  
(2010)

Without that opening line, there would be no *Hobbit*, no *Lord of the Rings*. Here lies a sizeable portion of the creativity in writing; that the story and more importantly, the characters, will develop and continue the story's growth. The planning, writing and revising of narrative is a non-linear process, one which has been described as a spiral as the writer uses 'each subsequent process to inform the other stages.' (Flower and Hayes, 1981). The writing process could be

likened to the observation of a ripple in a pond. A ripple is a wave of energy, borne of something else, informing and transferring energy as it grows and eventually dissipates. The ripple analogy could be likened to writing, an idea radiating in all directions, to be considered as a story by the eye that witnesses its totality. Each idea could be thought of as a pebble cast into the pond. The story, the culmination, hopefully, of beautiful circles of energy, a result of many ideas cast into the pond.

Vygotsky (1962) has shown that strategies such as peer feedback, group discussion, reciprocal teaching and other techniques that promote discussion in the classroom (known as transactional learning opportunities) have a major influence on teaching and learning. Many teachers and educational researchers are aware of this, as Brooks states: 'Teachers who were enthusiastic readers were likely to use literature circles and discussions to promote greater student engagement.' (Brooks, 2007, p.3). Apart from levels of engagement, teachers have also reported how literature discussions among students and teachers has increased the time devoted to reading in schools (Cremin et al, 2009, p. 14). Stories are the very stuff of discussion. If stories are a facet of the basic make-up of human and cultural identity, the potential for advancing students' knowledge through discussion in the classroom is profound.

The case for encouraging discussion as one means of interaction seems perfectly clear, given the extensive research from Vygostky and later, Bruner and others. The nature of 'interaction' needs to be clearly defined. It was thought that whole class discussion was a suitable way to instigate social and cultural exchanges, but group talk may not be as effective as intended, relying as it does on "appropriate tasks, willingness to engage, current knowledge and pupils' interpersonal skills" (Bennett and Dunne 1990, Cheshire and Jenkins, 1991, cited in Burns and Myhill, 2004, p. 3). Many teachers encourage their students to have the conversations but are at risk of making the incorrect assumption that any conversation is worthwhile (Burns and Myhill, 2004, p.4).

Whether writing or examining texts, much can be done in order to increase the level of engagement within the classroom. In my novel studies class for example, I have been using a group-based approach similar to the well-known 'reciprocal teaching' method, using specific roles: reporter, recorder, time-keeper and resource manager. Such roles, once learned are recognised and respected, even appreciated, as students know instantly what is expected of them. Small group-work is powerful in terms of allowing a differentiated approach in the classroom and also for providing whole class reflection time to conclude and consolidate the groups' and the class' discoveries and understanding.

'Socratic Circles' (Copeland, 2005) is another strategy that has worked positively in my classroom with students, even the reluctant contributors, finding their voice on issues from time to time. 'Socratic Circles' also allows for much interplay between listener and speaker, with exchanges becoming very 'higher order' as issues are more fully explored and ideas exchanged. This is particularly useful when discussing aspects of a shared story or class novel. Students who produce writing with the knowledge that they will be presenting and discussing their work with each other are beginning to think and act as writers.

Such group work is also able to be extended into writing classes, thereby allowing the level of group discussion that, over time, many educators have called for. The discussion time needs to be professional. This translates to my students' discussions being purposeful, on-task and productive. Students are expected to be able to rate their groups' performance in terms of productivity, identify weaknesses as areas for improvement and to set goals and solve problems in order to keep the discussions professional.

Explaining to students the reasons why they are being asked to undertake any task also assists them to discover meaning. In setting up group discussion work we conform to, as well as question, what constitutes positive, desirable human

behaviour. Even as we read for pleasure, we read to understand. We talk about our reading in everyday life, typically by forming book clubs and discussion groups in order to express our thoughts and clarify our meaning. We participate in writers' workshops to hone our writing, discuss and communicate.

Teachers of writing should trial many different methods, from McVeity's brand to others, before necessarily adding them to their repertoire. Rather than feeling inadequate as writers, teachers of writing could use their insecurities to demonstrate and importantly to model their thinking. The environment is then created for powerful teaching and learning opportunities in which a teacher gets his or her hands dirty by writing alongside their students.

Some writers start with the end in mind, others (like Tolkien) do not. How does a teacher assist a pupil who is developing a method of writing that is not consistent with the linear approach of The Seven Steps except by rigid correction? Such a student may merely be finding his or her own path, rather than straying from The Steps. Since the advent of word processing, even beginning at the start with an introduction is unnecessary. 'If you don't know what you're introducing, it's like introducing people at a party when you don't know their names' (Haynes, 2007, p. 29). Having a clear grasp of the content of the writing is essential to writing a clever, succinct and functional introduction. I encourage some students to write their introductions last.

The Seven Steps would seem to be ideal as a quick diagnostic tool for assessing a tricky area of the curriculum - the narrative - and this is reflected in the way that the program markets itself. One can hardly blame teachers for reaching for a tool such as this, given that narrative writing is perhaps second to poetry in terms of reluctance at the whiteboard face (Weaven and Clark 2009).

As Donald Graves has stated, 'testing is not teaching'. (Graves, 2002, p.2) He notes that we (educators) have even adopted the language of testing in

reference to children's reading and writing, with emphasis on scores and standards rather than on ideas that may open up the lives of children. Additionally, he worries that this implementation of assessment, standards and instruction practice mean that teaching and learning are becoming increasingly linked to obtaining or possessing the right tools or materials. Teachers ought remain as 'thoughtful and capable professionals who implement a variety of strategies based on student need and interest' (Coles, 2003; Graves, 2002; Ohanian, 1999, cited in Brooks, 2007 p.178).

McVeity's approach is certainly not wrong, for it is indeed a starting point, and the argument could be put that for teachers who don't know any better, here is a way to quantify a child's writing. Has the story got a sizzling start? Does it match with the visual planner in terms of beginning, middle, end? One can tick off each of the seven steps and grade a story without actually reading it deeply. The result is to reward formulaic, 'stick to the plan' type writing, ignoring, and therefore discouraging young 'pebble-casters' in the imaginative pond.

An approach that is more closely aligned to the argument of this exegesis is the 'Writer's Notebook' approach (Buckner, 2005). Unlike the Seven Steps, however, this is not a commercial package. While it is promoted as a 'tool', it is more accurately described as an approach to writing. The overall idea is firstly to allow students to regard themselves as 'writers', secondly to provide a place for the 'writer' to write. Typically, notebooks are portable, great to leave by the bed, armchair, café counter or (perhaps) toilet for times when the ideas are flowing. For writers, it's no big secret. For educators, it has infinite potential. This is reflected by Frank as he makes his own faltering entries in a journal, re-reading his thoughts and making new entries until he is writing daily. Although Frank's journal is not strictly speaking a writer's notebook, he is practising the same approach when he finds significance in his own writing.

As author Red Smith once remarked: 'Writing is easy. You sit at the typewriter and open a vein (Buckner, 2005, p. 4). Moving to more fluid means of writing is essential if educators truly place a high value on the creative. This is why the Notebook approach (as discussed below) offers students greater opportunity to write.

### **Writers' Notebooks**

Students are in charge of their books, meaning they can decorate and customise them. They need to be workable, that is, a reasonable size and with enough pages to allow for a great deal of writing. They do not get 'corrected'. In fact, if a student doesn't wish to share their work, they don't have to. The notebook is the students' property at all times.

The only real prescription lies in the setting out of the notebook, and this can vary from teacher to teacher. Generally, a section will be devoted to 'seeds', meaning small ideas that with care and revisiting, may, or importantly may not, grow into something more worthwhile. A seed may be a single word, a sentence or a page of description - a character study, event or even a piece of dialogue.

A section may be devoted to expanding ideas and rewriting passages. A section may be dedicated to drawing what you see before or after you write it. Another for reflecting. Another for building grammar. The key is to write every day, as a writer writes. This means not hanging around for significant subjects or inspirational moments, what I term as the patient restraint of promise. Buckner argues that students build fluency through daily writing and provide their educators with evidence of what they know or do not know about writing when they do it.

Using the notebook to capture inspiration when it may or may not strike is one application, a bit like having a butterfly net handy. To further the analogy, it's the

daily practice of swishing that net that will assist a student at becoming a dab hand at butterfly collection.

And so it is the practice of daily writing which has made writers who they are: people who write. The essence of the 'notebook' approach is to move away from rigid methods such as an over-reliance on writing prompts, situations or sentence starters to allow the writer to be more mindful. This happens when the writer moves away from what Buckner describes as 'grocery list writing'. As Calkins states, once a writer begins to write, as a matter of course they must place value on their work. 'I write to hold what I find in my life in my hands and to declare it a treasure...significance cannot be found, it must be grown.' (Calkins, cited in Buckner, 2005, p. 4). It is a myth that writers live more significant lives than non-writers. The truth is, writers are just more in the habit of finding the significance that is in their lives. (Vinton, cited in Calkins, 1988, p. 4).

The notebook approach encourages students to write regularly and to value what they write. This approach is a powerful tool in terms of social equity, the inheritance and retransmission of cultural capital, the way we instill self-esteem in adolescents and others in our care, and in the overall literacy education of our students. As educators, we should take serious note of what we value. The contention of this exegesis is that it is creativity, not the mechanics of writing, the prescription of 'tasks' and the quantification of scores that should dominate the classroom.

Some of Australia's fastest growing urban areas, known colloquially as 'growth corridors', are demanding increasing resources in terms of schools, teachers, transport and other infrastructure. Traditionally described as the 'urban sprawl', the rapid growth and shift of population creates the expectation that society's needs will be met by the government of the day and that as part of this contract, schools, mainly in the public sector, will meet the expectations of communities. It is to a consideration of the connection between meeting these expectations and

the role of a teacher of writing that this exegesis now turns in the penultimate section before the novel itself.

## Section Four: Literacy, Literacies and Being Human

This section of the exegesis locates the theoretical standpoint of the work within a Freirean framework, and explores some of the pedagogical ramifications of this. At the core of political, sociological and democratic beliefs, is the right of every person to quality education.

Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental... The freedom to learn... has been bought by bitter sacrifice (sic). (Du Bois, cited by Darling–Hammond, p. 454, 2006).

The ‘right to learn’ has long been seen as intrinsic to human rights, and arguably therefore, also as a measuring stick for democracy, along with other fundamentals such as health care and housing. Of particular importance to this exegesis is the way in which ‘the right to learn’ plays out in minority groups such as children attending schools in low socio-economic areas, and children who belong to minority religious groups. Several of the characters in Frank Davies deliberately fit both of these categories, in order to connect more closely with the world of the students I teach.

Literacy is one of the foundations of human rights and of world development. (Wagner, Venezky & Street, 1999, cited by Bender-Slack, 2007, p. 42). It is incumbent on educators, researchers and school communities to provide all students, regardless of backgrounds, with the best and most appropriate approaches and outcomes in literacy. More than ever, students must have the skills to think critically. Before they even leave school, they are participants in a world literally drenched in words. They have access to information and communication technology like never before. The 2008 Norton Online Living Report posted on the Australian Communication and Media Authority’s website revealed that 96% of children in Australia use the internet for finding information

for school projects and other work. (ACMA , 2010). Social networking has allowed children to form connections wider than, and in some cases instead of, their own immediate social circles. Students as users of technology are the targets of marketing companies for all manner of electronic devices: iPods, mobile phones, portable game consoles etc. They are consumers in every sense: magazines, media, food. And without a high level of critical literacy, they are easy-pickings for the well-drilled world of mass marketing, even before they leave the confines of school.

According to the Statements of Learning (English) from The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (M.C.E.E.D.Y.A), by the time students are commencing year nine, they:

...read and view texts that entertain, move, parody, investigate, analyse, argue and persuade. They read and view imaginative texts such as adolescent, contemporary and classical texts. These texts explore personal, social, cultural and political issues of significance to the students' own lives. They also read and view information and argument texts such as current affairs and news articles, features, editorials, documentaries and reviews. These texts contain accessible but challenging issues that deal with local, national and international events and current issues that develop over time. The texts they read and view may be in books, films, and on television programs, CD-ROMs and websites (2010).

This is the national statement on "Reading and Viewing". Writing demands that students be able to function equally as readers and thinkers and that they can demonstrate their knowledge, creativity and ability to inform and/or persuade an audience. Students are aware of genre, text type, audience, characterisation, plot, dialogue, elements of style, structure, grammar and spelling.

Our expectations beyond school lie in encouraging the development of literate, numerate and curious human beings with the skills to remain 'life-long learners'. Fundamental to functioning effectively in our society, from an academic and personal developmental point of view, is the ability - not just to comprehend, but to write. The number of aligned and divergent 'literacies' is enormous and evolving; a high degree of competence is required if one is to operate a mobile phone for texting, use email, update on Twitter, Facebook, Myspace, let alone post a blog, a wiki or deal with information for the purposes of swaying public opinion. These literacies are extensions of 'traditional' skills: decoding, processing and publishing. Writing, in this sense, is a multi-modal and vital skill learned in order to allow human beings to communicate, and which forms the basis for other means of communication and self-expression. It is not just a mechanical skill designed to assist a child through school, university, and academia. It is a life-long skill.

Brian Cambourne connects literacy to human development and provides a series of historical incidents to illustrate his claim. He describes literacy as 'an evolving technology which spans five millennia' (Cambourne, 2004, p. 11). Historically, literacy conveyed power in terms of one's usefulness and also in terms of privilege. For example the penalty for killing a scribe in England in the middle ages was the same as for killing a bishop (Cambourne, 2004, p. 15). He notes that it was an increase in public literacy during these times that enabled Martin Luther to write and nail his demands to the church door. This is connected to an increase in silent reading which in turn could be used to 'challenge and change the status quo'(Cambourne, 2004, p. 15).

Paulo Freire cites the individual's growth in literacy as a central, humanising attribute, one which helps to define consciousness and delineate 'man' from animals. 'By the characteristic reflection, intentionality, temporality, and transcendence, men's consciousness and action are distinct from the mere contacts of animals with the world' (Freire, 1970, p. 40).

Writing creatively can therefore be viewed as a logical extension of this vital branch of Freireian theory. Freire refers to creativity and humanity through the gender-specific word 'men', meaning:

...beings of praxis, to transform the world is to humanize it, even if making the world human may not yet signify the humanization of men. It may simply mean impregnating the world with man's curious and inventive presence, imprinting it with the trace of his works. The process of transforming the world, which reveals this presence of man, can lead to his humanization as well as his dehumanization, to his growth or diminution (Freire, 1970, p. 40).

In order to be meaningful, writing tasks need to be relevant to the world of the student. In Freireian terms, the writing needs to be in and of their world; 'this movement from the word to the world is always present' (Freire & Macedo, 1987, cited by Grunewald, 2003, p. 3). Students need to be able to connect with tasks regardless of the level at which they are learning. Tasks need to be relevant to learners, especially if one is to overcome issues of disengagement. Vygotsky (1934) states that knowledge is constructed between what the learner can achieve independently and that which is done with assistance from the teacher. In order to allow all students to operate at the same high level, students are exposed to repeated, high-ordered tasks, with support (scaffolding), from the teacher, commensurate to their level of ability.

The approaches advocated by both Freire and Vygotski contrast with the assessment-task-assessment method, which relies heavily on the learner's individual level of competence and the teacher's ability to differentiate accordingly across the classroom (Rose, 2005, p. 141-142). This is the basis for Halliday's Reading to Learn program, widely used in classrooms around the world for the transmission of reading and writing in early years (Halliday, 1975,

cited by Rose, 2005, p. 143).

It is the author's contention that educators encourage students to write about their experiences, but part of the struggle for students is to find stories that will reflect their own experiences. The role of literature in the lives of young readers cannot be over-stated: literature models precise language, unlocks new ideas and experiences and is not textbook oriented in its content and style.

The VCE reading list for 2010 included a list of novels reflecting a range of world views, conditions and life experiences: Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, *Hotel Sorrento* by Hannie Rayson, Orwell's *1984*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Robert Drewe's *The Shark Net*.

Seven of the VCE titles (*The Simple Gift*, *The Shark Net*, *Hotel Sorrento*, *The Secret River*, *The Maestro*, *Unpolished Gem* and *Romulus My Father*) reflect or portray life in Australia. The range of settings and situations of this sub-set include: life in South Australia, Darwin, Melbourne's Mornington Peninsula, a fictitious country town, outback Australia and The Hawkesbury river system. Issues include growing up, serial killing, relationships, escaping abusive relationships and immigration. Absent from this collection is a well-informed and sympathetic portrayal of what it means for a Muslim to grow up in Australia today. Absent also is the range of attitudes towards Muslims, attitudes that are not unfamiliar to dominant and wider areas of Australian society today.

Texts recommended by The Literature Text Advisory Panel are selected based on criteria which suggests a blend of literary merit, societal reflection and accessibility to the student, as follows:

Each text selected for the VCE Literature text list will:

- Have literary merit and be worthy of close study
- Be an excellent example of form and genre
- Sustain intensive study, raising interesting issues and providing challenging ideas
- Be appropriate for both male and female students
- Be appropriate for the age and development of students and in that context reflect current community standards and expectations.

The text list as a whole will:

- Be suitable for a wide range of students, including second language students
- Reflect the cultural diversity of the Victorian community
- Include a balance of new and established works.

This criteria is intended to allow students access to texts which neither alienate or further subjugate members of Victorian society who may perceive themselves to be, or be perceived, as minorities, culturally, economically or developmentally. The criteria should be enough to ensure that any list of texts offered to Victorian students will, at the very least, not reinforce stereotypes of power and powerlessness in society, but inform, inspire and educate our students.

Camel Rider by Prue Mason is a novel featuring an Australian boy, Adam, who is forced to rely on the assistance of Walid, a younger Bangladeshi whose real name is Amir and who has escaped the savage world of camel-jockeys. The story is set amidst the fierce desert and mountains near the fictitious Arabian Gulf city of Abudai. This title which deals with issues of understanding and tolerance, miscommunication and cruelty and which is required reading at many secondary schools, largely fails in its attempts to portray the myriad and complex issues at its heart.

Worse still, the novel is culturally insensitive in that Mason, who lived in the Middle East for some time, goes out of her way to portray most of the Muslims in this book as either cruel, blood thirsty, ignorant or just plain dumb. The protagonist of the story, biblically inspired Adam, referring to the family maid: 'She's either taken off to her friend's place or she's hiding and too scared to come out. Pathetic!' (Mason, 2004, p. 28). Careful parallels are drawn between Walid and Adam. They both have great affection for their animals; Walid and his favourite camel, Shirin, and Adam for his dog, Tara. There is equal mistrust on both sides as the boys try to find a way out of various predicaments. Both boys have fiery tempers, though Adam's is largely excused due to his Irish ancestry and red hair (Mason 2004, p. 31).

What is more than pernicious however, is the many opportunities Mason seizes on to make fun of the impoverished, Islamic characters in this novel. There are plenty:

Adam laughing at Walid because he benevolently offers him western clothes (because Adam views Walid's as dirty) and Walid takes to wearing Adam's underpants as a hat; one which does not hurt his ears. (Mason 2004 p. 31). Or Walid's pathetic ogling of Adam's sister Sarah: "A princess! Never have I seen such a jameelatun - such a beauty. She has hair like the shining sun and eyes more blue than the sky." (Mason 2004 p. 156). "Alaykum as-salaam Old Goat told me all foreign girls are ugly and bad, but you have the beauty of a princess."(Mason 2004 p. 159). There is a completely unnecessary reference to Islamic music as 'Magpie music' as the boys drive away in a stolen car. (Mason 2004 p. 100). Adam's mother (Jannette's) outrage after returning to Adam:

...children as young as three on top of a camel! Can you imagine? All for the entertainment of rich sheikhs! They could give away half the money they spend on those racing camels and keep half of Bangladesh in food for years! (Mason 2004 p. 164).

We are supposed to begin to feel sympathetic towards Walid. With more transmission of Walid's cultural cache (a minority of the story comes to the reader from Walid's point of view) this would have been worthwhile, instead, the cultural transaction here is making Walid appealing in 'western ways', e.g. constant hi-fives with Adam when they manage to communicate. This is presumably superior to anything from Walid's culture.

Of course the story is largely from Adam's point of view, so we can expect to witness Adam's adolescent view of the world. Without a more thoughtful narrative, we are left with an adolescent story with no capacity to make real meaning, even if we can make connections.

Novels reflecting life and situations that are recognisable to young adult readers are important as ways of reinforcing to students that they are connected with the stories they read. This is necessary for engagement, and the implication exists that students will not see their 'situations', their lives, as being worth writing about. If this is allowed to be, it reinforces an elitist schema, one seeking to preach to students about the world and to prohibit them from contributing to the sum of human experience by writing themselves. "How to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments of life? You don't do that with theories. You don't do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story." (Coles, 1989, p. 128, cited by Bochner, 1997, p. 425)

A central element in engaging readers in narrative and the world of stories is to reflect the world that readers inhabit. In the case of "Camel Rider" (a novel which is being taught in a public school within 5kms of a Melbourne mosque) the danger of misrepresenting the world is that minority groups, people who live 'underneath' the dominant culture are at once held up for ridicule or misrepresented. Texts that fail to reflect the known world of young readers 'privilege world views and realities which may reflect the lived experience of only certain groups of students in the room' (Badger and Wilkinson, 1998, p. 260). In

terms of the VCE reading list, few Australian suburban stories exist, with the notable exception of *Unpolished Gem* by Alice Pung, which deals with suburban perspectives on immigration.

Texts are chosen for VCE study by the Literature Advisory Panel and are further subject to approval by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. Twenty-five percent of texts on the reading list are turned over each year, allowing for more selection as texts become available or grow stale, however the VCAA stipulates that from a list of plays, novels, poetry and short stories, only two texts need be Australian. It is little wonder then that Alice Pung is alone in portraying what it is to live in an Australian suburb. There are plenty of novels being written for young adult readers dealing with exactly this setting and background, and they are worthy of contention. Contemporary authors such as Melina Marchetta (*Looking for Alibrandi*, *Saving Francesca*, *The Piper's Son*), James Roy (*Town*), Cath Crowley (*Graffiti Moon*), Fiona Wood (*Six Impossible Things*) and Adrian Stirling (*The Comet Box* and *Broken Glass*) are all writing from real and identifiable perspectives about very different issues and characters, born out of Australian suburban settings.

Teachers need to source texts that help to model to students the relevance of narrative in terms of their lives. This inclusion of texts could be likened to that of a varied, literary diet, stories from places and situations outside the students' immediate perspective, stories from within the students' frame of reference. Legitimising the world view of students in rapid growth areas, the so called 'growth corridors', frees a whole generation of potential story-tellers to make their contribution, tell their stories and influence the literary lexicon. A system of literacy teaching which denies these students this right cannot be anything other than discriminatory.

Learning in literacy is a transaction that occurs between teachers, learners and their families. Additionally, literacy is a shifting entity in itself. Different

communities utilise different 'literacies' depending on the situation, formality; who is using it, with whom, when and where. (Badger & Wilkinson, 1998).

In the classroom literacy program, the values, practices and world-views of dominant groups are manifest:

..some stories, some characters, some plots, some genres and some skills are included, others are not...some procedures for doing cultural activities with texts are valued, others are literally disallowed (Luke, 1993 p. 19).

The form that creative writing takes in the classroom can also be said to be 'culturally bound' around linear time lines, cause and effect relationships, heroic characters who 'display culturally valued traits like independence, strength, decisiveness, and courage - characteristics largely associated with masculinity'. (Badger and Wilkinson, 1998 p. 260). When it comes to writing topics, some are preferred over others, some may be considered 'uneducational, unnecessary or even subversive' (Luke, 1993, p. 19). Educators should look at a wide range of reading material and writing tasks; something they'll be better prepared for if they read and write widely themselves.

One of the ways that writers approach writing instruction is by offering workshops. In a writing workshop, there are clear expectations, there is discussion and there is productivity and feedback. The format of the 'writer's workshop' offers educators the pedagogy and the methodology not only to engage students, but also to allow them (teachers and students) to create and reflect. Research into classroom instruction points out the overwhelming value of discussion in the classroom to engage students, increase participation and extend on (scaffolding) students' knowledge and thinking processes. (Burns & Myhill, 2004, p. 48).

Anecdotally, one of the criticisms of this workshop lies in the contention that discussion per se is not necessarily as helpful as it is sometimes claimed. Vygotskian theory paved the way for this style of teaching and educators were quick to see and experience the tangible links between classroom talk and the inherently social nature of learning in context. However the conversations, as they occurred in small group settings, had the potential to have less of a focus; the problem being that students' abilities to develop interpersonal skills had a direct affect on their learning, as did their individual content knowledge and willingness to engage. Burns and Myhill (2004, p. 48) refer to this as the failure of reciprocity in the discussion. 'The focus of whole class teaching should be on creating reciprocal opportunities for talk to allow children to develop independent voices in discussion.' This needs to be addressed in the interactive classroom if discussion is to be worthwhile. The aim of running interaction in such 'classes' is to be facilitating 'sensitive teacher-led but not teacher-dominated discourse' (Hughes & Westgate, 1998, p. 189).

It would seem that the ideal approach is to merge the interactive classroom with the similar, democratic style of the writer's workshop. This approach would decentralise the classroom and leave the teacher as the facilitator of the students' learning experiences, rather than as the 'font of knowledge'. With manageable goals, engaging tasks, such as role-plays and discussion, the writing workshop approach allows for the thinking and reflecting of students with the support and encouragement of the teacher in the collective knowledge that students' creative writing will be unique and valued. Once this kind of success begins to happen for every student in the writing workshop, we can begin to claim to be addressing the disadvantage and social inequities of our classrooms.

While Frank, the protagonist in my novel, is unable to benefit from the discourse and feedback of the writer's workshop, he does manage to make some use of the commonalities of this and the writer's notebook approach. He faces the same, initial reticence and begins what he refers to as a journal hesitantly. In the

end he makes crucial reflective notes, which allow him to rethink elements of his world experience and to make meaning from his thoughts, feelings and actions.

