



WINNING STORY

Nature Strip

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Nature Strip

Jason walked home from school straying, as he always did, onto the nature strip. He had a curious habit of walking behind the tall eucalypts, whose twisted limbs sprawled high above. Often he buried his face in his primary school t-shirt, and walked that way, in a protected, womb-like world where the light filtering in through the t-shirt glowed a pleasing soft-red on his chest and belly. Of course, unbeknown to him, walking in this unusual manner drew the eyes of others. What they saw was a boy who was walking in their world but living in his own: a universe of one, enclosed, sealed and safe.

Fred Johnson, from grade 5, often watched him as they shared the same path home and it stirred a strange mixture in his mind. He didn't know if he liked what he saw. He was a tall boy for his age, lean and muscular. He had an angular face, with a broad forehead and a thick mat of shiny black hair which hung down over it like a creeping bush. His eyes were small and dark, set deep in his skull. He was not a popular boy; he wasn't good at sports and had a bad reputation for cheating and 'playing rough.' He was often arguing with his classmates and getting punished by the teachers, who seemed to instinctively fall on the side of others and against him. There was something over-grown and restless about him; parts of him already breaking out into adolescence, other parts remaining childish and awkward.

Fred Johnson watched this boy who walked among the trees with his head buried and decided he would take him as his friend. He wasn't good at making friends, but in this case that didn't matter.

The next day when the bell sounded for morning recess, Fred ran down the hallway and waited outside as the grade 2's started gushing out of classrooms and filling the far end of the corridor with running and shouting, creating a noisy bottleneck at the double doors which led outside. He could see Jason following a group of boys from his class, the leader carrying a basketball.

He quickened his pace, drawing level with Jason and when they had stepped through the doorway he took him by the hand, very gently.

'Hi,' he said, 'come with me,' and he led the boy down the roofed pathway, past the shelter sheds and the art room with its stone walls and straw roof, across the back oval and down the little ditch where the school grounds abutted other peoples' houses. There, at the far end of the school, hidden by the sloping ditch, he leaned his back against the wooden fence and looked down at his companion.

The boy had a shaggy mop of straight brown hair, 'a bowl cut,' which hung down over a soft and pretty face. A few of the older boys had asked him if he was a boy or a girl.

'A boy,' he had said, his cheeks reddening and tears forming in his eyes.

Fred looked at the boy who seemed to be trying not to exist; having mimicked Fred's way of standing with his bum resting on the fence but keeping his eyes fixed to the ground, too shy to enquire into the purpose of their secret meeting. He reminded Fred of slaters that rolled into balls when you disturbed them, as if that made them invisible. Fred knew from experience, it just made them easier to squash.

'You look like a girl,' he said with lazy pleasure, as if rolling a curled-up slater between thumb and forefinger. The boy didn't react at all and Fred started to get worried.

‘You’re not allowed to cry,’ he said hastily. If the boy started bawling, that would mean big trouble. The teachers would find out it was him, they always did. But the boy just stood there next to him, leaning on the fence, eyes fixed on the brown earth of the ditch, frozen.

The delirious screams of children’s games reached them from a distance as Fred took a snack bag of salt and vinegar chips from his pocket, opened it and put a few in his mouth.

‘Here,’ he said snorting with the effort of eating and talking at the same time, ‘you can have some.’

He lowered the bag under Jason’s nose and the smell of vinegar filled his nostrils, making his mouth water.

‘Thank you,’ he said in a tiny voice, dipping his hand into the packet. His timid fingers, not daring to linger, emerged with only one chip, small and broken. He put the fragment in his mouth. The vinegar pricked his taste buds like tiny needles and the salt flooded his mouth with wetness. This was a rare treat, his usual play time snack was a Granny Smith apple, big, crisp and quite sour. Jason hoped the bag would be lowered, so he could try his luck once more, but Fred, having stuffed all the chips hurriedly into his mouth, lifted the bag to the sky, tipping the last powdery pieces in, crumpled it up and threw it over the fence.

Naughty, Jason thought, glancing up at the boy and taking a mental photograph, to be stored in a file labelled ‘bad.’

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That night Fred Johnson’s face appeared in Jason’s dreams. His waxy, pointed head loomed over him and grinned and grinned. The face came so close to him he could smell the salt and vinegar on his breath and then, with a shock he saw spiders nesting in the thick, black webs of his hair. They started to crawl, down his pale face, shiny-black and bulbous, disappearing

underneath his t-shirt...crawling, where...? *Oh no!.. No!..Help!* They had crept down Fred's body and now they were crawling around at the foot of his bed. He could feel them brushing their hairy legs against his. He ripped his doona away and leapt from the bed, crawling towards the bedroom door, but he couldn't find the way out. Everything was pitch-black. His own small bedroom seemed strange and full of unknown dimensions; he was in one corner clutching some piece of cold metal, too frightened to move, knowing there were spiders all over the place.

'Heeeelllllp!' 'Heeeeeeelp!' 'Pleeeaaaase!' He screamed out.

The bedroom light turned on and his mother appeared. Jason's doona was sprawled across the carpet and he stood in the far corner, hugging the frame of his clothes drawers.

'There's spiders in the bed!' he cried out, tears streaming down his cheeks.

It took a long time for his mother to soothe him and to reassure him it had only been a dream. She had to inspect the doona carefully while he watched and then pull the mattress off the bed, checking both sides and under the bed frame. Still he refused get back in, demanding to be accommodated in her bed, where spiders don't dare enter.

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The next morning at recess, he found Fred Johnson waiting for him again. Fred didn't say anything this time, just clutched him roughly by the arm and led him down to the back of the oval. He walked quickly, forcing Jason to run to keep from being dragged.

As he pulled the boy along, Fred spoke in a low voice.

'Tomorrow,' he said, 'I'll wait in the ditch and you'll come and meet *me...*' and he squeezed Jason's arm, making the boy look up at him. 'If you don't, I'll find you and I'll *do* something to you.'

When they reached the ditch, they went through the same routine with the packet of chips, but this time Jason's fingers got hold of an entire, un-fractured chip, fishing it out and gobbling it quickly. After tipping the salty crumbs, into his mouth, Fred scrunched the plastic packet up and threw it over the fence again. Jason could imagine the back yard, completely covered with packets of salt and vinegar chips, the clothesline the only thing poking out through a carpet of crinkled plastic.

'I wanna show ya something,' Fred said and he walked along the fence line at the bottom of the ditch, until they came to a log. It was huge, once part of the trunk of a giant pine tree, from end to end, it was thicker and taller than Jason's body and almost as tall as Fred's.

'See this log,' Fred said, patting it gently, like a beloved dog, 'I can lift it....'

Jason looked up at him for confirmation of this amazing fact and Fred nodded his head confidently, dispelling any doubt. He straightened himself, threw back his shoulders and put his hands on his hips, letting the boy see the full extent of his gigantic body.

Then, he spread his feet apart and crouched down, holding each end of the log in his hands. He started by aping the sounds he had heard watching weight-lifters during the Olympics. Then he slowly raised himself, first to a crouch and with a final 'huuuuuuuuuuuuu!' he straightened to a standing position, hands above his head as if the log were cradled there in the clouds. He grinned with mixed triumph and strain, Atlas holding up the world.

Jason squinted up at him, half blinded by the glare of the morning sun.

'Then do you know what I could do to you?' Fred said, grinning down from high above and pausing as he let gravity start to take hold of the massive log. It rolled slowly out of his hands and Jason closed his eyes as the thing plummeted down to earth.

He opened his eyes again and looked at Fred.

'You'd be dead,' Fred said and they stared at each other, amazed.

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