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1. BURGERS

'Are you coming to Burgers or not?' Pam was getting annoyed.

'I've got homework to do and I—'

'Lighten up, Tiffany. Have some fun.'

'Why do you want to go to Burgers? You know Jacko's gang hangs out there.'

'So? I want to be friends with them.'

They were walking out the gates of Seacrest High School. It was half a kilometre to the bus stop, to the shops, and to Burgers where Jacko hung out with some of the other year elevens. The older kids hung out there too; mostly the rough ones, the ones who smoked and liked to call out crude things to the girls to embarrass them.

Tiffany was puzzled. For the past two years she had been best friends with Pam and they had looked on Jacko's gang, hanging around Burgers, with contempt. They were no-hopers, destined for unemployment, apprentice street kids. Now Pam wanted to join them.

'Really Pam, I want to do some more work for science and English.'

'It's only for half an hour. Then we can catch the later bus. If you keep studying you'll turn into a nerd.'

Nothing could have been more hurtful to Tiffany than to be labelled a nerd. She had to fight back.

'Well if you don't study you'll turn into a street kid and live in an industrial bin.'

‘What does it matter? There could be a nuclear war, or pollution could kill us all before we’re seventeen.’

‘Pam you’re being a klutz. What makes you want to hang out with Jacko’s gang?’

‘Fun! That’s what I want. Guys! I’m tired of having no friends.’

‘Pam you’ve got me. We’re best buds!’

And then the possibility that they were no longer best friends occurred to Tiffany; it felt like sand shifting beneath her feet as the waves washed back to the ocean.

Tiffany fished for reassurance: ‘Aren’t we friends?’

‘I guess. But I’m bored. I want ... something more than us. They just hang out at Burgers for an hour or so; there’s no harm in that. Then they go home. It’s not as if they’re doing drugs.’

‘Well what’s the point in wasting an hour?’

‘They have some fun! They talk, there are hot guys there. Guys! Doesn’t that interest you at all?’

‘Which guys? Strapper and Jacko? They’re not your sort Pam.’

‘There’s Roy, he’s okay. Besides Jacko and Strapper aren’t as bad as you think.’

‘Do you like Roy?’ Was that the reason she wanted to go to Burgers?

‘I guess.’ Pam was determined not to give much away.

They were approaching the bus stop, or by crossing the road Burgers. A motorbike was parked out the front.

‘Well, are you coming Tiffany? Or do I have to go by myself?’

‘Not ... this time. Maybe I’ll go next time if you want.’

‘Suit yourself.’ Pam turned and walked determinedly across the road and into the cafe.

Tiffany was about to peek in from across the road and watch what happened, but just as she started to get into position the bus arrived. She sat on the bus and wondered what was happening to her friendship with Pam. It wasn’t just any friendship ù they had been best friends, and if they broke up then Tiffany would be alone. Very much alone.

It just seemed so difficult to understand why Pam wanted to hang out at Burgers. And what if Pam became friends with Roy? What would happen to Tiffany? Roy was okay, not as loud-mouthed as Jacko but ...

On the bus she watched the other passengers. It didn’t escape her notice that every girl from her class sat with a friend, mostly other girls, but Susan sat with George holding hands, and Rhonda sat with Ken, shoulders touching, whispering. Only Warwick Hamilton sat alone, and that was to be expected. He had no friends, kept to himself, and seemed to like it that way. But mostly she watched Susan and George. When the bus came to Susan’s stop he gave her a little kiss on the cheek and a wonderfully warm smile. As the bus moved off he hung out the window and waved to her.

Such devotion! But she knew that she was jealous; madly, burning jealous. Not that she particularly liked George. It was just that Susan had someone who thought she was special and doted on her. Why couldn’t Tiffany have a friend like that?

Imagine: someone who would take her to the movies, someone to walk home with her, give her juicy kisses, partner her at the dances, someone she could tell all her secrets to, someone who would love her. Not like parents love you—cold matter-of-fact-love—but a burning, adoring passion. And of course she would have someone to love, someone of her own; a friend, a boyfriend.

As she walked up the driveway she could hear her parents arguing, a real problem when her father was on night shift.

‘I told you the electricity bill was to be paid first!’

‘I’ll choose which bill to pay first! I’m not an idiot,’ her mother yelled back.

Oh why did adults have to argue about stupid things like bills? She entered the back door, and as she went along the hallway she dropped her schoolbag outside her bedroom and walked through to the kitchen.

‘Hello Mum! Hello Dad!’ Tiffany tried to sound happy. The last thing she wanted was sympathy or worse still, pity.

‘Tiffany, I asked you to put your skirt in the wash last night, didn’t I?’

‘I suppose so—I’ll do it right away.’

‘It’s too late! I’ve finished the washing so it’ll just have to wait now. You’ll learn the hard way.’

Her father said, ‘How’s school?’

‘Fine. No problem.’

‘You look tired.’

‘Tired? Nope. I’m fine.’

Tiffany gulped a glass of water and made for her bedroom. The thing that irritated her about her father was that he always asked questions about her private life. There could be no privacy with her dad, no private suffering.

But before she made it to her bedroom door she spotted her thirteen year old brother kicking her schoolbag like a football.

‘What are you doing, you stupid idiot!’

‘Kicking it out of the way.’

‘Tiffany, don’t talk like that to your brother!’

‘He was kicking my school bag down the hall.’

‘I did not!’

‘Liar!’

‘I only pushed it a few times because it was blocking the hall. I couldn’t get past.’

Tiffany opened her bedroom door, and just as she was getting inside with her schoolbag, her father announced, ‘For fighting in the house—there will be no TV for either of you tonight.’

‘I wasn’t fighting!’ Tiffany shouted back as she closed her door hard. And to herself she said, ‘You and mum were fighting. No TV for you for a month!’

Tiffany lay down on her bed. What was Pam doing at Burgers? Sitting at a table with guys from school, laughing. Not locked in a lonely bedroom, banned from TV because of a idiot brother. Perhaps Roy was holding her hand. Maybe he’d take her to the movies Saturday night. If they decided to be an item, then that would be the end of her friendship with Pam. She would die of loneliness. Pam was not only her best friend, but her only friend.

She wondered just what it would be like to have her own boyfriend. What would Dad say? She longed to be cuddled and hugged and kissed, and caressed all over, from top to toes—nothing missed. Oh, and french kissing? Sex? Oh there were so many mysteries to explore. But what boy would be interested in her when she was practically flat-chested? She looked at herself in the

bedroom mirror. Her boobs had hardly developed. Well, you could tell she wasn't a boy, but they were nothing to be proud of. Sandra Gard, at the end of the street, was only thirteen and had bigger breasts. Thirteen! And she had two boyfriends. One of them, Gerry, was sixteen and in year eleven. Without boobs Tiffany was doomed to die an old maid. There wasn't one, not one, movie star or singer who had boobs as small as hers. Her only hope was that she was sixteen and they were still growing. Big deal, by the time she was thirty and everyone else was married, she'd finally have tits.

Tiffany turned to look at her profile in the mirror. Yes, there seemed to be a slight improvement. The trouble was since she checked the size every day it was hard to tell. Why did guys have to be obsessed with breasts? She looked at her hair. At least that was okay, shoulder length, dark brown with a touch of red about it. Her nose was alright, but if only she could make her lips look bee-stung. They were her best feature, she thought, but if they were just a bit fuller ... Oh but what was the point, she had no boyfriend to kiss them, and all that the guys saw was the size of her boobs.

She let herself collapse onto the bed, rolled over and stared at the ceiling. Tiffany felt the loneliness settle on her like a rain cloud. Pam was right, they needed more friends than just each other. If only there was some hot guy at school who wanted to be friends, then she could get by without Pam. They could even go out together, the four of them. Hey, wouldn't that be fun!

But without Pam, without a boyfriend everything was hopeless. She felt like she was dying of loneliness. It was like acid eating into her heart. She rolled over and pulled the pillow from beneath her head, hugging it to her bosom, her stomach, pretending it was a boy. She thought of hugging a boy like that and all the places she would allow him to touch her, kiss her. And then while she lay there utterly miserable, grieving with a loneliness that seemed to swell up out of her bones, tears came from her eyes and started a deep paroxysm of sobbing, sobbing, sobbing into her pillow, her only friend.

Suddenly there was a thunderous hammering on the door. 'Tiffany! Tiffany are you deaf? There's a boy on the phone for you.'

2. DAVE TRUNG

Tiffany was puzzled—it had been a long time since a guy, any guy, had phoned her. 'Hullo.'

'Hullo, Tiffany.'

'Yes, who is it?'

'Dave. From school.'

'Dave Trung? Oh. Hi.'

'Um. I ... I ... just thought ... wanted to talk to you.'

'Sure. About what?'

'Um, well ... the science project ... last week we seemed, so I thought you might like to go to the movies with me. If you're not busy. And you want to.'

'Huh? Me? But why?'

'Because. Just thought maybe you'd like to. But it's okay if you don't want to go. I'll understand. Do you think you would?'

'I might. Don't really know. Haven't thought about it. Is this a joke? Is Pam there with you? Or Jacko?'

'No, honest. I just thought it was nice the way we talked last week and maybe you'd like to go to the movies with me next Saturday night, or Friday; whenever you like. If you want to.'

‘Well ... Dave I’m not sure right now. Maybe. Could I tell you in a few days?’

‘Oh sure! Sure, whenever you like. I understand. Uh. Well, see you at school Tiffany.’

‘Yeah. Bye Dave.’

Her mother was hovering nearby. What a stickybeak! Tiffany could feel her face flushing. Did he really ask her out? It must have been a practical joke. Some sort of a bet? No one had ever asked her out before. Not with her chin and small boobs.

‘Who was on the phone?’

‘Dave. He wants to go to the movies with me, I guess.’

‘That’s nice. What did you say?’

‘I said I’d tell him in a few days.’

‘Who’s Dave? Do I know him? Oh Dave Thompson. He’s much too old—’

‘No! Dave Trung. What does it matter? We did a science project together.’

Her father looked up from the TV. ‘Did you say Trung? He’s not Vietnamese is he?’

‘Huh? I suppose so. He’s Asian. I don’t know which country he comes from. It doesn’t matter, he’s been here since he was a baby.’

Her nosy little thirteen year old brother butted in. ‘You know him dad, he’s the slopehead from the garage.’

Tiffany’s father looked annoyed. ‘Tiffany I’d rather you didn’t start mixing with that lot.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know, Asians, Vietnamese.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘Oh for Godssake girl wake up—they’re not the same as us. Don’t you understand anything? They’re egotistical, they eat dogs and cats, they are violent, always stealing, and getting handouts from the government.’

‘Dave’s not like that. His father employs Australians.’

‘Where?’

‘He owns the garage.’

‘How’d he manage that? There’s something fishy there! Probably sells drugs. Look Tiffany, I’m not racist, so I’m not going to forbid you to go out with this kid—but just don’t get serious. Those people are so rude the way they jabber away in their own language like monkeys. His family will hate you anyway.’

‘Oh Dad you’re mistaken he’s—’

‘Tiffany, you don’t know a damn thing about them! You’re just a kid! Do yourself a favour and keep right away from wogs and slopes.’

Back in her own bedroom, Tiffany lay on her bed staring at the ceiling. She wondered whether it was all some kind of trick to humiliate her. Jacko and Elvira, giggling in the background listening to Dave ask her to the movies. Well at least she hadn’t fallen for it.

But that didn’t seem likely. Oh, if it had been Roy who phoned her up then she’d know it was a set up! But not Dave Trung. Most of the kids would hardly talk to him. He wouldn’t mock her like that.

The teacher had paired them off for the science project last month. She had hardly spoken to him before that, but Dave was helpful, polite, and friendly. Their project had turned out very well and she expected they'd get an "A" for it. (THE BIODEGRADABLE PLASTIC BAG—DOES IT WORK?)

They had talked, joked, and worked together. And now he wanted to go to the movies with her. What would that be like? holding hands, talking to her, drinking coffee. Her own boyfriend! Oh why the hell hadn't she just said YES! instead of saying she'd tell him in a few days? But it was such a surprise—she had never thought of him as a boyfriend before. What an idiot she was—Dave would be great, he wasn't sleazy or a geek. Oh maybe she should ring him back and—no, he'd think she didn't know her own mind. First thing tomorrow she'd tell him she'd go out with him.

But what about Dad? The family would be rude to Dave, even though he spoke perfect English. He dressed the same as everyone else, talked the same, and his father worked hard at the garage. Dave looked hunky. He had a rather nice tan, his eyes and cheekbones were the only thing that made him look Asian. Actually he looked rather cute, and he did well at school—always near the top of the class.

Well Tiffany didn't care what her family thought of Dave. They could just lump it! It was her chance to have her own friend. Who were they to tell her who she could go out with? It wasn't their business and it wasn't as if he were a criminal. Sure, she'd go to the movies with him. Tiffany made up her mind that she would accept his invitation first thing in the morning.

3. THE BURGERS GANG

The next day, before classes, Tiffany saw Dave standing by himself. They smiled shyly at each other as she approached, and Tiffany wondered how she would tell him yes she'd love to go out with him without sounding too eager. So she said, 'Thanks for phoning. Yeah, we did pretty well on the project. Reckon we'll get an "A" ?'

'Oh we deserve an "A"—but getting it is another matter.' He laughed, and she felt happy to be with him.

She looked down at his hands. He was holding a CD:

MOZART

VIOLIN CONCERTOS NUMBER THREE AND FOUR

This amazed her. 'Is that yours?'

But he sensed an attack. Boys were expected to listen to Megadeth, or Eminem.

'Um, no. I borrowed it off my father, just to see what it was like.'

'I listen to my mother's Viv—'

At that moment Jacko, Elvira, Roy, Pam and Dawn came around the corner. They immediately saw what appeared to be a secret rendezvous.

'Oh wow! A love nest!'

'Kissy-kissy.'

Dawn called out, 'Mind your eyes Tiffany!' And Pam—of all people—pulled her eyes back into a slant with her fingers. 'Ah so!'

'Ah so! Pal dog food make velly good hamburger meat. Ah so!'

'Dog make good pet. But ah so, make better chop suey!'

They all roared with laughter.

Tiffany blushed despite herself. She could have stood the joking if only Pam, her best friend, hadn't joined in. That was too much.

'Dave, I'll see you later. I've got to ... um, see the maths teacher.'

She fled without looking back.

During the breaks Pam rattled on and on about how super it was at Burgers. All the guys joked and laughed and had a great time. She only stayed half an hour, but it made her feel so happy. The crowd at Burgers were mature—they could see through all the shit that oldies tried to put on them. They knew what was what—and they were prepared to stand up for their rights. Jacko, it turned out, was brilliant—oh not so much at school work. But what was the point of learning useless facts and figures just to pass some useless exam? He knew more than any teacher—he knew about the real world.

'And Roy, how'd it go with Roy?'

'He's interested in me! Definitely. He brought me Pepsi and stuff.'

'Did he—' She wanted to ask "hold your hand or kiss you?" But that sounded so corny. 'Did he talk to you?'

'Oh sure, all the time. He was telling me about this movie he saw.' Which reminded Tiffany of Dave. But of course Dave would never fit in to the Burger scene. 'Hey Tiff, the guys really want you to go along this arvo. What about it? You did promise me. Just half an hour, then we'll catch the bus home together. Okay?'

'Yeah, I suppose. Just half an hour, no more.'

* * *

Tiffany felt nervous. It was silly, but she wasn't sure how to act. She only had \$3-50. She bought a Coke and sat on the seat hoping Pam would sit next to her, but Pam sat down next to Roy. Wilson sat down next to Tiffany.

'How's it going, Tiffy?'

'Um, okay.'

Wilson said, 'That slope you were talking to is a clown isn't he? He wants to try out for the cricket team.'

Jacko yelled, 'He'd hold the f---ing bat sideways!'

They all roared with laughter, but Tiffany was stunned. Was that how they talked?

More drinks came, while Jacko ripped into a burger that dribbled sauce onto the table. In between mouthfuls he called to Elvira who was fetching drinks, 'Hey Slut! Come 'ere, I've got something for you.'

He reached under his jacket and pulled out a CD, Silverchair. He laid it on the table. 'It's yours.'

'Wicked! Thanks Jacko.'

Again Tiffany was amazed. He had called her Slut, and she had accepted it like a faithful dog being kicked. But then he gave her an expensive CD. These guys were strange; this must be cool.