## **Section Five: The Transaction of Teaching and Why Teachers Should Write With Their Students**

Given the weight of research (detailed here) by theorists advocating approaches that focus on the need for the student to take an active role in his or her learning and the practical ways of implementing creative writing in line with this thinking, the case for teachers to think of themselves as writers is worth consideration. If one is to adopt the writer's notebook approach, by modeling how a writer works, teachers can experience the same dilemmas, tribulations and successes that students will surely encounter, thus ensuring they will be doubly prepared for teaching moments when, or hopefully before, hands are raised. Teachers are in fact making themselves experts in the content they teach, something which is a fundamental aspect of not only good teaching, but teacher-training.

One of the primary aims of the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) is to ensure that teachers meet the Standards of Professional Practice in order to be registered and subsequently employed in Victorian public schools. The Standards detail elements of teachers' knowledge about how students learn, the content they teach, assess, reflect and engage as professionals within the teaching community. The process of continual reflection and making changes to our practice to ensure we meet the evolving needs of our students is itself reflective of our commitment to make a lifelong impact on students' learning and experience in school. As content within our curricula changes, we must hold these statements to be of utmost import; in fact as undeniable truths at the heart of teaching. We must also examine what skills we are prioritising for our 'life-long learners', and what skills we may be overlooking, or by non-prioritising, implicitly teaching our students to reject.

Literacy is a multi-faceted driver of curriculum, research, testing, professional development and pedagogy, and is a topic rarely out of the public discourse,

often in terms of school and teacher performance and perceptions of crises. As Luke and Woods; cited by McDougall (2009) state:

The teaching of literacy - and the various aspects of it - has always been a demanding task because of its complexity and also because of its undeniable status, especially in the face of gloomy forecasts of declining literacy levels in Australia and elsewhere in the world (2009).

To understand the ways literacy-teaching impacts on society, polarises public opinion and impacts on school-systems, it is reasonable to discuss 'literacy' as a term encompassing many other areas of curricula.

Misunderstanding literacy and its role in education is neglectful. As a 'cornerstone', it has been said to define an era in terms of changing literacies (McDougall, 2009, p. 679-680.). 'Digital Literacy' refers to the use and uptake of ICT 'Critical Literacy' is the ability to read and process text (which itself may be defined in as many variances as 'literacy' itself) with a view to gaining deeper levels of understanding and responses. 'Visual Literacy', 'Information Literacy' and more elaborate 'literacies' illustrate the evolution of literacy in terms of social perception and teaching content. This transformation and growth of literacy in context has lead to institutional reform with definitions such as the Queensland School Curriculum Council (2001) defining 'literacy' in terms of 'transdisciplinary, multimodal literacy practices' (McDougall, J., 2009, p. 679).

For students to remain 'literate' they need to be rich in terms of the social and cultural capital of their era. Central to this capital is being 'literate' - able to read and to write in line with all of the many literacies of the day. Writing in the modern social context of overwhelming multi-literacy creates its own circular argument. There are more opportunities and imperatives to get involved in writing and also many ways to do so. Digital media, blogging, social networking, web 2.0 and other evolving technologies make the 'market-place' potentially limitless. Passive

pursuits such as watching television can now involve 'tweeting' or contributing via other technologies to a live audience. There is more to read, more to write and the audience is participating, often in 'real-time' by writing to communicate. Asking children to write is therefore a multi-faceted request, not the least of which encompasses cultural and social identity.

Assessment measures in Australia have taken a 'back to basics' approach (Luke and Woods, 2007, cited in McDougall, 2009, p. 679), with reliance on measurable or attainable qualities and rigid, formulaic guidelines engendered to help students 'write narratives'. As with the Writer's Notebook approach, (outlined above) where regular application and frequency of writing is examined, assessment of students' writing must be approached with similar, extreme care and include more than just the finished product. In assessing reading, teachers listen, question and ask students for elaboration. For many reasons, this should be no different when assessing writing. For one, the final product, even though it may be more highly 'polished' than an early draft, may be significant because of what has been left out, not just 'left in'. Another reason is that the story could be considered the culmination of planning, revising, problem-solving as well as 'final product'. Other factors, audience, motivation, limitations, all provide more evidence for teachers to use and draw from. As a result, an assessment piece may include an initial draft, a character analysis or written explanation as to why plot, setting or a certain scene were included, altered or deleted as part of the overall writing process. In assessment in science and mathematics, teachers regularly 'triangulate data' to get a deeper sense of assessment by checking books, tests, students' reflections. To assess narrative based on the final 'product' fails the student and the assessment process, and just as worryingly runs the risk of alienating students from the opportunities that writing provides.

While assessment as such is not the focus of this exegesis, in terms of the teaching of creative writing and in particular narrative, it is an intriguing and important, if contentious area for further research. Engagement is a critical facet

of education at all year levels, yet many existing approaches to writing in the classroom seem designed for disengagement. They are chore-like, functional or mechanical. They are teacher-directed. As Kaufman (2009) states, a combination of student-chosen texts, writing topics and 'practices grounded in theoretical constructs arising out of process writing and literacy workshop approaches' (Atwell, 1998, 2006; Calkins, 1994, 2005; Graves, 1983,1990) are necessary in order to elevate students to be active in their reading and writing. Research (Smith et al, 2005) shows that students learn when they have access to social learning groups, for example when co-operative learning groups are established. The Roman philosopher, Seneca, advocated: 'Qui Docet Dis - cet (when you teach, you learn twice)' (Smith, Sheppard, Johnson & Johnson, 2005, p. 4). Writing need not be treated as a solely technical skill; in fact it is better if it is not.

Teaching kids to read and write should be an artistic event. Instead, many teachers transform these experiences into a technical event, into something without emotions, without creativity - but with repetition (Freire, 1975, p. 79, cited by Cremin, 2006, p. 416).

Educators could benefit from looking outside their industry at how professional writers share their craft through active role-plays, setting up dramatic scenes, providing students of writing with 'real-life' problems, solutions and situations and above all, participating in the writing process. This makes learning relevant and relevance helps to make learning engaging. In this model, teachers are working alongside their students, experiencing the same challenges, solving similar problems. Students who are interrupted by teachers who seek to 'correct' are quickly and effectively disengaged and potentially lost. Many teachers work bureaucratically when they should work artistically (Freire, 1975, p. 79, cited by Cremin 2006, p. 416).

Given the dynamic 'evolution' of literacy as a result of technology and its interdependence with subject areas and understanding, the need for educators to agree on what constitutes and informs 'the basics' has never been greater. 1200 educators from a range of areas in the United Kingdom responded to a questionnaire examining their use of children's literature in the classroom. At the lower end of understanding among British educators was the role of literature in developing writing among students. The study revealed that few teachers perceived important links between reading and writing. (Cremin, Bearne, Mottram & Goodwin, 2007, p. 12). This study raises several questions; what is the nature of literacy, literature and learning? How can purposeful, evaluative assessment be used in the classroom? How do educators enable students to respond creatively to literature? When does the writing of literature become at least as important as the reading of literature? When can writing literature be seen as pleasurable or at least more than just purposeful.

Being able to read, comprehend, discuss and contribute to literature should be viewed as a type of critical literacy, one which is 'woven with multiple discourses' (Cliff Hodges, 2010, p. 64). Rather than viewing writing through engaging in literature as a base literacy, it should be viewed as a rich, extended one. Few can argue that reading literature is unnecessary in the classroom, yet writing creatively (poetry, stories) is seldom treated equally, or indeed as in the UK survey, that (in teachers' minds) any links even exist between reading literature and writing (Cremin et al, 2007, p. 12).

The act of writing has been described as 'one of the most powerful tools we have for learning and for demonstrating what we know' (Graham and Perin, 2007, cited by Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009, p. 1). The onus is implicitly weighing on teachers to make writing a vital task, not only in terms of gravity in the curriculum and in the context of young, multi-literate lives, but in the sense that it is rich. Learning the craft of the writer through writing should be no different to 'learning the craft of reading through reading.' (Scholes, 1985, cited by Cliff-

Hodges, 2010, p. 64). In terms of purposeful writing, focusing on literature is surely as rich a task as there can be. In order to study text, a student needs to engage with it fully, that is, to read and respond, or to be responsive and productive (Scholes, 1985, cited by Cliff-Hodges, p. 64). Responding to literature in this way not only encourages higher order thinking from students, it fits in with trusted, widely-used evaluative tools such as Blooms Taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation). Teachers already have the framework in place to 'overlay' their students' goals with thinking tools (such as Blooms). In other words, students need to be able to read and write creatively and teachers need to provide the environment and the framework necessary for this to happen.

Highly effective writing teachers are enthusiastic about writing (Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009, p. 14), and underpinning this is the shared belief in the intrinsic value of writing as much more than a 'back to basics' tool for communication. In fact, in classrooms where writing is seen as 'work', not only is the labour of 'having to write' for the purpose of evaluation not sustainable, it is at once counter-productive, but worse, socially isolating (Santangelo and Olinghouse, 2009, p. 2). Teachers are as influential in their writing classrooms as they are in sharing their reading practices. The importance of teachers establishing active and modeled reading routines cannot be over-stated. Research into classrooms where reading practices were widely encouraged found that engaged readers displayed four main characteristics: they were motivated - choosing to read for a purpose, they were knowledgeable - able to use information to construct new meanings from text, they were strategic - able to regulate their reading for the purposes of their reading goals and they were interactive - able to share, communicate and jointly construct meaning (Alverman & Guthrie, 1993, cited by Gambrell, 1996, p. 16; Krashen, 2008, p. 183).

The same is true of writing. Teachers can signify the talent of authors who value and model the use of expressive language and the beauty of words, by showing

students that they value them too. This is part of recognising that the links between reading and writing are significant. As Barrs (2000, p. 54) states:

The work of talented and experienced children's authors who know how to make worlds and engage readers is one of the main resources we have for showing children what words can do (2000).

Engaging with students in creative and purposeful writing tasks can not only be seen as providing students with real, potent and life-long learning, but when approached from an ethnographic point of view, can result in social and cultural merit that is limitless. It can speak to the very heart of social inclusion, inequities and of the transmission of cultural capital. Educators who are unaware of the dissemination of power in their classrooms, including the reinforcement of social inequities by their non-awareness, are also remiss. This is particularly true if they do not consider that by failing to expose all students, regardless of perceived disadvantage, to both the readings that high achieving students are expected to read, and to the writing pursuits in which they are assumed to partake, they are (at the least) risking student isolation by disengagement or at worst, complicit in reinforcing the social and cultural inequalities that, rightly or wrongly, define society.

Considering the influence of teachers as literacy leaders in their classrooms, the apparent reluctance of teachers to engage in writing beyond mechanical, defined tasks seems worrying. In the United Kingdom, researchers and professional and creative writers (poets) have commented 'specifically on the need for teachers to model themselves as both writers and readers' (Stibbs, 1981; Dunn, Styles & Warburton, 1987; Nicholls, 1990; Yates, 1999, Dymoke & Hughes, 2009, p. 92).

Teachers operate in increasingly accountable environments and perhaps this helps to explain why quantifiable, technical writing outweighs the creative. Writing for the sake of 'text type' is measurable and more precise than more

artistic approaches such as narrative or poetry, which rely on structure, content and meaning. This is the case in primary and secondary settings where the drive for test results and benchmarks has enormous influence on methods of reporting and assessment. The growing focus on developing a tightly controlled system for teachers to model and engage in creative writing with students, has in fact, reduced the time teachers afford for their students' extended writing. (Cremin, 2006, p. 421, 428).

Another reason that teachers could be said to be reluctant writers is that creativity and preparedness make strange bedfellows. Studies in creative writing classrooms (Cremin, 2006, p. 417, 418) show that teachers approach the important task of modeling for their students with carefully prepared openings, well-written character descriptions and poetry composed at home and ready for the classroom. This eliminates a crucial aspect of modeling creative writing - risk. At loss here is the significant truth that risk-taking is a central component of creativity (Sternberg, 1997; Craft, 2000; Joubert, 2001, Cremin, 2006, p. 418), because a great deal of written composition involves generating ideas, considering and evaluating alternatives over time (Burns and Myhill, 2004, p. 41, 46, 48).

Teachers seem to be willing to engage in deep thinking about texts and routinely encourage their students to develop critical-thinking skills, yet the value of creative composition for these higher order processes is palpable. The value of reading is widely acknowledged, as Olsen (1994) points out:

Children of bookish parents may learn to speak with subordinate clauses, parentheticals and the like, marking structure lexically by means of subordinating conjunctions, relative pronouns and speech act verbs. Such bookish parents can do so because writing can and does provide a model for their speech (Olsen, 1994).

And as Barrs (2000) states, readers who:

Are aware of what is involved in structuring a narrative experience for others are likely to read more critically and responsively. It seems unlikely that there can be any fundamental writing development without reading development and vice-versa (Barrs, 2000).

The value of composition is all the more important, especially when one considers that writers often operate as problem-solvers (Hayes & Flower, 1980; Flower & Hayes, 1981, 1984, cited in Cremin, 2006), reaching dead-ends in their stories, then exploring new possibilities. Real modeling of creative writing should involve all the problem solving and risk-taking that has been shown to be the inspiration for students in successful creative writing classrooms (Cremin, 2006, p. 418,). In the context of teaching writing this implies that teachers also need to be writers, demonstrating the processes involved and providing expert knowledge and advice based on experience (Cremin 2006, p. 415). This may help to reduce or eliminate some of the chore-like aspects of creative writing and actually provide a way out for students who are not sure where to start, or what to do if, and when, they reach a dead-end themselves.

As the process of drafting, revising and editing requires great patience, planning and inspiration, there is a plurality of substantive issues that are addressed when teachers write with and alongside their students. Teachers who participated in writer's workshops with their students found that the effects on their classes were in some ways unexpected. Teachers who experienced the joys as well as the struggles of writing reaped the rewards of at once 'being humanized (sic) to their students as role models, and of developing great empathy for students' (Susi, 1984). Nicholls (1990) observes that, 'children need to know that adults too, struggle with words'. This model of teaching instruction fits the modern, constructivist teaching paradigm - where fixed roles are made flexible, mobile, and where memorisation is replaced by understanding. Teachers who lead the

way by writing themselves not only display the qualities considered worthwhile in role-models, they enhance students' opportunities in classrooms. 'Unless teachers do that they are tailor's dummies in a nudist colony – very bad manners' (Stibbs, 1981). Occasions when educators write alongside their students ought be viewed as valuable opportunities to equip students (as life-long learners) with the tools necessary to unlock their creativity and to write. This, in turn, allows students to contribute to the cultural capital, rather than be subjugated by, or subjected to it.

## **Section Six: A Personal Reflection on the Inspiration, Cultural Influences and Redrafting of Frank Davies' Amazing Frog Catapult**

There are many factors which moved me to write Frank Davies' Amazing Frog Catapult. Firstly, I wanted to write a book where frogs figured prominently in the story. Frogs have long been held up as an environmental barometer of the health of our planet, and are generally seen as reasonably diminutive. Add to this the intriguing varieties of frogs, and the at times outlandish names we humans tend to give them, with a little bit of imaginative word play one can suddenly invent a pretty special frog. "Pixie frogs", as stated on the Frogs as Pets Website, are actually African Bullfrogs (2011).

One of my heroes from childhood was a puppet-maker from Maryland and later New York by the name of Jim Henson. Jim was a gifted puppeteer and creative thinker who believed in the intrinsic good in every living person, and, through the medium of television, he imparted this extraordinary goodwill to anyone who cared to receive it. I did. My desire to write about frogs in some way harks back to one of Jim's earliest puppet - Kermit the Frog - who tended to personify what Jim was all about: Soulful, loving, fun, and imbued with humanity. So full of love for human-kind, Henson was once asked at a production meeting, what he wanted from his new film, to which he replied 'To do some good'. Frogs are my way of 'dipping my lid' or acknowledging Jim Henson's memory and legacy.

In terms of the title of the story, catapult is perhaps the least likely word to follow the word 'frog', at least I hope it is. Clearly, any 'Frog Catapult' would be 'Amazing', and so next I needed a name. In terms of a hero or heroine, I had a friend with a young son named Frank (after his recently deceased Father) and the name stuck with me. The surname 'Davies' just helped to make Frank more 'average'.

In the early stage of planning, the story was little more than a loose idea coupled with a notion of wanting to write about humanity; about the good in ordinary people who are amid the wreckage left by greedy developers and subdivision 'design'. A place stories don't usually get written about, or if they do, remain unheard.

The unfashionable prospect of an 'urban sprawl' setting appeals greatly to me. This is the setting that used to be inner city Melbourne or Sydney half a century ago - where the idea of 'battlers' was created and celebrated and myths glorified and justified. Laconia Heights isn't a real place as far as I am aware, yet it is depressingly easy to find. It looks like lots of places around Melbourne, or Sydney - pretty much every major town or centre has its urban 'fringe', complete with ridiculous, or at least wildly inappropriate, names.

And so 'Laconia Heights' is dead flat. It is, in fact, reclaimed runway space and former exclusion zone next to a semi-used airfield, which was once used for military planes, now consigned to chartered and light commercial flights. The infrequency of flights in and out of the airfield lent itself as a powerful plot point, or mechanism to manipulate the plot.

Altering the setting of the story from imagined to real is one of the most important early improvements that I was able to make to the story. Characters cannot operate in isolation from their environment. They are influential and have influence on their surroundings, be it ecological, sociological or physiological. Equally, characters are in turn influenced by their environment: where they live, what sort/style of house etc. Characters' attitudes to their surroundings reveal their 'character', do they rebel, assimilate, stand out?

As stated earlier, there is a unique parallel in educative debate with this very notion.

Grunewald (2003, p. 3) refers to a 'junction' between critical pedagogies (theory-

based and political) and place-based pedagogies (experiential, community and contextually based), stating:

A critical pedagogy of place challenges all educators to reflect on the relationship between the kind of education they pursue and the kind of places we inhabit and leave behind for future generations (Grunewald, 2003, p. 3).

Furthermore:

.. critical, place-based pedagogies can help to reframe and ground today's tiresome debates over standards in the lived experience of people and the actual social and ecological contexts of our lives. This does not mean replacing all of conventional education with critical, place-based pedagogy. The question is whether we will embrace place at all - What happened here? What will happen here? - as a critical construct in educational theory, research, and practice (Grunewald, 2003, p. 11).

A similar dichotomy exists when the writer places his or her characters in a world and begins to note the effects of the world upon them and of them upon the world. Furthermore, of these characters and this world, upon the plot. Drawing from a real world, even though it may borrow somewhat from other locales, breathed life into my story and my characters and focused the overall purpose of the story as it underwent further revision.

Reflecting on the story, I remember deciding to stop 'drafting', (the process of beginning to write, revising and occasionally scrapping everything and starting again) and to 'just write'. As a wide reader but a novice novel writer, I had little idea about the quality of my work, I just had Frank's story to tell. This discovery was only complete once trusted individuals shared my writing and provided me with encouragement to 'keep going'.

As a character, Frank began to define himself as I wrote. In terms of 'doing some good', the idea that Frank (little sister, Rosie, Grampa, Mum and Step-Dad Wayne) would stave off the evil, creeping menace from the north ('super-toads destroying the habitat and wildlife') was a way to demonstrate that one ordinary family unit could save the world. Initially, I had decided to write the story as a stinging allegory of the way that we Australians ostensibly and regularly approved of the imprisonment of asylum seekers - young, old, able-bodied/minded or feeble. I would therefore be writing two stories at once.

The sub-text of Frank's struggles is also perfectly average. Frank's constant, brooding rejection of his Step-Dad (his dead father's best mate); his emergence into early adolescence; his interest in girls and subsequent shyness; not wanting to have a bar of his little sister; even his battles with the dreaded school bully 'Wobber' and his mates. The stuff of drama. Frank goes out of his way to make his own life miserable, although he has absolutely no idea that he is the problem, rather than Wayne, or a world seemingly conspiring against him.

Frank's close relationship with his Grandfather is the vehicle for Frank's initial reticence to accept Wayne, but when Grampa is killed (falling off the family home's roof while shooting at planes in the dead of night), Frank has to go it alone. Even Grampa had given him clues ("You know, Wayne's not such a ..bad bloke. Once you get to know him.") It would be up to Frank to get it all wrong before he got it right.

I had completed a first-draft of the novel when I commenced teaching rounds at Newport Lakes Primary School. This was to be my first on going and meaningful interaction with people from a Lebanese or Muslim background. Over twelve months, I was to learn some of the traditions, from both the cultural and religious beliefs, of my charges in years one and two.

The events of September 11, 2001 had further tainted the way that Muslims were depicted internationally and domestically. It is the role of thinkers in society to question mass opinion, of writers to challenge the status quo, of teachers to provide students with alternative views. This is what Steven Wolk (and countless others mentioned earlier) maintains:

As citizens we have a civic responsibility to care for our democracy, and it is supposed to be one of the primary aims of our schools to help students learn the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to participate in the daily governance of our nation (Wolk, 2009, p. 665).

Muslims were under the microscope, despite the fact that 'Muslims' means no particular race, group or entity. I recall working in the media (for ABC local radio) at the time of the September 11 attacks and (apart from the event itself) marveling at the change in the media landscape at the time: blanket news coverage, shoddy, scandalous reportage that was allowed to flow (unchallenged) like so much sewerage into the minds of the ever-receptive public. I stress that I was not looking for a cause, but my work and my intent had found great purpose in helping people (young adult readers) to accept that maybe 'Muslim' meant someone who followed a particular faith - just like Christian or Jewish or any other faith for that matter; lending colour to the landscape of contemporary Australia, or the world of Frank Davies. This was my 'good to be done'.

And so (in various drafts) Frank's love interest became Muslim, with a Lebanese background. Wayne became 'Omar'; and aspects and features of Muslim culture became alternatively explored and included or ignored. For example, Omar is a more conscientious (if possible) version of Wayne with no known vices except his attempts to quell his swearing by doing so in Arabic.

The story also required a number of peripheral, yet important, characters: the O'Gradys, crotchety old neighbours who came to grief sticking their noses into

Frank and his family's business, Doonburr, the Northern Territory Parks Officer/Ranger who encounters the unnatural evil of the 'super-toads' firsthand and does a sterling job of fending them off, despite one systematically eating his jeep.

The role of women in my story has been questioned. In the initial draft Frank's Mum (who didn't even have a name) and Rosie were merely plot points. The first draft was an unintentionally misogynistic tale which I have (hopefully) corrected: Frank's Mum (Pam) is the backbone of the family unit who is most affected by the death of Frank Snr, her husband and Frank's biological father. She is a strong and immensely capable woman who is carrying on doing a tough job as a nurse working the night-shift at a 'retirement home'. Pam is constantly worrying about Frank's mental state following the death of his father, and later, his Grandfather, as well as the evident friction between Omar and Frank. Keisha, who is a critical character in terms of defining the social, multicultural background of the story, is a polite, forthright intellectual, as she demonstrates during her English classes. Rosie is a key player in events, showing a great capacity for change, challenge and compassion. She is potentially the central character for a sequel.

The final and most recent addition to the novel is the inclusion of a glossary. This came about in my year nine creative writing class, as I was using a couple of chapters of my novel for my class to get used to offering feedback and questions as part of the writer's workshop. Several students picked up on aspects of the story which were designed to allow them to identify with the characters (the story is set in a school like theirs, for example) and this alone was enough for some students to want to hear more. However, some students pointed out that too many unknown terms were confusing. The exact terms were easily identified and compiled into a questionnaire. This confirmed that most students in the class had not heard of terms such as 'pied-heron', 'DC-3' or certain expressions. Apart from having fun defining some terms and names used in the story, the glossary is

intended to bridge some of the gap that readers would be likely to encounter, as my class rightly pointed out, as we took part in the writer's workshop.

The following work is my novel, born out of the experiences I have outlined herein, and the vehicle of discourse of this exegesis.

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Frank Davies' Amazing Frog Catapult

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- 6) Four Wheel Drive (4WD) Large, inefficient and expensive cars which use all four wheels to grip and thereby thresh the environment while the engine poisons it. Almost exclusively used for picking the kids up after school.
- 7) Grimoire A large, mysterious and incredibly ancient book. Usually dusty. Contains much wisdom, lore and a handy index.
- 8) Hijab Traditional headscarf worn (and in turn, sometimes not worn) by female followers of the Prophet, Muhammad. See point one (above) for clarification.
- 9) Hoicked Tugged at forcefully in such a way as to embarrass the 'tugger'. (For example, when losing one's shorts on climbing out of a public swimming pool. 'Too late, he hoicked up his shorts.')
- 10)Greener A famous old manufacturer of shotguns and rifles (since 1829). Not a suitable search engine topic if looking to improve one's environmental credentials.
- 11)Hatfields Sub-class of (12). They started the fight with the McCoys. Banjo (3) players/manufacturers/apologists.
- 12)Hillbilly An American version of a 'Yob' (see 24) possibly armed with (10). Consider the sound emitted by (3) to not only NOT be pitiless noise, but musical.
- 13)Hooning The primary use for a ute (22).
- 14)McCoys Sub-class of (12). They started the fight with the Hatfields. Banjo (3) players/manufacturers/apologists/thieves.





And so, I pass this on to you, this legacy, this curse!

Down through the mists of time, to you.

My life's work.

My very existence.

Ha! The battle is won, the war is not. The Earth shakes before you, they are sleeping- waiting for you.

Awaken them!

You are the chosen one...

The keeper of the Grimoire!

(And all I got were these lousy warts)

-From the Sacred Frog Grimoire, author, unknown<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Unknown, London, UK.

I'm a dead man. If you are reading this, I have been brutally murdered by Wobber Wiley and his mates. And before you ask, NO, I DIDN'T DESERVE IT! All for attempting to break the unofficial school record for catapulting someone's lunchbox. It would have gone smoothly, but I was sabotaged! That's why I'm writing this now while I'm in detention, so my account of what really happened is 'on the record.'

