

Brotherly Love

Morgan

‘Come on, Tyler. Keep up.’

I hate it when Mum makes me take my little brother on adventures. We told Mum we were going to Thorndon Park Reserve to feed the ducks on the lake, but we have a plan to stop Tyler hanging around us for good. He gets scared when we do dangerous stuff, but the most annoying part is his big mouth. Like the time we dammed the spoon drain out front of Sheila Murphy’s house with sticks and mud and it flooded her mum’s flowers. Mrs Murphy’s a wide woman and after sloshing about in petunia mud, trying to unblock the drain, she smelt like fertiliser.

Jake knows a kid who fell into a drum of liquid fertiliser and reckons it stained the kid’s skin brown. I heard the kid’s mum washed him so many times that his skin started peeling off, but Jake says that’s crap and *he* knows the kid.

Anyway, after we flooded those flowers, they were as limp as Sheila’s hair. Mrs Murphy shuffled down the driveway in her fluffy pink slippers, shakin’ a fist—and a flap of pale skin under her arm—at us. Her face went all red and Jake said he thought she was gonna have a heart attack. Was she actually tryin’ to run?

Jake and me jumped on our bikes and took off so fast my back tyre left an arc across Mrs Murphy’s lawn, but Tyler wasn’t as fast and she grabbed his arm. It gave Tyler such a fright that he cried all the way home to Mum. Mum told me to wait until Dad got home and Dad marched me down to apologise to Mrs Murphy. My bum hurt every time I sat down for days.

‘Morgan, wait up.’

I turn my head to glare at Tyler and keep peddling. I line up the sloped lip of the Jones’ low wall. I bet Mr Jones didn’t know how popular it would be with stunt bikes when he built

it. He got his revenge by planting a cactus garden next to it. When he catches a rider he sends them home crying with thorns sticking out of their skin.

Jake knows a kid who didn't get all the thorns out and got a boil the size of a walnut on his leg. His mum had to take him to the doctor to get it lanced. That means they cut it open. I heard enough pus came out of that thing to fill a whole cup, but Jake says that's crap and *he* knows the kid.

I like the dirt tracks around Thorndon Lake, because I can slide my back tyre sideways and send up a spray of gravel. Tyler tries it and nearly comes off. I see him rubbin' his ankle where the peddle clipped it, but he doesn't say anything.

'Hurry up,' I call over my shoulder.

Mr Grunge lives on the other side of the park and his house has paint peeling off and vines growing up the trees. Creepy. Jake knows a kid who reckons the plants in the Grunge's garden are alive and they dragged a kid in once and he never came out. I heard the Grunge keeps kids in his cellar and feeds them bread and water. Jake reckons that's true and *he* knows the kid who saw it.

Tyler

I know where Morgan's going. The haunted house. I don't want to, but they'll tease me if I wimp out. Everyone knows the Grunge kidnaps kids and eats them for breakfast.

The road is short and the Grunge's house is at the very end, hiding behind massive trees. There are hundreds of coiled strips of tin, hanging from string in the trees and bushes and they swirl in the breeze and clink together like wind chimes. Morgan reckons the strips of tin are there to ward off evil spirits. He's in grade five, so he ought to know.

Jake and Morgan stop near the Grunge's letterbox. They're whispering. I stop behind them. If the old man's gonna get a kid, it won't be me.

'Hey, Tyler. Come 'ere.' Morgan curls his finger so I'll come closer.

The hairs on my arms are standing up, like when I'm cold, but I'm not cold. I toss my bike on the side of the road and take a few steps.

'Look at him,' says Jake. 'I'll bet he's so scared he's about to cry.'

'Am not!' There's no way I'm gonna admit that to big kids.

'You can ride with us whenever you want if you pass one test,' says Morgan.

Wow, if I pass their stupid test, they won't be able to leave me behind anymore.

'Okay, what is it?'

'All you have to do is knock on the Grunge's door.'

'I'll bet you two never done that.'

I really don't wanna go into the Grunge's yard. I'm pretty sure I'll never get out alive.