She looked around the shop. Some year twelves sat down the back, talking and laughing. The dark-haired man behind the counter served continuously: Coke, burgers, Mars bars, chips, smokes. Everyone except Tiffany was smoking, even Pam. That too was peculiar. Tiffany found it difficult

to actually believe that Pam was smoking. It must be some joke, some trick. Why would she do something so stupid?

‘Wanta smoke?’ Wilson was offering her one. ‘Or would you like something harder?’ They all guffawed. She shook her head. ‘You don’t talk much.’

Dawn said, ‘Oh but she sweet talks to cute little you-know-who!’ And they all pulled their eyes back with their fingers and laughed.

Tiffany coughed from the cloud of smoke; not really needing to cough but trying to distract everyone from what was excruciatingly embarrassing: her friendship with Dave Trung.

‘Have a cigarette, then the smoke won’t bother you.’

‘But ... it’s bad for your health.’

Jacko overheard; he looked across the table at her. ‘F—my health. Wise up, Tiffy. The world is being destroyed by pollution: Chernobyl, chemical smog, exhaust fumes, sulphur dioxide, greenhouse warming, toxic waste, nuclear war—that’s what’s bad for our health! This bullshit they go on about cigarettes is just to keep us from enjoying ourselves. You notice oldies smoke. And they’re still alive, right? What is their solution to all the poison they pump out into OUR world—not theirs—those wrinklies have had their go at stuffing the world up. You know what their wonderful solution is to all the world’s pollution?’ He dragged deeply on the cigarette, then looked down and read from the packet in a solemn voice: ‘WARNING. SMOKING DAMAGES YOUR LUNGS.’

They all laughed. Pam smiled, as if to say, I told you so! These kids aren’t dropouts, they are wise and cool. They see through all the bullshit that politicians and oldies try to put over them.

But the time! The bus would leave in a minute. She glanced at Pam, but knew if she tried to get her to leave now Pam would make a fuss. They’d have to catch the next one.

Jacko and Wilson talked on and on. They were planning a beach trip during the next school break; fishing, surfing, drinking. They’d take tents and camp on Seven Mile Beach. ‘That way no one rips us off. We’ll call it the anti-rip-off holiday. We pay no one. We own this country, we shouldn’t have to pay to camp on the beach; it belongs to us. We’ll catch our food, take a bit with us, plus a few tinnies. No cops, none of this under-age drinking shit. You know’, and here Jacko looked around at all of them— ‘we’re forbidden to drink until we’re eighteen, right? But then suddenly on the stroke of midnight as we turn eighteen we’re supposed to become adults; wise and careful drinkers, although we’ve had no experience. Oldies are hypocrites—catch this dudes—they forbid us to do all the things they enjoy, smoking, drinking, and sex; and not necessarily in that order.’ Everyone laughed.

‘Sure! Jacko’s right. Driving! Why can’t we drive when we’re sixteen? In the USA everyone has their own car at fifteen and a half.’

Tiffany waited and waited for a break in the conversation, wanting to catch Pam’s attention. They had to go! She stood up. ‘Um, we’ve got to get the bus.’

‘Yeah. Sure Chick.’ And as she half-bent to pick her bag up she felt Wilson’s hand lightly on her rear. She flinched forward, startled. Everyone laughed. She was so uncool. ‘Sorry, Tiffy. I didn’t know you were so sensitive.’

Pam finally stood up. ‘See you, guys!’

The bus swung into the stop as they were crossing the street. ‘Hey what do you reckon, Tiffany, they’re a fun crowd aren’t they?’

‘I suppose.’

‘But Jacko—he’s a cool dude. Get all that stuff he said. He’s streetsmart.’

‘Yeah but—’

‘What?’

‘Oh I guess you’re right.’

‘They all really like you, Tiffy. Especially Wilson.’

‘You reckon?’

‘Sure. I can tell. Trust me. He was talking about you yesterday.’

‘What’d he say?’

‘Oh, he thinks you’re nice looking; you know—attractive.’

‘Did he say that: attractive?’

‘Not exactly. But that’s what he meant. Listen Tiffy, they all really like you. That’s why they want you to go on this camping thing. I want to go. I reckon it’d be a blast. No parents. No cops. No oldies, no rules. We could do what we please for a change without some old prune-face pushing us around.’

‘Do you mean us? Go to the beach overnight with those guys?’

‘Sure Tiffy. Wake up! They asked you didn’t they? You just tell your parents that you are going with me and some of the chicks from school. Oh and you’d better say the sports mistress is going too. We’ll borrow your brother’s tent. What about it? It’d be fun; Tiffy—you and me together, and the guys.’

‘Oh Pam ... I really don’t think—’

‘Tiffy come on, don’t be a nerd! Lighten up a bit, you’re always studying. Please go with me. I’d be lonely without you. It won’t do any harm, and think of all the fun we’ll have. What do you say?’

4. TWO BOYFRIENDS

On Wednesday morning as they came out of maths class, Dave spoke to Tiffany. He was smiling and happy, which troubled her because she hadn’t decided what to tell him about going to the movies. If she went with him everyone in her class was sure to find out, then they would tease her. Not only that, she could never be part of Jacko’s gang. While she wasn’t certain she wanted to join, it did seem promising. For a start her best friend, Pam, was in it; and maybe she would get to meet new guys and have some fun. In fact it had been fun when she sat with the others at Burgers; she felt she had been part of a club that needed no one else. Maybe she wouldn’t be lonely if she joined Jacko’s gang. And the beach camp sounded like it could be a blast. She decided not to give Dave an answer just yet. She searched around for something else to talk about.

‘I hear you’re trying out for the cricket team.’

‘News gets around quickly.’ Dave laughed pleasantly. ‘Yeah, I used to play in grade eight quite a lot. Hope I can still remember. How’d you know?’

‘Uh ... Jacko told me.’

He laughed. ‘And I bet he made that old joke about me holding the bat sideways?’

‘Yes he did!’

‘Someone always says that.’

‘It doesn’t worry you?’

‘Nah. I can live with jokes. But sometimes ... I just wish I could be accepted. You know what I mean? I always feel I’m on my own, and that I’m being judged by the slant of my eyes. Not even my skin colour, after all Jacko is almost the same colour himself and the rest of the kids in our class are trying to get as brown as me!’

That was true, and Tiffany saw the humour in it. Dawn spent hours on the beach trying to perfect her ‘bronze tan’, and she didn’t quit until she was a shade darker than Dave. They laughed together, and she felt sure now that she would go to the movies with him. She just had to think of the right words.

At that moment Pam, Jacko, and Elvira turned the corner just ten metres away, walking towards them. They didn’t say a word, just stood and stared at Dave and Tiffany. ‘Um, I think Pam wants to talk to me about something.’

‘Will I see you in the library at lunchtime?’

Tiffany felt agitated and nervous. Why did he want to see her? If she said “no” he might ask why. And all the time the gang were watching, staring. All she wanted was for him to go away, for while Pam and the others stood there she felt a burning embarrassment—as if she’d just been caught stealing. ‘Yes, alright.’ She almost whispered. Turning her back on Dave she said brightly to Pam, ‘Hi! What’s up?’

They stood looking at her. ‘Nothing.’

‘Come on then, we’d better get to geography.’

Elvira and Jacko walked past them in silence.

When they were out of earshot Pam asked, ‘What is it with you two?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You and Dave Trung. Is he bothering you? Always hanging around.’

‘No ... he’s okay. We were ... just talking about the project.’

‘It looked like he was telling you jokes.’

‘He wasn’t, but why shouldn’t he, Pam?’

‘Look Tiffany, there’s nothing wrong with talking to him, it’s just that Dave’s such a bloody geek, and no one likes him.’

‘I sort of like him ... a bit. Do you really think he’s a geek?’

‘He is a nerd, believe me. You know I am not racist; it’s just that he’s a nerd, a slopehead, and a wanker. And if you keep hanging around with him you’ll lose all your friends, including me. No one wants to be your friend if that dork is going to be hanging around. You couldn’t imagine him at Burgers could you? He’d dob everyone in for under-age smoking.’

‘Pam, he’s not my boyfriend or anything. I haven’t even been to the movies with him.’

‘Yeah I know, Tiffany.’

‘Hey, call me Tiffany like you always did. I don’t like Tiffany, it sounds babyish.’

‘Okay, but just compare Dave to Jacko or Wilson. They’re real guys, streetwise, not nerds. Be honest, isn’t Wilson a hotter-looking, more mature, more gutsy guy? And Jacko really likes you.’

‘But he’s already got a girlfriend, Elvira. And why does he call her Slut?’

‘I don’t know. A joke I guess.’

‘It’s terrible ... it makes her—’

‘Tiffany you’re beginning to sound nerdish. Let’s hurry or we’ll be late. Besides, it’s cool—Elvira can handle that. She knows he’s rapt in her. Jacko says adults are always coming down heavy on teenagers for swearing yet when a group of adults get together and there are no teenagers around they swear like drunks. They’re hypocrites.’

‘You like Jacko?’

‘He’s cool! I feel a bit sorry for him. His parents are divorced and everything. He lives with his mum and her boyfriend. I think his mother’s an alcoholic.’

But at lunchtime Pam stayed close to Tiffany. Pam knew she had made a practice of going to the library and working on her science project with Dave Trung. But that was all finished now—the projects were in and being marked. If Tiffany told Pam she wanted to go to the library it would be obvious the reason was Dave.

Tiffany would have fretted knowing Dave was sitting in the library waiting for her, but Pam kept her occupied with constant chatter, mostly about going camping. Tiffany didn’t have a chance to give Dave more than a passing thought.

‘You’re coming to Burgers this arvo aren’t you?’

‘Well I—’

‘Tiffany, come on! It’s great fun, and I want to find out more about the camping.’

‘But ... we must catch the quarter to five bus, we nearly missed it yesterday.’

‘I promise we’ll leave at twenty to five.’

This time Burgers didn’t seem so strange. The same year twelves sat down the back smoking. The same fat-bellied cook served up hamburgers behind the counter. The guys sat in the same seats, Pam sitting with Roy, Jacko with Elvira, and Wilson with Tiffany.

Jacko said, ‘Hey Slut, I got you something, another CD.’ He laid it on the table. ‘*Eminem*.’

‘Hey great shit, Jacko! Terrific. Dawn lend us your CD player, I wanta play it now.’

‘I didn’t bring it today.’

Tiffany saw a chance, she could help the gang. ‘You can use mine if you like Elvira.’

‘Thanks Tiffy.’

Tiffany dug down into her school bag and dragged the CD player out, then the headphones. She handed it over, proud to have contributed to the Burgers crowd. She felt like part of the gang. But when Elvira opened it Tiffany remembered something. The worse possible thing: she had left Mum’s CD in there. The one she’d been listening to on the bus: VIVALDI, THE FOUR SEASONS VIOLIN CONCERTOS

A month ago Tiffany had found her father listening to the CD and felt curious. It didn’t sound too bad for violins, with an easy rhythm to it. She’d played it a half dozen times—sometimes on the school bus. But now she froze; everything would depend on what Elvira did. She now held the power of life and death over Tiffany. Elvira picked up the CD, looked down at it, raised one eyebrow and handed it to Tiffany, who took it and immediately pushed it deep into the bottom of her bag. No one else seemed to notice.

Elvira said lightly, ‘You listen to some weird music.’

‘Oh, it’s actually Mum’s.’

‘What is it?’ someone asked.

Tiffany searched desperately for escape. ‘You think that’s weird,’ she told Elvira, ‘Dave Trung listens to Mozart!’

‘Mozart? With violins and shit?’

‘Didn’t I tell you he was a nerd?’

‘Don’t you mean a wanker?’

Everyone started laughing, and Tiffany felt a sense of having escaped being put down. It hardly mattered that she had put down Dave in her place since he wasn’t there, so it couldn’t hurt him.

Now the gang were talking about the camp, while Elvira listened to Eminem. It was all friendly again, everyone was excitedly planning the camp. They all assumed that Tiffany and Pam would be going. Dawn, unfortunately, couldn’t go because she was going to Hawaii with her parents. But there would be seven of them, three girls, four guys.

It would be a cheap holiday because they’d be sure to catch plenty of fish, and Jacko had told his mother that it was a school excursion and the money, 100 dollars, had to be paid in cash tomorrow. Elvira said that she’d try that on her mother. They’d pool all their resources; money, food, equipment. They’d share all the work at the camp putting the tents up, cooking, washing up; each person would help the others. It would be fun, for the first time in their lives they would escape the clutches of parents, teachers, and cops. ‘Man,’ Jacko said, ‘it’ll be like a different planet!’

* * *

Tiffany had been home half an hour when her mother knocked on the door.

‘Tiffany! Telephone. A boy.’

‘Coming.’ She picked up the phone looking for her mother to see if she was listening. ‘Hello.’

‘Hi! It’s Dave. I just ... err wondered if everything was okay because you didn’t go to the library.’

‘Oh sorry Dave! I just couldn’t make it, I was so busy.’

‘That’s okay, as long as everything’s alright. And look I really owe you an apology for the other day. You remember when you asked me about that Mozart CD and I said it wasn’t mine. Well, it was.’

‘But—what’s the apology for?’

‘Well Tiffany, I said that it wasn’t mine because I didn’t trust you. I was afraid you wouldn’t like me if you thought I listened to Mozart. That’s really treating you as a shallow person. I thought you might tell all the other kids. Then they’d have something else to put me down with. I should have been honest with you. We’re all individuals and I really know that just because I listen to different music than you, it wouldn’t make you dislike me. You know what I’m talking about Tiffany?’

‘Sure. Sure.’ She was beginning to feel embarrassed.

‘Sometimes I feel afraid to be myself. I want to fit in to the class, or a group so much that I pretend to be the same as everyone else. Sometimes I know the right answer to a question but I say nothing so that kids won’t think I’m a geek, getting all the answers right. I hate it when I do that ... but I just want to be friends with the other kids. I wish I had more independence to just be myself, instead of copying.’

‘Uh sure. Thanks for calling, but I’m pretty busy Dave.’

‘There was one other thing. I wanted to ask you about going to the movies with me. What do you think?’

‘No, I can’t make it Friday night.’

‘Well, what about Saturday?’

‘No, that’s out too.’

‘Well, I don’t mind when Tiffany, any time during the next few weeks would be okay with me.’

‘No, Dave. You see ... I’ve already got a steady boyfriend.’ Maybe she did have; Wilson thought she was cute, didn’t he?

‘Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t ... know.’ He sounded very disappointed to Tiffany, and she wanted to say something to ease his pain. Some nice fib, something to ...

‘Uh, I do like you Dave, but well I can’t have two boyfriends. It wouldn’t be fair. Sorry.’

‘That’s okay, Tiffany. It was nice working with you on the project. I guess I’ll see you about. And thanks for being honest with me.’

‘Bye.’

Tiffany hurried to her bedroom before her mother asked any questions. She certainly wasn’t in the mood to answer anything. She closed the door firmly and lay on her back staring at the ceiling. But instead of feeling good that she had finally managed to shake off a nerd, she began to cry. Simple little tears; confused tears; frustrated tears.

She wanted Dave for a boyfriend, oh how much she wanted him! But the gang said NO. She couldn’t hang out with Jacko, Pam, or the others if Dave was her boyfriend. No way! And now she’d messed things up with Dave by telling everyone about Mozart just to save her own neck. She felt the terrible tears of loneliness running down her cheeks. But why? She had lost Dave Trung for ever, but now she had the gang. Maybe Wilson, or Strapper—or maybe one of the others guys, anyway it didn’t matter so long as she belonged with the gang and they all had fun.

She just hoped the gang would be happy now. She’d ditched Dave for their sake. Was he really a nerd? He did listen to Mozart. But then she listened to Vivaldi. He did get A’s in maths, science and English ... but some of the other kids got A’s. And what was wrong with that? Well it was done now. Dave was her first potential boyfriend and she had dumped him.

5. PREPARATIONS

The last week of school before the term holidays was difficult. Tiffany screwed up enough courage to ask her mother if she could go on a school excursion for six days. The difficulty was that she knew she was lying. She lied about the destination, about the cost, and about the teachers.

But Elvira gave her advice, ‘Sure you’ll have to tell a few lies—so what? Adults tell us millions of lies. All that bullshit about Santa Claus and God, and punishing us for our own benefit. We’re just getting our own back with a few fibs. Besides we’re not hurting anyone; all we want to do is go camping on the beach for six days. What’s wrong with that? But if you tell them you’re going with a few boys, they’d freak out and forbid it—so it’s really their own fault that we have to tell them lies.’

Tiffany’s mother bought the lies. Then to make Tiffany feel even more guilty, her mother took the 90 dollars out of the bank that she had saved for her hair-do, and gave it to Tiffany in cash.