OK, so it's already MY catapulting record. That doesn't mean I can't beat it. No one in the history of Laconia Heights Primary School has ever, EVER catapulted anything over a portable. 'Onto', sure; in fact some of my best work is currently on the roof of 2C near the oval (half a hamburger, a rock, my old pencil sharpener). Everyone knows I'm the best. Only 'the best' would be the subject of deliberate sabotage.

You see, I thought the lunchbox was empty, the first rule of catapulting is (obviously) 'know exactly what you are catapulting'. Everyone knows that. I was a bit nervous to start with. Wobber has arms like legs and is trying to grow a moustache. He'd already bet someone \$5.00 that I wouldn't even make the roof, let alone clear it. At some point Daniel Coffy (ex-best friend) put a large Frotho-Malto-Milk™ inside an old lunchbox that was supposed to be empty. I know it was him, because he was my wingman on this one and anyway, he was the one who had the lunchbox. It could have happened when Keisha Farris (grade 7D) smiled at me. The lunchbox in question was supposed to land on the roof of 2C's classroom, but the aerodynamics were all wrong. I reckon it went ten metres - straight up. That must have been when the milk made its successful separation from the lunch box. I'm not sure though, cause I was still staring at Keisha. I think I went red. She went white. I got Wobber with the lunch box and her with the milk. I ran all the way to the shed on the oval before he caught me. I never knew I was such a good runner. Neither did Mr Smith. Wobber picked me up by my nose. Mr Smith said it looked like it really hurt. Mr Smith had to use his Pinchy-

Fingers Behind the Neck Technique™ to get Wobber to put me down. Mr Smith said something about anger management to Wobber.

That's why I'm writing this. Before something...'happens' to me. And also because the school's calling my Step Dad to come and pick me up. My nose hurts. Not a good day...

One

Omar Salman flicked the switch and fed the coiled metal snake down the drain. It rattled and flexed wildly in his grip, and the young son of the guy who'd called him after lunch stood and watched attentively. Omar hated this sort of work; packed up sewers, items<sup>7</sup> lodged in pipes, blockages. The sort of work that really took the edge of the plumbing business.

The snake shook and pulsed in his leather gloves and Omar, having sensed the lad's excitement at seeing the machinery and the long role out of cable and hose had even begun to commentate the whole process. He fed the cable deeper down the drain.

"Yep, moving well here." More cable shifted between his hands. The machine, which the cable passed through before heading drain-wards, chugged and vibrated. The boy's eyes widened.

"Don't get too close Griff," the boy's father said, his hands on his son's shoulders. Omar particularly hated this sort of work when the family stuck around to watch. This time however, he felt every bit the showman. He began to thrust the snake energetically down into the sewer, each time slightly exaggerating the effort.

"Yep, coming to a bit of a bend, by the feel of it," he announced. More snake rattled down into the pipes. The machine chugged. The hoses shook and twitched. The lad stared. Omar felt himself in command of the show. "How old are you mate?" he called to the boy. He was only just out of arm's length away, but the noise of the rattling snake was enough to make conversation tricky.

"Seven." Replied the boy politely. The snake made a sudden twitch.

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<sup>7</sup> Often of a deeply personal nature that you wouldn't fancy your mum finding, let alone your plumber

“How old?” Omar took his eyes off the drain and looked at the boy.

“Seven,” called the boy above the noise. The snake lurched.

“Seven eh? My kids are a bit older than you, they’re twelve and ten.” Omar took one hand off the snake and placed it on his hip conversationally. “Bet you want to be a plumber when you grow up, eh?”

The snake bucked and reversed. The safety switch on the machine cut off the engine. In the attention-grabbing silence that followed, the drain became successfully unblocked<sup>8</sup>. Whatever had caused the blockage in the first place dislodged and made its way at supersonic speed along the pipe<sup>9</sup>. The resulting shower of unmentionable debris<sup>10</sup> which spurted out of the sewer and all over the lad meant that no answer was to be forthcoming<sup>11</sup> from the boy. Omar stared in horror at the lad. His father stared in horror. The boy stared (presumably also in horror) at Omar.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Let me, um.” Omar felt around in his overalls for a hanky, though he knew this was no job for a hanky. The lad’s hair was plastered. A big globule had settled on his nose and threatened to drop onto his lower lip. Omar felt himself wanting to gag.

The boy’s dad gripped his son tightly by the shoulders and steered him away wordlessly.

Omar flushed water down the drain and around the fence where the atrocity had occurred, rolled up his snake and packed everything into his ute. He couldn’t even bring himself to write the invoice. Maybe he should just call in again and

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<sup>8</sup> Which is good news!

<sup>9</sup> The *wrong way* along the pipe, which is bad news!

<sup>10</sup> A polite way of saying ‘shit’.

<sup>11</sup> Or indeed, necessary

apologise. He sat for ten minutes in agony in the driveway until at last, he was saved by his new mobile phone. His ring tone was “Friday” which although he had only heard twice, was already beginning to annoy him.<sup>12</sup>

The news he received however, proved to be even more annoying.

Omar Salman was a positive sort of bloke but today had tested him. With every turn around the school’s large perimeter, he tried to force the image (and the smell) of the lad soaked to the bone out of his mind. Luckily (or unluckily) he had other things to worry about. For one, he’d had to cancel the afternoon job to come in early and collect Frank from detention and for another, the only parking space in the whole school was outside the office of the one man he wanted most to avoid, especially right before the weekend.

Problem was, he saw the park at the last moment, jerked the wheel hard and levered the handbrake to expertly slide ‘cop-show style’ into the spot.

As the dust and gravel flew into the air around the old ute, Omar realised the potential magnitude of his error:

One: I must avoid Principal Edwart at all costs, or I’ll be patching up some broken pipe or clogged drain on the weekend-whether the school’s holding a working bee or not.

Two: Parking ‘cop-show style’ was not a good way of avoiding Principal Edwart.

Three: I’ve just lost a half a dozen PVC pipes out of the back of the ute. Right outside the office.

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<sup>12</sup> And every other living thing.

Omar kicked the rusty driver's door open and grimaced at the prolonged squeaking noise it made. He slithered quietly out of the ute, bent low to the ground below the level of the windows and waddled the length of the office, gathering the PVC pipes under his arms. He scanned the car park. No one about.

“So far, so good,” he thought.<sup>13</sup>

Frank sat dejectedly in the wooden chair next to Principal Edwart's compact, ordered desk. There were a few photos and papers on the desktop and an old PC to one side, but just like Edwart himself, nothing seemed to be the slightest bit out of place. Frank's attention was dragged away from the desk and his eyes widened. Right outside the window, Omar seemed to be pretending to be a duck with a large, white pipe under one arm. Frank desperately glued his eyes to Edwart's, who was still lecturing, and prayed that the Principal of Laconia Heights College didn't notice the pantomime happening in the car park.

“And what if a younger child decides you are a role-model? We'll have objects being flung around all over the school! What would that lead to?” Principal Edwart began strolling back and forth past his desk.

Frank knew that actually it would lead to full-scale catapulting competitions, which would be really cool. “I don't know, Sir.” Frank's eyes slipped to the window. Omar waddled past with a pipe wedged under each armpit. Frank felt his resolve abandoning ship.

“There would be lunch-boxes, rocks, bottles - you name it - raining down all over the school grounds. We'd have injuries. We'd have angry parents,” Edwart stopped strolling back and forth and looked directly at Frank. “We'd have

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<sup>13</sup> His positive mood began to return.

litigation!” Edwart’s eyes seemed to protrude at that point. Frank didn’t feel like making eye contact anymore, especially when Edwart’s tongue jutted out and moistened his thin lips in a manner that reminded Frank of some desert-dwelling reptile. At least Omar seemed to have disappeared.

Edwart stood with his back to the window and eyeballed Frank. “Don’t let us speak about this again. Your Dad’s here; you can go.” He turned and stared out the window and his tone was suddenly conversational, as though he were in thought. “Remember our little chat about all this catapulting rubbish, eh?”

Frank nodded and stood. “Yes Sir”.

The Principal of Laconia Heights College sounded funny when he wasn’t delivering some speech. Or handing out Friday afternoon detention. Frank walked to the door and opened it. “He’s not my Dad,” he mumbled to himself. Still staring into the car park, Edwart, if he heard the remark, remained as still as a stone.

Omar walked past the automatic doors cautiously and began wiping his feet. Frank walked straight past with his bag over one shoulder. Omar watched him slouch out the door. “Right-go and wait in the ute, Frank.” But Frank was already halfway there. Omar scanned the office. Quick entry, quick exit; this too was looking extremely positive. He hurried over to the reception desk where a neatly dressed woman sat typing. Omar smiled and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “I’m just taking Frank - Frank Davies - year eight. Principal Edwart called me an hour ago.”

The woman stopped typing and looked up at Omar, who in turn abruptly stopped talking and took a short, involuntary step away from the desk. Omar was looking into the eyes of someone much, much older yet seemingly inhabiting a living body. She wore a pricey looking jacket, in fact she seemed to be very well

groomed, but something in the way she regarded him made him feel..uncomfortable. Omar quickly checked the desk for any sign-out notes. “It’s fine. He’s just..I’ll,” Omar actually mimed signing out as though he had a pen in is grip as the woman stared at him.

Two seconds went by which seemed to Omar to be more like twenty.

When the bell suddenly sounded, Omar leapt and spun on his heel towards the door, where Edwart now stood smiling serenely.

“Ahh, Mr Salman.”

Omar couldn’t believe it, how the hell did he get there? “Err, sorry about all this Mr Edwart” he shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’ll have a word to Frank about the catapulting. All a bit silly really.” He tried keep it casual. “How’s that new hot water service?”

“Oh fine-fine. The urinals in the junior school are leaking again, however.” Edwart had a thin smile that chose to reveal itself on occasions like this.<sup>14</sup>

Omar edged towards the office door and tried to think of a suitable response. “Best place for a leak, I s’pose?”

Edwart stared.

“Right, well Rosie’ll be along any minute, so...” He could see the exit. He continued edging.

“Er, I don’t suppose...”

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<sup>14</sup> And on other occasions, but they can’t be printed here. Or here.

He stopped. Omar's hands had formed fists in his pockets. "Saturday do, Mr Edwart?" It's all over, he thought.

Edwart's smile hung around just for the novelty value and then, inevitably, faded. "Done," He said. "See you then at nine, Omar. I'll be in my office."

Of course you will be, thought Omar. He nodded, aware that the woman behind the desk had yet to resume her typing and that his weekend - which was so close - was now so far. He felt his last positively charged molecule split and explode quietly inside him as he walked out the office door.

Omar sat down and yanked the creaking ute's door closed without a word. Frank could already hear his teeth grinding. He rolled down the window and stared out at nothing as Omar switched on the radio.

After a few moments, Omar reached over and opened the glove box. A pile of 'Salman Plumbing. Your leak is unique' business cards fell onto Frank's feet. He kicked them off with a dismissive groan.

Omar didn't bother asking Frank to pick them up. "At least you're not suspended, eh?"

Frank stared ahead. "It was nothing, bloody Daniel switched the lunchbox, or something." Frank knew that a suspension wouldn't have been all that bad, at least then maybe Wobber might calm down.. a bit?

Omar fished his new phone out of his pocket. "Frank, check this out." He dangled it provocatively in front of him. "State of the art, digital mobile, data and video." He offered it to Frank, who ignored him and kept outstaring a nearby rock. "If we get your phone switched over to the same network, we can get another one." Frank pictured his old phone which was lying somewhere at the bottom of his

bag. It had a rubber band around it to hold the battery in place. He considered the offer.

“We can even video call each other. Just like Dick Tracy.”

Frank wondered when that was ever likely to happen. “Who?” he asked, squinting up at Omar.

“Dick Tracy. You know?” Omar tried again. “How about Inspector Gadget?”

Frank took a sideways look at the phone as Rosie Davies (4B) ran to the ute. She laughed and threw her bag through the open window. Frank opened the door and got out while Rosie slid into the middle and dug for a seat belt.

“Hey Rose,” Omar ruffled her short black hair.

“Hey Dad” Rosie began as Frank got back in and nudged her with his elbow. “I mean- Omar,” she corrected herself. “Did ya hear about Frank’s catapult? You should be in the Olympics, Frank!”

“Yeah sweets, heard all about that one,” Omar looked at Rosie while Frank got re-acquainted with that rock. “I don’t think catapulting is in the Olympics just yet, although you never know. They do have curling”

“That’s winter Olympics,” muttered Frank

“Still the Olympics!” Omar replied.

“Omar, can we go now?” Frank said to the rock.

Omar looked at Rosie and smiled. "At least it's the weekend eh?" he said, and then frowned to himself.

"Cool, new phone!" Rosie was clearly delighted as she took the small silver unit from its box next to Frank and stared at the screen. Frank ignored them both.

"Yep, hey Rosie, if you press this, this and then this, you can hear my fab new ring tone." He pointed to a sequence of buttons, which Rosie carefully pressed into the phone with her thumbs.

Friday, Friday, gotta get down on Friday blasted out of Omar's handset.

"Oh God! Why doesn't that surprise me? Can we please GO?" Frank was now venturing into new depths of embarrassment.

Omar grinned and cranked the ute and with a rattle of the exhaust he backed out as Frank's eyes wandered to the side mirror. He reached out, needing both arms as he forcibly adjusted it. When he released the mirror he found himself staring into the big, horribly grinning face of Wobber (Robert) Wiley. Frank turned and tried the only option he had under the circumstances<sup>15</sup>.

"Oh, hey Wob.. Robert. Sorry about the lunchbox." He self-consciously rubbed his nose. "We're even, right?" Omar began to ease the ute forward. Wobber had the sort of look on his face that said "No, actually Frank, we're not quite even. One or two merciless beatings and a couple of years' worth of ritual humiliation and bullying should just do the trick. Unless you're too busy?" Frank thought Wobber probably wouldn't phrase it exactly like that, but that the overall meaning would be roughly the same.

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<sup>15</sup> Apart from ducking down into a crash position or feigning death.

Wobber looked a bit like a shark that had been lured towards a shark cage as he approached the ute. In dismay, Frank noticed Wobber's mates, who, along with Wobber had started to chase the ute. Frank started to slide under the dash. Was Wobber really game enough to have a go at Frank in his own car? He risked another look in the mirror. Wobber's reflection was grinning insanely now. "Surely that was a bad sign," he thought, again sliding down. Wobber was nearly level with Frank's window, which Frank began urgently to wind up, though the handle was old and stiff and hard to move. To Frank's relief Omar decided finally to floor the ute through the school gates. A big PVC pipe flew out the back into the spray of gravel and dirt. Frank sat up again and stared in horror into the mirror at the diminishing image of Wobber Wiley on the deck, painfully holding his groin and the PVC pipe. "I'm truly a dead man", thought Frank. He put one hand across his face and moaned. "He'll probably kill me with Omar's old bit of PVC. I'll die without any school certificate, let alone qualifications."

After twenty minutes the ute rolled off the last suburban hillock onto the flat expanse of Laconia Heights. 'Close to transport, services and schools', as the brochures from the land office<sup>16</sup> had said. As it turned out, that meant near the aerodrome. Not the big one, just the service one. The big one was on the other side of town. Before the accident<sup>17</sup>, when Frank's Dad had been struggling to find electrical work, he'd said "You don't want one of those big bastards falling on you in the night" and Frank's Mum (Pam) had said "Watch the language, Francis" and so good old, flat Laconia Heights became the Davies' proud, new neighbourhood. Frank tried hard to remember the old neighbourhood where Mum's parents both lived<sup>18</sup>. Then Frank and Grampa and Mum and Dad had moved in and Dad and Grampa began doing the old place up. That was before Rosie even, Frank couldn't really remember anything of it at all except for what Mum and Grampa told him about it. Like how he used to go to sleep when he

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<sup>16</sup> Hut in the middle of nowhere

<sup>17</sup> See "Moomba" in the glossary

<sup>18</sup> Until they died.

heard the trains thumping past the back gate. Probably something to do with the rhythm, according to Mum. He was sure he was happier then, even if more space and a new house was supposed to make everyone happy now.

He wasn't in the inner city any more. In the early days, Frank would know he was getting close to home because the aircraft would get louder, and lower. Then certain landmarks: the windsock that occasionally got stolen from Maroopna Road, or the famous corner store that took up a whole double shop space but failed completely to be on any corner, became more familiar. No one even knew where the original 'Laconia' was, let alone how 'Heights' got to be there. It was pretty flat after all. There were still billboards up showing young families heading off to schools, playing golf and couples walking romantically through leafy parks by large lakes and streams. The only aircraft you'd ever spot by looking at a billboard in Laconia Heights would be the real one that looked (and sounded) like it was about to take it out.

That's exactly why Grampa loved it. He called it "aerodrome enriched". Grampa was well known in the area<sup>19</sup> despite his efforts at remaining a solitary, elusive figure. As the ute rounded the corner Frank spotted Grampa first, elusively and solitarily sitting out on the brick letterbox playing his banjo. Omar shook his head and said something in Arabic under his breath. Frank was certain he was swearing, Omar only ever swore in Arabic.

Frank suddenly turned to him. "Omar, that video phone, do you know anyone else with one?"

"No. Well, not yet, I..."

Frank stared straight ahead. "Well how are you going to use it?"

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<sup>19</sup> That's not necessarily a *good* thing.

“Ummm. Well. Yeah, you could be right.”

Mental note for inclusion into the journal of Francis Robert Davies-  
Friday March 21 2011:

Omar is a dickhead.

“That should be good for at least a page of journal writing,” he thought as he kicked the ute door open even before it had fully stopped. Frank vaulted from the ute and up the front stairs of the tall, rendered brick house before the dust had settled. Rosie followed as Omar waited for the automatic garage door to open. Grampa finished playing Cripple Creek and with a final, lusty twang of the drone string, he picked up his long-necked five-string banjo and made his way inside. He shut the door behind himself, then re-opened it suddenly. Squinting up into the darkening sky he recognised the last Armstrong Whitworth Argosy as it chopped through the balmy Laconia Heights head-wind, climbing to altitude, cranking its four propellers for just one more freight run north. The old man’s lips parted to release the word ‘Beautiful’ as the rising breeze tore the word away with the old, labouring aircraft.

North, and away from Laconia Heights.

Two

The brown, speckled arm pointed uselessly out of the grimy water. But for the interested pied heron, no-one else would have given a toss. All perfectly normal around here. The arm was beginning to dry out under the northern sun, but the promise of existence coupled with the high humidity kept the small metamorphosed creature alive for just a few more, precious moments. The heron, having prowled the mangroves carefully for just these occasions, was well pleased when the owner of the arm, a small toad, emerged from the silty water. The cautious bird lowered its head in preparation for a meal. Just then, another small toad popped up right next to the first one. And another. And another. The heron straightened up and shook itself.

It was bemused when the first toad sidled up to the second toad and with a glooping noise become one, bigger toad.

### Three

Grampa stacked his banjo in the umbrella stand behind the door (he had never, ever owned an umbrella) and sat down in the ancient and wise armchair (as he liked to call it). Frank had already retrieved the afternoon's first can of Red Bull from the fridge and sat down on Grampa's footstool. Omar was making slow progress towards the kettle as Rosie darted back and forth, hungrily assembling the basic ingredients required for an after-school snack: biscuits, a mismatched cup and saucer containing more milo than milk and a frozen crumpet.

Grampa leaned back and put his feet on Frank's back. "How was school?" Frank turned and eased the old man's legs down onto the seat beside him. Grampa was always the same. In fact when Frank thought about it, Grampa was the only person he knew from the years BO (Before Omar) who hadn't really changed at all. Still nearly bald- still wearing old, brown trousers, white singlet with his silver chest hair frothed out the front (although In Winter he allowed for a cardigan or jacket). Standard uniform for a Grampa, probably. Frank hid his smile by suddenly digging around in his bag for nothing really and without looking up said "Yeah, not bad. Where's Mum?"

"God's waiting room," said Grampa. "She got called in a while ago for the night shift."

"Cup- check. Milk- check. Crumpet- check." Rosie opened the jam jar and slid the crumpet into the toaster.

Omar tried a half-hearted dive at the kettle but was cut off by a jam-knife wielding ten year old with purposeful eyes. He turned, twisting his neck towards the lounge. "It's a nursing home, Pop." Then much quieter he added "Where you should be- Inshallah."

Grampa liked being called “Pop” about as much as he liked Omar. He stood up so quickly, Frank fell over backwards off the stool. “Listen, sonny- it may well be, but you’ll nae have me there afore my time!” He looked down and frowned, like Frank had fallen over all by himself. “Oh, let me help you Frank.”

Frank stared up at Grampa- he was the biggest man Frank had ever seen. Not that he was tall, he was certainly thick-set, but Grampa was just sort of- big. A thick arm reached down and ‘hoicked’ Frank up. Frank never knew why Grampa went all Scottish when he got angry. He’d never even been to Scotland.

Omar hesitated, thought better of going on with the discussion and tried to reach over Rosie who was now balancing on her school bag to gain access to the top cupboard.

“Look out Dad!” Rosie was trying to reach the biscuits from her perch.

“Rosie!” yelled Frank.

Rosie looked at Frank. “I mean Omar,” said Rosie.

Omar frowned at Frank and tried again to get the kettle. “Did Pam say what time she’d be in?” He could nearly touch the kettle past Rosie’s flailing arms, but he might also cop a nasty back-hander, which would just about top off a near-perfect crappy day.

“Not to me,” said Rosie. “And my word is my bond.”

Omar grinned.

“Early,” said Grampa, easing Frank back onto his stool.

Frank sighed. 'Early' meant early in the morning, which meant 'late' depending on when you went to bed or how you looked at things. Grampa held Frank by the chin and peered into his eyes. Grampa's eyes and Frank's were almost identical, grey with green flecks. "Which means Frank and I are cooking!" he said.

Frank smiled.

Omar abandoned his attempt at making a cup of tea. "After he helps me unload the ute. Come on Frank."

Frank hesitated. What if he just said, "No, unload it yourself?" He felt himself nearly say it - nearly. He watched Omar walk to the door. At the last possible moment, he stood and trudged out behind him.

Frank helped lift a few lengths of wood and pipe cutting gear out of the ute. It was heavy, but Frank managed the weight. Omar said, "I remember when you couldn't lift this much weight." They lowered the machine to the ground next to the car.

Frank grunted.

Omar rubbed his hands together. "Thank God it's Friday eh?"

Frank looked at him darkly. "Rosie's not to call you Dad."

Omar's smile faded. "OK- Where did that come from, Frank?"

Frank stared back. To be honest, he didn't know. He saw a look of hurt and anger flash across Omar's face. "Well, she just shouldn't, that's all. Sorry."

Frank slammed the tailgate of the ute.

Omar ran his hand through his dark hair and stared at the ground for a moment. “No, probably not Frank. You’re right,” he said. He took a step closer. “I’m not your Dad, and I’m sorry he died.” He put his hand on Frank’s shoulder. “He was my best mate, you know.”

Frank wished he hadn’t started this. He leaned against the ute and stared at his feet.

Omar squeezed Frank’s arm. “I’m sorry mate. It doesn’t hurt if Rosie sometimes slips and calls me Dad. Pam - Your Mum and I have always been up-front with you both.”

“Yeah I know.” Frank thought he could do with new shoes.

“OK,” said Omar. He stepped back to the side of the ute. “You should have a talk with Mum. Thanks for the hand. Let me know if you need help with your homework, eh?”

Frank turned his downcast face away and jogged up the front steps. He could feel his face burning with embarrassment. Rosie had already finished eating her snack and lay reading a library book on a bean bag, chocolate milk and jam framing her mouth.

Omar watched Frank go all the way inside as the front door closed. One of Mrs O’Grady’s cats walked past, paused and sprayed on the back wheel of Omar’s ute.

Even a positive sort of bloke like Omar had his breaking point; reaching into the tray, he sent the cat home over the fence with a well-aimed section of twenty-mil PVC pipe. “Arse!” he yelled after it, and then felt very silly. Omar hated trying to swear in English, but the O’Gradys got a bit abusive when they heard Arabic.

## Four

All was quiet in the swamp. The bemused heron stalked across the shallow mangrove towards the big toad. The 'super-toad'. Just then another toad emerged. Then another. The heron paused as these toads 'glooped' into another super-toad, which turned and stared back monstrously. To be honest, the heron was starting to lose confidence.

## Five

The second highest point on the Davies' completely flat block was Grampa's shed. It wasn't that it was actually Grampa's as such. It had been built when the house was built about ten years earlier. Grampa spent most of his time out there and Omar later connected water and installed an old sink. Although it still didn't have the power connected, the shed had a few mod cons, especially when Grampa found a couch down the road with an "I'm Free" sign and sat in it until Omar arrived home and helped him load it into the ute. That had been a long day. He'd got a bit sunburnt and had to have a leak behind the nearest tree, but a bargain was a bargain after all.

Grampa kept the shed the way he liked it with a wood heater and a huge pile of wood nearby for burning. At the back of the shed was a long, timber ladder which Grampa was absolutely prohibited from climbing, even if the gutter did get clogged up with leaves and cause the shed to leak. It had a high, pitched roof on which he wasn't allowed to sit with his binoculars to watch the freighters and military planes fly over. Those were the rules, but they would never have existed if Grampa hadn't occasionally broken them. A park cut through behind the Davies' block, and beyond that a small creek and then trees. Except for the actual Davies' house, (and the neighbours on either side) there was not much else to block the view of the sky.

Grampa's eyes were watering and he spat his false teeth across the shed. "Oh Fwank," he spluttered, leaning on a post for support. "That's as good as, as...oi-pass me me teef, lad."

Inside, the shed was a neatly arranged mess. Grampa ruled out here, and there were several old tools - a hand - drill which, to operate, you actually had to crank the handle on the side while you held the drill in the right position. There were hand planes for shaving wood from items like furniture or whatever Grampa

happened to be building or fixing at the time, jars of various unlabelled gums, glues, resins and polishes, rags and orange-scented cleaning products, and a small sink. The room itself smelled exactly as if you had taken some oranges, clamped them in one of the rusty vices and drilled them to death before wiping up the mess with an oily rag. There was a line of tall cupboards, mostly locked, and apart from the aircraft - themed calendar, the walls were unlined and a bit like Grampa -largely functional.