Then I see the pile of rusting metal by the garage. There's a spoked wheel and a red seat.

They're kid's bikes. I swallow hard and look back at my bike, wondering if the Grunge will come all the way out here to get it, after he eats me.

'There's no way he'll do it. Squirt's too little to ride with us.' Jake's laughing at me and I don't like it.

Tears sting my eyes and it makes me mad. That's when I make up my mind to show the both of them. 'I'll do it all right.'

Jake and Morgan's eyes go wide. It feels like there are lead boots on my feet, sandals would be sneakier. When I get to the letter box I stop for a minute to look around. There's no sign of the Grunge. The curtains are closed, spider webs criss-cross the veranda and junk mail has spilled out of the letter box. Maybe the Grunge doesn't live here anymore.

Jake and Morgan are sniggering behind me. Bugger them. I take a deep breath and walk past the letter box. I hear Jake and Morgan gasp and go quiet.

The gravel path crunches loudly under my feet and I hold my breath, eyes darting all around to keep watch for the Grunge. I duck under spider's webs and thorny branches scratch

my legs, but I don't take my eyes off that door. The blood in my head is so loud I can't even hear my feet anymore and I wonder if it's possible for a head to explode. When I try to step over a thistle weed in the middle of the path, my foot gets tangled and that's when it happens.

'Ouch!' I yell, as my knees hit the gravel.

I look behind me to see if Morgan is coming to help, but him and Jake are like statues in the middle of the road. Then a weird sound like someone being strangled under water comes out of Morgan's mouth and his hand shoots up.

He's pointing. Behind me.

I didn't even hear a foot step, but long bony fingers wrap around my arm and the Grunge is towering over me. 'What are you doing on my land.' He yells with a mouthful of yellow teeth gnashing near my face.

I think I'm gonna pee my pants and it feels like a brussel sprout is stuck in my throat. I look at Jake and Morgan, who are standin' there, catching flies.

One hard pull and my arm slides out of the Grunge's grip, so I start running flat out. Jake and Morgan scream—louder than Sheila when you pull her hair—and jump on their bikes. They're peddling down the road with bums in the air by the time I pass the letter box. Why did I leave my bike so far down the road?

'Ouch!'

It's not me this time and I have to slow down a bit to look behind me.

Why's the Grunge lying on the ground? Shit, maybe he's gonna turn into a bat and fly after me. That's probably how he catches all the kids.

Then I see him sit up slowly and rub his knees. There's blood on them.

My legs have stopped. I turn around to look at the Grunge more closely. His limbs are bony, socks pulled up to his knees and a grubby singlet that shows a fuzz of white hair at the front. He's mumbling and rolls to one side, but can't seem to push his body up.

Funny, it doesn't look like he's turning into a bat. He looks like an old man that's stuck on the ground with bloody knees. Before I know it I'm next to the Grunge, offering him my hand. He squints up at me for a few seconds, then grunts and lets me help him up.

'Thanks kid,' he says.

His voice is soft and dry sounding. I watch him limp onto the veranda. Should I run now?

Then the old man turns around to look at me. 'You want some lemon cordial?'

Mr Grunge and me sit on his veranda and drink lemon cordial, while he wipes a wet cloth over his bloody knees and we compare wounds. He tells me how the tin strips keep the birds away from the veggies that grow wild in his garden. He makes me promise not to tell the other kids the truth about him. He likes to be left alone.

'Come back and visit anytime, kid.'

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When I peddle up my street, Jake and Morgan are sitting on the front lawn, waving their hands in the air.

'There he is,' shouts Jake.

Morgan's eyes are buggin' out of his skull. 'Shit, did the Grunge try to put you in his cellar? I never thought you'd go past the letter box. I'm sorry, Tyler.'

I throw my bike on the lawn and shrug. 'He grabbed me.' I demonstrate how. 'But I escaped.'

As I walk away, I hear Morgan whispering to Jake about how brave I am and it makes me smile. I'm not gonna tell them that next weekend I'm helping Mr Grunge weed his front yard.