Phone calls flew backwards and forwards all week. Every night there had to be a conference. Did you tell them? How much did you say it costs? Ninety dollars? I said a hundred. What clothes are you taking? What about the tent? The four boys and three girls called each other one by one, repeating what each of the others had said. Each repetition seemed to build the excitement and bond the gang into a unit.

* * *

Tiffany still suffered from loneliness, but she imagined that when they were on the beach they would sit around the camp fire at night; everyone would sing silly songs and tell stories and jokes. They would be one big happy gang, all friends, holding hands, hugging and laughing. She'd belong to the gang—she wouldn't ever feel lonely again. Everyone would stick up for each other and look after their friends. And maybe, just maybe, a hot new guy would be there—someone she didn't know, someone hunky and strong, and he'd be so lonely and he would come over and sit next to her on the log staring at the fire and be fascinated by her because she would tell him all these cute jokes, and he would laugh and laugh, and then he'd see this little tear in the corner of her eye. Why are you crying? And she would answer: Because I used to be so lonely before I met you!

* * *

Schoolwork could not compete with the excitement of the beach camp, and of course it was a horrible nuisance that there were end-of-term exams in English, maths, and science. There just wasn't enough time to study; besides Tiffany's head was filled with speculation, and just a little anxiety about the whole camping trip.

Of course she was sharing her tent with Pam. Jacko would share his with Elvira. Wilson had a two-person tent and would share with Roy. Strapper said he'd sleep under the stars like he always did when camping. He was used to roughing it. He'd done a trek up to Queensland that lasted three months. He'd lived with hippies on the beach for a month. They ate fish, paw-paws and lots of different wild fruits. Sometimes they killed pigs or rabbits using home-made traps. They had smoked dope all day and no cops had bothered them.

His stories were quite exciting, but Tiffany had a doubt. She remembered that in Australia there were no wild fruits, just the Queensland nut tree. Still, obviously he was an experienced camper.

The thing that worried Tiffany the most was sex.

No one really discussed it. But they all thought about it. In the tents at night, what would happen if Pam slept with Roy, and Elvira slept with Jacko, would she be expected to sleep with Wilson or Strapper?

Pam was, like herself, a virgin. But Dawn had confessed to having had regular sex with Ashly and Wilson. Elvira, as everyone knew, had regular sex with Jacko, and previous to that the list read like a football team. In fact some said the football team had been accommodated, and the real list would be more like the crowd in the grandstand.

Tiffany dug her sex manuals out of the hiding place. They explained that the first experience was very important. If it occurred in an atmosphere of cooperation, love, and understanding, everything would turn out fine. She could expect some pain and maybe a little blood. It was usual for females not to have a wonderful time with their first experience of intercourse; sometimes it seemed disappointing.

Tiffany tried to think of who she might take this first step with. Not Jacko, who would no doubt do it with Elvira. Perhaps Wilson, but he had a lot of pimples and lived in a house where his sister had caught hepatitis. In fact he confessed to having sex with a girl who lived on the streets; a girl who charged ten dollars, and built the profit up by high turnover. She had asked Wilson to use a condom, he explained. In the dark he used a Chockee Bar wrapper held on with an elastic band. He thought that was great. It had fallen apart during the early stages of intercourse and he laughed at the whole business. 'What do I care if she gets pregnant?' But now Tiffany was thinking: what if he had caught a disease? He could have anything.

So that left only Strapper. He was perhaps the worst looking of the guys and very moody. He'd sit in silence for a long time, smoking and listening to the others, then talk like a high speed DJ reading adverts on FM radio. His father had disappeared and his mother drank a lot. So did Strapper, although he was only sixteen. Every six months his alcoholic father would return and there would

be hours of fighting. When things got too difficult one of them would move out, his father, his mother, or Strapper. Then there would be a long process of forgiveness, of making promises that were never kept, and vows never to drink again.

Well then, although Tiffany liked all the boys, there was none she wanted to have sex with, and to be honest with herself she wanted to get this virginity business out of the way. It was somewhat of an embarrassment. It marked her as a girl without experience at sex or life—and without a steady boyfriend. There was, of course, one boy she would have chosen, but he was not invited to the beach camp.

She was watching Neighbours on TV. And as she watched Tiffany felt this infinite embarrassment in front of her whole family when her little sister, Jennifer, said with innocence, ‘How come all the girls in the story have got boyfriends, but Tiffany doesn’t have one?’

At first Tiffany wanted to answer back, but there wasn’t a good answer. Tiffany had asked God the same question every day. She felt so embarrassed. Her mum said, ‘Oh Tiffany’s got lots of time yet to get a boyfriend. She doesn’t have to worry about that for years.’

And her stinking brother said softly so her mother couldn’t hear, ‘Maybe if her tits grew a bit she’d have one.’

Tiffany punched him on the leg, ‘Arsehole!’ she whispered, got up and locked herself in her bedroom. She had never felt so miserable in her life.

At school Dave Trung also looked unhappy. He worked ruthlessly in class. Once he met Tiffany’s eyes and gave her a smile. She feared the others were watching and so just gave a little twist of her head, and a tiny smile; not big enough for anyone to complain about.

At lunch, she sat with the gang and as Dave went past, Jacko yelled out, ‘How’d the cricket try-out go?’ The gang laughed. Cricket was a big deal at Seacrest High. Their school was an acknowledged leader in the schools competition.

Dave smiled and waved. ‘I don’t know yet, Jacko.’ But he looked tense.

Tiffany thought, what does it matter if he failed to make the team, at least he tried. But she didn’t want to stick up for him; he’d have to stick up for himself. Jacko glared back as Dave Trung walked away.

‘Hey Mozart!’ Jacko called out, and when Dave turned to look Jacko mimed playing a violin. Everyone laughed except Tiffany who tried her best to look invisible. She felt extremely embarrassed. She had loaded the bullets they were firing at Dave. But still, she hadn’t told a lie or anything—she had only told them the truth: Dave Trung listened to Mozart. The worse part was that Dave would know that it had been Tiffany who told Jacko. That would be the total end of their friendship. He would hate her forever. But still ... it didn’t matter so much now that she was part of Jacko’s gang.

Jacko told them that they should all leave their mobile phones at home—accidentally on purpose. That way they wouldn’t have any oldies checking up on them. Their parents would just have to trust them for a change.

But the thing that preoccupied Tiffany that last week of school, was the sleeping arrangements. Over and over her mind kept returning to them. As long as she slept in the tent with Pam everything would be okay. But what if, for instance, Pam wanted to swap her for Roy? Although neither of them had discussed the sleeping arrangements it could hardly come as a surprise to Tiffany. And if Tiffany refused, they would all reckon she was a frightened nerd. But if Roy moved in, then who would Tiffany sleep with?

6. HEADING FOR THE BEACH

The trip to the beach in the Tarago was cramped. There was Tiffany, Jacko, Elvira, Pam, Roy, Wilson, Strapper plus Ken the driver. Ken was Jacko's brother who was paid thirty dollars for driving them down passed Gerringong. He would also come back and pick them up when it was time to go home. They put on a CD and sang in high spirits all the way down to the ocean. They followed the Princes Highway through Unanderra, past Dapto and Dunmore.

It was between Dunmore and Bombo that they passed an old Valiant bogged alongside the road. Jacko called out to his brother, 'Hey Ken, stop! Pull over.'

'What's up?'

'The Valiant is bogged. Let's push them out.'

Strapper and Elvira moaned. Wilson said, 'We're wasting time. We don't even know them. Why should we help strangers?'

'Hey, come on gang! It'll only take us a minute.' Jacko was out the car and walking back. Everyone got out and followed him.

'You wanta push?' Jacko was walking up to the two guys struggling with the Valiant. It was in a fairly deep hole.

'Bloody oath! This bastard is so heavy. We've been here an hour—no one else would stop to help us.'

'Come on gang, everyone on the back and push.' Jacko was right, once they all started pushing it only took thirty seconds and the car was free. They all cheered. Tiffany, and obviously all the others, felt a sense of triumph. Perhaps it was silly to feel elated over such a small thing, but as they got back in the Tarago and started singing she realised that Jacko was right. Everyone felt stoked—they had been the only ones to stop and free the car. If it hadn't been for them, the Valiant could have been bogged all day. Jacko knew a few things alright.

They drove on passed Bombo, not stopping till they branched off into Kiama. They piled into a hamburger shop and felt right at home, as if they were back at Burgers. Tiffany felt relaxed and happy, she was sure this trip was going to be great. It was worth dropping Dave Trung to be part of a fun gang like this. They left the hamburger shop in a good mood, joking and laughing. Jacko's gang headed towards the bottle shop and the supermarket. Ken was given an order for beer and vodka.

In the supermarket they divided into two teams, took a couple of trolleys and started putting in orange juice, sausages, rump steak, tins of spaghetti, coffee, eggs, sugar, and Chockee Bars.

Tiffany said to Pam, 'Sunscreen, I must get some 15 plus. Did anyone put in sunscreen?'

Jacko couldn't see the point. 'We'll all be dead in five years from the hole in the ozone layer. The sun will give everyone cancer, so why bother? Why should I spend my cash on sun screen—ten dollars! I didn't make the bloody hole in the atmosphere, the industrial companies who messed up the ozone layer are the ones who should have to pay—and until they do I refuse to buy sunscreen!' And with that he walked over to the cartons of cigarettes.

Tiffany wasn't convinced, but Wilson was saying, 'To hell with the ozone layer! They tell us to use a sunscreen, but it's not our fault is it? It's nerd cream.'

Elvira said in an excited voice, 'Up the ozone hole!'

'Stuff it!' Pam agreed. 'I could buy a lippie for the same price.'

Tiffany turned the sunscreen over in her hands, then put it back on the shelf. She wasn't any keener to spend money on something she didn't need than anyone else. She also knew that she wasn't

going to put sunscreen on if no one else in the gang did. Even if she burnt she'd go along with the others.

Once they loaded the food and drinks into the Tarago van it was as full as a tick. They all had to nurse packages on their knees. Fortunately they were nearly at the beach. They swung down along the winding road to Gerringong, through Gerroa, cruising around looking at the river and the people camped in the caravan park.

'Silly bastards,' Jacko said, 'paying fifteen bucks a night to live in their own country. Look at the brainless morons, rounded up like sheep crammed into a pen. There's eleven kilometres of beach and they squash up like that. Come on let's find a deserted spot, Ken.'

Finding the right spot in the sandhills took almost an hour before Jacko, Wilson, and Strapper were happy. Then they all carried their gear into the dunes: tents, bags, food, drink. It was near to midday when Ken headed back to Wollongong.

They milled about in the sun, struggling with the tents in the heat. That is except for Strapper, who sweating, looking pale and sickly sat under a bush. He didn't have a tent. Jacko said, 'Let's stop for a drink. Oh shit, we forgot to get the ice! Wilson, you asshole! That was your job. Now the beer will get warm.'

'It wasn't my job to buy the ice. You said we could pick it up at Gerringong.'

'For Christ's sake! Come on we'd better start drinking it before it gets warm.'

Tiffany was concerned about the food. 'What about the meat? It will go bad before long.'

'No problem, we'll walk up to the shops and get some ice.'

They decided to sit on the rise overlooking the ocean. They stared out over the endless blue-green water, drank beer and watched the waves. The sky was a pale blue except for a small patch of grey clouds further south. Strapper only had one can of beer before becoming quite drowsy. He took his shirt off, revealing a white, skinny chest. Jacko, Wilson, and Roy all took their shirts off and sat in the sun.

Elvira was the only one who brought a mobile phone. She made a call to her mother, telling her how they'd arrived at the camp and how nice it all was. She signed off with, 'Oh, I must go Mum! The teacher is calling us. Bye!' When she hung up they all burst into laughter.

Strapper sat up rather suddenly; he began telling them all about his parents whom he rarely spoke of. Tiffany found it hard to make much sense of what he was saying. His eyes were flickering. She thought it was the wind, but then he started looking about the sandhills.

'Cops, we've got to watch out for the pigs! The bastards hide microphones in the sand and have balloons with cameras looking down watching you. They even put them on the seagulls and they can watch everything you do. Did you know that, Tiffany?'

'Um, no. Why would they do that?'

'They're nosy. They follow me everywhere. Sometimes they plant secret microphones in my clothes to hear what I'm saying.' He began whispering. 'Shhh. Watch this.'

He stood up and walked unsteadily down towards the water. The others started to giggle. Pam said, 'Boy he's a one can screamer.'

'It's not the beer,' Roy said. 'He's always popping pills. Check out his eyes. Hey, what's he doing?'

Strapper walked determinedly into the ocean, fell over, much to everyone's amusement, stood up and then kept walking unsteadily till the waves were chest high.

‘Jacko,’ Tiffany asked, ‘can he swim? Is he alright?’ She stood up worried, hardly aware that she was walking towards the ocean. Strapper was floundering, the waves knocking him over each time he stood up. He came up spluttering and coughing, yet relentlessly he kept struggling out further and further.

‘Come back, Strapper!’ Tiffany called out. He showed no sign of hearing her. She turned and looked back at the others. They were sitting on the sand-dune laughing hysterically. Jacko and Wilson were drinking more beer. Tiffany thought she was making a fool of herself, worrying about Strapper when they could all see it was a joke. But she couldn’t help it. She knew he was in danger, and she knew she had no choice but to try and help him even if they all laughed at her. Strapper was being swept in and out with the waves now, like a piece of driftwood. He was no longer getting to his feet, but just staggering about. She ran into the waves; she felt the weight of her wet clothes and the first icy chill of the salt water. She headed towards Strapper who was struggling in chest deep water, going under, coming up totally out of control. She swam towards him and grabbed his belt, but he turned around in a panic and flung his arms around her neck screaming at her. They both went under. She touched bottom and pushed up, the water was rushing out and she fought against the drag, digging her toes in. Strapper felt the sand under his feet and calmed down a little. Tiffany pushed him back towards the shore. Bit by bit she tried to drag him towards the beach. He struggled and spluttered, she tried to hold his head up, but he was too heavy. Finally she pushed him onto his back and dragged him by the armpits towards the edge of the water. He was only half conscious.

As it became more shallow, Strapper dragged heavier and heavier onto the sand. She could only move him when a wave washed in over him, lifting his body a little. She turned exhausted and puffing towards the dunes, the others were all sitting where they were before. She yelled out, ‘Pam help me!’

Slowly Pam stood up and walked down the beach. Tiffany held Strapper sitting upright. He was coughing water out and mumbling something that made no sense. Then she caught it, ‘I drowned ... their microphone. They can’t hear me now.’

‘Come on Pam, help me. He nearly drowned.’

‘Oh he’s a fool! Look at him.’

‘Take an arm and we’ll pull him up onto the beach.’

‘He’s an idiot— taking pills.’

‘Yes, but we can’t let him drown!’ Together, struggling, they dragged Strapper up to the high water mark, turned him onto his side and sat down. Tiffany, now soaked and exhausted stared at Strapper. He seemed to be recovering. His long hair lay tangled and wet on the sand. A voice behind her startled her. It was Elvira. ‘What a clever little lifesaver. Pity about the tits.’ She was staring at Tiffany’s wet T-shirt, it showed a lumpy wet bra underneath.

They all came down to look at Strapper. Wilson said, ‘All your clothes are wet, Tiffany. You’d better take them off and let them dry.’

‘They’ll be okay.’

‘You’re not shy are you? We won’t look.’

‘Of course not. I often swim ... in the nude.’ What a lie! But she was determined to act as mature as Elvira. ‘It’s just that they’ll dry more quickly on me. Besides we haven’t finished unpacking the food and camping gear.’

‘Right,’ Jacko said, ‘we’ll finish unpacking then we can all come down and have a swim in the nude. There’s no one about. It should be fun.’

Tiffany felt utterly embarrassed. Now what had she started? Oh my God. How would she survive this camp for six days?

7. LEARNING TO DRINK

Strapper threw-up a couple of times on the beach. He was muttering to himself and still acting rather wobbly. Everyone sat around for ten minutes before deciding to help Strapper to walk back to the tents. With Jacko on one side and Wilson on the other they half carried and half walked him back to the camp.

They finished setting the tents up, unrolled the sleeping bags, and everyone, including Tiffany, drank a can of beer. Tiffany thought the first taste was not very pleasant. But by the fourth mouthful the slightly bitter taste was less noticeable. She drank the whole can, while the boys ripped into their fourth and fifth cans.