Frank picked up the dentures from the wood - pile. As he did so, something scuttled away in the shadows. Frank leapt back and handed the teeth over. Grampa reached over to the sink and rinsed the plate off. “Mnuerrrk,” he said, stuffing it back in. He looked out the window across the backyard to the back of the house. “Only one phone eh?”

“Yeah,” said Frank. “What sort of an idiot would you have be to buy two phones with video streaming and internet when all you want is to make calls?” Frank leaned next to the piles of wood and grinned.

Grampa smiled back. “That’s as good as that bloody electric whipper-snipper he bought.”

Not only was the shed the second highest point of the Davies’ property, it was also about two metres further away from the house (and the only source of power) than the series of extension leads could reach. Omar had tried everything<sup>20</sup>, running the leads out of Frank’s window, from the corner of the house, but it was no good. Omar would never get power connected to the shed or fork out for one more extension lead: that would be giving in. For Omar it was a matter of principle - no fuel based appliances. He’d paid out a lot of money for the solar panels (while the government subsidy was there) and that meant making the most of electricity.

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<sup>20</sup> except buying more extension leads or maybe a petrol trimmer.

Grampa waited for Saturdays, especially in summer, because that was lawn - trimming day, and he loved watching Omar get to the zenith of the immaculate arc of short grass that ended just over a metre from the shed. It was the way he leaned forward to try and reach just that extra bit further without ripping the lead out of the wall. Sometimes Grampa threatened to buy Omar an extension lead for Christmas, though he would never have ruined the fun of Saturday mornings for himself.

Something rattled again in the wood - pile, and this time a small log tumbled down. Frank jumped back. "Bloody cats," Grampa cursed. He sat down on an old petrol drum he was using as a chair, remembered his haemorrhoids, and placed a nearby cushion under his bottom. Frank wasn't sure what they were exactly, but he knew that, for Grampa, they were a pain in the arse. He watched him remove his glasses and began to polish the tears from them. Frank sat too, just across from Grampa where he could make out his tattoo, high on his arm: a large, bluish treble - clef. His eyes wandered to the wall calendar and Grampa's beautiful, copperplate handwriting peppering the dates.

"You know son, Omar's not all that bad." He squinted at Frank. Frank stared back as the old man carefully finished polishing his glasses and pushed them back up the length of his drooping nose. "OK, maybe he is, but the point is your Mum's happy now."

Frank started to say something, but it stuck - sort of.

With a lot of grunting Grampa pushed himself up slowly and laid his palm down heavily on Frank's head. "It's hard to lose your Dad, son. I lost mine when I was thirteen, just after the depression and I wished my Mum had hurried up and remarried, because I had to go off to work. Look - why don't you have a chat to Mum in the morning, eh?" He ruffled Frank's hair.

Frank wanted to say that everything had gone wrong. Dad was dead, Rosie had forgotten him nearly completely and Laconia Heights sucked, even if Dad had picked it. And now Wobber was after him. He looked away, nodded and said nothing.

The light was fading as the sun set over the back fence and as Frank kicked through the long grass outside, a startled ginger and white cat uncoiled with a hiss, bolted and leapt the O'Grady's fence even as Frank jolted to a stop. "Bloody hell Tabatha!" said Frank. In the evening light, Frank felt his heart pounding as he bounded up the back steps.

Grampa leaned in the doorway, staring after him. "Bloody O'Grady and her cats!" he muttered. There was a crash behind him as the woodpile fell in on itself and logs and chunks of wood tumbled across the floor. He didn't remember jumping, but he still found himself out of the shed staring back into the mess as a meagre puff of dust drifted behind him from the collapse. Grampa frowned. That wasn't a cat - or a rodent. He stuck his head back through the doorway suspiciously and said, "Hello?"

Six

“You guys got homework?” Omar drew his chair in, the last to sit at the battered, wooden table. Grampa who had been late in for dinner was making up for lost time and was half way through his mashed spuds and cutting his chops into tiny fragments.

“Yeah, but I’m not a guy, so I don’t have to do mine until Sunday,” said Rosie with a shrug. Omar looked at her suspiciously. “I’m not a guy?” she said hopefully, raising her hands.

“You’re right- you’re a wise – guy,” he said and tickled her. Frank glared and swallowed some beans. “I’ll be right, Omar.”

Omar shrugged and peered at his blackened chops. “No worries. I see the oven’s up to its old tricks.” They called the oven the ‘killer griller’ for good reason: it either provided enough heat for a suntan, or if you tweaked the knob just a little... Frank knew the house would still smell like burnt chops in the morning. Maybe even the next. Everyone mumbled quietly about their chops being ok, but Frank knew cremation when he saw it.

“Shouldn’t you be off praying somewhere?” Grampa didn’t look up as he shovelled his food.

“That’s what I was doing when I smelled smoke. You were in the shed.” He winked at Frank.

“Dad! I mean.. Omar! Look!” Rosie screamed, pointing her fork at the ceiling. Frank and Omar looked up, and as one they booted their chairs back and scuttled away like terrified crabs.

“Oh, it’s only a bloody huntsman,” said Grampa, squinting up at the massive spider that was now just about directly above his face. “Frank, you’ve smoked him out of hiding I reckon.” He chuckled to himself as he kept sawing away at his chops.

Omar edged back into the kitchen as Rosie ran to the doorway. Frank stood a few feet away staring up. The thing was HUGE! It had just come out of nowhere. Grampa eyed it curiously. The spider had stopped scampering and remained motionless, right above Grampa, who wasn’t about to let it ruin his meal.

Omar came back with a big jar and gingerly placed one foot on the chair beside Grampa before taking another step - all the while staring up at the spider - and balancing on the table.

“Do you bloody mind?” said Grampa, now forced to protect his dinner. He cradled the lumpy mash and the carbonised lamb and edged sideways with several, noisy shuffles of his chair. Omar’s face was about thirty centimetres from the spider and as he carefully held the jar up with two hands and began to unscrew the lid he could make out rows of black eyes glistening back at him.

“Er, Omar..” began Frank.

Every facet of the spider was fascinating. “It’s really quite beautiful,” said Omar in tense appreciation. “I can see his eyes,” he added, slowly unscrewing the lid of the jar. He was concentrating on the quivering mass of hair and legs directly above him, and was no longer listening.

“Omar-hang on..” said Frank.

As the lid of the jar came loose Omar began to carefully line up the spider. “Stay still now. We don’t want to lose any of your lovely, big legs..”

That’s when the REALLY big spider, the one that had been waiting quietly in the jar from the last spidery invasion, boiled up out of the jar and ran down his arm. “Shit!” yelled Omar, losing his balance and falling squarely on the table, destroying it completely. Grampa’s dinner went down in the crush and if he hadn’t been laughing so hard as Omar flailed around in the table - cloth and broken crockery, he may well have put the boot in.

“Isn’t that the spider you caught a few nights ago? Why the hell was it still in the jar?” he said, wiping mashed potato off his chin.

Omar jumped to his feet and tried to reach every part of his back with both his arms. “Is it on me? Can you see it? Hell, where’s the jar gone?”

“Be careful,” laughed Grampa, “you’ll make the other one drop on you as well in a minute.”

There was silence as they all looked up. It was gone. Everyone began checking the person next to them and feeling their backs and necks. The doorbell rang and Frank, being the first to compose himself, went to the door.

As soon as he opened it, he wished he hadn’t. An old woman with curly, purple hair and a jagged, thin scowl stood waving a piece of PVC. Frank felt the atmosphere thinning, like the room had suddenly grown cold.

“Hello Mrs O’Grady,” said Frank.

“Explain THIS!” she yelled and tossed the pipe straight past Frank into the living room.

Frank stared back. “Javelin?” he said, but not hopefully.

The woman’s expression did not alter. Grampa had once said her mouth resembled a cat’s bum when she was really cross. Frank couldn’t take his eyes off it, but snapped out of it again when she continued.

“That projectile was hurled at my Tabatha today,” ranted the woman before Frank had time to breathe, “and I want to let you know that you’re not getting away with it.” Frank would have been thrown by the old woman’s attack, except that it happened so regularly. Mrs O’Grady was constantly complaining about something. Mum said she wouldn’t mind if the old buzzard ever bothered saying hello once in a while. Mrs O’Grady always seemed to have something unpleasant to say and made sure she wasn’t ever short of an audience. Grampa thought Mr O’Grady must be deaf. And blind. Or if he was really lucky - dead. The O’Grady’s cats (there were seven of them) spent more time at the Davies’ house than at their own home next door. Six months ago Tabatha had crawled under Frank’s bed and promptly given birth. The kittens spent all their time now trying to get back in. Frank hadn’t opened his window since, and it had been the middle of summer.

“You bloody people shouldn’t be allowed near animals! You’re lucky my husband doesn’t come over here and teach you some respect!” She was jabbing her long, bony finger into Frank’s chest. “You just watch yourself young man.” Mrs O’Grady peered past at the broken table and the half dance that Omar was carrying on with. She frowned and left with a final, indignant “Hmmmff!” as the screen door slammed shut right onto Frank’s already tender nose.

Frank blinked and closed the wooden door. He walked over to the pile of wreckage, found his plate and took it to the sink, then silently went upstairs. His room was small, with a single bed against the wall and a new desk awkwardly

placed against the next wall. Opposite was the window that looked out over the rear pergola, paving and barbecue area.

Frank closed the door behind him, slung his bag onto his bed and knelt on the floor. Reaching under the bed, he lifted the tile of carpet and felt around underneath. Frowning, he reached further into the hole he'd made in the carpet until his fingertips found the journal. He dragged it out, dusted the crumbled underlay off it and replaced the carpet tile. He didn't remember sticking the thing that far under the carpet. He'd better be more careful next time or he might not get it back.

Frank's journal was a battered old vinyl daily planner for 2005. Frank read the spidery scribble inside the front cover:

From the journal of Francis Robert Davies. No qualifications, but did well at English.

Spidery black ink on dated cardboard, January 2011.

Dear Frank,

Not much of a Christmas present, and a bit late, but here is your very first journal. You'll get the hang of it!

Love Grampa.

PS- don't let the dates put you off, they line up with this year. I've scribbled out the 2005 on the front, you can do the rest. (What a bargain! There's not even a leap year to stuff it up!)

At first Frank hadn't had the faintest clue what to do with it, let alone why he had to fill in a journal. But as the days and weeks went by after his birthday, something about writing every day had become a habit. Anyway, it was like twitter. Frank didn't have a phone, but he didn't particularly want anyone reading his thoughts either. It wasn't a diary- that was a girly idea to Frank. Within a few weeks, Frank's journal was a place he went to...to think. For himself. Somewhere he could sort out stuff. Especially when he read back over things. Some days (particularly in the beginning) he only had a couple of sentences and usually wrote things like 'Don't know what to write in this crappy book' a lot. Others, he had half a page or a whole page for when ideas needed sorting out, or when he was angry. These days, he even backed everything up on his laptop for editing and safe-keeping. The journal had been a strange gift, and Frank had started with a sense of duty with his (mostly) daily entries. The first two dates were a bit ragged, but Grampa had been right - he did get the hang of it. He sat up on the bed and dug under his pillow for his pen. Then he found his exercise book, flicked through the journal to Friday, March 25 (2005 crossed out) and copied the day's events so far onto the page.

Frank had discovered something about keeping a journal. He had written it on March the 10, 2005 (crossed out). It was this:

I have to be careful about what I write, and I keep the journal well hidden now. Saying something out loud means that you give the 'something' just a little bit more truth than when you just thought it. Saying it out loud means you think it's real. Writing it down means believing it completely. And that's more real than anything.

Frank reached over and grabbed his school macbook, booted it up and opened 'Pages'. He opened the file named 'History' and scrolled down to the end to continue transposing the diary into his file. Another reason Frank had begun the practice of re-writing everything onto the laptop was in case someone (mainly

Wobber) got hold of the journal. He finished writing about Wobber Wiley<sup>21</sup> and scrolled back through the entries so far. He stopped at the handy 'Notes' section:

From the handy notes section of the journal of Francis Robert Davies, Bachelor of Arts and Sciences/hon, Dip Ed, frcacs, MBA.

Blue ink on cardboard.

Fight with Mum. She doesn't understand it, but I'm over Dad's death, I'm just embarrassed by it. I feel bad, but it's true. She said I need to talk with the school counsellor, Janette, but I reckon she's a freak (the counsellor). Janette's nice and everything – she's just not much help. All she could say was how it was like the 'Workcover' ads on the TV, where there's this cop that comes to the door and has to tell some family that their dad's been killed at work. In the end she teared up and I had to keep passing her tissues. Mum said Dad wasn't the first electrician killed on the job, that being an electrician can be dangerous. Dad (Frank Snr) worked for the City, ever since the family business started to go under. Why did he have to be bloody killed during the Moomba parade? The Korumburra 'Karmai' float had broken down, and Dad was doing electrical work to get it going again. A whole semi trailer just to carry a steel and papier-mache earthworm. They showed the other floats at the front, and when they cut back to the worm, it had toppled. Grampa was cacking himself. Then they rolled the big, puffy slug away, and there was Dad. Under a timber pallet-squashed by the worm float. We knew it was him, recognised the stupid pink overalls he always wore since he accidentally washed my red socks with them. There was an inquiry

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Reilly had been branded 'Wobber' by his much younger sister who everyone agreed was far too cute to be his *biological* sister, and must have been stolen by the Reillys years before. Her piercing baby voice had regaled the whole playground with a tearful "Bye-Bye Wobber" from her mother's lap on the retreating bus every morning for a whole year. Wobber *hated* being called Wobber even though some of the teachers called him by that name now. Actually it explained Wobber's general attitude to other life – forms.

and everything...The only thing it had in common with those 'Workcover' ads was that we saw it on TV.

Frank started to scroll through pages and pages of entries when there was a tremendous crash at the window. Leaping from the bed, he stared out the window opposite as an orange, furry mass scampered away down the length of the pergola roof. With his laptop still cradled in his arm, Frank pressed his cheek to the window. Tabatha scampered along the guttering, turned and glared back, then the big cat shook itself and ran to leap into the branches of a nearby tree. Frank watched it slowly make its way back to the long grass near the shed. He could feel his heart pounding right through where his head pressed against the window. Breathing a little easier, Frank sat quietly on the bed and updated the laptop:

The O'Grady's cats are going nuts, like they're...scared of something.

## Seven

When Frank shuffled down to breakfast the next morning, his mum ambushed him and hugged him tightly. Frank felt loved and creeped out, all at the same time.

“Hey Mum, how was work?” Frank dragged a stool to the kitchen bench. Mum’s long, dark hair was in a tightly wound towel. She had showered and changed already; you’d have to catch her moments before she left, or as she drove in after her shift to see her in her nurse’s uniform.

“Fine,” she said. “You know I never liked that table.” She nodded to where the dining room table used to be. Omar and Grampa had taken the wreckage out after dinner. “Pancake?” she asked, shoving a pancake in front of him.

“Excellent, thanks.” Frank yawned and sat down. The sweet aroma of frying bananas and batter filled his nostrils. He grabbed the syrup. “Omar forgot to empty the spider jar again.” He looked around the room. “I s’pose we have to eat at the bench from now on. Where is everyone?”

Frank’s Mum poured another pancake. “Rosie’s out the back with your Grandfather. Omar’s dropped in at your Principal’s early.” She looked at Frank. “Omar said you had detention yesterday.”

Frank stopped chewing and met his Mum’s gaze. Her expression was cool, almost bemused, but with that undeniable hint of “please explain”.

“Thanks Omar,” Frank rolled his eyes.

“You know Frank, Omar had to cancel a job to get to school and collect you.”

Frank swallowed another bite. "So he got to knock off for the weekend early."

"He's not exactly "knocked off" now is he?"

Frank stood up. "Well I didn't want him to, did I?" Flecks of pancake dotted the bench. He stared at his Mum, surprised and shaking at his outburst.

"Frank, sit down."

"Why should I?" he yelled and shoved his plate back across the counter. What was he doing? He wiped his forehead. He saw his Mum looking at his shaking hands. She gazed at him evenly and turned away to the stove.

"Frank, you need to talk to me calmly, when you're ready. What would your Father say?" She turned and looked at Frank encouragingly. "But that's the point isn't it?"

"What's the point?" He was quieter this time.

"I know you miss him. It's OK. I miss him too." She turned his pancake on the stove and it sizzled. "We have to talk- your life's a closed book to me Frank. It's not healthy. Here." She shovelled his pancake onto his plate and pulled the towel from her hair. "I'm going to bed, I'm way too tired for this now, and you need to wake up. Maybe we should do lunch?" she laughed.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

She kissed him then and went upstairs. He finished his breakfast, dumped his plate in the sink, then went down to the bathroom, showered and dressed. He thought about Wobber. At least Monday was still a weekend away. He went

back to his room and looked into the backyard through the closed window. Rosie was crouched talking to a clump of bushes. Grampa was in a deck-chair playing the banjo. Omar was nowhere. The sun was shining; just about the perfect start to the weekend.

Frank's room was small. His desk formed an 'L' shape abutting his bed opposite the window, and as he crossed the room to leave, he saw the corner of his journal through the opening of his school bag. He hadn't left it anywhere it would be visible. He frowned and bent over, but before he even picked it up, he knew she'd read it. On her way to bed, while he was eating pancakes.

He sat on his bed holding the book and stared blankly at the window. "Closed book," she'd said. She'd read it before, too. He felt sick. He started opening the journal, and then shaking he cradled it under his arm and ran out of the room, out of the house, down the front steps, nearly tripped on another of the O'Grady's cats on the way down, his fingers digging into the journal.

When he got under the house, he felt he was barely breathing, felt the tears and the anger as he grabbed the wheelie bin. He dragged it away from where Rosie and Grampa might see, and then ripped every page of his journal into shreds until his fingers and arms were sore and paper-cut and he scattered every page into the bin. The best part of 2008 floated, torn and red streaked into the wheelie bin.

That was Saturday morning.

## Eight

The heron approached the second super-toad eagerly. In hindsight, this would have been a massive mistake. For one point, the SUPER - TOAD had become super - fast. It was able to easily evade the probing, stilleto - like beak of the heron. For another, the super-toad was also super - hungry. Hindsight was a small luxury that the heron would never possess. The Super - Toad rounded on the heron quickly, and with a darting tongue, swallowed its entire head and sat there, mouth open in a toady smirk. Before the bird could try to kick free, the first super - toad leapt across the mangrove and similarly took care of the bird's rear end, leaving the bewildered animal's legs jutting out awkwardly, as though it had been rudely stuffed into a toad's mouth. Fortunately, no other living thing heard the sickening sound that the toads made as they each worked their way along the length of the heron, using their toad arms to help further stuff the quivering body deeper into their gullets, until finally they came to be almost toad lip to toad lip. The sound itself was something like an old toilet plunger being jammed down an old toilet, only much, much nastier. The whole unfortunate episode would have looked quite comical, (although probably not for the heron) except for what happened next. With uncanny timing and a sickening crunch, both toads viciously clamped their crocadilic jaws closed.

Another toady-tuosome popped out of the murky slough.

Gloop.

Nine

Frank had been riding his bike around Laconia Heights for most of the day. He thought about heading over to Dan's place, but found himself meandering out past the tip where the new developments were springing up. Last time he'd been out here the bike path had been fenced off. Now it stretched away as far as he could see. There were bulldozers and hulking earthmovers and he could make out newly designated subdivisions all the way to the distant highway. The place really had sprung up and 'gone ahead', like his Dad had said it would years ago. Frank watched the procession of 'B-Doubles' and wondered if it would ever stop 'going ahead.' Frank's legs were heavy when he turned for home.

\*

"That's a DC-3 from the looks!" Grampa squinted out the window through his binoculars at the noisy speck as it droned away overhead. He stepped out the doorway and followed it until it banked behind the distant clouds. "Designed over the phone in the thirties. Amazing!"

Frank had gathered an armful of scrap pieces of wood, old nails and other bits and pieces from around the shed and was busy hammering them together. He didn't look up.

Grampa glanced across at Frank. "That's an interesting, err," he frowned as he came back through the shed's open doorway. "What is that you're making again Frank?"

"School project" said Frank as he hammered in the last nail and stood the thing up. It wobbled and fell over.

"Right. Looks..good?" asked Grampa. Frank was about to answer when a jet roared overhead sending them both ducking behind the workbench. Grampa

was first to his feet, running out the shed door and screaming “What the fecking??...” and beaming at the now long gone jet. He turned and walked back into the shed. “Wow - didn’t even get a good look at it, but that’s a new one I reckon!” Frank stared at him. His eyes were wide with the excitement.

“Grampa, how come you always swear in Scottish?”

“Do I?” he said innocently. He scratched his head. “Don’t really know son. Never even been to Scotland.” He smiled. “Braveheart was good though. FREEEEE-DOM!”

Frank smiled. Grampa eyed him from the other side of the bench. “Still keeping your diary up to date then?”

Frank tugged a nail out of the ‘thing’, re-nailed it and stood it up. It fell over. “No.” His voice was small and seemed to him to be coming from somewhere else. He cleared his throat. “Mum’s been reading it,” he said. He glanced up at Grampa and picked up the object. They said nothing for a while as he patiently repositioned some nails and stood the ‘thing’ up carefully. A silent tear dribbled down his cheek. “I had to chuck it all out.”

Grampa was by his side then, and Frank felt the sheer crush of the man across his shoulders, hugging him tightly, and Frank cried and cried against the weight of him; a simple old man who understood. And soon Frank felt better. Grampa took him by the arms and looked deep into his eyes and smiled - didn’t say a thing. And they understood each other.

The ‘thing’ teetered and finally fell over again. Frank felt himself laugh miserably.

“Good, now in you go my man and put the kettle on. I’ll be up shortly.”

Frank nodded and walked back into the house, his eyes down.

Something lurched beneath the wood - pile and a log shot out across the shed floor scattering fragments of timber into the bench. Grampa jumped back and a grim expression came to his face. Frank's wooden 'thing' lay pulverised against the bench. He slowly backed away, reached into the tall metal cupboard behind him and retrieved a large bore shotgun.

"Stay calm now my beauty, stay calm," he said and swallowing nervously he approached the wood-pile as it again shifted. He breached the 'Greener' and as it opened several avocado pips rolled out of the rear of both barrels and across the floor.

Ten

Grampa wiped his blackened hands on his overalls as he poured the brewed tea out of the old pot into his cup. He raised the mug of tea and the pot together on a large, rectangular tray and placed them on a small table by the great and wise armchair. Glancing out the lounge-room window, he could see Frank out the front talking with another boy who sat leaning forward on his bike. Grampa lowered himself steadily into the chair and carefully poured some milk into his cup. The boy looked to be about the same age as Frank and Grampa smiled as he put his aching legs up on the footstool and sipped at his tea in deep contemplation.

“Beauty. Enough there for two?” Omar walked past brandishing a mug.

Grampa scooped up the pot. “Nae, jess enough fae one.” He frowned at himself and then shoved the pot over to Omar, who muttered a bewildered “Thanks.” Omar sat nearby with his tea. They sat this way for some time saying nothing until Omar flicked on the TV. Grampa picked up his pot, realised he no longer had a second cup of tea and muttering, headed for the kitchen. “Isn’t it prayer time yet?” he called back over his shoulder.

Omar smiled and flicked around a few TV stations. “Not for another hour and a half,” he said, and then added “Why, want to join in?” He flicked the TV off, finished his tea and headed into the kitchen to place his cup in the dishwasher.

As he rinsed the teapot, Grampa turned slowly. He had a feeling something wasn’t right. Omar straightened up, frowning. He’d been leaning over and sniffing noisily.

“Were you smelling me?” demanded Grampa, a furious look on his face.

“You smell like avocado.” Omar looked more puzzled than embarrassed. He opened his mouth to ask more about it, but as the old man’s expression shifted to a new level of darkness, he decided (probably wisely) to leave it at that.

\*

“Hey Dan.” Frank hadn’t spoken to Daniel since the sabotage, and wasn’t sure how to greet his friend. He leaned on the letterbox as Daniel backpedalled his bike out of gear.

Frank could tell he was trying to look cool. “Boy did we stuff up!” he said.

Frank raised an eyebrow. “How do you figure that?”

Daniel looked at him. “Yeah OK, maybe I stuffed up. Sorry about that, but you should have seen your face!” He laughed. “That was mad! And Wobber! Holy hell is he pissed off!” Daniel leaned back and folded his arms. “I reckon he’s out to get you, Frank.” There was something resembling amusement that Frank saw in Dan’s face just then, but in a flash it vanished. Still, he saw it.

Frank laughed. “Yeah, which means he’s out to get you too, Dan. He already knows it was you who loaded the catapult with milk and not me.”

Dan suddenly stopped smiling. “How-how did he find out then?” he said.

Frank grinned. “I reckon he just knew.” The sun was beginning to give way to a massive shadowy cloud and the wind had shifted and picked up, crossing the Davies’ house to the east.

“Oh well then,” said Dan. A clap of distant thunder. “He’ll probably forget by Monday anyway.”

Frank raised an eyebrow. "How do you figure that?"

Daniel looked at him sheepishly. "Yeah OK, maybe I stuffed up. Sorry about that, but you should have seen your face!" He laughed. "And Wobber! Wooooa- is he mad!" Daniel leaned back and folded his arms. "I reckon he's out to get you, Frank."

Frank laughed. "Yeah, which means he's out to get you too, Dan. He already knows it was you that loaded the catapult with milk and not me."

Dan stared blankly, as though his internal processor was running on an old Windows platform no longer supported by his brain. He eventually managed to look nervous.

"Ah - well then," said Dan. He looked over his shoulder. A clap of distant thunder. "See you Monday," he said and rode off with an eye on the approaching storm. Frank waved goodbye as he turned towards the house again, feeling a bit guilty that he had been bluffing about Wobber. He knew he had other problems to worry about.

He couldn't count on his friends.

The toughest kid in school was after him.

His own Mum was spying on him.

He had to admit - it had been a bugger of a Saturday.

It had nothing on Sunday.

## Eleven

Frank thought the enormous bang that shook the roof was something falling from a plane; maybe landing gear or luggage or hopefully<sup>22</sup>, frozen waste. Above the distant sound of propellers there was a loud, Scottish curse, a barely audible swear - word and a metallic clatter. Jolted awake, Frank was reaching for the clock radio and squinting at the 2.50am figures, when he heard the sliding noise down the pitched roof, the horrifying pause and the heavy thud in the bushes below.

For a few minutes, Frank didn't move, heard only the plane's exiting drone and the fall of rain. Then the sound of Omar muttering something in Arabic downstairs, heard him yell for Mum. Again, a pause and then Mum pounding the stairs hard and crying down in the dark; Omar running in and calling the ambulance.

Frank didn't move. Not even when the reflected red and blue lights flicked off out the front. The men came running up the side and left about twenty minutes later. At 3.35am his Mum opened his door, and Frank lay completely, deathly still while his heart beat itself out of rhythm and his Mum quietly called his name. Behind him he sensed his mother hesitating and hoped to god she wouldn't wake him, though as she eventually closed the door, he felt ashamed.

Frank still didn't move, as the loneliest feeling in the world circled around him. He heard Rosie crying a few minutes later and only then did he get up. When he did, for the third time in his life and the first time AO<sup>23</sup> he found that he faced a whole new world.

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<sup>22</sup> (Purely for the amusement factor)

<sup>23</sup> (After Omar)

Extract from the new journal of Francis Robert Davies (No real qualifications)

Wednesday March 26 2008:

The police have just left. They were a bit narky because Grampa died while discharging a firearm at a passing Air-freighter. They said they were considering charges. Omar got angry and asked if they could hurry up and charge Grampa straight away because the funeral was on Wednesday.

The last three days are a blur. I was nervous about the funeral because I've never been to one, but also Grampa had all these relatives I've never heard of. Even Mum was sketchy on some of them. Rosie and I stayed together (my idea) and we got introduced to them one by one. They were old and mostly smelly, but they smiled a lot. In fact, they were all pretty.. I don't know – not really upset, or maybe they were being tough about it.

Even Principal Edwart was there. (Probably to make sure there had actually been a death, since I'd been given the week off.) A couple of the oldies were whispering about why he's not married, but I didn't think you had to bring a date to a funeral. Funeral's aren't exactly celebrations, are they?

Actually only Mum seemed upset. I think that must be what funeral's are about: being really, terribly upset and not letting on in case anyone sees. I've got it down pat, but Mum needs more practice.

I'd never really seen a coffin before Grampa's; genuine walnut and oak veneer (according to the guy at the funeral place) with silver handles (also available in gold). Some people I didn't know made long speeches about how nice Grampa was, how loved by the family and how missed he would be (except by Omar, I reckon). There was this one, big lady that Mum said was Aunty Myrtle. She's one of the things I'll always remember.

Rosie called her Myrtle the turtle (not to her face though, that would have been rude, and anyway she was scary). Aunty Myrtle (Grampa's only sister) was very grief stricken. That's what that look on her face was- grief. That sort of "rip your head off and spit down your neck" look that you sometimes see on old people's faces. She held in her crying really, really well.

I was relieved to get out of the funeral place and I sat in the back of a big, white Ford on the way home. Home hasn't been like home since Grampa died, it's just been busy and weird. We've got to be strong for Mum, Omar said.

It wasn't over though, in fact the weirdest thing in the world happened. Everyone came back to our place for a "wake", including Grampa in his walnut-veneer. But that's not the weird bit.

They brought plates and even a pie warmer; Mum and Omar had already had to buy a new dining table from the second-hand furniture dealer at the shops the day before. They went around handing out coffee-rolls and quiches and things and made heaps of teas and coffees. Some people fussed around and cleaned and served food and others chatted and said stuff like "Oh, you're Omar- heard a lot about you sonny" and that helped Omar spend more time in the kitchen. Mum came up towards the end put her arm around me and looked over at the coffin and said how much he'd have loved all this. I said "except the being dead part."

Then Aunty Myrtle went mad. She said people were using the coffin as a table, and true, there were a couple of rings from tea and coffee cups on the walnut. Anyway, Aunty Myrtle (Mum said she doesn't mind a sherry) got a bit extra grief stricken. She made a loud speech about "How dare we use a coffin for a public bar," and How we should have some bloody respect". One old guy yelled back "Why, would it ruin the walnut and put off the cremation," and she said again,

“Have some bloody respect.” Everything was deathly quiet, but when someone stifled a giggle she yelled that she’d, “Better remind us all who was in here!” Then she ripped open the coffin lid! That’s not the weird bit.

Everyone looked away in shock, except me. And so I’m the only one who saw it. It had been clinging to the underside of the lid, and as soon as the lid opened, it sprang out and stuck itself across Myrtle’s face like a metre of green glad - wrap. It was a frog - more than a frog – it was THE FROG.

There was a short, slurpy - suction sound and it was gone- out the window. Aunty Myrtle spluttered and dropped the lid closed. Someone caught her as she staggered back and asked her how many sherries she’d had and we didn’t see her again. I ran straight to the window and looked down, but only one of Mrs O’Grady’s cats was there in the bushes looking up at me. Principal Edwart grabbed me by the shoulder and said he was very sorry for my loss- or something. Then he gave me this creepy wink and left. When I looked back down, whatever it was, was gone.

This is my first journal entry since Grampa died. He left me a new journal. Mum gave it to me yesterday. She didn’t say anything, so I don’t think Grampa told her about the old one. This one is big and heavy, black and dust-stained; a bit beaten up. There’s a sticky note in his writing that says “11.52?” on the morning he died. I’m going to keep it there. This is my first page. I’ll try and write every day Grampa, but I’ve already missed a couple of days..

Twelve

“What have you done, you bunch of MURDERERS!?”

Frank squinted up at Mrs O’Grady. “That’s it,” he thought, “I’m never opening the front door again.”

“Hello Mrs O’Grady,” he said. It was definitely colder in here since he opened the door.

“Don’t HELLO me young man,” she yelled. Frank hadn’t got to opening the screen door yet, and from the spittle already clinging to the wire, it was staying shut. “Where’s my Tabby?” Mrs O’Grady stood there, hands on hips looking like she might barge down the flyscreen if Frank didn’t open it.

“I don’t know, Mrs O’Grady,” said Frank. I haven’t seen her for a few days.”

“You’ve done something haven’t you?” she stammered.

“No, really, I...” Frank began, but Mrs O’Grady was winding up.

“If I find you heathens have hurt my little Tabby...” she began.

“Mrs O’Grady!” Frank jumped as Mum closed in from the rear, nearly pinning him to the damp screen and the angry old woman. Mrs O’Grady stopped. Frank tried awkwardly to turn around, tried to shuffle out sideways and gave up. “Mrs O’Grady, kindly take your venom, your ill will and your stony face off my porch. We’ve had a death in the family!”

Mrs O’Grady looked like she was going to say something as Frank managed to jump aside and his Mum slammed the door. Frank stared at her. She was

furiously staring at her side of the door, while on the other side, Mrs O'Grady was probably doing the same thing.

"Thanks Mum," said Frank. He hadn't heard his Mum speak that ferociously, since, well- ever. He reached out to touch her arm; at that moment Omar arrived and put his arm around her and she folded like a deck chair, sobbing into his chest. Frank looked on for a moment, then silently went upstairs.

Frank lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling. He had his Ipod on charge, but he was sick of the music. He lay quite still and could hear Mrs O'Grady prowling around her yard again, calling her cats.

He walked to the window and stared out at the shed at the end of the mowed bit of lawn. He hadn't been back inside since Saturday. Since Grampa died. He was sort of saving that up. Frank could hear a plane arcing high overhead and staring into the darkened doorway of the shed at the end of the yard, he wondered what type it was.

Mrs O'Grady's rattling voice was calling "Bobby, Bobby!" as she poked the bushes near the fence with a large stick. "Rotten old bat," he said to himself and then frowned. She was looking for Tabatha half an hour ago.

Frank sat back on the bed and retrieved his new journal from his school bag. Wherever he went, this journal was going too. Staring at the big book made him sad, but the silence of his empty room and staring at the darkened shed made things worse. The book had an odd sort of feel to it. Maybe because it was old - it didn't look like the sort of book you could buy easily. The pages had a thickness, or a rawness to them, a bit like hand made paper. He rifled deep in his school bag for a pen, and carefully laid the book across his lap, slowly turning the first few pages.

The he stopped.

Frank stared at the words on the page and said aloud, “They weren’t there before.”

He turned back to the beginning.

Frank stared at the large, ornate letters across the inside front page. For a moment or two he thought he must have overlooked this part:

“If a frog croaks in the forest, does anybody hear?”

Frank gaped at the writing, running his fingers over the letters. They were raised; supple like skin, a bit like Grampa’s tattoo. He couldn’t have missed it before. With a prickly feeling at the nape of his neck, Frank carefully eased the book closed and turned the book over in his hands. The rest of it appeared the same. Maybe the page had stuck and he’d missed it.

He opened up the book again. No change. That was good. He relaxed. Under the curly writing there was a space and a line, the same as his old journal. Frank took his pen and wrote “Francis Robert Davies”.

His name immediately changed colour. Frank felt the pen drop out of his fingers. The writing, now bright green, looked to be swirling on the page, and a sizzling sound, along with wisps of smoke rose from the book. This time Frank snapped it shut and threw it across the room in alarm, standing back as a large fountain of smoke belched out of the book from his desk.

Then it stopped.

Through the clearing haze he could just make out the green glow that brightened into a symbol as the smoke thinned. Frank didn't need to wave a path through the smoke- the black cloud had changed to wisps of white before vanishing completely. He walked back to where the book lay, a glowing, green light shining upwards from under his desk, casting an eerie light all around the room. Slowly, he knelt and tried touching- that was OK, so he picked the book up and sat it on his desk where he could inspect it at arms' length. On the front of the book was a large, odd- looking hand- print. Or rather, a large something print.

Frank sat carefully and tentatively poked at the book in case it was still hot. If it had been hot, it wasn't now, so he slowly picked it up and examined the cover. The book appeared still to be dusty and black, except for the.. something print: four fingers splayed out like a hand - or maybe three and a thumb; it was hard to tell. Carefully he traced the print with his finger - tip. It was bumpy, sort of yellow and white and Frank suddenly grimaced and grabbed his finger.

He dropped the book again, having reopened a painful paper - cut on his index finger. The book fell with a large drop of blood on the top of one of the 'fingers'. To Frank's horror, the small blob of red soaked right into the print, leaving not a trace of the blood behind. He sucked his finger silently for a few moments before picking up the book and easing it open. Inside, the first page had changed again. His name was gone, and in the same swirling letters, dark and raised were the words "Hail, Frank."

He snapped the book closed and kicked away from the desk, toppling over backwards and banging his head on the side of the adjacent bed. It took him a few moments to get to his feet, not because he was especially injured but because from down here, he couldn't see the book! He stood, checked his finger, looked around the room and reassessed things. He was being stupid- what was he afraid of?

That definitely wasn't there before. Frank picked up the book in wonder and cradled it against his lap, sitting down heavily on the bed. "Where'd it go?" he muttered.

"Talking to yourself now Frank? Maybe mum was right- maybe I really DO need a counsellor.."

The print was gone. There was a thunderous crash at the window, and Frank fell off the bed, dropping the book all over again.

At first glance the window seemed to have been completely blacked out. Frank's immediate thought was that an O'Grady cat had just failed to make it into his room again. Then he realised he was wrong. It wasn't an O'Grady cat.

More worryingly, it hadn't necessarily failed.

### Thirteen

For a worrying few seconds, it looked just like a shovel full of greenish eggs had been tossed against the window. The mass of underbelly and suckers scrabbled desperately at the glass, all the while sliding steadily down again.

Frank laboriously got to his feet. He hesitated, then ran to the window and tried to open it. It wouldn't budge. Frank had carefully nailed it shut years ago to stop Tabatha having kittens under his bed. The thing outside scrambled spasmodically with its long suckers and what appeared to be knees, trying to muscle itself up the glass, but it was a losing battle. Frank ran back to his desk and grabbed a screw - driver out of the bottom drawer. When he turned back, the thing had only one, long hand smeared across the glass. Frank levered hard at the window, his face only a few centimetres from the strange, yellowish palm. Just as the window popped open and he threw up the sash, he realised it looked like it would fit perfectly onto the print on the book.

THE FROG regarded Frank eye to eye as it dangled there absurdly, about an arm length away. "Whooaaa!" said Frank, backing away slowly. The window creaked ominously and then broke away with a crash as THE FROG swung itself clumsily through firstly onto the ledge and with another, powerful leap, across onto his desk, scattering his lamp and some pens onto the floor. Frank edged around THE FROG to the broken window, closed it, and turned around.

It was looking at him. Frank had never seen a frog like it. It was massive, larger than a cat, a bit smaller than a dog. Most dogs. And heaps greener. And glaring. Frank stared at THE FROG, noticing the bulging throat that puffed out occasionally. He could even make out his own reflection in the coal black eyes-eyes that followed him around the room as he nervously circled back past his bed. In those black eyes, two tiny, scared- looking Franks slowly orbiting the

centre of each eye as he reached backwards until his fumbling hands found the door handle, twisted it and opened the door to his room.

“Frank,” began Rosie, striding into the centre of the room and stopping in front of THE FROG. Frank stared in disbelief, then jerked the door shut and pulled Rosie backwards to the edge of the bed. They both stared, sitting in slow motion. THE FROG turned slightly and stared at them from the desk.

“Big frog!” Rosie pronounced each word slowly.

“Yeah. It jumped in through the window.”

Rosie noticed the shards of glass and window-sill and the screw driver on the floor. “Looks like it broke in,” she said.

“No, I did that.” Frank wasn’t taking his eyes off THE FROG, which was returning the favour. Despite having absolutely no eyebrows, it looked like it had one raised.

“You let it in?” asked Rosie.

“It was going to fall.”

“What does it eat?”

“How the hell would I know?”

“I’m getting Dad!” Rosie jumped off the bed. THE FROG stirred.

“Rosie!”

"I mean Omar!" She stood and made for the door.

"ROSIE!" Frank caught his sister by the shirt and waited for her to stop pulling. "We can't tell anyone," he hissed.

"Why not?"

Frank let her go. "Because I've seen it before. At the funeral." He swallowed. "In Grampa's coffin."

They both looked back across at THE FROG. It seemed to be quietly regarding them. Maybe even enjoying itself.

"Really?" said Rosie.

Frank nodded. Rosie edged closer.

"He's cute," she said.

"I know - I don't think it's dangerous. I don't know why. It's like it's to do with Grampa - somehow."

Rosie thought for a moment. "OK. I won't tell. My word is my bond."

They sat again and stared at THE FROG. "What are you going to do with it?" said Rosie eventually. Frank reached over his bed and retrieved his school bag.

"If it'll get in here I'll let it go outside in the garden."

Frank and Rosie slowly approached THE FROG, which remained completely still. Frank got half way and then said "Wait," and they backed off.

“Are you sure it’s not dangerous?” said Rosie, who was digging her fingernails into Frank’s arms from behind.

“Sure,” said Frank, and after a couple of deep breaths, they slowly moved forward again. When he was close enough, Frank threw the open bag over THE FROG and made a scooping lunge, then overbalanced, fell and banged his arm.

“Yow!” he moaned, raising himself on the other elbow. That thing must weigh a ton!” Rosie was giggling at him.

Frank got up and stared as THE FROG contemptuously tossed the open bag from its head onto the floor. It was like it had been welded to his desk. It was going nowhere. Frank stared at it from the carpet.

“Right,” he said. “Go and get Mum’s spatula.

## Fourteen

Rosie came back to visit THE FROG six times before bed, bringing lettuce, water and noodles for it to eat. THE FROG ignored everything, but whenever Frank approached or walked past it, it seemed to be eye - balling him. Frank sat up well midnight with a book he had found downstairs about reptiles and amphibians, but THE FROG was not in it anywhere. Well not exactly. Lots of frogs had lots of bits and pieces which looked like the bits and pieces of THE FROG, but not in the same order. Frank put down the book. He smiled at THE FROG.

“I’ll call you Frankenfrog!” he grinned.

THE FROG, if amused, kept its composure.

Frank liked the name so much he reached under the bed for his journal. He hunched up on his bed with the big black book on his knees and flicked through until he reached the page with the corner turned. He had time to touch the pen to the paper before he dropped the pen, slammed the book shut. He had forgotten about the weird journal all this time.

Someone had been writing in it. He opened the book at the start. Closing it quietly he stared at THE FROG.

Someone had been writing in liquid silver.

The words were dazzling, a bit like mercury, he remembered from when Mum had broken a thermometer years ago, and the silver liquid ran onto the floor. He leafed carefully through the book, the words casting glittery light around the room, over his fingers. Frank stared around the room in wonder at the beauty of the shimmering, liquid light as it ran and shifted around the bookcase, the desk.

He turned back to the glittering words- pages and pages of them. THE FROG's dark eyes sparkled even more deeply as it watched Frank intently. It had seen this book before.

The book read like a diary:

'I have slain the beast, not without amphibian assistance. Darwin must never get wind of this; it'll absolutely ruin that evolution thing he's been working on...'

Frank skipped ahead a few pages.

'Have reached the summit. Tenzing ( my Sherpa - companion) has been resolute - especially about the frogs. We have released them at the summit, as they wished. God knows what miraculous work they will now complete. I am nervous about the climb down without our sticky, sure - footed friends..'

Frank swallowed. He thumbed back to the beginning.

'And verily, he is risen and the stone has been rolled away, and even his frog is missing..'

He slammed the book closed. THE FROG's eyes regarded him- deep, tranquil, tiny dust motes lit silver on black in the dark room. Suddenly Frank had a thought- he opened the journal again about a third of the way through. Reaching out with one finger he smoothed the yellow sticky note where his Grampa had written "11.52". He flicked through the pages - hundreds and hundreds of them - diagrams of frogs, listings, sightings, legends and lore until he came to one of the last, completed pages. This entry was still in black ink, but the flowery copperplate was unmistakably the same as the post- it note.

So it is clear then. It has made its thoughts plain to me. I've waited all my life for this and now I have my part to play! My shot - gun has been modified for its very

precious round and I have lubricated the barrel so its skin doesn't get peeled off on firing. Tonight is the night! My valuable friend will be headed north. I have a spot on the Eastern edge of the roof that will be perfect. It will be a strange thing, being rid of this duty- this burden! But I think I've been kept alive for this. It's time.

His Grandfather's section!

Not for the first time, Frank gaped at the book. Grampa had fallen off the roof just before 3AM. Did he climb up there at 11.52 and wait? All alone up there, silent in the darkness, waiting for.. what? "Not with those haemorrhoids," he thought. As he peeled off the sticky note, the black words trembled, almost squirmed and a great squeal came from the book.

"Aaaaarrghh!" yelled Frank and closed it. He pushed it away and stood on the bed because now he had no doubt- no doubt at all that the book was alive.

With the sound of a thick water balloon almost popping, THE FROG leapt from the desk to Frank's feet and eyed him calmly. Frank stared down as THE FROG gently extended its right leg and placed its fingers exactly on the print on the journal's cover. Its elegant digits fitted perfectly, and the indentations on the front of the book seemed to close around them. The book flared, light screamed out through the closed pages with a brief intensity and Frank squinted as it died away just as quickly as it had begun. THE FROG turned to Frank, made meaningful eye contact, and in one powerful leap, resumed its place on the desk.

Frank quickly snatched the journal up and threw it into his school bag. It was late, and he had his first day back at school in just a few hours, but he knew he wouldn't get much sleep.

## Fifteen

A thousand or so kilometres away in a small mangrove swamp all was quiet. The last rays of the sun had warmed the backs of the thousand or so super-toads which now began to hop away into dark, secret burrows, following whichever animals had made them. Soon after, when the various species of fish were gone, the super-toads turned temporarily vegetarian, demolishing the many varieties of water-plants. Some of the toads that remained began to climb the delicate roots of the monkey-puzzle trees, one of them with half a mangrove crab sticking out of its mouth. Above them birds shifted uneasily in their roosts. As each enormous, spurred foot raked the trees, even the toad with the crab was smirking, as it cracked through the crab's shell like it was chewing gum.

## Sixteen

Frank lay on his bed, the words his Grampa had written running through his mind. The old shotgun – it was more than a hundred years old. He had shown it to Frank ages ago. Frank was pretty sure it had been Grampa's father's before it was even Grampa's. 'Tonight is the night' and '11.52' also troubled him - what on earth was he doing? What was he shooting at and why? It just didn't make sense.

Frank drifted in a world of half sleep and wakefulness. At times he could look down on himself as slender tendrils of mercury emanating from the book snaked slowly around the room, probing into different areas and corners, searching out something while THE FROG remained silent and watchful. When it came, the dream was disturbing. Frank ran as fast as he could, but his legs were so tired, he was stumbling, scrabbling at the ground to get away from...the voice.

"Sorry- SORRY!" it called behind him, this time closer. Frank hated that voice, it stabbed through him like icy wind, but his legs... just... wouldn't... work! He hugged himself tightly to keep the cold away. It was dark all around him and so cold, but he could just make out a narrow track through some trees ahead.

"SORRRRRRRYYYYY!!!!" the voice screamed it this time, and Frank felt a blinding light in his eyes, hands on his shoulders throwing him back and forward.

"Frank!" yelled Omar, "Hey, snap out of it! Sorry for what? It's a dream, son: Wake up-NOW!"

Frank looked at Omar's blurry face and rubbed his eyes. It had taken so long to get to sleep, he didn't know he'd really dropped off. His legs were tangled in the bed sheets. The light was on. He shivered as a blast of cold Laconia Heights wind streamed in through the broken window.

Omar looked at the jagged glass in the pane. “Al -‘ama! Did next door’s bloody cat do that?!” he said.

Frank’s eyes began to adjust as he sat up and took in the room. He saw his Mother peering in from the corridor as he rubbed his face and said “Yeah-must have been”. He slowly glanced at the desk. THE FROG sat there, quiet, oblivious and luminous in the bright light.

Omar sat on the bed next to Frank. “Ok? That was quite a nightmare.”

Frank did his best not to look at THE FROG. He stared at Omar. Don’t look at it..Don’t even move your eyes...

“Yeah, I’m right now. You go Omar. I’m right.” Frank could make out the THE FROG’S throat bulging periodically out of the corner of his eye.

“Want to talk?” Omar looked kindly at him. Frank wasn’t comfortable being this close to him.

“No, really I’m fine.”

Bulge Bulge.

“You go- I really don’t need any help, ok? I’m just gonna get back to sleep.”

Omar sat back and looked at Frank. Then he nodded and left the room. Frank stared at THE FROG. It looked sort of...different. Like it knew it had nearly been caught and it was feeling sheepish.

“Frank,” called Omar from the doorway, leaning in to the light switch. Frank jumped. “Goodnight, mate.” The light flicked off. Frank pulled the sheet and blankets up to his neck and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark again.

Outside, on the icy wind, Mrs O’Grady’s voice called: “Polly - POLLY!”

Frank shivered.

And in the darkness, the light glinted, or did it gleam in the eye of THE FROG?

## Seventeen

Frank woke with sunlight pouring in through the broken window and sat up stiffly. His clock said it was 8.05am. He'd slept in. Then he saw the window and remembered. With a sudden shock, he looked around the room. THE FROG was gone. He panicked, wondering if it was in the house, then after a five minute- search he quickly sprayed some deodorant on and threw on his uniform. First day back, not one he was looking forward to either. It was just easier than not going, but not knowing where THE FROG had got to, let alone the mystery of Grampa's last hours were at the top of his thoughts now.

He jumped down the stairs to the living area and slung his school bag next to the kitchen bench. Mum looked up and threw the phone book closed, crimping the page.

"Breaky?" she asked perkily.

"Yeah, thanks," said Frank. He walked to the new dining table where two litre container of light milk and a couple of bowls and cereal awaited. Frank threw down half a bowl of cereal and left the bowl spinning on the kitchen counter.

"Waiting for the waitress? Frank, you know where the dishwasher is don't you?" Mum had a point actually. He grinned as he pushed the dish closer to her end of the bench.

"Yeah, I'm talking to her, aren't I?" He offered.

She made a lunge and tried to flick him with the tea - towel. He dodged back easily, grinning. "Next time!" She said and picked up his bowl with a flourish that said "last time I do this". As she turned away, Frank flicked the yellow pages

open again. "Psychological Counsellors". Hmm. He closed the book silently. "Was that for his benefit?" he wondered.

"Has Omar gone?"

Just then Omar jogged to the front door. "Good timing Frank, just going. Rosie's in the ute if you're.."

But Frank jogged straight past him and down the front steps.

"..ready." Omar finished the sentence and pulled a face at Pam. "At least he's keen?"

"Frank, you haven't even brushed your teeth," she called, but Frank was gone. Frank had no doubt that Mum's psychologist - search was meant for him. He opened the door and sat next to Rosie.

Omar followed a moment later carrying Frank's bag. "Geez Frank, what have you got in here - bricks?" The ute shook as Omar slung Frank's forgotten school bag into the back on a load of old pipes and loose spanners. The rest of the trip to school was deathly quiet, except for Omar turning up the country music station and singing Slim Dusty to the world. Frank's mind was too much of a blur now to worry about it, and he was still feeling tired.

Frank shouldered the bag all the way up the front steps at school. Mum actually thought he was crazy now. It had come to this. First up was 'Home - room' which was a relief. Frank's teacher Dave Mahmoud made a big deal out of not making a big deal out of Frank coming back into the room after a week away. Still, he felt the eyes of everyone as he walked in and sat down.

“Hey Frank, make sure you grab a note - we’re thinking of introducing a laptop program and we want to get an idea about who’s interested so we have numbers. Here you go.”