The drinking worried Tiffany because she felt that if the boys got drunk she really didn't know what they would do. Anything was possible. They might decide to swim to New Zealand, or blow up the police station, or steal a bus. She also felt a terrible dread of having to strip off all her clothes in front of the others, including Elvira, who was sure to ask her who had stuck the pin in her breasts and let the air out. And of course what would happen with the boys naked? Oh no, she was determined to delay the nude swimming until it was dark.

So while the boys joked about Strapper, Tiffany started to sort through the food. 'We really need ice,' she said, 'because the meat will go off in a few hours. And the butter has melted.'

'Yeah, and the beer is getting warm!'

Pam suggested, 'We could walk down to the shops and take turns in carrying the ice back.'

Jacko, for one, didn't think much of that idea. He was enjoying himself drinking beer; besides it was a hot day, and probably a ten kilometre round trip. Who knows how far they'd have to walk in search of ice.

'We'll go tomorrow morning—it'll be cool then. The meat will be okay overnight. And the grog won't go off. The butter will go hard over night.'

'Yeah, so do I!' shouted Wilson gleefully. The more they drank, the louder they got. Not only louder but dirtier. The language was all f--- this and f--- that.

Tiffany was determined to steer the conversation away from sex. It was something she didn't want anyone to talk about. Not just yet anyway. She hadn't decided what she was going to do about it.

They were all sitting around the pit they had dug in the sand. The pit was filled with cans of beer and the bottles of vodka. That was to keep it cool. Tiffany said, 'We don't have a light, so we should start cooking our dinner while we can still see. Besides I'm hungry.'

'Righto. You're the cook; that's women's work.'

'What's man's work then?' Elvira asked. She had more courage than Tiffany.

'Eating, drinking, and rooting.'

'Lucky for some!'

'If someone can make a fire, I'll cook the sausages. I'm starved,' Tiffany offered. It then occurred to her she was now supporting the division of labour into men's work and women's work.

It was Wilson who decided to help. He gathered an armful of sticks, some dry grass, and lit a fire beneath the barbecue plate which sat on a couple of bricks. The nearby grass caught alight and for a

few moments it looked like they were going to have a bushfire. The flames were stopped outside Jacko's tent.

Tiffany felt nervous. Very nervous. The boys were drinking their beer as if they were determined to get drunk. Pam and Elvira were drinking vodka and Coke. Strapper was asleep again.

And while they sat about in a circle watching her prepare the food she felt flustered. She began to prod the sausages with the fork to let the fat out. Jacko watched everything she did as if she were on some kind of test. He asked her, 'What are you doing?'

'Pricking the sausages.'

Everyone laughed; but she didn't understand what was so funny. She felt intensely embarrassed.

Elvira said, 'Just how many pricks do you want?'

Tiffany didn't dare to answer, but blushed as the others went into hysterics.

She tried to cook the sausages as perfectly as possible. Something that she had not had much practice with. At home, when Mum wanted her to cook she found it a total bore. But she figured someone had to cook. They'd gone all day with little more than a hamburger each. Besides while she was cooking she had an excuse not to have to swim in the nude.

Elvira and Jacko kept up a constant criticism of her cooking. The more they criticised the more clumsy she felt.

'For Godssake turn them! Don't squeeze them so hard, you're busting them. The fire's too hot! Have you ever cooked before or is this your first time?'

'We should call her Cherry.'

Tiffany blushed, she knew what they meant, Cherry the virgin. Pam must have told them that Tiffany was a virgin. Tiffany thought how hateful her virginity was—a sign of immaturity, a badge of shame. The mark of a child, a girl no one was interested in; only geeks were virgins.

'Aren't you having anything to drink?' Wilson wanted to know.

'She's Tiffy-the-toffee-nosed-virgin,' Elvira smirked.

Tiffany was ready to run down the beach to get away from these people. Pam was supposed to be her friend, yet she said nothing to help, just sat there making eyes at Roy.

Wilson opened two cans of beer and handed her one. Tiffany felt that maybe, if she could make a few jokes it might get them off her back. They seemed to be ganging up on her for some reason. Yet she was the one cooking food for all of them.

'I'm saving it till I get married,' she said as a joke.

Surely they could see it was a joke, but no one laughed until Wilson said, 'With any luck you could get married tonight!'

8. GOING DOWN

Tiffany thought how lovely everything would be at the beach if she were just by herself. She could look at the changing colours of the ocean; the stars would be bright points of light; the milky way would be enormous once she was away from the city dazzle. At her feet she could see how the grass grew out of the sand, thin and sparse, the breeze from the ocean bent it over, then as the wind eased a little the grass sprang upright again. In the distance she could hear the deep growl of the waves as they pounded onto the shallow water.

Despite all the teasing about her sausages they gobbled them down like starving dogs. For an hour she cooked sausages, no sooner than they were cooked than the others ate them. She managed to eat three herself. Then the boys toasted bread on sticks over the fire. When all the sausages were cooked she decided to have another can of beer. Her third. Darkness slowly descended making the fire prettier; a flickering cascade of light and heat.

Wilson brought out his stereo and played some heavy metal. The others talked above the noise, but gradually it was turned down. It seemed to Tiffany that she was not yet accepted by the gang, and although she was with them she was on the outside.

Strapper was awake now, but sat rather quietly alongside Wilson. She felt light-headed herself. She was getting used to all the swearing and cursing. And yet in some strange way she felt that it degraded her, like when Jacko called Elvira “Slut” and Elvira didn’t disagree—it almost seemed that she accepted that she was one. Maybe that’s what the boys wanted. If the girls accepted all the swearing and dirty jokes, then they could hardly be surprised when it was expected that they act out those sleazy jokes. But the more Tiffany drank the less she cared about anything. She didn’t care because her head felt warm and fuzzy, and nothing mattered at all. The others were drunk. Tiffany finished her fourth can of beer. Wilson was sitting alongside of her, Strapper in a world of his own on the other side. Elvira and Jacko were sitting on the opposite side of the fire, arms around each other. Roy and Pam were nearby, seeing only each other.

Wilson was paying attention to her. ‘You’re not drinking much Tiffany.’

‘Oh yes. This is my fiv-fivth can!’

The others laughed, they’d all lost count of how many they’d had. She tried to make up for this childishness. ‘Um, I always like to drink my beer cold. I’m not used to it warm.’

‘Put some vodka in it. That it improves it a lot. Here,’ he reached over and took the can from her, and out of view poured some vodka into it. When he passed it back it was full. ‘Try that, it’s much better.’

She did, and found it revolting. Nevertheless, she persisted drinking it. At least if she was drinking they’d leave her alone, and maybe she would be accepted as part of the gang. Besides she no longer felt embarrassed, everything was a fuzzy blur.

Elvira, for unknown reasons, seemed to despise her. Pam, of course, still liked her, but things were different ever since she had become friends with Roy. Pam only seemed to think about Roy now.

Elvira and Jacko were sitting with their arms about each other, hugging—then before long turning to give each other long, deep, sloppy kisses.

It was quite dark now, and lonely—no other campers in sight. Tiffany finished her drink and she looked up to see Jacko and Elvira, arms about each other, lying down. Pam and Roy were talking softly, so that she couldn’t hear them.

Wilson sounded weird, his voice slurring. He got up and went into the bushes for a piss.

When had gone Tiffany thought she too absolutely must go. She quickly sneaked off in the opposite direction. When she was out of sight from the camp she looked about her, afraid someone was hiding nearby watching her. All she could hear was the stereo from the camp, and the surf. She pulled her shorts and knickers to her knees, squatted down and let the evening’s takings flood out. She felt immensely relieved, stood up, adjusted her clothing, and walked unsteadily back to the camp. It was only then that she realised she was quite drunk.

When she got back Elvira and Jacko were in their tent. She could hear Jacko whispering in a loud voice. And before long she heard him moaning and grunting with a final ebullient yell.

Strapper had come to life.

He was talking to Wilson about cars. He knew where they could get a Subaru WRX, very cheaply. Seriously cheaply.

Tiffany sat drinking another beer, and after a few mouthfuls decided to top it up with vodka. Everyone else was drunk and having fun. Roy and Pam were now in Tiffany's tent, where she heard giggling and moaning. Nothing was going to get Roy and Pam out of her tent. And then the truth dawned on her, she was expected to have sex with someone—Wilson or Strapper.

But Wilson was vulgar and dirty. His unwashed hair hung in his eyes. His clothes smelt of B.O. She wanted to have sex, but not with him. Strapper was worse. There was something spaced out about him, violence or madness lurking beneath the surface. You could see it in his eyes, a deep burning anger. If only there was some other cute guy—no one special, but at least clean.

Strapper got up and walked a few steps away from the fire and relieved himself and then farted loudly. Wilson moved closer to Tiffany and put his arm around her waist while he drank another beer. In the dark after all the alcohol he didn't seem so bad.

'Give us a kiss.' He turned his head towards her. She let him kiss her lightly on the lips. Then his tongue slid into her mouth and she flinched with surprise. The kiss got very sloppy, so she pulled her head back and broke off the kiss. He took another mouthful of beer.

'You know—you're cute and sexy.'

Tiffany felt vague and clumsy, she kept leaning to one side as though she had just gotten off a circus ride. Wilson put his arm around her neck and fondled her hair, slowly pushing her face around, then he kissed her again. Suddenly she realised what was wrong with her—she was drunk. Her vision was blurry and she felt dizzy.

Wilson was kissing her again, more and more, his tongue in her mouth and now she could feel his hand on her breasts. She felt so drunk it hardly mattered. He was reaching under her T-shirt with one hand, searching for her nipples. But her body gradually seemed to be going numb all over, like lips after the dentist had given an injection.

Wilson was talking softly. Strapper was lying down a few metres away, probably asleep. Tiffany wanted to lie down but not with Wilson. Tiffany's tent was occupied with Roy and Pam, and she could guess what they were doing in there.

'Tiffany, how about a root?'

'No. I'm dizzy.'

'Jeez Tiffany, everyone else is doin' it. Come on.'

'No. I've got to lie down or I'll be sick.'

'Go on then, you can use my tent. Roy's in yours anyway. I'll sit by the fire.'

But before she was able to reach his tent, she found her stomach twisted itself into a knot. She doubled over, kneeling on the ground vomiting. For five minutes she retched, spat and clutched her stomach. Then she staggered into the tent, found an air-bed and laid down on her back. Inside the tent it was totally dark. The fire had died down. The other tents were silent. The stereo was on softer now, just a babble of noise to her ears. Her head was spinning around as though she'd been on a show ride. Dizzy and sick, she shut her eyes and lay very still, feeling like she was about to die.

9. HER FRIENDS LOOK AFTER HER

Tiffany fell asleep very quickly, but after ten minutes she felt someone lay down alongside of her in the dark. She stirred uneasily, drunk and sick she didn't care a damn who it was.

‘Don’t worry, Tiffy, it’s me, Wilson. I’ll look after you.’

She dozed off again. When she awoke ten minutes later Wilson was having sex with her. It was the sudden pain as he pushed deep inside that woke her. Tiffany thought that she must have led him to believe that she wouldn’t mind having sex with him. She really couldn’t remember what she had said half an hour ago. She didn’t even care that much; all she wanted was for her stomach to stop feeling like it wanted to throw up. She just wanted her head to stop aching; she wanted to sleep, and for Wilson to get off her and leave her in peace.

He was kissing her mouth, then moaning into her ear. It felt strange, a little bit sexy, but nothing to make a big deal of. It was more boring than exciting. Then in thirty seconds he stopped and groaned like a wounded dog. He lay on top of her for another half minute, then rolled off without a word.

So what, she thought. Big deal!

An hour later she was deep in sleep when she woke to find him on top of her again. She knew her blouse was missing. In fact she knew she was naked. Once was enough. ‘Stop it. I don’t want to.’

‘Uh. Uh. Uh. I’m nearly finished.’ It didn’t sound like Wilson.

He was jerking about inside her, it felt horrible like a toad squirming about in there. ‘W-who is it?’

He didn’t answer but kept on moving, his weight holding her down. She snapped, ‘Who is it!’ Suddenly it seemed important that she knew who was inside of her, using her, doing this to her without her consent. It was so dark she couldn’t even see his face.

‘Who is it? Stop it! Stop it!’ But she felt too sick to push him away. His answer was a deep groan. It didn’t sound like Wilson, and in the dark she couldn’t see. Finally he stopped and panted, ‘Strapper.’

‘Oh God. Get off me!’ She felt disgusted, miserable, without even knowing why. He rolled off her, and lay silent. Her head had stopped spinning, but she felt exhausted, and her face burning hot. She pulled some clothes up over her and after a few minutes was deeply asleep.

When she woke it was morning.

It was already light. Jacko, Elvira, Pam and Roy, had all crammed their heads into the entrance of the tent. Jacko woke her with his loud voice.

‘It’s a brothel!’

Tiffany blinked her eyes open, and saw the four amused, laughing faces at the tent opening. For a few seconds she couldn’t remember where she was or who these people were. And what were they laughing at? She sat up, and realised she was totally naked. But it was only then that she saw Wilson laying on her left and Strapper laying on her right. All three of them were totally naked. Strapper lay face down with his white bum sticking in the air like sand dunes. The two boys stirred, woke and sat up. Wilson’s white prick flopped about as he turned.

Tiffany screamed, ‘Get out! Everyone get out!’ And she began searching desperately for her clothes. But no one got out, the four faces at the tent doorway laughed all the harder as she tried to cover her naked breasts. Wilson and Strapper sat up looking dozy, then smiled and laughed. Everyone was laughing except Tiffany who was embarrassed and very much ashamed.

But it was Elvira who—when the laughing had stopped—said, ‘What a little slut she turned out to be. Virgin my arse! She’s had more pricks in her than all the sausages we ate last night!’

Pam’s face disappeared, then Roy. Tiffany finished dressing while Wilson and Strapper sat up and covered themselves half-heartedly. When she was dressed she pushed past all of them and got away from the tent. Her head ached awfully and her stomach felt nauseous. She went straight to the water bottle and drank a cup of water, turned and walked off towards the beach.

Now was the time to do some serious thinking about what had happened to her.

10. THE MORNING AFTER

Tiffany sat on the hillside overlooking the ocean. It was early yet, the sun hardly above the horizon. The gentle breeze blew in from the ocean and made a rumbling noise in her ears. As the waves washed onto the sand she could hear the hissing as they skimmed up the beach.

She felt dirty. Dirty in her head, dirty in her body. She felt disgusted. She had wanted, yes really wanted to have sex—but not like that! Everyone drunk, not even knowing in the dark who was doing it to her. Neither of them even asked! Yet it was her own stupid fault, once she was drunk she lost all control. She was defenceless, available for anyone. It was just lucky that the other two boys didn't come into the tent as well.

She knew sex wasn't really like last night. She knew the two boys didn't even care about her, they just used her as a thing to satisfy themselves. Sex was supposed to be something you shared with someone you loved, someone who understood you, someone who really cared about you—not someone who attacked you while you were drunk and asleep.

She stood up and walked down into the waves. Surprisingly it wasn't all that cold. She walked out to where the water was waist deep. Turning around to make sure no one was looking she removed her clothes, firstly her shorts under the waves, and washed herself rubbing with her hands—as if trying to rub the filth from her body. Then awkwardly she dressed before wading to the beach.

She walked back to the hill and sat on the sand. After about half an hour she heard some trail-bikes. They didn't see her, but four guys rode past on the wet sand. She envied them their freedom, the wind in their faces, the smooth speed as they rode into the distance along the edge of the water.

Tiffany's clothes felt uncomfortable, still damp, they clung to her skin. She sat wondering about what had happened last night. She had wanted to be like the others. They wanted her to get drunk; so she had, they wanted her to have sex, so she did—but now they mocked her and Elvira called her a slut. Yesterday she had been called a toffee-nosed-virgin. There seemed to be no way she could ever please them.

For a while she had enjoyed the beer, it had relaxed her; but she had become so out of it as the alcohol took effect. And now that she thought about it she knew neither Wilson or Strapper had used a condom.

Oh God she could have caught any disease—especially from Strapper. And worse still, what if she was pregnant? She wouldn't even know who the father was. Not that under any circumstances would she ever marry either of the sleazebags, or have the baby.

That's what they were. Wilson got her drunk and sick by putting vodka in her beer, then he had sex with her while she was still half asleep and drunk. Oh, but she was pretty drunk even before the vodka; still it was the vodka that finished her off completely. Strapper waited till she was asleep then he had sex with her. She hated the thought of his pimples, his dirty hair, his smell. That was her reward for dragging him out of the surf and saving his life. As soon as she was drunk and asleep he jumped on top of her.