“Thanks Dave,” he said and began folding the note. Other students were chatting away and he thought he heard his name. Looking around carefully, he noticed Keisha (being the only one of her group of friends who didn’t wear the hijab- she always stood out) who had turned and looked towards him at the same time. Their eyes met briefly and Frank felt his heart flutter up out of the mire it seemed to have been sunk in for weeks. He quickly glanced away and concentrated on folding the note carefully. When he raised his flushed face next, Keisha’s friends were whispering to her and they were all smiling as if they were in on some secret. They were all looking at him and laughing.

The rest of the class was just about touching base with Dave about school issues- the canteen, building works at the school, proper use of the library and lockers. Frank had double English next with Ms Alende, but on the bright side, he got to catch up with Dan and didn’t have to worry about Wobber until fifth session - Maths. He didn’t know why, but he was actually starting to feel better about things.

Ms Alende had finished a long and boring introduction about the origins of words. “And did you guys know that your names all have origins? I can tell you a lot about where you’re from or at least where your families are from, just by your name.”

Daniel nudged Frank. “Yeah- if your name is ‘Hamburger’ you’re from Hungary.”

Ms Allende shot Frank and Dan a ‘look’ and continued. “For example, if your name is ‘Smith’, then you are probably going to be somewhat bigger than someone who has the surname ‘Taylor’. Can anyone tell me why?”

Everyone looked at everyone else. Either no - one knew, or by now, no - one was owning up to it.

Ms Allende strode across the room to the whiteboard and wrote 'SMITH' in large letters and 'Taylor' underneath it, only much smaller. "Well?" she prompted.

Frank thought of crickets chirping in the night as the silence continued.

"That is because - traditionally you see, Taylors," at which point she circled the word 'Taylor' "were folk who mended clothes. Just like 'Tailors'," which she wrote on the board nearby. "Who knows who the 'Smiths' might have been?"

From the back of the room came a tentative "The Smith Family?"

"No, but good try," lamented Ms Allende. She scanned the room. There were no other hands. "Smiths," she continued, "were blacksmiths." She wrote 'Blacksmiths' on the board.

The same voice from the back of the room chipped in with "Ooh- that's racist."

"Now blacksmiths were the village iron-workers, so they were typically male, big, powerful men, and they passed on their names down the generations. Which is why Smiths are usually a lot bigger than Taylors."

Ms Allende beamed at them, waiting for a round of applause.

Frank imagined more crickets.

"Unless some rotten female came along and ruined it for them?"

The statement cut through the silence so quickly that no – one even had time to gasp.

It was Keisha. All through the room, twenty - nine year olds all suddenly became completely alert and attentive.

Ms Alende beamed at Keisha. “Yes sweetie?”

“Well if the mighty blacksmith had a daughter, the tradition was instantly dead, right?” Frank turned, as did the rest of the class to look at Keisha and her friends. “So maybe that’s a bit of a generalisation is all. I mean a lot of people had daughters down through the centuries.”

“Yes, but it still rings true to this day.”

“What does?”

“Smiths are bigger than Taylors.”

“OK.”

“I’m sure there are similarities in your culture, dear”

Frank turned to look at Ms Alende. He wasn’t sure, but he wondered if she was stepping over some line with that comment.

“My culture?” said Keisha levelly. Her eyes had narrowed. “What is my culture Ms Alende?”

The whole class except Frank, Keisha and her friends all said “Woooo,” in reference to the growing tension in the room.

“Class, please!” snapped Ms Alende. She smiled again warmly. “I just meant that Muslim’s have a wonderful tradition..”

“No, that’s a part of my culture, not all of it, Ms Alende,” interrupted Keisha. She looked around the room at the many faces now staring her way. “Islam is part of my culture - I don’t think you know about my background or where my name comes from for that matter.”

Frank leaned in to Dan slightly. “She’s awesome,” he whispered.

“She’s a towel-head,” said Dan.

Frank felt a moment of shock pass through him as another minute part of his universe realigned.

“Let’s get back to words, before they get me into more trouble,” laughed Ms Alende. “If that’s OK with you Ms Farris?” Frank noticed the hint of steel she saved for Keisha in her stare. He also saw the cool reception reflected in Keisha and her friends’ faces.

“Open your texts to page thirty - five..”

As the bell went for recess, Frank watched Keisha leave as he and Dan headed off to the lockers. He rounded a corner and was still deep in thought when he ran straight into Wobber Wiley’s vanilla slice, followed closely by Wobber.

Wobber grunted, swore and peeled the pastry and custard off his shirt and stared at Frank. Frank felt his stomach drop. He noticed Wobber’s piggy eyes actually bulge. “Davies!” he yelled, in the same way you might say “Maggots!” or “Cockroaches!” Wobber mangled the remaining slice in his meaty fist, pulled

Frank's shirt open at the collar and rubbed it into his chest. He shoved Frank backwards.

"See you on the oval at lunchtime, Davies."

Frank slumped against the wall as Wobber's mates laughed and slapped Wobber on the back.

"Wighto, Wobber" he said very quietly. Dan said nothing.

Frank stood there holding his shirt out from his chest and jiggling himself up and down, trying to get rid of the custard and icing.

"Yuck!" commented Dan.

"Hi."

Frank spun around. Keisha stood there, staring at him. Frank tried to grin a cool grin as mangled pastry and custard fell in thick blobs down his legs and onto his runners from his untucked shirt. She stifled a giggle. "What happened?" she asked.

Frank looked down at his shirt and gulped. Yeah, I, err - slipped." He opened his locker and then slammed it shut. "Actually, I think I'll just grab a spare shirt from the office." He leaned casually on the locker. Dan stood there wondering what he was doing.

"I'll..catch you later," she said, backing away with a smile and short wave. Frank smiled back as his shirt clung to his chest, where his heart was beating wildly. He opened the locker, shoved his books inside and locked it.

“Coming?” he said to Dan.

“I haven’t had any morning tea,” complained Dan.

“Fine, see you shortly.”

Frank stood at the counter in the office for most of the morning tea break. The woman behind the counter didn’t seem terribly interested in him, but eventually looked up from her typing and yelled “Elaine!” in an annoyed tone.

Elaine suddenly appeared from around the corner and hurried around the counter. “Goodness Frank, what on earth?” She ushered him into the side room where second hand uniforms were stored and sold. “Get that off,” she said briskly as she searched through a bag of crushed school shirts. As he removed his old shirt, he carefully rolled it into a ball, catching most of the slice. Some of the icing still made soft splat noises on the linoleum floor. Elaine handed him some paper towel, and he was able to wipe, or at least smear away most of the congealing custard. She thrust a new shirt at him. He wiped his hands carefully and held it up. It was too small. He struggled into it, but could feel it straining across his back and nearly pushing his shoulders together.

The bell went just as he got back to his locker, and he just had time to open the door, retrieve his books and toss in the dessert – soaked shirt before heading off to geography. Then he remembered. He re - opened the locker door slowly and carefully.

Licking its lips, THE FROG eyed him curiously from on top of his maths book. Frank stared down as it burped and spat out a ball of yellow gunk into his textbook. The bell went again. Frank slammed the door closed and ran to class. “Maybe it’ll eat the old shirt,” he thought. He wasn’t optimistic.

Mrs Stavinsky was collecting homework when she paused next to Frank. "You smell like a pastry, Frank," she said and moved on. Frank smiled weakly and glanced down at his shoes. They were trashed.

Daniel grinned and elbowed Frank from the desk next to him.

"You still gonna take on Wobber?"

Frank looked across. "I thought you'd like to," he said. Daniel stopped grinning and Mrs Stavinsky slapped his homework down in front of him. Frank didn't say another word.

After Geography, Frank opened his locker and to his relief discovered that THE FROG had found its way back into his bag. He closed it tightly and decided it was best to take it with him- that way he could make it onto the bus earlier and avoid Wobber.

Lunch passed without incident- Frank managed to avoid Wobber and eat something from the tuckshop without having it inserted in his shirt. Or anywhere else. To be honest, the whole afternoon he was more worried about the 'contents' of his bag, which moved every now and then.

He sat with Daniel outside the library- the last place Wobber would be likely to show up. Daniel was now also keeping a worried eye out for trouble.

"Hey!"

Frank dropped his apple pie onto his shoes with a soft 'splot'. He spun around. "Oh, hey Keisha." Daniel knew enough to make himself scarce, but didn't want to go too far, so he skulked off into the background where some of Keisha's friends

were gathered. They looked at him oddly. He smiled and waved an awkward “Hi.” They ignored him.

“You’re a bit jumpy”, Keisha said.

Frank felt relief, followed closely by a whole different colour of nervousness as he looked at Keisha. He grabbed his apple pie, and then wished he hadn’t. Frank turned and quickly flung the now mangled pie behind him. She was still smiling. He heard Daniel’s sudden yell of “Yuck!” and then his muttering as he scraped apple pie out of his hair. Frank smiled back. “I thought you might have been someone else.”

“Good to be back?” she asked.

“Yeah, well up to point I s’pose.” He looked down at his small shirt and now crusty runners. “I liked what you said in English - to Ms Alende.”

“Yeah, well, she makes me so mad!” Keisha’s expression changed. Her eyes were full of the enjoyment of retelling the story. “She has no idea! She wouldn’t know if I was a Muslim or even a Buddhist, let alone a Sunni unless I wore a sign on my head.” She turned and pointed over her shoulder to her friends. “Like them.” Her friends were trying to ignore Dan as he continued picking bits of pie - crust out of his fringe.

“You are a Muslim though, right?” said Frank. He hadn’t realised he’d said it until he said it. He suddenly hoped he hadn’t offended her. It just seemed easy to talk with her.

“Yeah, I just don’t want to wear a hijab. They do,” she pointed to her friends, “but that’s their choice. Our families are all from Lebanon, but not the same parts. My family’s from Mish Mish, but don’t tell Ms Alende. And our families are all different

too.” She paused, then smiled. “Anyway, thanks.” She reached into her pocket. “My mum saved this from the paper,” she said and handed Frank a folded clipping. Frank opened it and stared. There was a photo of Grampa and a heading:

“WW2 Vet’s Last Stand against Flight 1152- From Laconia Heights!”

Frank stared at the photo of Grampa. Keisha said “Really sorry about what happened. I know what it’s like to lose family.” She reached out and touched his arm sympathetically. “See you later,” and smiled as she turned and left, but Frank could only gape at the headline.

Daniel had wandered back, feeling disconcerted by the inattention of Keisha’s friends. “Yeah, see you Keisha,” said Daniel, now removing chunks of Frank’s apple pie from his shirt. He looked at Frank. “What’s that?”

Frank finally lifted his head to look for Keisha. “1152- it’s flight 1152!”

Daniel looked at him oddly. Frank tucked the clipping into his bag, shouldered it and bolted.

“Hey Frank!” yelled Daniel, but Frank wasn’t stopping for anything. Stuff the bus. Stuff fifth session Maths. Stuff Wobber Wiley, he thought triumphantly. He had to get home. Rosie would have to get the bus without him for once. He weaved through the other grades as they mingled outside the tuckshop. He was headed for the school gate. Before his brain had a chance to make sense of it, he saw his legs fly into the air, the world swung around violently and the lights momentarily went out. He was suddenly on his back and he felt warm liquid all over his face.

“Told you I’d see you later, you weak bastard!” said Wobber, leaning over him. Frank was so shocked, he didn’t know what to do. He heard Wobber’s mates laughing, someone yelling “Kick him!” and a crowd starting to gather. He rolled onto his side and touched his nose. He’d never felt a broken nose before, but this one felt broken. There was blood everywhere. “Get up!” screamed Wobber.

Frank didn’t know what to do. He sat, with his hands up, half expecting the kick, which didn’t come and heard himself saying “What did I do?” Then, as he got unsteadily to his feet, saw Wobber shaping up for the next punch and with everyone watching- he bolted.

When he got through the school gate, he realised his bag was back where Wobber had decked him. Frank wiped blood from his face and felt a great fresh flood of it shoot down his front. He wrinkled his tiny shirt up and holding the hem to his nose, walked around in a tight circle. What should he do? He had to go back! He hesitated, then determinably walked back ignoring the stares of the students mingling around the gates. He saw Wobber walking away with two bags - no doubt, one was his.

With a fresh sense of dread, he knew had to get it back.

Occasionally cradling his nose in his shirt, he jogged as fast as could, but Wobber and his mates had made it to their bikes. They were long gone. Frank stared helplessly as the bell rang for last period. He watched Wobber ride away, out behind the school where the main road cut right past and could only think of one place to go: Wobber Wiley’s house.

In a lonely park on the other side of the road, Wobber slammed Frank’s bag onto the ground and ripped the zipper open. Anything worth taking was going home with him- the rest was going out onto the road to get smashed. He had a fair go at rummaging through Frank’s things- books, mashed pastry, pencil case- before

something the size of a feral cat (only greener and with a much nastier temper) smashed into his face at the sort of speed usually reserved for long range missiles. After that, for Wobber at least, there was nothing.

## Eighteen

Everyone in the district knew where the Reilly's lived. Well, everyone with a sense of self-preservation knew where the Reilly's lived. They were a wild bunch: Wobber's older brothers raced dodgy cars and ran a dodgier wrecking business just outside of Laconia Heights in an industrial area.

It took Frank nearly forty minutes of trudging through the new suburb to the older one where the Reilly's weatherboard house came into view opposite a large spray of lantana and wild grass. The front yard was decorated with semi-abandoned cars and parts.

The long walk had relaxed him a bit, but Frank felt his stomach start to clench as he approached the gate, then walked up the path, and finally rang the doorbell. He tried to steel himself as he heard footsteps approach on the other side of the door, and as it swung open he took a quick step back in anticipation.

A female version of Wobber stood there, only she had greyish hair and a harder face, if that was possible. She looked as if she was ready for a fight, but when she took one look at Frank her face suddenly softened.

"Oh you poor thing- come in! What on earth happened to you?" Before he knew it, Wobber's mum had her arm around him and had ushered him inside onto the brown velour couch in the Reilly's meagre lounge-room.

"Is Wobber – I mean, Robert home please?" Said Frank as Mrs Reilly helpfully balanced a bag of frozen peas on his bloodied face.

"Tilt your head back," she said. "No - he's not home from school yet." She lifted the edge of the bag of peas and peered at him. "You're Frank aren't you?"

Great, Wobber had been talking about him. Frank wondered what he could possibly have had to say about him to his own mother. Martial arts moves maybe.

“Your father’s my plumber!” she said with delight.

Frank’s voice rose up from under the peas, “He’s not my father.”

Mrs Reilly looked at him suspiciously. “Did Robert do that to you?” she said.

“He um- picked up my bag by mistake-I just want my bag back Mrs Reilly.”

She gripped the edge of the couch, and her face turned back to granite. “Wait ‘til he gets home,” she said. Frank sensed Wobber was in serious trouble. He almost felt sorry for him.

The doorbell rang and Mrs Reilly’s fingers released the couch next to Frank. Frank heard a familiar voice talking, then footsteps and “Hello, Frank. Thought I’d find you here!”

Frank dragged the peas slowly from his face and turned. His voice sounded nasally.

“Oh. Hi Omar.”

“How’s the supply out to the extension Mrs Reilly? Still plenty of pressure?” asked Omar. Frank squinted up from the couch.

“Oh yes, excellent. Thanks very much Mr Salmon. I’m sorry about the payments – I should be able to send another cheque next Wednesday. We’re so grateful to you.”

Omar smiled. "Sal-man, not 'Salmon'. No fish in the family, as far as I know, Mrs Reilly." Looking around the room, Omar knew perfectly well the money would be a long time coming. He looked at Frank. Tell you what," he said, "Let's call it even."

\*

Omar was driving fast and Frank couldn't work out if it was because he was angry or if something was wrong.

"Where are we going?" Frank asked from under the peas.

"School." Omar half drove up the gutter and made an old man and his dog jump back from the curb, swearing superbly.

"Geez - I'm sorry Omar - can we slow down?" Frank's teeth clashed together as the old holden drove back down the gutter. He gripped the bag of peas tightly and found himself suddenly covered in partially thawed vegetables.

Omar glanced at him momentarily as peas bounced and mushed their way around inside the ute. "You have an urgent meeting - with Mr Edwart."

Frank's heart sank even further. He ran through a list of his crimes in his head: fighting at school, although technically, running off and getting beaten up weren't really fighting. Leaving school without permission. Frank remembered a boy last year in grade six who got expelled for leaving the school at lunch - time. He'd had to go to Laconia East Primary. Rumour had it that it was full of Wobbers.

If they both got expelled, he just hoped Wobber and him didn't end up at the same school again. What had he done to deserve this?

“Omar- look, it’s not my fault,” Frank began, trying to save the last of the thawing peas against his face.

“Oh I know mate, I know. Don’t worry about that.” Omar grinned at Frank for the first time since they’d left the Reilly’s house with Wobber’s peas. “Mr Edwart saw you nick off and was about to run after you when something, well, more urgent came up.”

Frank felt a strange sense of foreboding. “What?”

Omar glanced in his mirror as they skidded to a halt in the car park outside the office in the same spot Omar had skidded ‘cop-show style’ not so long ago. Omar looked earnestly at Frank and gripped him by the shoulder.

“It’s about Wobber,” he said.

## Nineteen

Frank eyed Principal Edwart's desk nervously. Beside him, Omar was grinding his teeth. Frank had time to look around-the only photographs on the desk were of marshy landscapes that looked like they may have come with the frames. Frank wondered if Edwart actually had any family. If he did, they hadn't made it onto the desk. Or they were somewhere behind the marshy landscapes.

They both jumped when Edwart walked briskly into the room carrying a folder. He spoke without making eye contact as he moved sleekly behind his desk. "As you are both no doubt aware, the school regards assaults such as this very seriously." He looked at Frank as he spoke to Omar. "Mr Salman, would you mind waiting in reception while I get Frank's side of the story?"

Omar also looked at Frank and said "No. Actually, I'd like to hear Frank's side of things too."

Edwart blinked and looked at Omar. Frank turned to him and said "It's OK Omar. I'll be OK."

Omar looked from Edwart to Frank and seemed to wait for Frank to say something else. Then he wiped his hands on his jeans, stood and left the room without speaking. Edwart continued staring coldly at Frank. "Davies, I want you to prepare yourself for what you are about to see. Come with me."

Edwart lead the way through the office, down the corridor past the uniform shop to the rooms used as the school's sick- bay, where he stopped outside a white door emblazoned plainly with the Red Cross symbol. Frank was tired of guessing what was likely to happen next. He would have been wrong anyway.

"Are you ready?" he said, gripping the handle.

Frank nodded numbly and Edwart pushed the door open.

There was just about nothing left in the universe to surprise Frank. Over the last few weeks, he figured he'd seen it all. He was beyond scared, beyond tired. The door opened inwards to a small room containing some furniture, but not much else.

Frank gasped.

Wobber was seated bolt upright on the small bed facing them with his big hands clasping his knees tightly. Over one shoulder was Frank's bag. On the bed next to Wobber was Frank's journal. On Wobber's head, like a glistening green hat, perched THE FROG.

Wobber's saucer-like eyes swivelled to Frank's, his face seemed to be pleading silently at him, and Frank felt it hard to meet his gaze. He looked at THE FROG'S dark eyes, and then noticed its elongated tongue, dangling delicately over Wobber's shoulder- the other end jammed firmly in Wobber's left ear.

Mr Edwart closed the sick-bay door behind them with an echoing 'click'.

TWENTY

“You see, he touched the grimoire.” Edwart circled Wobber slowly with a look of fascination. As Frank stared from Wobber’s beseeching expression to THE FROG and then to Edwart, he realised that the principal was actually taking in THE FROG and not Wobber at all. Frank reached over cautiously and retrieved his journal. Wobber sniffed.

Edwart suddenly glanced at Frank as Frank turned the journal over carefully to the frog - print cover. Edwart nodded encouragingly. He gazed at the book he was holding and gently placed his hand on the strange frog print, forming his middle two fingers into one, thick appendage.

And immediately tasted ear - wax.

With a noise like an elastic band thwacking across the room, THE FROG rolled its long, pink tongue back into its mouth, licked its lips and jumped onto the bed next to Wobber, who immediately fainted.

YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO.

THE FROG stared up at Frank. Frank put down the book.

“No- I don’t,” he said.

“You don’t what?” said Edwart, who looked surprised.

“I don’t know what to do.” Frank said, pointing at THE FROG.

YOU KNOW.

“I don’t!” exclaimed Frank

“Don’t what?” replied Edwart, a little annoyed.

Frank realised the THE FROG hadn’t actually said anything. The voice was in his head. He had a telepathic link with THE FROG. Frank stared hopelessly at THE FROG, then at Edwart. “WHAT? I don’t know. You have to give me some help!”

THE FROG blinked once, closed its delicate green lids over the orb-like eyes.

THE END OF THE WORLD. THE CANE-TOADS OF THE APOCALYPSE ARE RELEASED!

Frank felt his pulse gaining speed.

IT IS TIME. YOU ARE THE ONE. I WILL SHOW YOU FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF FROGS!

Meanwhile, Edwart walked over, retrieved Frank’s bag and opened it next to THE FROG. Looking down, he grimaced at the custardy mess inside the bag.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE GRIMOIRE, STAYS IN THE GRIMOIRE. With that, THE FROG then plopped itself heavily, head-first in Frank’s bag, and Edwart zipped it up. He proffered the sagging bag to Frank, who placed it on his shoulder carefully. As Edwart opened the door, Frank stared one more time at Wobber. He was just lying there, looking blank. Hard to tell if that was normal for Wobber really, he thought.

Omar’s head craned around from the reception area and watched as they walked back into Edwart’s office. As Frank sat and the door clicked behind him, Edwart

quietly removed the key and lanyard from around his neck, and bending down, unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk. He placed a small, dusty book on the desk in front of Frank. It was similar to Frank's, and he was just starting to wonder what that might mean, when Edwart reached over and placed his hand on the tiny print on the cover. It fitted perfectly.

Frank was just wondering about the Principal's tiny hands when, with a 'spring' followed by a 'splot', a tiny, pink frog leapt from the open drawer onto the desk. Frank stared.

His eyes moved from the tiny, pink frog to the now grinning Edwart, and Frank was struck by his Principal's suddenly frog-like features. Frank found himself staring at Edwart waiting for him to blink, and when he finally did, Frank jumped.

"This must all seem strange to you, Frank," he said, delicately picking up and cradling the little frog in his hands. "I didn't even know your Grandfather was a 'Keeper of the Grimoire' until his unfortunate passing."

Frank stopped staring. "Keeper of the Grimoire?"

Edwart leaned forward eagerly. "Yes. Like you."

Frank edged back in his chair. "Me?"

Edwart was really smiling now; that was even weirder to Frank than the pink frog. "Yes- you." He continued. "Otherwise your friend there in that hell-hole of a bag you seem to own would have attacked you as soon as you touched your tome." He nodded to Frank's bag, which squirmed.

Frank blinked.

“Your book?” said Edwart. “You do study English at this school Davies?”

“Yes sir.”

“Hmm.” He stroked the little frog gently with his index finger. It raised its neck in delight. And shut its eyes. “Each book is a tiny piece of the Frog-Grimoire. Each book owns one frog.” Edwart’s eyes lit up. “Each frog, one master. When a ‘Keeper’ passes away, his or her name appears on the honour roll in the back of the grimoire.”

“Mr Edwart- Sir- What do I have to do?” begged Frank.

Edwart looked furtively at Frank. “That’s entirely between you and your frog.”

Frank looked around at the bag on the floor which bulged and fell over.

“I would imagine, Frank, that the previous ‘Keeper’ didn’t quite manage to complete his task. When this particular frog sought a new master, you volunteered your services.”

Frank blinked. “Mr Edwart, I didn’t volunteer for anything. Really!”

“And at some stage, that frog accepted.” He leaned close to Frank, who by now was wedged into the seat. “Frank- this is a mortal contract between you and your frog. An ancient, permanent pact, signed- in blood.”

Frank remembered signing his name. That was when THE FROG had plastered itself across his window that night! “But- I-I don’t know what I have to do!” he stammered. Frank rubbed the healing paper-cut on his finger and with a sinking feeling suddenly recalled the smear of blood on the frog print on the cover of the journal.

Edwart stood and placed his frog quietly into his shirt pocket. “Only your frog can release you now.” He smiled, this time warmly. “Remember to record everything in your journal. The grimoire must be fully informed and recorded faithfully.” He was treating it like some big adventure now. “Your frog will guide you.” Edwart walked around the desk, placing one hand on Frank’s shoulder. “Good luck Frank.” He walked away and held his office door open. Frank stood dragged the bag to his shoulder and approached the door.

“If you’ll excuse me now Frank, I have to go and erase Mr Wiley’s memory,” he said, again, gently patting his frog-in-a-pocket. “Goodbye Mr Davies.”

Frank walked past and turned. “That frog can do that?” he said in amazement.

Edwart grinned the most reptilian grin Frank had ever seen. “Oh yes, that and more. Comes in handy at staff-meetings.” Edwart closed the door and walked down the corridor before adding: “And parent-teacher nights.”

Frank shivered, then walked quickly to reception where Rosie was now waiting with Omar.

Edwart opened the sick-bay door as Wobber sat up groggily and wiped a thick strand of drool from his cheek. “Ah, Mr Wiley. Thanks so much for waiting...” Edwart closed the door.

## TWENTY-ONE

“Uggggh. I’ve got squashed peas on my bum!” complained Rosie, sliding into the middle seat of the ute.

Frank held his school bag between his knees as they headed home. His mind was still reeling with everything he had learned in Edwart’s office. He suddenly looked at Omar. “Who called you?”

Omar looked a bit startled. “Mr Edwart rang my mobile.” He adjusted his grip on the wheel. “He told me everything, Frank.”

Frank didn’t know what to say next. Maybe he was going crazy. Rosie looked at Omar and then at Frank, then at Omar again. “What happened, Dad?”

Frank was so lost in thought he didn’t even bother correcting her.

“Frank got into a scrap with the Riley boy,” said Omar.

Rosie looked in amazement at Frank. “You took on Wobber!?”