At first she wanted to blame Wilson and Strapper. But she knew it was her own fault for drinking too much. Once she started she couldn't stop, and once she was drunk she was helpless.

She walked back to the camp. Tiffany felt she had learnt a lesson; she didn't care what they said anymore—she wouldn't get drunk again. One beer only, that was all, and no vodka or Southern Comfort.

At the camp Roy and Pam were sitting about looking miserable. In the small patch of shade, a few metres away Jacko was lying face down in the grass vomiting.

‘Where did you get to?’ Pam asked.

‘I had a swim and washed my clothes.’

‘In the nude?’ Wilson asked smiling.

‘No. My face is so itchy, it’s burning.’

‘Yeah,’ Pam agreed, ‘mine too. I think we’re sunburnt.’

‘Yes, you are! God, look at us we’re all sunburnt on our faces. We should have used sunscreen.’

Wilson said, ‘Why should we? We didn’t stuff the ozone layer.’

Tiffany stared at him. ‘No, we didn’t stuff it. But so what? If we don’t use sunscreen we get burnt. All the other people on the beach didn’t stuff the ozone layer but they’re using sunscreens aren’t they? It doesn’t matter whose fault it was. And maybe it was partly our fault. We ride around in cars and buses and use electricity and buy things made of plastic and light fires.’

Elvira looked at her coolly and said, ‘Get off your soap box, Tiffany. If you’re so smart how come you’re sunburnt?’

Tiffany felt embarrassed. She stopped and went into her hot tent, closed the flap and changed into clean clothes: shorts, a loose blouse buttoned down the back, and no bra. Her stomach still felt unwell.

Outside the others were sitting around looking unhappy. Strapper came back. ‘Has anyone got any toilet paper?’

No. It was another thing no one had thought of at the time. Toilet paper—such a trivial unimportant thing compared to the beer and cigarettes. Now it made a big difference. They searched but couldn’t find any paper, they had started the barbecue fire with what little they had. No one had even bought a newspaper. Eventually he had to settle for a handful of dry grass, and during the afternoon, one by one, each of them suffered the same fate.

They retired to their tents, Pam and Tiffany together this time. Pam asked Tiffany to swap with Roy. She wanted Tiffany to sleep in Wilson’s tent.

‘No way. It’s my tent. If you want to you can go move in with Roy and Wilson.’

By lunchtime everyone had recovered. But what they still hadn’t done was bought any ice. ‘What does it matter?’ Jacko said exasperatedly. ‘We can drink the beer warm. And the meat will keep three days without ice, won’t it?’

No one knew. Tiffany thought maybe six hours was the maximum. Lunchtime they ate bread with melted butter and spaghetti.

They all felt somewhat better. Though they now noticed the lack of showers and toilets. When the boys started on the warm beer they soon suggested that later on they should all walk down and get some ice. But no one wanted to go just at that moment. They were talking, talking, talking. The more they drank the more they talked. They talked about rap music, about Puff Daddy, about Nike shoes, and about hotting up Subarus so that they could outrun cop cars.

Tiffany drank one can. Elvira drank Southern Comfort which she had brought from home. Pam drank three cans of beer. Wilson and Jacko consumed about eleven cans between them by four in the afternoon. Strapper drank only water—but Tiffany saw him swallowing three or four little pills. When he noticed her watching he said, ‘Would you like a couple?’

‘What are they?’

‘Um, Happy Pills. They make you feel happy.’

‘They’re not working are they?’

‘Yeah, they work just fine. I’m miserable without them.’

‘You really don’t look at all happy, Strapper.’

‘Fat lot you know, Tiffy. You’ve never tried Happy Pills. You can’t criticise something you haven’t tried. Try them out first.’ He held them out to her.

‘Come on Strapper, you know better than that! I haven’t tried getting run over by a truck or drinking sulphuric acid, but I know they’d be bad for me. You don’t have to try everything out—we’ve each got a brain.’

He laughed, ‘Yeah, guess you’re right.’

‘What makes you take all these pills, Strapper?’

‘Huh? Well, I used to smoke marijuana, and I liked that ... it’s not addictive you know.’

‘Yeah, but how come you’re always using these uppers and downers and things?’

‘Huh. I guess once I’d tried marijuana I wanted to try something else and see if it was any better. So I just kept trying all the different things. Now I’m hooked.’

‘But couldn’t you give them up if you really wanted to?’

‘Sure! Of course I could give them up any time ... I guess ... if I had friends and people who’d help me, but I dunno. See, when you’re on drugs you lose all your real friends. The only ones you’re left with are those who want something from you. Money or sex or ...gear. You get so lonely ... everyone seems to be against you.’

‘Sex?’

‘Yeah. Uh, this guy I get pills from, Fatman, once I was so desperate for uppers I had to let him have sex with me to pay. And that’s what happened to Elvira.’

‘Elvira?’

‘Yeah. See I was supplying her with cheap pills ... when the price went up she was seriously into the uppers—but she couldn’t afford them. At first she had sex with me, then later on she ended up doing it with Fatman. Remember when she was off school for a month sick—she caught a disease from him.’

‘But can’t you get help from someone?’

‘Yeah. I suppose if I went to hospitals and stuff. But trouble is after you’ve been swallowing all these different tablets for a while you don’t give a stuff what happens to you anymore. You never care enough to try and stop taking them. The only thing you care about is getting your next hit. You don’t care about friends or TV or holidays or sex—nothing matters as much as getting your next hit. That’s why I had sex with Fatman. You know I’d steal stuff of my friends to get a hit—I warn you I’d do anything.’

Tiffany stared at his white face and she believed him. But his eyes were growing glazed as she watched; he was going back into his own world where madness was just one more pill away.

His voice sounded like it was drifting away. ‘I’d be really happy if people left me alone. Bastards are always picking on me, starting fights, stealing things from me. The microphones are always listening to me. I’ve got enemies. But I know who my enemies are! I have all their names written down in a notebook. And I will destroy them one by one!’

His pupils had grown smaller, and his face turned hard.

‘I’m not you’re enemy, Strapper.’

‘No, I guess not. Did you like me last night? I was pretty good wasn’t I?’

‘I ... sure. You were ... good.’

‘Yeah, so were you Pam.’

‘I’m Tiffany. But really Strapper you’d feel better if you didn’t take those happy pills.’

‘Don’t lecture me. Leave me alone!’

And he walked off towards the beach, staggering a little in the loose sand as he went. Tiffany sat and wondered exactly what Strapper meant when he warned her he’d do anything to get a hit.

11. TRAIL BIKES

The inside of each tent was like a kiln, so they all sat outside on the sand. Although there was little shade there was a nice ocean breeze. Tiffany sat at the side of her tent, while Pam and Roy sat over near the food boxes, talking softly.

Elvira was sitting in the sand by herself. Apparently she had argued with Jacko, who was drinking warm beer with Wilson and talking about cars. Elvira had the bottle of Southern Comfort at her feet with a plastic bottle of orange juice alongside. Tiffany was looking with jealous admiration at Elvira’s breasts squeezed nicely into a bikini top. She wondered how different her own life would be if she looked like Elvira, a hot bod, a nice face, even if her hair was always scraggly. Elvira had no shortage of boyfriends.

Tiffany, staring vacantly at the food boxes, noticed that the meat had been left out of the Esky. It was sitting in the sun, wrapped in a plastic bag. Thirty-five dollars worth of rump steak rapidly going bad. When she went over and opened the bag she could smell the meat. ‘Oh no! The meat has gone off.’

‘What do you mean?’ Jacko was looking at her as if it were her fault.

‘Someone took it from the Esky and left it on the top in the sun.’

‘What asshole did that?’

‘I don’t know. I suppose it doesn’t matter who did it. The meat’s finished. It could have been any one of us. Once we started drinking last night no one knew what they were doing.’

Elvira said, ‘But whoever did it should pay for it. They should have to buy some new meat.’

‘Well, it’s been lying here for a long time. All of us should have seen it.’ Tiffany couldn’t see the point of pinning the blame on anyone now.

‘I think you left it out last night Tiffany. When you were burning the sausages.’

‘No. I certainly didn’t. I put all the meat away on the bottom so it would keep cool.’

‘You left it out and that’s why you don’t want anyone to get the blame.’

‘I didn’t! You know I didn’t, Elvira. It won’t help to know who did it. The meat has gone off. Besides it was going off because we have no ice. Why don’t we walk up to the shops and buy some chicken or hamburgers?’

Elvira was not impressed with that idea. ‘Great, you go ahead and use your money. I spent all mine on orange juice and vodka. And I think you drank a lot of my vodka too.’

‘Well I spent mine on food, meat and bread.’

‘We’ll just have to eat spaghetti.’

Jacko stood up and came across to the meat. 'It looks alright.'

Tiffany held it up. 'Smell it.'

He sniffed it, a cigarette in one hand, a beer in the other. 'It smells alright to me. You're imagining things. It'll be okay. Cook it up for us Tiffany.'

She sat down. 'No. It's off, I can smell it. It's not worth risking food poisoning. It does smell. Elvira, you smell it.'

'It looks okay to me. It's only a day old. Besides we've got nothing else to eat. We didn't bring enough food.'

'Don't worry about it,' Wilson said. 'Have a beer.'

'That's why we didn't have enough money for food. We spent about a four hundred dollars on grog, and a hundred dollars on cigarettes. There was only a hundred left for food. We should—'

'Just cook it up, Tiffany! And don't give us another lecture.'

'It's too early; four o'clock. Why me? I cooked yesterday.'

'Yeah, but you're good at it.'

'That's not what you said yesterday! Elvira just said I burnt the sausages. I'll cook spaghetti or eggs, but I'm not cooking the meat—it could make everyone sick, then it'll be my fault.'

Elvira snapped, 'I'm sick of you Toffee-nosed-too-good for us! If you won't help with the cooking, just piss off and let someone else have a go at it.'

But Jacko didn't feel like cooking. 'Oh it's too hot to light the fire just now. We'll cook at six when it's cooler.'

Tiffany walked off towards the beach, this time remembering her hat. As she put it on Elvira called out, 'Slip! Slop! Slap! What a good little slut you are Tiffy.'

Tiffany turned around to answer back. Elvira stood up, as if she were expecting a fight. Tiffany turned and walked away saying nothing. She found a spot on the beach and sat down overlooking the ocean.

She knew now that she had been wrong. Every person has to think for themselves. And that was the trouble with a gang. If you wanted to be a part of one you couldn't use your own brain anymore. Of course they couldn't smell the meat, they had been smoking and drinking. Well, she would rather starve than eat bad meat. She had seen what happened once before—vomiting and agonising stomach pains for twenty-four hours. This time she knew she would defy them. She wouldn't cook it, and she wouldn't eat it.

The whole trip was becoming a disaster. She was sick of going into the bushes for the toilet. They had run out of drinking and washing water, because no one thought to bring a large enough container. So now they couldn't make coffee or clean their teeth or wash their faces. At night-time it was dark once the fire went out. They had one torch, but someone had left it turned on all night, and now the battery was flat.

But the worse thing was what had happened with Wilson and Strapper. She was disgusted now; at the time she hadn't cared much what Wilson did to her. In a way she thought she was responsible since she was kissing him and letting him think she would do it. Wilson and Strapper had their fun, and it was all over for them, but she could end up pregnant or with gonorrhoea. Her period was due in a week, she would just have to wait till then to find out. But what if she had caught a disease?

And what would happen when they got back to school. Jacko and Elvira had started calling her a slut. The first night they had called her Tiffany, the toffee-nosed-virgin. Then because she got drunk and fell asleep ...

She was startled when Wilson and Strapper came up behind her and sat one on each side of her. Wilson had a can of beer. Strapper looked vague, as if his brain was on another planet, certainly not Vulcan; more likely one of those strange planets from Dr Who, with horrible lurking monsters and enemies hiding behind every rock.

‘Wanna drink?’

‘No thanks, Wilson.’

Strapper lay back, his hair in the sand, eyes staring at the ocean. He was mumbling to himself, singing bits of songs, and gesturing with his hands.

Tiffany looked at him with pity. ‘I see Strapper is off the planet again. Why does he do this to himself? Is he trying to escape from his life or something?’

Wilson looked down at the mumbling Strapper lying in the sand. ‘Nah, he’s just a hopeless shit hooked on pills.’ He reached over and put his arm around her waist. ‘What about going into the bushes? We’ll lie down on a blanket and do it.’

Tiffany stood up. ‘No thank you! Don’t think that because I got drunk once and let you have sex with me that I will ever—’

‘Arr come on! Everyone else is at it in the tents. Elvira and Jacko, Roy and Pam. We’re the only ones missing out on the fun.’

‘It wasn’t much fun for me when I was drunk and asleep.’

‘It’ll be different this time—you’re sober and awake. I’ll give you a good time. You’ll enjoy it—trust me.’

‘Forget it, I’m not having sex with any of you.’

Wilson stood up alongside her. ‘Okay. Okay. I’ll just walk with you along the beach. I won’t even touch you.’ They began to stroll down to the edge of the water. Wilson decided to try a new approach. ‘Beautiful Tiffany, you know I love you don’t you? I love your eyes, and ... uh your ... mouth and I love your tits. You’re great Tiffany.’

‘Thanks.’ She was walking half a pace in front of him. She listened to what he said. It sounded clumsy, but amazing. Could he really love her? Oh even to have someone as crude as Wilson in love with her would be nice. But she just couldn’t believe him. It was obvious what he was after.

She walked along the edge of the water, not saying much. Wilson walked by her side. When he finished the beer, he threw the empty can into the ocean.

She thought how it was always Jacko and Wilson who blamed everyone else for pollution, business and rich people mostly. But they contributed their share to pollution.

In the distance she could hear the sound of trail-bikes. If she had a bike, she’d ride the length of the beach every night. The headlights would pick out the way, the waves skimming onto the beach, the cool wind blowing in her face.

She glanced at Wilson. His eyes were dull and she realised he was partly drunk. She knew she’d have to be careful of him. She didn’t trust anyone who was drunk—especially herself. But the afternoon breeze was blowing in from the sea making her feel relaxed. If she got Wilson to walk a couple of kilometres he might sober up. But he had other ideas.

‘Come on, Tiffany. I’ve waited long enough, give me a kiss.’ He grabbed her hand and put his arm around her waist. ‘I’m so horny from looking at you. If we do it up in the sandhills no one will ever know. I won’t tell the others.’

In the distance she could hear the trail-bikes coming closer.

‘No, I don’t want to. You don’t even use condoms.’

‘Arr what’s the point? You’re not going to get pregnant doing it a couple of times. You’re too young.’

‘Fat lot you know! Did you sleep through the sex education classes?’

She wriggled away from him, but he held her hand tightly.

‘If you don’t give me a f--- I’m going to tell you’re father you went on this camp with three boys and no teacher. I’ll tell him everything. I’ll tell him how you got drunk and had sex with all the guys. Everything!’ He was shouting at her now. The trail-bikes were only one hundred metres away and slowing down.

She stood facing Wilson, who looked angrily at her, waiting for her answer. She twisted her hand from his grasp.

‘No! No! No! Got it?’

They turned as the trail-bikes slowed down and came to a stop one on each side of them. She looked at the guys on the bikes. Had they heard the two of them shouting and come to help? What did they want?

They were both about eighteen or nineteen. They had tattoos and wore only dirty shorts. They parked their bikes, and the tallest one said to Wilson, ‘Take off, punk. Or get your head punched in.’

Tiffany thought they were trying to protect her from Wilson.

‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘He wasn’t going to hurt me. We were just arguing.’

The bikies laughed. ‘Great! Now piss off, Dorky. We wanta talk to the chick.’

Wilson looked dazed. The tall bikie raised his fist. ‘Take off or you’re dead meat!’ Tiffany saw they were menacing, she didn’t know what they wanted but there was no point in arguing. ‘Okay, we’ll go,’ she said, turning she began to walk away from them. But the fatter bikie reached out and grabbed her blouse by the back of the neck, she struggled and it ripped the buttons off. Wilson stood still, looking dumbfounded—staring at Tiffany’s breasts. ‘Don’t—’ he began, but the tall bikie took a step towards him with a closed fist and Wilson started walking away.

‘Okay, I’m going. She’s a slut anyway! Do what you like to her.’ He walked off towards the sandhills.

Tiffany was near to panic. Both bikies turned away from Wilson who was walking off, apparently leaving her. She thought that surely he would run back to the camp and get help from the others. But Jacko and Roy would be drunk and Strapper doped to the eyeballs on pills.