Omar half grinned. “He gave Wobber a clobber!” he said.

“Cool,” said Rosie. She started practising ninja moves on the dashboard.

Frank looked at Omar hopefully. “Is that all he said?”

“No- he told me the whole story. Unbelievable as it is.”

Frank blinked in astonishment.

“I can’t believe you actually chased his mates down the road. It wasn’t until we found out that Riley had stolen your bag that we realised that you must have gone to the Riley’s to get it back. That’s why I picked you up.”

“You chased Wobber?!” said Rosie in amazement. More ninja moves.

“That took some guts, Frank,” said Omar, grinning.

With a flood of relief Frank realised that Omar didn’t know about THE FROG. Or the grimoire-thing’. He gently probed his nose. At least it’d stopped bleeding.

“Frank gave Riley what it sounds like he deserves. And he’s suspended.” Omar smiled at Frank who was now staring straight ahead, his brain trying to unravel something. “Not you, Frank- the Riley boy.” Omar was still grinning as they drove.

Frank recalled the look on Mrs Riley’s face and for the second time ever he very nearly felt sorry for Wobber.

“You must have made mince meat out of him, eh Frank?” Omar reached over and nudged him. Frank shuddered as he remembered the hollow look in Wobber’s eyes as THE FROG dangled its long, pink tongue in his ear.

“Yeah-sure,” he managed.

They drove straight into the garage and picking mashed peas off their legs and bums made their way up the front steps. Half way up the steps, Frank gathered his school bag tightly in his arms and yelled out “I’ll be in the shed.”

Mum’s car was gone. She must be on night duty again. “Good,” thought Frank.

The evening sky over Laconia Heights was full of the cool promise of autumn, of the end of things.

## TWENTY-TWO

In a far away mangrove swamp, the last super - toad (having finally devoured the only remaining living thing for miles), grinned contentedly from the branch of the tree it had climbed. With an arching of its back, it delicately lifted its back leg and let loose an enormous, rumbling, methane-drenched fart that instantly ignited the tree and sizzled through the atmosphere and away into the expanding ozone hole. A fart which did not go unheard.

When a dismayed Park Ranger arrived at the scene the next day, he found nothing alive. The charred remains of the tree were still smouldering. A Yolngu tribesman, he'd never in his life heard the bush devoid of the song of birds and insects. As he turned from the wreckage of the swamp and dejectedly made his way back to his four-wheel drive, the only sound he heard was a soft 'gloop'.

## TWENTY-THREE

Frank stared around Grampa's shed. It was still pretty much as he had left it. The wood pile looked the same - his souvenir aircraft calendar untouched - still turned to March. Frank leaned his bag against the wood and placed the journal carefully on the bench. Reaching into his pocket he unfolded the newspaper clipping from Keisha. His eyes lit up. On the calendar - March 28, in his Grampa's writing were the numbers "1152". He stared at the cutting. "Flight 1152 from Laconia Heights".

Trying to shoot down a plane from the roof of the shed really was a crazy thing to do, especially now that he knew Grampa had planned to do it in advance. But why?

Grampa had that plane targeted. Frank stared at the Lockheed aeroplane in the calendar's picture for March. He would probably never know why, but he had to try to find out. With a soft sigh he pulled out the tack holding the calendar to the wall, flicked the page over to April. The next picture was a large, oddly shaped plane from the Second World War. He could see the tiny turret at the bottom where the gunner would have sat.

With a sound like a water balloon dropping on cement, Frank's bag exploded. Turning in alarm, he saw THE FROG sitting there amid a large, gelatinous custard that exuded an oddly citrus-smelling smoke. His bag appeared to have completely dissolved. THE FROG jumped sideways out of the mess and began to clean itself with its long, elegant fingers.

Frank turned back to the calendar. There, on April 14- Thursday- Today, Grampa had made one, last note. Frank traced the numbers with his index finger.

11-52.

He stood for a while, not thinking anything until THE FROG leapt into the woodpile, and sent a log and something round skittering across the floor. He frowned, bent down and picked it up.

Frank held the small, smooth object in front of his eyes as THE FROG settled down on the woodpile and watched him. It just seemed like a normal avocado pip.

Frank looked across at THE FROG. Suddenly it seemed to undergo some terrible spasm and rolled onto its back, clutching at its throat which began bulging rapidly. Frank looked on horrified and was about to pat it hard on the back when it righted itself, reached irritably into its own mouth, made a retching noise and flung out a length of sloppy string. Then it burped, a foul vanilla-tinged effusion, and went back to its seat on top of the woodpile. Frank dropped the avocado pip. He walked over and looked at what the FROG had dragged out. If not for the bells on the end, he would never have thought it could once have been a cat's collar. It fizzed, and like Frank's bag, promptly dissolved.

"Well, Mrs O'Grady can stop looking for her cats then." THE FROG, though expressionless, looked smug. An idea began to form in Frank's mind, but it wasn't quite within grasp. He looked at the cupboard and held the avocado pip between his fingers. He spun it around and around, savouring the roll of it against his skin. It was perfectly smooth, but not perfectly round. The idea in his head was rolling too, moving from synapse to synapse, lobe to lobe, forming with the absent – minded repetitive rolling in his hand. He thought about how hard it felt – like a stone, yet how smooth it was as he turned it in his palm. His hand tightened on the pip as he walked briskly over to a large, metal cabinet, and tried the door.

It was locked. The police had insisted. If he was right, he had to do two things. First, he had to pry open the locked cupboard and get Grampa's shotgun. And then he had to call the airfield. He glanced down at his bloodstained and ill-fitting school shirt. Maybe he should go in and get changed first. "Not a bad idea," he thought.

Storm clouds began to gather on the edges of the Laconia Heights skyline. If Frank had looked out the shed's window, he would have marvelled at the way those clouds seemed to cover the horizon at every edge, leaving a large, fluffy window in the sky above. He was too busy ramming screwdrivers into the space where the key would have fitted into the cabinet. THE FROG gazed at his exertions lazily. Reflected its dark eyes, the window in the sky – very slowly – began to close.

## TWENTY-FOUR

The Ranger sat on the smooth rock staring at his four-wheel drive for a long time. Occasionally he removed his bush hat and wiped his forehead, otherwise he remained very still. Doonburr was a man of the bush – even named after local grass-seed, he had developed a wide knowledge of the bush, passed down through Yolngu culture. That led to gaining an important job with the Department of Parks and Wildlife, but nothing in his past had prepared him for the sudden devastation he had just witnessed. Or what he was witnessing now.

The super-toad was now as big as a wild boar, and uglier. Apart from the shock of seeing the creature, he had never seen anything doing – that - before. The thing had its mouth wrapped firmly around the rear tyre of his four-wheel drive. And it wasn't letting go.

Something about the expression on its face was troubling the Ranger. Some animals might attempt to eat something larger than themselves and then simply give up. He'd seen it with snakes, birds, lizards, but this *thing* looked angry. Really angry.

With a sudden 'pop' and 'hiss' the tyre exploded, sending the super-toad rolling backwards into the shrubs like a cannon ball made of fish guts and offal. The Ranger leapt to his feet, ran to his four-wheel drive and found his camera. Tracking the path through the bush where the super-toad had rolled, he walked silently for five minutes, snapping a few photographs and shaking his head when

the trail ran cold. He walked back to the four-wheel drive and pulled out the jack and the spare, dumping them on the ground behind the vehicle.

The tyre had been completely wrecked. Not so much punctured as *sucked* to death. There wasn't a lot of rubber left, and the ends of the severed steel belt woven through the middle of the tyre were gleaming like they had just been polished. He threw the tyre into the back of the car, walked around the vehicle, and reaching in through the driver's window, grabbed the radio transmitter.

"Base it's Don, do you receive? Over."

After a moment the radio flared in the cabin. "Go ahead Don. Over."

"Base I'm out at Arrrrrrghhhhhhh!"

"Sorry, missed that Don, Repeat. Over."

"ARRRRRRRRGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"Just getting static here, Don. Say again. Over."

Doonburr yanked his foot half out of his steel capped boot. This was a very good move on his part, because half a second later, the super - toad, having clamped onto the end of the boot, bit it in half. Doonburr fell backwards, completely snapping the radio transmitter from the car and with enormous relief, stared down at his intact sock. The super toad turned and eyed him viciously as he scrambled back in terror. Doonburr scrambled away, doubled back and dived through the rear of the vehicle. Lying between the front seats he dug deep in his pockets for his keys, crawled into the driver's seat and jammed the key in the ignition. His foot ached painfully as he plunged his half boot, half sock onto the

accelerator. The 4WD roared away on its three good wheels, the shredded tyre flying out from the steel rim as it bit and bounced from rock to rock.

## TWENTY-FIVE

Frank levered the bent metal cabinet door to one side, grabbed the shot gun, fumbled with its weight, and strode back to the woodpile. Placing the gun down at his side, he walked over to the woodpile, knelt and began heaving blocks and planks of wood out of the way. He was working on a theory.

## KEEP DIGGING.

Frank jumped up and smacked his head on the log above. Straightening up, he stared at THE FROG, who stared back. He returned to his work at the log pile. An avocado stone! Excellent! Frank started digging frantically. It was almost too dark to see, he hurried back to the cabinet and could just lay his hands on Grampa's torch. He returned and aimed it at the wrecked woodpile. Frank grinned as one piece of the puzzle found its place.

At the very back was the upturned cutting block: larger than the rest of the pieces of wood. It was thickly layered in brown, compacted avocado wreckage. Frank felt a sudden rush of adrenaline. He went back to the bench and grabbed the shotgun and after some fumbling, pulled back both of the large hammers on the back of the barrel. In wonder, he stared into the back end of the barrel, holding the torch as close to the other end as he could. It had been machined into one, wide chamber. You could (for example), fit an avocado in there, and practise firing it at a target. A target (for further example), like a nice, solid chopping block.

Frank turned the torch onto THE FROG. Another piece of the puzzle seemed to be just beyond his grasp as he stared into the dark globe-like eyes. Silently, Frank switched off the torch and just stood in the darkness, the weight of the idea that had occurred to him suddenly filling his soul.

Grampa wasn't firing avocados at that plane. Or shotgun shells. An avocado that sailed through the air that fast would explode when it met its target and achieve nothing. Frank's new theory involved both the ammunition and the target being safe.

Grampa wasn't about to harm anyone or anything, that was one thing of which Frank was absolutely certain. He stood for a few moments just breathing in the smell of the shed, thinking about the old man he loved and missed more than anything. In the shadows, he tasted a silent tear as it fell.

Francis Robert Davies took a deep, controlled breath.

He flicked on the torch.

He picked up the shotgun, broke the barrel where the ammunition went and placed it on the floor in front of THE FROG and then stood up.

"Get in."

THE FROG's black eyes twinkled in delight.

YES.

With a squelching sound, THE FROG placed its delicate fingers, then its hands inside the barrel. It slowly pushed itself forward, squeezing itself into a tubular shape until with a last kick of its powerful legs, it had loaded itself inside the gun.

Frank stared in wonder. Deep inside he could sense the planets in the universe lining up. He felt like punching the air, but he also knew he was running out of time. He quickly seized the gun, now heavier than ever, and with a loud 'click', he cocked the weapon.

He had been right. Grampa had tried to shoot THE FROG at the plane! He hastily stuffed the gun under the remaining wood, then piled up some of the loose blocks and logs. Heart pounding with exhilaration, Frank grabbed his journal and ran through the long section of grass, up the path and into the lounge - room.

His heart was singing. Grampa wasn't just some crazy old codger going nuts and trying to shoot down planes. He was.. he had been a keeper of the grimoire. Frank felt his own connection to some fate outside his understanding. It meant trusting all his instincts. It meant helping Grampa. He knew what he had to do!

First though, he had to phone the airfield. He stopped short at the end of the corridor. Omar was on the phone.

"Um, Omar - how long will you be?" Frank tried not to yell. He was dancing from one foot to the other.

Omar looked over and placed his index finger vertically over his lips.

Frank stared back. "Is that 'one minute' or 'shut up?'" he said desperately. Omar glared and repeated the mime. Frank felt as though an hour was going by. Omar eventually hung up the cordless handset and handed it to Frank. "Don't be long, tea's not far away," he said.

Frank ran out of the room, yelling "No worries" over his shoulder. He got up to his bedroom and clicked the phone button anxiously. With relief he heard dial tone. He shoved the door closed and dialled for operator assistance.

"Laconia Heights aerodrome please." Frank fumbled in his drawer for a pen. "And hurry - it's an emergency," he added.

## TWENTY-SIX

Ranger Doonburr grabbed his hat in one hand and threw it over his shoulder into the back of the jeep, all the while gunning its three working tires and bare rim over the rugged bush track. His head was reeling. In this huge expanse of the park, he had encountered wild boars, even feral bison from South East Asia, but that – thing - had left him uneasy. It wasn't so much the enormous size of the creature, although it must have been nearly a metre long! It was something about the eyes.

He wriggled his foot tenderly, his toes poking ridiculously onto the accelerator. As he bounced the rugged jeep over stones and through pot - holes, his hat smacked into the back of his head and landed back in his lap. With a creeping shiver that began at his neck and jagged its way into the pit of his stomach, he glanced into the rear view mirror. And the eyes of a super toad.

“AAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHH!”

The jeep left the track, revved hard and slammed into a stand of bushes and a gum tree. The super toad shot straight past Doonburr's left shoulder, through the windscreen and skittered onto the bonnet. Doonburr shook broken glass out of his curly hair, groaned and struggled to focus. As his blinking eyes cleared, he realised all too late what it was about those eyes that had bothered him earlier. They were full of hate.

Worse still, they were advancing towards his face through the broken windscreen. And now, as he struggled to unhook his seat belt, they were really, really angry.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

Frank finished his dinner quietly, helped with the washing up and watched half an hour of TV. Rosie and Omar were sharing a bowl of chips and laughing at some lame reality show, but nothing was reaching Frank. He knew what he had to do.

“Goodnight,” he said and strode out of the room. Omar and Rosie stared at him, looked at each other and went back to their show. Frank went up to his room, closed the door and sat on his bed. After a few moments, he leaned over and set the alarm on his clock- radio for 1.45am. Then he found his pen, opened the journal.

He found the date he was looking for and began to write. As he wrote, the letters changed into quicksilver and squirmed away from under his pen before settling on the page. It was hard to get used to.

Extract from the Secret Frog Grimoire,  
Liquid Silver on Ancient Parchment of Some Kind,  
Thursday, April 14, 2011

I know what I have to do. The time is nearly here. Grampa believed in this, and I don't know why, but so do I. I have to do what I can, even if it is dangerous. Something went wrong for Grampa, I don't know what, but it did. I will write more in the morning, when my part- our part in this is over. I have a feeling this it- one way or another.

Frank finished writing and glanced at his macbook. He had the feeling that what he had written wouldn't need to be backed up and preserved electronically. He read over his words again as light rain fell and stopped, the air cooled and thunder rumbled in the distance. Saying something out loud means that you give the 'something' just a little bit more truth than when you just thought it.

Saying it out loud means you think it's real. Writing it down means believing it completely.

And that's more real than anything.

Frank believed it. He had never been so scared. As he lay exhausted on the bed, he looked at small clock radio by his bed and knew, once again, that he wouldn't need the alarm.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

The thing was on a rampage. From where he had crawled out under the jammed seat -belt, Doonburr had felt its foul breath against his ear as the remnants of windscreen collapsed inwards from the approaching amphibian. He had to admit it: he'd got lucky this time. He smashed against the door, caught the sling he kept his rifle in and bounced out into the scrub, commando - rolling into long grass about three metres away. He kept himself low in the grass, keeping his eyes trained on the jeep.

The thing was ropeable. It was so angry, it just started to demolish his car - long arms and legs ripping the interior lining off the inner roof. From where he was crouching in the bush, he thought he saw it eat the interior light. It ripped off the steering wheel and threw it out the window, missing Doonburr by a few centimetres.

Doonburr yanked back the leather pouch and removed the rifle, scrabbling in the inner pocket for ammunition. When it was loaded, he carefully lined up the rear window of the jeep in the sight. He waited.

Nothing was moving. The sun baked his neck. Somewhere a crow called a melancholy cry, which echoed and was suddenly cut short. The Ranger flinched, then held the rifle steady. Slowly he saw the thing's enormous head raise itself in the window, staring straight at him. He recoiled again at the sheer wickedness in those eyes. He regained his composure. An ant bit his ankle. He didn't react, other than to squeeze the trigger gently.

The super - toad fell back in the rear of the jeep as the rifle crack reverberated around the bush. Doonburr waited until all was silent, then cautiously stood and limped, tracking around at an angle behind the vehicle. Squinting through the

rear windscreen, he saw the upholstery had been stripped from the seats, the steering wheel was gone and, alarmingly, so was the thing.

Gone from sight, that is. The good news was that Doonburr's shot had nailed the toad. The bad news however, was that being shot had made it even crosser than before. Doonburr heard a low, jarring growl begin under the rear seat. With a creaking and grating sound, the super toad forcibly removed the entire bench seat from its mounting, and proceeded to drag it out through the body of the jeep to the windscreen, and then onto the bonnet.

Doonburr stared in shock as the low growl ceased to be replaced with heavy panting. He quickly retrieved more ammo, loaded the gun and made ready to let the thing have it.

When Doonburr woke up, he couldn't remember what had happened. He gazed up into the sky and wondered how long he'd been lying here. With this car seat on his chest. Behind him, he heard a curious 'gloop' sound. Then another. Another.

He tried to crane his neck around to look behind him but he couldn't see what was making the noise. Probably just as well.

## TWENTY-NINE

The voice was closer this time, and the faster Frank tried to run, the more he felt he was slowing down.

“I’m sorry!” It called. Frank had to get away from the voice. He scanned the corridor in front of him. He was running through his own house, too terrified to think about what to do- he just had to run. A part of him warned him not to turn around, and a part of him told him he was trapped. In confusion, he ran and tried to turn his head. He felt himself barrel into the wall at the end of the corridor and slump to the floor. Stunned, all he could do was stare up as the owner of the voice peered down at him. The voice had never caught him- NEVER! Out of the darkness, Omar loomed above him, his expression concerned. Frank lay in the dark for a long time and just stared at nothing.

He gave up any thought of getting back to sleep. The dream eventually faded away, but Frank had to force himself to stop analysing what it meant. The voice was Omar. Why was Omar saying ‘Sorry’? and why, and why was he so terrified of Omar? Eventually his thoughts turned back to what he needed to do. What was going to happen? Would he fail? Would he miss the plane? What would happen to THE FROG? Grampa had fallen off the roof and Frank knew it would be dangerous just getting up there. He glanced at the clock. Half an hour to go. The guy at the aerodrome had told him that flight number 1152 was the discontinued freight plane to Darwin. Tonight was its last run before decommission.

At 1.25AM Frank couldn’t stand it any longer. Outside he could hear the wind starting to pick up. He quietly dressed with the light off, then eased open his bedroom door and crept out down the corridor.

Rosie's room was silent, though her door was wide open. Frank pinned his back to the wall and began to carefully tread the polished floor boards, dreading the sound of his runners squeaking. By the time he reached the end of the corridor, his eyes had adjusted to the darkness nicely and he could make out the stairs and the back door. He manoeuvred his way stealthily down each step, walked silently to the back door and gripped the handle.

"Where are you going, Frank?"

Frank face-planted the door and then turned in horror and embarrassment to see Rosie standing there, rubbing her eyes. "Jeez Rosie, you scared the crap out of me!" he hissed, grabbing Rosie's arm and dragging her into the shadows of the darkened room.

"What are you doing?" Rosie asked with a far- too serious expression.

"I can't tell you- go back to bed!"

"Tell me!" Rosie pleaded, arms folded.

"Go back to bed- NOW!" Frank glanced up the stairs, worried that Omar would come out at any moment.

Rosie looked at Frank. "I'll tell Dad. I mean- Omar." Rosie looked up at Frank seriously.

Frank stared at Rosie. He knew she would tell him. There was nothing he could do. For an exasperated moment, he hated Rosie. He let go of her arm with a shove that sent a shocked look across Rosie's face. "Right- but only as far as the shed. Right?" He grated the words through gritted teeth.

“Alright,” said Rosie, looking hurt and rubbing her arm.

Frank turned and eased the door open. It caught in the gathering wind and he had to usher Rosie out in front of him and heave the door closed harder than he’d meant to. It closed with a loud ‘click’, and he winced. Frank stopped and listened. No sound from inside the house.

“Where are we going?” Rosie demanded.

Frank stood listening.

“Are you running away?”

Frank stared at her. He lowered himself until he was eye to eye with her. “No way,” he said. “I can’t leave you, can I?” She still looked cross. He led the way through the yard to Grampa’s shed.

## THIRTY

Doonburr stared helplessly as the super-toad glared down from on top of the car seat. He could make out the large sack under its throat, the enormous poison glands on each side of its powerful, upper neck. It seemed to be wheezing slightly; the sack expanded and appeared to shudder closed, then fill with air again.

Doonburr tried to push the seat off him, but with the added weight of the toad, it was useless. It sat quite still, apparently gazing out around the bush. A thick droplet of foam oozed from the toad and hit some leaves near his head. They sizzled. From under the seat, Doonburr could hear the sound of the grass further behind him being flattened. He knew something was coming. He had to find a way to lever the seat and the toad off him. He wriggled painfully to his left.

Gloop. Gloop. The grass was alive with the sound of 'gloops' and movement. He squirmed some more and heard a small tree crash onto the ground not far away. He gave up trying to get out and with a supreme effort, he managed to move himself further under the seat, felt its centre of gravity shift and pushed himself along the ground, managing to roll out as the weight of the toad and the seat crunched down heavily beside him.

He rolled twice more, planted his palms into the dust and pushed himself up, ready to run. Then, as his eyes took in his surroundings, just as quickly he stopped.

The bush around him was gone. As the light began to fade in the Northern Australian sky, all around him was trampled bush and levelled trees. No birds called across the marshes. No insects whined, whizzed and hummed. Not for a hundred miles around. Instead the humid air was full of rustling and 'glooping'.

At first he thought he had landed in the middle of a paddock of ant-hills. Realisation sank in him as the sun- casting light sideways across the remote area- through the ghastly vista into diabolical relief. All he could make out for metres all around were the unmistakably lumpy silhouettes of toads. They were advancing from all directions. With a sickening sensation, he recognised the look of hate on each of their faces as they converged. The earth felt like it was starting to shake under him, but he was dimly aware that it was only his legs. He forced them into one, desperate - perhaps final - run.

## THIRTY-ONE

“Hold this and point it at the woodpile,” Frank muttered, shoving the torch into Rosie’s fumbling fingers. Switching the torch on, Rosie did her best to aim it at the pile as Frank climbed in underneath. Rosie breathed in with fright when Frank emerged with the gun folded under his arm.

“What have you got that for?”

“Look- I can’t tell you ok? I just need it.”

“What? Why can’t you tell me?” Rosie was spraying the torch back and forwards from the gun to Frank’s squinting face.

“I just... can’t, right?” Frank growled, then stopped. No-one had actually said he couldn’t tell anyone. He reached over and took the torch, placed it on the bench where it shone into room with a dull light. In the shadowy room, Rosie looked small and scared.

“Look- its ok.” Frank began. “It’s not loaded.”

Rosie stared.

“Well, it is loaded, technically, but not with ammo.”

Rosie swallowed.

“Oh for God’s sake! Here!” Frank uncocked the shotgun. Two frog legs dangled out comically. Rosie’s eyes bulged. Frank re-cocked the weapon. “OK?” he said.

“You can’t shoot THE FROG!” stammered Rosie.

Frank looked at her desperately. “I have to.”

“Why?” Rosie looked like she was going to cry.

“It’s what Grampa wanted.”

Rosie sobbed. Frank grabbed her arm again, this time gently.

“You have to trust me!” Frank glanced out the window at the house. “I couldn’t tell you in case you told Omar.” Frank looked guiltily at his toes.

Rosie looked hurt. She stifled a sob and said “I wouldn’t have told. Not if you didn’t want me to.”

The wind was starting to howl outside. A few thick drops of rain spat against the window and then stopped. Frank quickly checked his watch in the torchlight.

“Look- we don’t have much time. Rosie- I’m going to trust you, but you have to trust me too-ok?”

Rosie brightened and stuck out her hand. “My word is my bond.” She spat into her palm and offered it to Frank. He stared in wonder at his little sister, then smiling, shook the moist hand with love.

“SEBASTIAN!”

Rosie and Frank dived under the bench.

## THIRTY-TWO

“Oh hell - it’s Mrs O’Grady,” stammered Frank. He carefully reached around for the torch but left it off, as he rose and peered out the window. In the vapid light he saw Mrs O’Grady peering over the fence, prodding her walking stick into the bushes, and walking up and down next to their fence. Every now and then she stopped prodding and flicked a powerful torch light across the yard.

“Sebastian-come out this instant!” she yelled. Frank risked using the torch again and checked flicked the beam onto his watch. In horror he realised there was only about ten minutes left. He wished there was a blind on the shed window. He needed the ladder. Spinning, he cast the torch light wildly around the shed. The end of ladder stuck out behind the door.

“Sebastian!” The old lady croaked into the whirling wind.

Frank’s heart was leaping now. He gave the torch to Rosie. “Keep it pointed at the door!” he said as loudly as he dared. He ran for the ladder and tried to prop the door open. It blew shut loudly.

“Was that you Sebastian?” Outside, the old woman’s torch swung towards the Davies’ shed.

Frank couldn’t help it. It was too late now. “Rosie, grab the door!” he yelled.

Rosie rushed across the shed and grabbed the door in the breeze. Frank stumbled out with the ladder and the shotgun under his arm. Rosie pulled the door closed with a bang. Frank ran for the back of the shed and flung the ladder against it hard.

“Who is that?” called that old lady.