Tiffany slipped out of her torn blouse, trying to get away from the bikies; the fat one was left holding the blouse. ‘What do you want?’ She had freed herself and began walking backwards. They laughed and walked around their bikes towards her, gawking at her breasts.

‘We want you, sweetheart. We’re not going to hurt you. We just want a little fun. Your boyfriend thinks you’re a slut. So we should be able to satisfy you.’

As he talked they moved towards her slowly, but she kept her distance by walking backwards. She felt ashamed of her bare chest. They were staring at her breasts. She wanted to get her blouse back but it was behind them, dropped on the sand.

They started running towards her, one on each side. Tiffany spun around and began sprinting barefoot along the edge of the water. They were wearing thongs and found it awkward to run. They stopped and kicked them off, but already she was twenty metres in front, sprinting along the beach. She glanced backwards toward Wilson. He was sitting down on the sand in the distance, watching like a vulture, waiting to see what would happen.

When she turned to look back again she noticed the bikies had stopped chasing her and were walking back to their bikes. Maybe they were only kidding. Now they would turn around and ride their bikes back to where they came from. She heard the engines start, rev up, while she kept walking away. She turned and watched; they were coming after her. She ran for her life along the hard sand. Whenever she ventured into the soft sand she slowed to a jog. It didn't matter because in a few seconds they had caught up to her, following along a metre behind her, laughing, watching—waiting for her to exhaust herself and fall helplessly to the sand.

Tiffany thought of turning and running up to the soft sand and into the grass, and then back along the ridge till she reached the camp. But they could follow on their bikes, and she would never last the distance—a kilometre. She would tire quickly in the soft sand, and they could grab her whenever they felt like it.

But what if she ran into the ocean?

She stopped abruptly, the bikes overshot her before they could turn. She doubled back and ran straight into the water. She didn't look, but lifted her knees high as she sprinted through the shallow waves towards the breakers. When she was waist deep she looked back. One of them was standing, grinning, and holding the two trail bikes, the tallest one was running through the water towards her.

The waves were quite rough. She dived through a dumper and came up struggling, half swimming, half walking through the water up past her waist. She began swimming, heading out to the deep water. She looked back and saw he was swimming after her. She turned and swam parallel with the beach, trying to avoid the breaking waves. Tiffany was tiring, not being a strong swimmer, but he wasn't so hot either. Yet after another thirty metres he was alongside of her.

Tiffany felt him grab her by the waist-band of her shorts. In desperation she turned, took a deep breath, and flung her arms with all her weight around his neck. They were out of their depth, and they went down, Tiffany clinging to him. He struggled beneath the waves, and when she opened her eyes underwater she could see his open mouth gulping in water, his eyes panic-wide. Like her, he had been out of breath when she dragged him under. Taking that last breath gave her the advantage. His hands let her go, his legs were kicking out trying to push him back to the surface for air, but his feet were not touching bottom. Her arms slipped from around his neck, but she managed to grab one of his wrists with both hands. Flapping about with one arm, he couldn't get his head out the water. She held on to him, her lungs aching, while under the water he panicked, swallowing mouthfuls, coughing, choking, lashing out with his free arm and legs. He punched her hard in the side and she let him go, they struggled up to the surface. She gulped air, while he could only splutter and cough the water from his lungs, unable to get a decent breath.

He turned and started struggling towards the beach, swimming and coughing. Tiffany quickly regained her breath, since she hadn't swallowed any water. Swimming after him, she caught up, and managed to fling her weight onto his back, trying to swim over the top of him. He sunk like a stone. But as he did, he lashed out with feet and arms in a frenzy of madness. Tiffany copped a couple of kicks in the legs and on the shoulder, then she swam away leaving him to struggle weakly towards the shore, coughing, gasping and white faced.

Tiffany swam along the beach-front staying in the deep water. She stood for while catching her breath, watching his slow progress towards the beach. She watched from the chest-deep water, feeling tired but triumphant. Alone, she had held off two guys with trail-bikes.

In the distance she could make out someone, Wilson, sitting on the beach. The two bikies sat down near their machines. One was bent double for about ten minutes, no doubt coughing up water. She watched from a safe distance, the water just past her waist. They both stood up, started their trail-bikes, climbed on and rode back along the beach to where they had come from. As they got further away she moved in towards the shore. When she reached the beach they had disappeared into the distance. Tiffany walked, legs trembling, but feeling quite proud, back along the beach towards the camp. She looked about for Wilson, but he had gone. Tiffany was hoping to find her torn blouse and hat, but when she couldn't see either, she continued on to the camp, naked from the waist up.

12. WILSON'S LIES

As Tiffany came into the camp she saw the others sitting about in the centre between the tents, quite drunk, talking loudly.

Elvira saw her first. 'Look what the cat dragged in!' And they all laughed. Suddenly Tiffany was conscious of herself. She was nude to the waist, her hair still wet, and she held her ripped shorts up with one hand.

Jacko said with a smirk, 'Wilson tells us you've been swimming in the raw with a couple of bikies.'

Wilson laughed, then said, 'That's not all she did in the raw! First sex with me, then Strapper, then the two bikies. She couldn't get enough.'

Tiffany dropped her hand covering her breasts in disbelief. 'You liar! I did nothing with any of you!'

'What a slut,' Elvira sneered. 'What a little slut, then coming back here showing off your tiny boobs. You've spent most of this holiday on your back, haven't you?'

Tiffany ran into her tent, tears pouring out of her eyes. Crying, crying. She felt they were all so unfair to her. They should have been proud of her, fighting off two bikies. Wilson was angry with her because she wouldn't have sex with him. Now he was telling lies like he said he would.

Pam came into the tent. 'What happened, Tiffany?'

She struggled into a T-shirt and jeans, crying and trying to dry herself. 'Two bikies ... on the beach. They chased me into the water.'

'What for?'

'I don't know. What do you think? They ripped my blouse off.'

'Did they—did they rape you?'

'No, I swam out to the deep water. One of them came after me and I dragged his head under the water till he nearly drowned. It was so scary. I'm still shaking. Then they rode off.'

Outside she could hear Wilson's loud voice. 'She did it with all of us. Even Strapper had a go with her. You should have seen the size of the bikies' dicks.' He laughed and measured it out in the air with his hands. 'Tiffany loved it. She's a real nympho.'

Tiffany burst into tears again. Surely Pam believed her. 'Oh stop the crying, Tiffany. It doesn't impress me. If they didn't have sex with you what does any of it matter?' Pam was three parts drunk.

'They tried to rape me! Wilson wouldn't help me.'

‘But you say they didn’t get you. Besides, I don’t know who to believe. You have been acting strange ever since you got here. Would you like a vodka and orange?’

‘No thanks, I just want to rest.’ She lay down on the air mattress and shut her eyes.

But an hour later hunger and thirst forced her from the tent. She wanted coffee, but there was no water. Tiffany found some dry biscuits and a can of Coke. She sat alone eating and drinking. Pam had managed to get Roy to go for a walk on the beach. Wilson was in his tent burping and farting. Strapper was flaked out on the ground, muttering in his sleep.

Elvira came out of the tent by herself. She was quite drunk, but looking for another can of beer for Jacko, who was in the tent. ‘What are you doing sittin’ out here, Miss Taffey-nosed-Toffee?’

‘Elvira, why do you hate me?’ Tiffany was looking up at Elvira. ‘What did I do to make you hate me? I just don’t understand.’

‘I’m never gunna tell ya.’ Elvira sounded quite drunk. ‘Oh, shit I feel crook. I feel so dizzy. Uh, let me sit down. And Tiffy, uh Taffy you wanna know why I hate you? Well, maybe I don’t hate you I dunno. I’ll tell you why. Because ... you’re so bloody pure. Do you get it?’

‘No. Please tell me Elvira.’

‘Because I’m nothing, I’m a slut, a dirty slut that the guys treat like a ... and they think I’m dirty, and I feel so dirty inside, and they all swear at me and I’m full of shit, I hate myself. I hate myself ‘cause ... I’m so lonely I’d do anything to get ... to get a guy to like me. And I gave up studying ‘cause Jacko said ... said it was all bullshit, and I did pills and Strapper ... used to give them to me and I blew all the money I’d saved for a car, twelve hundred dollars! You know that twelve hundred bloody dollars went on tablets and marijuana foils, and grog. I bought the gang whatever they wanted. And they all screwed me and I feel like I’m just a piece of shit, even my boyfriend calls me Slut.’ Elvira bent forward, and put her face into her hands and began crying and talking through the tears. ‘And when I look at you, Tiffany, I see you’re clean and pure like I was, an’ I can never go back to that. Never. And that’s why I hate you, because I’m so bloody jealous of you. You still got a chance. But when I see these guys draggin’ you down into the pig sty with the rest of them I laugh to myself. Misery likes company. When those guys turn you into a drunken slut, at least I’ll have company. Ya see? Ya see ... I hate myself. I hate myself cause I can’t break away.’

Jacko yelled out from the tent, ‘Elvira, what are you doing? Bring me that f----- beer!’

‘See what I mean? I gotta go.’

But Tiffany didn’t know what to believe. Could Elvira really think like that?

* * *

Tiffany sat staring into the fire wondering about everything that had happened. Being in Jacko’s gang hadn’t eased her loneliness. Here she was outcast, sitting alone by the fire. Strapper was there poking with a stick in the sand, but he hardly counted. She felt miserable, it seemed no matter what she did she was destined to die of loneliness and misery.

But then everyone decided to come out of their tents and talk. Jacko and Elvira came out and sat around the other side of the fire. Roy came back with Pam and they all started laughing whenever someone farted. They seemed to be having a great time, yet to Tiffany it all seemed childish.

* * *

Jacko and Elvira were cooking the smelly meat on the barbecue plate. Tiffany sat by herself puzzling about what Elvira had said about being jealous. Strapper wasn’t eating or drinking, but slowly like a parachute descending, he came back to earth. He sat next to the stereo turning it up loud every time a song he liked came on.

‘Come over here, Tiffy.’ Jacko called. ‘Don’t sulk.’

She moved a bit closer. ‘I really don’t think you should eat the meat.’

‘It does taste a little bit funny, but it’ll be okay. Do you want some?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Have a vodka.’

‘No, I’ve had enough to drink.’

Elvira said, ‘What’s the matter with you Tiffany? Have a drink, don’t be a nerd all your life.’

‘Nerds don’t f--- like rattlesnakes!’ Roy said, and they all laughed.

Tiffany felt nervous, but things were becoming clear to her at last.

‘Tomorrow morning,’ she announced, ‘I’m going home.’

‘What! We’ve just started enjoying ourselves!’

Elvira said, ‘I suppose she’s done it with every guy on the beach and wants to look for someone else.’

‘It’s not safe with the bikies. I think they are camped further along the beach in the sandhills. And I’ve seen four of them on bikes.’

Pam said, ‘But they’d never find us.’

‘Oh yes they would! They know where they saw us, and they’d hear the stereo. I think they might come back.’

Elvira put on a superior expression. ‘That should please you Tiffy. We can watch you gang-bang them this time. What a pity there is only four of them!’

13. THE STREET FIGHTER

It was growing dark gradually, but it was still quite hot. Tiffany felt uncomfortable from salt, sand, and sweat. She needed a shower with soap; she needed a real toilet where she could sit down, with toilet paper. There was not even water to brush her teeth. She was hungry, but after eating an apple—no one else was eating them—and a few slices of bread with a glass of Coke she felt better.

In her mind she felt stronger than before the camping trip. Stronger, because she had been able to fight off the two bikies by herself without any help from Wilson or Strapper. She had used her brains, firstly by going into the water where their trail-bikes were useless, and then by ducking him under the waves before he could catch his breath. She’d been lucky, if he’d been a stronger swimmer, or had taken a breath before she pulled him under things would have been different. She hardly dared to think what would have happened; he would have dragged her up onto the beach and then they would have attacked her. She didn’t want to think about it anymore than that, it was too scary to imagine. She had smelt the tall guy’s breath, and thought it smelt of rum. That’s how close they had been together.

But now she felt immense relief, just like she felt after studying for months and sitting for the last exam of the year: total relief. It was over. Wilson was despicable; he hadn’t tried to help her at all.

Pam came over and sat next to her. ‘I wish you wouldn’t eat the meat, Pam.’

‘It doesn’t taste too bad. I’m only having a little bit because I’m so hungry. You might be right about it. I thought the boys were going to catch fish.’

‘They’ve been too busy drinking.’

Then Pam surprised her. 'I'm beginning to hate this trip. There's no toilets, no food, no water, no showers, no electric lights, no fridge!'

'Yeah but ... you seem to be getting on pretty well with Roy. I thought that was why you wanted to come.'

'Yeah, big mistake!' Pam lowered her voice so no one else could hear her. 'He's a slob. He threw up last night on my pillow just after we'd finished doing it. He wouldn't even clean the mess up. I've got vomit in my hair, look.' She held her hair out to Pam. 'I've tried to wash it off in the ocean, but I need to shampoo it. He farts all the time and he's very rough. He bit my breast, and now there are teeth marks. He thinks that's cute—a love bite. What bullshit—he doesn't even care about me. It's just sex for him. If Elvira said swap tents he be just as happy doing it with her.'

Tiffany bit into another apple, although it was warm it tasted good, the juice running into her mouth. 'I'm going home in the morning, Pam. Even if I have to go alone.'

'But how could you?'

'I'd phone Dad up. He'd come and get me, no trouble.'

'Yeah, I'm ready to go as well.'

Wilson called out, 'Can I get you a beer Tiffy?'

'No thanks, I'm eating an apple.'

'Yeah, that's another thing, don't drink a beer unless you open it yourself.'

'Why?'

Pam made sure no one could overhear. 'They're going to give you one with pills in it. When you're zonked out all the guys are going to have sex with you. They'll carry you into the end tent and take turns all night. I overheard them. Wilson, Jacko, Strapper and even Roy, they're all in it. That's what they think of you. I don't know what you can do. Why don't you get your sleeping bag out of our tent and go into the sandhills where they can't find you in the dark?'

'Whose idea was it?'

'I'm not sure. Elvira hates you. Wilson might have thought it up. Or even Strapper. Oh, it could have been any of them.'

Wilson was back again with a beer in his hand, it had been opened. 'You want your beer now, Tiffy?'

'Okay, I'll drink it in a minute.' He handed it to her and sat back watching. She whispered to Pam, 'Don't worry I won't drink it.'

Wilson was stacking the fire up. It looked rather nice, but Tiffany thought it would be seen from the beach if the bikies rode along the sand.

'Wilson,' she said, 'you shouldn't make the fire so big, the bikies might see it if they ride along the beach.'

Elvira said, 'You're scared shitless of the bikies, aren't you?'

'No, but I don't want them coming up here tonight. They look pretty mean.'

Wilson laughed, he sounded drunk. 'They looked mean when they were naked and rolling around on top of you in the sand!'

Tiffany remained calm this time. 'Wilson why don't you tell everyone the truth, that you ran off when one of them threatened you. That you left me to fight the two of them.'

‘Bullshit! You did it with me first, then Strapper, and when the two bikies came along you called them over and did it with them.’

Jacko called out, ‘Strapper! Strapper! What happened on the beach?’

‘Huh? Beach?’

‘Yeah, did Tiffany have sex with the bikies? Did she do it with you?’

‘Huh? Do what?’ And his eyes wandered off.

Elvira said, ‘She’s a wuss. Now she wants to go home to mummy because there’s no hot shower. I’m not scared of two bikies.’

‘Four,’ Tiffany said.

‘Oh now it’s four!’ They all laughed.

But Pam helped her. ‘She means there are two more that weren’t there today.’ But no one was listening, they were too busy laughing.

Wilson said, ‘Drink your beer Tiffy. Lighten up.’ She raised it up to her mouth and pretended to swallow. Everyone smiled. ‘Good Huh?’

‘It’s okay.’

‘Why should we move from our camp. I’m sick of being pushed around by adults always telling me what to do,’ Jacko said. ‘Teachers, parents, cops always telling me to move on. Now it’s bikies.’

‘They’re probably teenagers,’ Tiffany said. ‘It’s just that if they are riding along the beach they’ll see the fire. So maybe we should—’

‘No way!’ Jacko, almost completely drunk was shouting with excitement. ‘If these wankers come here I’ll drop them like a schoolbag. I grew up on the streets. I don’t care if there are eight of them. I’d pick up a knife, a branch—anything. When ya been on the streets you toughen up. Wilson’d back me up, wouldn’t cha?’

‘Course. We could put a rope across the track and they’d ride into it. Smash!’

‘We’ll dig a trap for their bikes, then set them on fire.’

But Pam wasn’t convinced, ‘Maybe it would be a lot simpler if we put the fire out and turned off the stereo.’

‘No way. We’re not hurtin’ no one.’

Elvira said, ‘Pam, you’ve been listening to the wuss. She’s a sook—now she’s going to run home to mummy. If these bikies do come we’ll take care of them. I’m not scared shitless by a couple wankers on trail-bikes.’

Roy went further, ‘Well I hope they come! I love a good fight. Remember that rumble we had last year in Wollongong near Danbury Street? There were ten of us against twenty skinheads—and we thrashed them.’

‘Have some more beer, Tiffany.’

She pretended to drink again. They all stopped talking and smiled. When she put the can down she said, ‘It tastes funny. You drink the rest Jacko.’

‘No, I’ve got a can.’

‘Let me swap; you can see if this one tastes okay.’ And before he could say anything she moved across and switched the cans. ‘You try it.’

‘Ahh no. You drink it Wilson.’ He handed it to Wilson.

‘No thanks. I’ve had enough for the time being.’

‘Is there something wrong with it?’ she asked innocently.

‘It’s okay. Give it to Strapper.’

Wilson handed it over. Strapper took it and swallowed a mouthful without a thought. ‘Nice.’

Roy was looking around in the mess for another beer. ‘Geez I wish they were cold. We should get ice.’

Pam stood up. ‘Come on Roy, forget about the beer. I want to walk on the beach.’

‘Huh. I was just—’

‘Come on!’ She insisted. Tiffany thought she was trying to keep him away from the beer. Finally after arguing and pushing she dragged him off towards the beach.

Tiffany went into her tent and got her sleeping bag. Wilson and the others were drinking and laughing. She pushed it into the shadows, then keeping out of sight behind the tents crept away into the darkness with her sleeping bag.

She did a big circle, and came out over-looking the beach. She was about one hundred metres away from the camp, but in the darkness without a torch that was a long way. Too far for Wilson or Jacko to find her. She stumbled into a little dip in the sand dunes, a depression, unrolled her sleeping bag and made herself comfortable.

She lay on the top of the bag and looked up at the stars. They were unbelievably clear against the black sky. Her watch said it was 8:54 p.m. Tiffany waited, wondering if she would be safe from the boys.

14. ATTACK

Tiffany fell into a deep sleep but was jerked awake by a loud noise. It sounded like a yell. She sat up, afraid and nervous. In the distance, louder than the ocean or the wind, she could hear the stereo pumping out heavy metal music. The wind was distorting it—bringing the sound in waves, like the ocean. She looked about in the darkness. The moon, now obscured by thick clouds, issued only a wisp of light. She felt that even though she couldn’t see anyone, at least they wouldn’t be able to see her. Up ahead she could see a bright, flickering light—the camp fire. She moved a few paces away from her sleeping bag, and squatted down to empty her bladder. She hated that—living like animals—no toilets, no water, and now she was forced to sleep in the open. Tiffany walked quietly through the patchy grass towards the camp and watched.

Wilson was arguing with Strapper, both of them spaced out on beer or pills. Finally she understood, they were arguing about whether there were more stars in the universe or more grains of sands on all the beaches. They argued back and forth getting nowhere, yet they both seemed so serious.

Tiffany turned and walked back towards her sleeping bag, but before she had gone more than five paces she heard Jacko screaming at Wilson and Strapper to shut up. Perhaps Jacko had screamed before and that had woken her.

She laid back down on her sleeping bag and thought of how the drinking and drugs had spoilt the holiday. Here she was afraid to sleep in her own tent! Not because of the bikies, but because of the guys she went with. No one had even been in for a swim—except for her escape swim—or done any fishing, the supposed purpose of the trip.

Tiffany fell asleep, and this time when she woke it was darker; the sound she could hear was the insistent, jack-hammer rattle of trail-bikes. It sounded like there were three or four of them, it was hard to tell. The noise was coming from nearby—the camp. She sat up wondering what she should

do. The loud rattle of the trail-bikes themselves was frightening. There was little point in running up to warn the others. The noise would do that.

Tiffany began creeping up to the camp, her eyes and ears watching everything. She could see headlights, they were going round and round the tents—she counted four bikes. Then she saw Jacko and Wilson come out of the tents, they were staggering about; she saw Jacko knocked flat by a trail-bike as it swept past him. She moved in closer; next thing Jacko, Wilson, and Roy were screaming and running towards the ocean. Pam and Elvira followed, the trail-bikes circling around them, their headlights lighting up the darkness. But where was Strapper? Then as the bikes circled again she saw him in the headlights staggering down the beach after the others, he fell twice, got up and ran after Elvira. The others were all in the water up to their hips by the time Strapper had reached the water. One trail-bike kept going up and down the beach scaring Jacko's gang from getting out, while the other three trail-bikes turned and went back to the camp.

Tiffany followed them, flitting low to the ground in the shadows. She lay on her stomach watching. They had parked their bikes with the motors still running, the headlights shinning into the tents. The bikies were inside the tents, she could see the tents moving about—they must have been searching them. They were yelling to each other and when they came out of each tent they began kicking them down, bending the poles, pulling the pegs out and throwing them into the bushes. One landed near her face. Now she could see they were digging into the grog pit, shrieking with delight as they put the beer and vodka into a plastic bag. After about five minutes, they climbed onto their bikes, carrying plastic bags, and long poles, they rode off down the beach where the gang had emerged as far as their ankles. The four trail-bikes rattled off into the distance.

Slowly Jacko's gang stumbled back up the beach. Tiffany lay on the sand-ridge and watched from the distance. It was very difficult to see them, but she could hear Elvira swearing and Jacko telling her to shut her fat mouth. She was calling him a wuss and a coward. They got back to the camp, with Tiffany following in the darkness, watching. She wondered if she should show herself. But Elvira and Jacko would probably blame her; it was sure to be her fault. They re-lit the fire, and now she could see them sitting about despairingly. Elvira began screaming that her mobile phone and purse were stolen. 'My purse had fifty bucks in it! Fifty f----- bucks!'

Wilson was yelling, 'That's nothing. My two hundred dollar stereo is gone!'

But Jacko could only moan that they'd stolen all the grog, every last can. Wilson and Roy struggled to erect the tents for a while, then gave up. They all sat about complaining. Finally Elvira realised Tiffany was not there. 'And where's the slut? I hope they got her this time.'

Tiffany almost stood up and shouted at her, but instead turned and walked back to her sleeping bag in the sand dunes.

The next time she woke it was dawn, a beautiful red sun obscured by clouds tinged the east with pink. The breeze blew in steadily from the ocean. Tiffany walked down to the beach, where she found her soggy hat. She splashed cold water on her face before heading up to the camp.

15. COWARDS AND COPS

Everyone lay sleeping, scattered about the camp-site, while all the tents lay flat on the ground. Tiffany began quietly taking her things from inside her flattened tent. Fortunately she had brought nothing of great value.

Pam sat up, and one by one the others struggled grumpily from their sleeping bags. Elvira said, 'Where did you get to last night?'

'I slept in the sandhills over there.'

'Huh, shit-scared of bikies!'

‘Not really, I was more worried about my friends who gave me doped beer. Did you think I couldn’t taste it? But I did happen to see a lot of people hiding in the water, and I believe you were one of them Elvira.’

‘These cowards,’ she nodded towards the moping Jacko and Wilson, ‘ran for their lives. Fat lot of good they were protecting me.’

‘We were drunk, Elvira. We were too pissed to fight. Besides there were at least eight of them. And they had ... knives.’

‘Four,’ Tiffany corrected. ‘I didn’t see any knives.’

Elvira was working herself up. ‘Well, the shits have stolen my mobile phone and fifty dollars from my purse.’

‘And my two hundred dollar stereo!’

‘They knocked the tents down and stole all the beer.’

Elvira was furious. ‘We’ve got to get our stuff back! Jacko, come on. How are you going to get our stuff back? Are you gunna attack them?’

‘Not in daylight, they’d see us coming.’ He scratched his chin, the whiskers were getting itchy. ‘Maybe we could find their camp and if no one was about, sneak in and steal all our stuff back.’

‘But what if they don’t go out? I wanta go home now. This place is the pits. And I want my mobile and money back before we leave.’

Wilson had an idea. ‘Okay, I’ve got it. We find their camp, then phone up the cops and tell them the bikies stole our stuff. And the cops will have to get it back for us.’

Tiffany was amazed. ‘What! You mean you’d go to the pigs? Yesterday you said the pigs were useless scum who all were corrupt. Now, as soon as something goes wrong you expect them to help you! I can’t understand that.’

‘Tiffany’s right,’ Pam said. ‘You all said how rotten the pigs are, how you’d never help them even if you saw someone doing a bank robbery or a murder. Now you want them to help you.’

‘What do you smart arses suggest, then?’ Elvira was stomping around smoking a cigarette.

‘Forget about the mobile phone and money. Put it down to experience—like the rest of this trip. You don’t believe in cops, and it’d be too risky to try and get your stuff back without help.’

‘Forget it? Sure, the mobile cost me two-hundred-and-fifty dollars, plus my last fifty bucks in the purse! You don’t care, you didn’t loose anything; you didn’t even try and help—hiding in the sandhills!’

‘I did help, Elvira. I warned you last night but you laughed at me.’

Jacko said, ‘Forget it. No point in arguing. We need something to eat. I’m starved.’

Strapper was poking around in the cardboard box. ‘Um some meat, and coffee, that’s all we got. But no water or milk. Stale bread, ugh, its got ants in it.’

‘Let’s cook the meat.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding!’ Tiffany couldn’t believe this.

Elvira said, ‘You told us yesterday we’d all be dead with food poisoning. Well, Miss Goodie-two-shoes you were wrong! I’m going to cook it and eat it and you can go hungry. Wilson, get the fire going.’

The meat smelt revolting and looked quite off, but they cooked it smoking cigarettes, and then ate a small bit each. But even Elvira found it tasted yucky. Pam and and Tiffany refused to eat any, they packed their clothes and tent.

Jacko stopped chewing. 'Shit! My fishing gear, where is it? My fishing rod's gone! The bastards have stolen my two hundred dollar fishing rod!'

Wilson and Roy sprang up and began pulling at the tents that were still lying on the ground, searching for their fishing gear.

'No! No! The fishing gear was over there all together near that tree, remember?'

'Mine cost a hundred and fifty dollars. And where's my carton of smokes?'

'I borrowed mine from my brother. He's gunna kill me.'

'We should get the police,' Roy said. For the first time Strapper pushed forward into the group. 'No way. We don't need pigs. They're our enemy.'

But things were getting difficult. If the cops got their things back would they still be their enemy? And weren't the trail-bikies a worse enemy? No one felt confident that they could actually attack the bikies and get their things back. With the police it would be easy.

'The police,' Tiffany said, 'aren't just there to harass us. They are there to help us.'

'Bullshit!' They all jeered her. 'What a nerd. The cops are always picking on us!'

'Okay,' she continued. 'What would you do if a maniac broke into your house and shot your family and then took someone hostage with a gun pointed at their head? The first thing you would do would be to phone the police, right? And some cop would have to go in and risk his life to save someone he doesn't know. Someone who puts shit on him everyday. Who was it that climbed down the cliff at Bulli the night Joel got drunk and was going to kill himself? Not his mates, but some cop who got called up from bed to save a stupid drunk. And who was it that dragged the dead bodies out of Smirky's car last year when they all got pissed and stole the car and ran off the road? The cops who you despise.'

Wilson said, 'You're sticking up for them!'

'I'm trying to explain that you rubbish them, but whenever things get tough you all go running to them for help.'

'Not me,' Strapper insisted. 'Never.'

But none of this impressed Elvira. 'Yeah well what are we going to do about getting my mobile and fifty bucks back?'

Jacko looked serious for a moment, and everyone stared at him; he was the leader, but he seemed unable to think of anything.

Strapper, who had recently arrived back on planet earth, made a suggestion, 'We've gotta attack their camp. All of us, the girls on one side and us on the other. We can drive them into the sea, and throw rocks at them, then we get our stuff back and before we go we pour petrol over their bikes and set them on fire. We'll destroy their camp ... we'll burn everything.'

But Roy wasn't so sure. 'Huh, yeah maybe. How many do you reckon there are? Maybe eight of them ... we don't know. They're older than us, bigger ... maybe a bikie gang ... they could have weapons.'

Elvira sneered at him, 'You're all gutless! You had your chance last night to fight them, and you ran off without us. All this is just talk.'

Jacko snapped at her, ‘Shut your mouth, Slut! I’m not scared of them. When my brother gets here he can drive us down near their camp—then we’ll go in and get our stuff. Me, my brother, Wilson, Roy and Strapper. We’ll demand our stuff back. If they don’t hand it over, we’ll beat them up and take it.’

Roy said, ‘Maybe if we went to the pigs they could go down with us and if there was any trouble—’
‘We can’t ask pigs for help! They’re our enemy.’

‘I don’t care what you do,’ Elvira said, ‘so long as I get my mobile phone and money back!’

‘Alright, alright. You weren’t the only one to lose stuff. Come on let’s start packing up.’

16. RIP-OFF MERCHANTS

They finished packing their tents. Everyone was looking about for things they might have left behind. Jacko was watching Elvira, who was scrunched up. ‘What’s the matter with you, Elvira?’

‘I wanta go to the dunny!’

‘Well, just go. You don’t have to ask.’

‘Sure. Dig a hole in the sand and sit on it like an animal. I’m sick of doing that. I want a real toilet. We should have camped at the caravan park.’

‘No way! They want fifteen bucks a night each. We own this bloody country, so we’re not going to pay any rip-off merchants.’

Tiffany was boiling over. ‘We own nothing! If we want to use toilets, if we want to get water out of a tap and camp on grass and have hot showers, then someone has to pay for it, right? The people who built the toilets, who paid to have the water pipes and sewage and electricity connected, who collect the garbage and pump the sewerage away, who pay the rates—all those people have a right to be paid for their work and their investment. If we want to camp in the bushes like animals then we can’t whinge about it. Are all those people camped at the caravan park paying their fifteen bucks a night for toilets, electricity and hot showers, idiots? Fifteen dollars! Shit we spent four hundred dollars on booze, and then vomited half of it onto the sand.’

Jacko looked at Tiffany with contempt. ‘Who do you think you are telling us what to do? You’re just a toffee-nosed slut! You never did belong in our gang.’

‘I’m not telling anyone what to do. I’m just stating the facts—if we want comfort we have to pay for it.’

He turned to face Wilson, Elvira, Roy and Strapper. ‘She’s a real smart arse, isn’t she?’

There was an electric silence. Elvira looked like she would gladly have paid a hundred dollars for the use of a toilet at that moment.

Pam spoke into the silence. ‘I think Tiffany might be right.’

‘Arseholes!’ Jacko turned and picked up his gear and began dragging it through the bush towards the road.

Pam was staring at the mound of rubbish left behind: bottles, cans, plastic bags, meat scraps with a swarm of flies, packets, bits of newspaper, and empty packets of cigarettes. ‘Hey, what are we going to do about all this rubbish?’

‘Stuff it! It’s the council’s job to clean up.’

Pam saw the others walking off, so she hurried after them. Tiffany looked down at the pile and was wondering if she could bury it by herself. It would take ten or fifteen minutes, but by then the others

would be gone—and she didn't want to miss her ride back to Wollongong. No way. She turned and hurried off after them.

In a rather miserable single file, they walked towards the road. Everyone was sunburnt, Tiffany the least, but enough to make her skin itchy. Strapper was burnt all over his face, chest and back. When they reached the roadway they sat, grubby and unwashed, on the side of the road. Tiffany was the only one with a hat. Jacko and Roy walked to the shops where Jacko would phone his brother and ask Ken to come and pick them up in his Tarago van. Strapper sat under a tree, looking very ill. His long straggly hair hung down into his face. Suddenly a white-faced Wilson doubled over and began throwing up.

Elvira looked at him but said nothing. As soon as Wilson had stopped he lay on the ground clutching at his stomach, then Strapper started vomiting, and just watching made Elvira turn white, sweat formed on her face before she too began heaving. They were bringing up the meat.

Tiffany and Pam got up and walked further away. Cars whizzed past, the drivers looking at the ragged collection along the roadside.

Pam said, 'I'm finished with Roy. In fact, I'm finished with all of them. They only care about themselves.'

Tiffany asked, 'Didn't you have a good time with Roy?'

'Huh, if that's what sex is all about they can keep it. I hate it. I was just a piece of meat to Roy.'