Frank checked the ladder. It seemed solid. "Hold the ladder!" Frank was already halfway up as Rosie dropped the torch at her feet and steadied the ladder. Another sudden blast of rain and wind nearly knocked Frank sideways. He felt his centre of gravity shift near the top of the ladder, and was just able to keep from toppling sideways. The shotgun slipped from his arm and dangled uselessly from the old leather strap against his shoulder. His fingers strained to hold him as he reacted to the falling weapon, his feet slipped off the ladder, kicking it sideways and just out of reach. The flexing metal guttering threatened to twist away or slice open his hands.

Rosie pushed against the ladder as hard as she could, but it lurched violently as Frank slipped. Staring upwards, she put her hands over mouth in fright, then remembered the ladder just as it threatened to topple sideways, and quickly steadied it again. She could see Frank's legs as he tried to touch the ladder with his feet. The rain was needling her face painfully and she desperately tugged the ladder to try to move it in his direction.

Frank shimmied sideways as much as he could until with his toe and then his foot he was able to make contact with the ladder. He stayed there for nearly a minute, not able to move and trying to drag the ladder to him with his foot. All the while his tenuous grip on the guttering was weakening. Between them, they managed to budge the ladder just enough for Frank to swing onto the edge, and then make his way down as quickly as he dared. Each rung was horrendously slippery now as the rain got worse, and he felt exhausted from the near fall. He was relieved to feel solid ground under his feet again. As he leaned against the ladder, something poked him in the chest as he turned, a beam of light shone into his face. For a few seconds he wasn't sure who was waiting for him in the dark.

In shock he stared at Rosie, who had let go of the ladder and was now jabbing the butt of the shotgun at Frank.

“What the hell are you doing?” Frank yelled.

Rosie handed him the gun. “You dropped this!” she yelled against the bitter wind as more icy rain began to blast down. He hadn’t even felt it fall.

Suddenly the yard was full of light.

“What the hell are you two playing at?” yelled Omar’s silhouette from the back of the house.

## THIRTY-THREE

It was like being pinned by a world championship wrestler. Or what he thought it would be like being pinned by a world championship wrestler. Or lots of world championship wrestlers. He swivelled his head from side to side, but all he could see was heaving, moist, tan toad bodies, oddly pulsing and clambering over each other with fat, flailing limbs.

He managed to glimpse his toes sticking out of the end of his severed boot. A super-toad had his other leg pinned, and just as he aimed to kick it sideways, another toad jumped on his free leg and pinned that too. Both his arms were being suspended behind him. By the cold, clammy feeling in his hands, he didn't need- or want- to try to catch a glimpse of the situation back there.

From his peripheral vision- almost beyond where he could see on one side, something horrible and lumpy made slow and steady progress towards him. He didn't want to watch, but he couldn't tear his eyes away. Hop by hop, it approached, the bullet wound already healed to leave only a scar. And more than a smattering of lingering resentment.

Two metres. One metre. Now he could feel its foul breath washing over him. He thought immediately of sulphuric acid mixed with something more caustic, and possibly cow dung as it lowered its enormous, oddly shaped head until it stared-eye ball to eye ball- right through him. And growled.

## THIRTY-FOUR

Rosie stood guiltily at the bottom of the ladder. Frank leaned the gun against the shed, gave the ladder a testing shake, looked behind him and did the only thing he could think of: he bolted to the top of the ladder, gripped the edge of the guttering as the wind tore at him brutally, and launched himself onto the sprawling, tin roof.

“Frank-get down from there!” yelled Omar, who was now striding out into the yard.

Frank looked back and as the moon briefly broke through the fast moving clouds, he glimpsed the small area of the roof that was flat. There were some bricks and planks of wood arranged into a crude seat. Grampa’s plane - spotting roost. Then he remembered the gun.

“Rosie! OI! ROSIE!” he yelled as the wind tore his words away. He could just make out Rosie down in the darkness as she looked up.

“Bring it up- QUICK!”

Rosie spotted the gun. She looked at Omar as he rounded the corner of the shed, then sprinted for it. Her little legs pumped furiously, but she was only three rungs up and then Omar was there. Frank stared in horror, clinging to the edge of the roof, as Omar, his face registering the shock of the situation, took the gun. He looked up at Frank and yelled “Get down- NOW!”

Frank gritted his teeth and yelled back “I’m not coming down. No-you’ll have to come up!”

Mrs O’Grady called out “Is anybody there?”

“Frank, what the hell are you doing? Get down! Your mother will be home any minute,” Omar yelled, clutching the shotgun.

Just then Mrs O’Grady stuck her head over the fence and yelled at Omar “Oh I knew it would be you up to no good! Where’s my Sebastian? What have you done to him you MURDERERS?” Omar turned to look at her, and she noticed the shotgun. “Ooooooh,” she said, and fainted dead away into a bush.

Frank saw her sag from the top of the shed, where the wind seemed to be twice as harsh as it was below. Then the ladder began to shake. Frank backed away from the edge.

Omar was coming up.

## THIRTY-FIVE

Omar sat opposite Frank on the tiny flat section of the shed roof.

“Look, Omar - I don’t have much time.” Frank held his watch and pressed the built in light switch. It glowed too bright to see for a moment, then he saw the figures 2.45 and began to panic. “You’ve got to give me the gun-It’ll be here any minute!”

“Calm down, Frank, calm down.” Omar was holding out his hands so that Frank thought he was trying to make him keep still, like he was going to jump or something.

“Look, Omar- please understand please!” Frank pleaded with him. I need to shoot- something- at the plane. Not to damage anything. I just have to do it.” The wind ripped at them.

“What- Why Frank? What are you talking about?” Omar half yelled it through the gusty wind at Frank.

“For Grampa!” yelled Frank, and big tears were streaking his face.

Omar edged closer.

Frank leaned back in case Omar made a grab for him. He was close to the edge, could feel the beginning of the slope away down the other side of the shed roof.

“He’s telling the truth!” yelled Rosie, who had crept up the ladder and was shining the torch on both of them.

“What the...!” yelled Omar shading his eyes from the light.

Frank yelled and toppled backwards from the safe expanse, slipping on the wet tin down the steep side of the shed roof. Omar lunged at the last moment, catching his jumper with two fingers. Frank dangled precariously then used his knees to inch his way back up the slope to the landing.

“Woa,” said Rosie, laughing. “That was pretty close!”

Both breathing hard, Omar and Frank turned and stared at Rosie in horror. Suddenly Omar burst out laughing. “OK,” he said. “Everyone just sit still while we work this out.” The wind howled. Above the howl came the sound of propellers. Frank, who had just sat down, leapt to his feet. There was no way to tell how much time was left. The wind was swirling and the sound faded in and out.

“Its here!” he yelled.

“Frank- sit down,” said Omar, still holding onto his jumper.

“Its here! Help me, Omar. You’re a good shot, aren’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter, mate.”

“Why? We don’t have much time, Omar- the plane’s nearly here!”

Frank was searching the sky for its lights, but he couldn’t see any sign of the plane in the sky. Even the moon had slipped behind the clouds.

“Frank, the gun’s been deactivated. It’s got no firing pin.”

Frank was still staring at the sky. The droning plane might be here any minute.

“It doesn’t work any more!” Omar yelled above the wind.

Suddenly Frank heard him. He stared down at him in dismay realising the truth: he’d failed. He let Omar pull him down slowly.

“Is that why the police let us keep it?” he said. “I was wondering about that.”

Omar nodded and put his hand on Frank’s shoulder. “Yes mate,” he said.

Frank put his head in his hands and wept. Rosie crawled over and hugged Frank and Omar. Omar held them all together under the brewing Laconia Heights storm. After a moment, Frank took back the gun and uncocked it. He reached in and pulled the two large feet carefully backwards.

THE FROG emerged with a loud sucking noise and regarded him coldly. Omar stared open-mouthed, and grabbed the torch from Rosie. Backing away slightly, he jerked the beam of light onto THE FROG and said “Allah Hu Akba!”

Frank looked into the black eyes of THE FROG and said “I’m so sorry.”

He meant it with all his heart.

## THIRTY-SIX

It was Omar's turn to nearly fall off the roof this time. "What the.!" he began, staring at THE FROG.

Frank turned his tear and rain - streaked face to Omar. "I was supposed to shoot him – it, THE FROG - at the plane. That was the plan." Frank wiped his nose on his arm. "That's why he fired avocados into the back of the wood - pile. He was working on the gun so that it wouldn't hurt him."

Omar recalled the avocado aroma that often accompanied the older man. The sound of the aircraft's engines gusted suddenly through the night. Omar stared from Frank to THE FROG and back to Frank. Without warning, he grabbed Rosie and bolted for the ladder. "Wait here, Rosie - don't go near that thing - don't even move, OK?" Omar moved back towards Frank slowly.

Frank sat alone with THE FROG as the droning sound changed in pitch. He squinted up through the streaking clouds and as the rain pelted into his eyes he could make out snatches of the bright moon. He looked at THE FROG. It was staring up at the sky, its neck craned elegantly in anticipation of the approaching plane.

"Frank!" Frank turned and saw Omar not far from the top of the ladder. "What - What the hell is that?" Omar continued towards him and crouched about three metres away.

He wiped his rain - slick hands on his jumper. It was really starting to come down now.

IT'S TIME.

Frank looked at THE FROG sadly. “I know. The gun won’t work. I’m so sorry.”

THE FROG simply looked at Frank and then back into the sky.

IT’S TIME.

Frank put his knuckles against his eyes and pushed until he saw sparks. “If I could get you to the plane I would, I promise! I’m sorry!” He was rocking backwards and forwards slightly. Exasperated, he tore his hands from his face and yelled “I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO!”

THE FROG regarded him one last time. YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO.

Omar stared at Frank in horror. He had no idea what Frank was doing, who he was talking to or what on earth he was talking about. He just knew that, for a bunch of reasons, Frank needed some help – serious help, and he was the one who was going to be there. Risking his life at the top of a ladder. In a storm.

The unmistakable lights of a slow - moving plane emerged from the clouds nearby, but Frank felt the weight of nearly two days with little sleep and the emotional strain, and thought for the first time it was too much.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

“Frank- get away from that- that thing and get down here. We need to get inside!” Omar yelled. He knew if he couldn’t talk Frank down, he would have to try and restrain him. It would be dangerous, but there were no options left.

Frank stared at THE FROG - pining for the thin air of altitude and probably tough enough to withstand being shot out of a gun into the underside of a moving plane.

Suddenly, he knew what to do. The idea flowed through his veins. It was like an electric shock. It was so simple.

“Omar!” He yelled- “Give us a hand!” Omar uncertainly crawled over as Frank grabbed THE FROG under the heaving belly and straining hard, thrust it at Omar. Omar stared down at the enormous amphibian tucked under his arm in absolute horror. Frank grabbed the torch out of Omar’s other hand and placed it to one side so he could see what he had to work with. He kicked the seat over and piled up the bricks carefully. He walked around the other side and made the necessary adjustments. Next he grabbed the three short planks and inspected each one, settling on the medium length plank, which he position along the top of the bricks expertly. With the care of an Olympic - catapult.

Omar stared in growing realisation. He set THE FROG down and felt around in his jeans pocket.

“What’s going on up there you hoodlums!” Mrs O’Grady cursed from her side of the fence. She was gripping the fence as far as she could manage to climb it to really let them have it. “I’ll call the police! MURDERERS! MURDERERS!!!”

Mrs O'Grady didn't matter at all to Frank now. When he was satisfied, he squinted at the sky and with panic, realised the plane was nearly overhead. Omar turned and handed him THE FROG, who was now growling. Frank placed THE FROG on one end of the catapult and as Rosie crept closer to watch, he retrieved the torch and handed it to her. "Keep it on THE FROG," he yelled. As the beam lit the creature in contrast with the dark shed roof, he stared in horror.

Omar had tied his belt around his phone and strapped it to THE FROG's back! THE FROG didn't look happy, but suddenly craned his neck skywards. NOW, it said calmly.

Frank made some lightening fast mental calculations, focussed ahead of the roar of propellers above. In the eerie, silent moment that followed, Frank moved mechanically into a half leap, half spring, his right knee arcing upwards, his whole body weight poised to lever his foot down. He concentrated all his force, his gravity, his centre downwards on the end of the raised plank.

THE FROG shot upwards with a twang and the plank vibrating made a comical wobbling noise as the roar of revving engines took over. The lights of the plane marbled the clouds above and they all stood straining to see or hear anything that might give them a sign of their success. Frank watched the green body shoot vertically away into nothingness, as Rosie did her best to follow its progress with the torch. Her fading beam soon lost the disappearing creature. The plank of wood slid from beneath Frank's foot, clattering down the far side of the shed.

If you had been sitting in the O'Grady back - yard and had your ears tuned in to the happenings on the Davies' side of things, you'd possibly have heard the ever so soft "Ooh!" that was the sound of Mrs. O'Grady as she again flopped into the same hedge, having been collected by a falling plank.

The sound of the plane faded away, the wind began to die down and the rain stopped, so that in just a few seconds the storm, the plane and THE FROG were gone. They stared at each other as Rosie flicked the torch into the yard below them. One by one, they climbed down the ladder in silence. Frank caught a glimpse of Mrs O'Grady lying across a thick, comfortable looking hedge as he descended and as he and Omar put the ladder away behind the shed, her voice called out shakily "Murderers!"

## THIRTY-EIGHT

Frank awoke at 10am the next morning. Not because he wanted to, but Omar was shaking his shoulders excitedly. Frank stared at Omar's grinning face and realised with astonishment that he hadn't had the urge to tell Omar to get out of his room. Yet.

"Check it out-I knew this phone would come in handy."

Frank blinked and sat up. He took the phone and stared at the small video screen. At first the screen looked black, then it seemed to shift in sporadic, jerking movements. The bottom half of the screen was black and green and Frank stared with widening eyes.

"But how did you..." Frank couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

"You were right about that phone. No use just having one when you really need two." He grinned even wider. "So I bought you one as well. Only..."

"Only you attached it to a supernaturally large frog and I catapulted it onto a plane and now it's dropped off somewhere?" Frank stared at the screen.

"Yeah- sounds weird when you say it like that. Actually, sounds weird however you say it."

They watched in silence as THE FROG leapt about. The terrain looked different to anything Frank had ever seen. It was desolate, barren, with a burnt look. Once you got used to what you were seeing, you could make out THE FROG's snout at the bottom of the frame.

“Hang on, what’s that?” said Omar, pointing at the screen. They crowded in together and watched expectantly. Something else had come into shot. It was a distant, brown smudge; the camera almost couldn’t make it out, but it approached THE FROG directly and stood before it- massive, gruesome and warty. Maybe it was just the camera angle, but it seemed even bigger than THE FROG.

Suddenly everything went yellow. The camera fogged for an instant, and then Omar and Frank could make out a struggling, mucus-coated ball. A burst of steam rose into the air as it stumbled away.

“Omar-did-did you just see that thing?”

Omar was staring in horror. “I think-whatever it was-dissolved!”

He was right. After a few, gruesome moments, whatever the thing was had melted into a distasteful looking puddle of mucus. Frank recalled the mess in his school bag that had caused it to finally melt down and dissolve in the shed.

“Hey - that phone must have sound too?”

“Oh don’t think so,” said Omar.

Frank looked at him with a raised eye - brow. “Think about it Omar - It’s a PHONE!”

Omar seemed to understand. He grabbed the phone, pushed a button on the side of the handset. They grinned at each other when they heard the sound of water lapping. Omar stared at the screen in revulsion.

“What’s he doing?” said Frank, the excitement nearly killing him.

“Let’s just say he’s leaving no trace of his crimes.” Frank and Omar looked at each other. From the phone came a loud “UUURP!”

“Oh please- how gross!” Mum said from the doorway. “I’m off to bed. Omar’s doing breakfast this morning Frank.” Frank’s mum paused before turning away from them.

“Have you two been here for long?”

Omar and Frank looked at her, then each other and when they simultaneously said “No, why do you ask?” they both burst out laughing.

She smiled and shaking her head she muttered “It’s a miracle,” as she headed off to catch a few hours’ sleep. She showered and changed and made her room as dark as she could against the bright morning, and she drifted off with the hope that they would both still be there, just as she’d left them, when she awoke.

## THIRTY-NINE

Doonburr awoke with a groggy feeling of unease. For a start, he was obviously upside down. When he strained his neck backwards he could easily see the ground and the wide trunk of the tree swaying to and fro below him. The blood which had rushed to his brain and temporarily revived him was now starting to pound in his ears, making his head throb. He glanced up at whatever was holding him and realised that this- surely- was it.

The tree around him was dead in almost every respect. The leaves which had burst through the hot Northern Territory air into the stark sunshine were burned and gone. The branches which had sustained them were poisoned, blackened and twisted. The birds and the insects and one very unlucky bandicoot that had lived there had been systematically disposed of with vile and cruel precision. The tree which had stood for hundreds of years was now alive with monster toads.

Doonburr stared up at the hundreds of gleaming eyes, which seemed to be fixed on him as he swayed to and fro like the pendulum of some vile clock. The only thing holding him ten metres from the ground was THE SUPER-TOAD. It simply grinned a crooked grin, belched and then let go of his leg.

As he plummeted to certain death, Doonburr glimpsed a bright green patch at the foot of the tree and he landed flush on it - head first and motionless.

THE FROG carefully pushed the limp ranger off itself and slowly peered up at the man down - turned eyes. As the man groaned and shook his head, THE FROG grimly began the long climb up the trunk of the tree, as the assembled masses of toads began to try to climb over each other to get away.

## FORTY

Omar and Frank were sitting at the kitchen bench, unable to take their eyes off the screen.

“Oh- it’s just... Carnage!” said Omar in sick fascination.

Frank nodded. “It’s the sound I can’t stand.” He was sure that the sloopy - sucking sound would stay with him forever. He shivered internally.

By midday the screen was blank, the battery on the other phone obviously dead at last. Frank had roughly counted four - hundred toads completely dissolved. THE FROG had had some impact on the native wildlife as well: One echidna<sup>24</sup> had been rolled down a hill in anger. Even a fruit-bat had been slapped. At one point a crocodile had closed its monstrous jaws around THE FROG and everything went black. Frank saw Omar actually tear up, but after a couple of seconds THE FROG managed to get itself spat out and set off chasing the croc back down the river where the scenery once again was lush and green.

The only really disturbing part was the tree. That’s where Frank had lost count. Toad after toad had hopped frantically out of the path of THE FROG, but it had them backed away to every branch edge, sometimes squirming over each other to get away. Some jumped, but THE FROG caught them all as they fell. One really big one was last, and Frank and Omar both had to look away as THE FROG went to work on it. THE FROG eventually hurled it out of the tree, and it landed in a big ball of yellow mucus on the lower half of a man lying motionless at the bottom of the tree.

“Oh my God!” Frank turned to Omar. “It’s taken human life!”

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<sup>24</sup> which had defended itself by curling into a ball

“No, hang on,” said Omar. “He must have been asleep.”

The man looked down at his lower section and then leapt up, clutching his buttocks, as his trousers burst into flames and promptly dissolved. He ran screaming down the track right past an on - coming tourist bus. From the tree’s high angle, Frank and Omar could noticed the bright flashes of the many tourists’ cameras as they recorded the ranger’s cheeky retreat. The tourists would never know the significance of their photographs, having captured images of a once in a life –time event; perhaps even a once in an age event, images which would travel home to countries or provinces around the world and be the subject of bum jokes for years to come.

As THE FROG looked down briefly at the base of the tree before continuing its ascent, Frank and Omar could make out the big ball of yellow goo as it pulsed and disappeared in a hiss of evil looking steam.

Luckily, not a single tourist’s camera caught a glimpse of the world’s biggest, most dangerous amphibian five minutes later, as it smirked to itself and hopped away into the blackened bush.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lucky, that is, for *them*.

## FORTY-ONE

Omar placed the two pizzas in the centre of the dining room table, and Frank and Rosie eagerly ripped the lid open, recoiling at the cheese and garlic steam. Frank hadn't eaten pizza in months. Mum had thought pizza was a good idea since she finally had a weekend shift off. Everyone agreed. The television news was still on in the lounge room, the promise of take away food had successfully lured everyone out at top speed.

"Well, that's about time!" mum said, nodding at the TV in the adjacent room. Something caught Frank's eye and when he glanced at the television set in the nearby lounge room, he stared. He'd seen that landscape before.

"Omar," he said, pointing his pizza slice at the screen.

Omar glanced over and then stood and jogged to the TV, turning up the sound. He stood back as the report went on. Frank stood too and made his way to the lounge, still holding the pizza.

'The devastation wasn't confined to the creek however, the upper mangrove and much of the bush inland was also affected. Wildlife in the region has already been decimated. Scientists from Darwin are expected to begin analysing samples of the toxic waste within days. The Minister says the company or companies involved in the dumping of chemicals will face heavy fines.'

Frank lowered himself into Grampa's ancient and wise armchair. The scenery was starker on the television: the tangled, demolished bush, where Parks' employees in uniforms were collecting samples and taking photographs. Frank saw one man he thought was familiar standing by a wrecked 4WD. It seemed to have a wheel missing. He was explaining something to another man in a suit

and pointing wildly, the other man was shaking his head in disbelief and making notes on a clipboard.

'The only witness, a Parks Ranger, was apparently attacked and concussed. Department heads have interviewed the man who is expected to be taken to Darwin hospital for observation and in the words of his supervisor: 'extended rest and respite.'

Then Frank saw the tree. The camera had panned right past it, but he dived on the remote control and rewound the live pictures. The tree was dead, like it had been that way for a hundred years. It was streaked with what looked like the residue of the yellow goo that had caused Frank's bag to dissolve back in the shed.

"Look at that!" Frank's mum said from the table. "Toxic waste! Someone should look into who dumped it there and charge the companies and their bosses. It's bad enough with global warming. You know, Frank," she continued, "like dad always said: when the frogs start to disappear, it's a sure sign the ecology is in serious trouble."

Frank dropped his pizza in his lap and turned to her.

She looked around. Rosie, Omar and Frank were all staring at her. "What?" she said. "You don't remember? Dad was always going on about frogs and the environment. He loved frogs." A tear welled in her eyes.

The report finished and Omar switched the TV off. Frank retrieved his pizza and walked back to the table. He put it back in the box, walked around behind her and hugged her where she sat. She gratefully patted his arm.

"You mean Omar?" said Rosie, still staring.

“What? Oh no,” she laughed, “My Dad - not yours.” She craned her neck to look back at Frank. “You know, not Omar, I mean.”

“It’s OK mum. I know what you mean.”

She smiled warmly. “Who knows what those investigators will find.”

Frank grinned at Omar and Rosie. Who knows.

“What do you think of Lebanese pizza?” Omar threw the question out for general consideration.

Extract from the Secret Frog Grimoire,  
Liquid silver on ancient parchment  
Saturday, April 16, 2011

This is my last journal entry. THE FROG has gone and has begun its work, but whether it will return, I do not know. We have all played our part - one of us didn't survive. Nothing will ever be the same now that THE FROG is out there. If it was a blessing, then it came with a curse. I am so full of grief and also I am proud that I finished the good work started by the previous Keeper, my Grampa. I loved him. That's all that matters. And that's more real than anything.

One Year Later
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Omar idled the ute slowly into the garage and killed the engine. Rosie Davies (5C) scrambled out and up the front steps. Perfect. She had beaten Frank home again! She punched the air and yelled Woo-Hoo! Frank hadn't wanted a lift home today- she figured he'd got off the bus at the shops instead and was hanging out with Keisha at the corner shop. Disgusting! Rosie was glad she didn't have a boyfriend. It was bad enough living with a brother. She chucked her bag in her room and wandered out the back door down to the shed where she'd left her volcano project.

As Omar unloaded the ute he could see Rosie through the window at the back of the garage, skipping away into the long grass out by the shed. Maybe it was time to cut it and finally get the yard in order. The garden was already looking better without any cats from next door to worry about digging and crapping everywhere. The ute no longer smelt of cats' piss. Just then, Frank rounded the corner behind him.

"G'day stranger. How was school?" Omar walked past the front steps as Frank stopped.

"Good thanks." He adjusted his bag on his shoulder. "Are we cooking tonight?" Frank's big eyes were dreamy.

"Yeah - if you want to. That'd be good. I tried your mobile"

"Oh yeah - I was a bit busy, hanging out down at the shops," said Frank.

Omar leaned against the garage door and grinned at Frank. "Yeah - I saw you when we drove past. I was going to give you a lift and I saw that you were, what was it? Oh yeah, busy." He grinned. "How's Keisha?"

Frank blushed and smiled. “She’s pretty good.” So that was Omar’s ute going past. Mental note for inclusion in the new, improved journal of Francis Robert Davies:

“Omar really does know what’s going on. Some of the time.”

The conversation abruptly ended when Frank got a text on Omar’s old mobile. Frank was already after a newer one, but he would have to wait a bit longer until his next birthday. He turned away sheepishly and ran up the front steps, thumbing a reply as he went.

Omar scratched his chin thoughtfully, turning again to regard the long back yard and the scraggy mound of grass by the shed he hadn’t had the heart to finally cut - his last real connection with a prickly old man who Omar had not so far admitted he missed. “Naa- bugger it.” He grabbed his toolbox, peered out at the cloud - streaked sky and said in his best Scottish accent “Let’s just leave it long, eh?” and headed down into the house.

Rosie was busy using the claw of Grampa’s old hammer to lever a bit of plaster from the side of the enormous volcano. She turned excitedly to Omar. “Omar, can you help me? My project’s due in next week and it’s not working.” She pointed at the misshapen lump of plaster and then up at the calendar. April was a full - colour display of frogs in trees. She had written “Project due” in large, red letters.

Omar grinned and threw his toolbox into the corner where a few scattered logs stood. “No worries mate.” He ruffled Rosie’s hair. “Come and grab something to eat first and we’ll get to work on that volcano of yours. Omar trailed his fingers through the long grass as he walked back towards the house.

Rosie stood, carefully placed the hammer down next to the 'project' for later and followed him through the doorway.

Behind her, something darted behind the bench, scattering the remaining wood. A log rolled slowly past the volcano towards the door. Very carefully, Rosie Davies peered back around the corner of the doorway and said "Hello?"

The End