'No Pam, everything was wrong—we were all drunk, and we didn't even like the guys. It'd be different if it was someone who cared about you, wouldn't it?'

'You mean someone who didn't throw-up on my pillow and then expect me to clean it up? Someone who brought one condom, and then when he'd used that tried to use a Chockee Bar wrapper?' Pam was crying. 'I wanted to be part of this gang so badly, Tiffany. I believed everything they said—all that stuff about owning this country and not having to pay for a caravan park. All that shit about us not having made the hole in the ozone layer, so we shouldn't have to spend our money on sunscreen. Well look at us—all burnt and peeling. My Jesus I hope I'm not pregnant. I think I even messed up my exams, I stopped studying. That'd be right wouldn't it. I'll be pregnant, have herpes, hepatitis B, and fail my exams.'

'Come on Pam. It's not that bad, things will turn out okay. We feel miserable because of everything that's happened here. When you're back home you'll feel better.'

'Yeah, just some water to drink to would help. And a hot shower! Oh heaven!'

'Imagine a toilet that isn't just a hole dug in the sand! Oh toilet paper! I feel like we've been here for two months, not two days.'

'Hey, that looks like Jacko and Roy coming back. Woopee. Oh you should have seen them running away last night. They took off without us. Some gang. It's everyone for themselves. But when they want you to do something, you've gotta do what they say or they're sarcastic. Look at them all sick. They only ate the meat to prove that you were wrong.'

Jacko and Roy were walking very slowly. When they reached the others they admitted they'd been sick. Not enough water, or maybe the sun was too hot. No mention of the meat.

It was another long, boring two hours before Jacko's brother showed up. It was with wondrous relief they climbed into his Tarago. Everyone except Tiffany and Pam felt utterly miserable; they had headaches, stomach pains, and talked of going to the hospital—for a virus.

As they drove along the beach road they saw two trail-bikes come out of a bush track and head in the opposite direction.

Elvira called out, 'Hey, that's them. What about getting our stuff back?'

But Jacko didn't feel like it. 'Yeah, but I'm crook right now. We'll come back next weekend and smash the piss out of them and get everything back.'

Elvira sulked. Tiffany looked at her face and she could see that Elvira knew she'd never see her mobile phone or her fifty dollars again.

17. HOME AGAIN

'Tiffany, what are you doing home? Is something wrong? Has there been an accident?' Her mother looked concerned. 'I thought the camp was for six days?'

'It was supposed to be, but things went wrong.'

'Oh no, how disappointing.'

'I'll tell you about it after I've had a shower.'

'Alright. My, you look sunburnt. Didn't you buy the sunscreen?'

'Um ... I forgot.' How could she tell her mother that the hole in the ozone layer was not her fault and so she refused to wear it?

In the shower—the heavenly shower—Tiffany washed every part of her. She shampooed, scrubbed, and rinsed. Her burnt skin seemed to be preparing to peel. When she had finished washing she just stood there in the bliss of pure rain washing her clean. But in her mind she was trying to decide what to tell her mother. The shower, drying her hair afterwards, finding some nice clean clothes, a trip to a real toilet, and finally a quick rest on a comfy bed, all took so long that she now had to explain, not only to her mother, but also to her father who had just arrived home from work.

This could be tricky. She couldn't tell the whole truth—or could she?

If she did they'd be bitterly disappointed in her original lies. Then they'd be—especially her father—appalled by the ding dongs she'd gone with: Strapper, Jacko, Elvira, Wilson.

And what if she told them she was raped? Twice. Oh my God! She didn't even know if she was raped or not. And she would then have to explain that she had gotten drunk. Maybe she had indicated to Wilson that it was okay to have sex with her; she had let him kiss her with his tongue in her mouth and fondle her breasts. When you were drunk all the rules were meaningless. He must have taken her shorts and nickers off while she was asleep. If she hadn't been drunk she would have woken up immediately. Besides, once he started doing it and she did wake up it seemed too late to stop him. She'd told Strapper to stop. Hadn't she? But once a guy is actually having sex with you it's a bit late then isn't it? She was disgusted with what happened with Wilson and Strapper, but it seemed partly her fault for getting drunk. But falling asleep sick and drunk didn't give guys the right to climb on top of you and have sex without asking, did it?

The problem was what if she was pregnant? Or what if she had caught a disease—gonorrhoea or even AIDS was possible.

She really couldn't explain all that to her parents! She'd just have to tell some plausible story.

'Hi Dad!'

'Hello Tiffany. That was a quick camp. What went wrong?'

'Oh the toilets were blocked up. And then some kids ate meat that had gone off and everyone started getting sick ... vomiting and stuff.'

'Right. And it was Mrs Honiker who organised the camp?'

‘Y-Yeah.’

‘Right, I’ll phone her and complain. They should give most of the hundred dollars back if everyone had to leave early.’

Tiffany felt the ground opening up beneath her, like an earthquake. Down below she could feel the heat from the burning fires of hell, the flames licking at her feet.

‘Uh, no dad. It wasn’t her fault.’

‘Well whose fault was it? The caravan park? Which one did you stay in?’

‘N-No Dad. You see ... some kids stuffed a plastic bin bag down the dunny ... and and it blocked it up. And then ... they they smashed up the ice for the meat and threw it at each other and put it on the fire and then the meat went off and they didn’t want to tell anyone but I knew and wouldn’t eat the meat and neither did Pam and so we were okay but the kids were messing about so much I figured I didn’t want to stay at the camp any longer.’

‘Right. The best thing I’d say. Who were these kids then?’

‘Oh they were from some other school ... um in Sydney—Campbelltown or somewhere.’

‘Well if you had to leave we should still get a refund.’

He called out to Tiffany’s mother. ‘Honey! What’s Mrs Honiker’s phone number?’

‘No Dad! Don’t embarrass me! Besides she’s still there—at the camp ... you see we didn’t have to come home—that was my idea. I told everyone “I’m going home in the morning” because it was all dumb, I hated it.’ She could feel the emotions building, catching in her throat, tangled between the lies and the truth. The reality of what happened was so bitter. ‘Mrs Honiker was really nice Dad, she tried hard to make it work out. It was just these kids from the other school—they came down on trail bikes and and then they messed about in the caravan park, they got into a fight with some kids from our school, the caravan park owner chucked them all out. But I didn’t like the camp any more and neither did Pam and we wanted to go home, so it wouldn’t be right to ask for the money back because it was my decision to leave. I mean I could have stayed if I wanted to.’

‘Then why didn’t you? If the owner chucked the kids out making a nuisance of themselves, then you should have stayed for the six days. You were only gone two nights and three days.’

‘It seemed like two years, Dad. I just wanted to get home. Please leave it. It’s no one’s fault.’

Her brother flopped down on the carpet. ‘What a neat idea, stuffing bin bags down the dunny. All the turds would come flooding back when they flushed it!’

‘You’re disgusting,’ she told him and made her escape back to her bedroom. She felt she had escaped another disaster, as bad as with the bikie in the surf. God, life was perilous when you were a teenager. Adults think it’s all fun and messing about. They never see the heartaches you have to go through day after day.

* * *

When Tiffany returned home from the beach she found that her ten year old sister had an excited story to tell her. On the way home from the shops Jennifer had found a sick magpie. It was flapping about on the grass unable to stand up or fly. At first she thought it had a broken leg. Some boys from her class were preparing to throw stones at it.

‘I was scared to pick it up because its beak was so sharp. Have you ever seen their pointy beaks, Tiffany?’

‘Of course. But not really close up I guess.’

‘Well, I knew I just had to grab it and take it home or those stupid kids would kill it with stones. I rushed in and snatched it up and held it tightly. It was struggling and trying to flap its wings.’

‘Where is it?’

‘I took it to the wildlife reserve and the rangers said it had probably eaten some poisoned grubs. Oh Tiffany, you should have seen all the sick and injured animals he has! The ranger’s got sick wallabies, and bandicoots and owls and a frill-neck lizard and even some little joeys! You should see the little darlings.’ Jennifer was so excited explaining it that Tiffany had to suppress a tiny smile at her sister’s childish joy. It took so little to make her happy. And why not? Jennifer was only ten—not yet corrupted by the likes of Strapper or Jacko.

‘And I got a job!’

‘A job? But how could—’

‘Well the ranger isn’t going to pay me, but he said I could help feed the animals and look after them. I’m going up to the reserve every morning of the holidays.’

‘That’s really nice, Jennifer.’

‘Sure, I love helping them. It’s so nice to help something to get better when it’s sick isn’t it?’

‘Of course.’

And for some reason she thought of poor sick Strapper.

* * *

Tiffany spent a lot of time during the remainder of the school holidays staring out the window of her bedroom; and waiting. She was waiting for her period. She waited with a heavy dread in the pit of her stomach that she mistook for a fertilised ovum. She had marked the expected arrival of her period in her diary: Tuesday!

But it didn’t come on Tuesday.

She sat staring out the window trying to will its arrival. Her bedroom was gloomy and depressing. Although she was looking out the window, she seemed to see nothing. She just sat and thought about the events on the beach. It was as though inside her mind she was slowly digesting all the things she had experienced.

If she was pregnant it would be the most vile, hateful thing of her life. And it was largely her own fault: drinking. There was no way apart from DNA testing to even know who the father was. And she really didn’t want to know. She despised both the possible fathers. If no one knew for sure, then no one could lay any claim to it or to her. The knowledge of who the father was would tie her to that person for the rest of her life. Not knowing would blur the tie.

But what would she do if she was pregnant?

After many hours she decided on either abortion or adoption. But neither of those options was satisfactory. She had always condemned abortion. It was evil—self-centred, irresponsible, destructive. Adoption was bad enough, but worse still she’d heard many stories of unwed mothers who found that once they had given birth, they couldn’t give the baby up. And even if they did—they spent the rest of their lives wondering what their child was doing. Where was it? Was it happy? Was it cared for? Did it miss her? The thought of all that was depressing.

She sat in her darkened room listening to Vivaldi’s Four Seasons violin concertos. It was the only music she could tolerate.

Wednesday she decided she would have an abortion.

Thursday she decided she would have it adopted.

Friday her period came, and she felt the joy of the curse.

18. POPPY

The first day back at school Tiffany decided that she had made a huge mistake when she dumped Dave Trung. After all the vileness with Wilson, Strapper, Jacko, and Elvira she realised how much of a good catch Dave was. Oh, if only she could borrow Dr Who's time machine and go back to the afternoon Dave had phoned her and asked her to the movies!

Okay, she would get him back. It was only three weeks since she had dumped him—although it seemed like three years to Tiffany. She'd win him back, she'd flirt, phone him up and apologise. And this time if anyone mocked her she'd tell them where to get off. She peeked at Dave in the science class, he did look cute. Why hadn't she seen it before? When Mr Harris handed out the project results—A plus—Dave Trung turned around and smiled at her, then mouthed the words "thank you". Jacko and Elvira got an E plus, Strapper and Dawn an E, Pam and Bruce got a C. Jacko's gang smirked and laughed, as if they were so tough they could handle getting ratshit marks. Yet the marks would end up on their end of year report. And where were they going when they left school? Jacko was always boasting about how school had taught him nothing. He wanted to be a research scientist for Greenpeace. Fat chance.

The smile from Dave Trung lit Tiffany up. She clung on to it during the afternoon depression when Jacko's mob began making jokes about her.

Someone threw a folded up note onto her desk during science. She opened it up.

HOW MANY GUYS DOES TIFFANY NEED TO TAKE HER TO THE BEACH? ANSWER: TEN. NINE TO HAVE SEX WITH AND ONE GUY TO COLLECT THE TWENTY CENTS OF EACH OFF THE OTHER GUYS.

She tore it up and put the pieces into her bag. It was then she noticed there were more copies circulating. One was flung onto Dave Trung's desk. He read it in about two seconds, and immediately tore it up, then looking around at Jacko put the pieces into his pocket. Jacko had a huge smirk on his face.

But it was Quincy Graham, the new kid, that almost got into trouble. A glider, with writing on it, landed on his desk just as Mr Harris turned around.

'Bring that here please.'

Quincy took it out and handed it to the teacher. Jacko's gang burst out giggling and whispering to each other. Quincy looked puzzled. Were they laughing at him? Unfortunately, Quincy looked like a true nerd. He was smallish, wore glasses and on the first day had actually worn a tie to school. He had freckles on his face and always dressed in neat clothes. But apart from that, no one really knew what he was like as he had only been attending their school since the start of the new term.

Mr Harris read the note, then crushed it with one hand, putting it in his pocket.

'I take it that high marks create jealousy in those people who refuse to make an effort. Let me give the drongo who wrote this piece of libel a bit of advice.' He was staring at Jacko. 'You can't climb the ladder of success by pushing someone else down. Think about it. Okay, see you all on Friday.'

She glanced at Jacko, his smile had disappeared.

But it was that afternoon she received the worst blow of all. Of course she had no one but herself to blame. It was Tiffany who told Dave that she would never go out with him. But after that stupid note she had the perfect excuse to talk to Dave Trung. She could explain that it was Jacko causing the problem because he was jealous of their "A plus" project.

Her idea was to watch for Dave as he left the school. She would hurry after him, or dawdle if he were behind her, and then talk to him. She'd apologise for telling him she'd never go out with him. Oh, she'd say she was sorry and could they go to a movie on Saturday night—dutch treat?

Dave would forgive her and hold her hand, they'd have time to go to the coffee shop or somewhere and talk before they caught their buses home. Oh, she'd congratulate him on their science project, give him all the credit.

As school broke up she felt terribly nervous. She hated having to do all this. Why, oh why had she dumped Dave when he was keen on her, and she was so utterly lonely? All to get into Jacko's gang.

And where was the gang? She couldn't see them. But she did see Dave Trung. He was standing across the road from the school waiting for her! As she walked towards him he smiled at her.

'Hi Tiffany! Don't worry about that stupid note. It's probably Jacko's gang—they're jealous.'

'Oh, I knew that was it, Dave.' Then Dave's eyes flicked and looked past her, his face seemed to light up as though it had a bulb inside it. Someone was approaching from behind her. She turned and looked. Poppy Laverton the year twelve captain was approaching, and she was smiling broadly at Dave.

'Hi Dave!'

'Hi Poppy!' He reached for Poppy's hand and held it. 'Poppy, do you know Tiffany from my class? We did our science project together and got an "A plus". Tiffany did most of the work, she was so precise with her diagrams. Thanks Tiffany.'

Tiffany was trying to keep her mouth closed. Poppy was one of the best looking year twelves—and they usually kept well clear of the year elevens anyway. Alongside of Poppy, with her developed breasts, Tiffany felt like a deformed snail. It was obvious what had happened. Dave Trung had found someone else after she dumped him. She knew she had to get away quickly, before she burst into tears or died from embarrassment.

'Thanks for working with me on the project, Dave.' She waved, turned and began walking away. But she had only gone six paces when she heard Jacko's voice call out.

'Whatsamatter, can't cha get a white boyfriend, Poppy? No one else want you?'

Tiffany remembered that Poppy and Jacko lived in the same street and probably knew each other quite well.

'What's your problem now, Jacko? Jealous?'

Wilson said, 'This slopehead is a nerd, Poppy. Don't mess about with him. Go for a class guy—like me.'

Wilson came and stood close to Dave, as if threatening him. 'Hey lookit Poppy holding hands, ain't love sweet?'

'More like a pair of wankers,' Jacko said.

Elvira had to get something in, 'A pair of dags.'

Jacko stared at Dave Trung, then as he turned to walk off—he reached out quickly to give Dave a hard push in the chest, hoping to send Dave sprawling over backwards, and with any luck drag Poppy down as well. That, Tiffany imagined, would have given the gang a good laugh.

But it didn't work out like that. Dave Trung turned and grabbed Jacko's outstretched wrist, gave it a sharp pull towards him and stepped aside. He was as fast as a cat and had obviously practised it before. Jacko had put himself off-balance with the attempted push—the quick tug on his wrist by

Dave brought Jacko staggering forwards into the nearby fence. Jacko stumbled helplessly and almost fell right over the top and into the rose bushes. His gang stared at him in disbelief.

Jacko was their street-wise leader, their star fighter! Humiliated. Dave and Poppy stood back a pace and simply watched what was about to happen next. Neither of them looked concerned.

Jacko regained his balance, dropped his school bag and came up with his fists clenched. But Wilson calmed him. 'Hey, no sweat Jacko—don't beat him up. He's just trying to get you into trouble.'

'I don't care I'm going to have this runt, do him over. Come on Slope!' But Dave looked confident and ready to handle anything that Jacko could dish out.

Wilson stepped in front of Jacko and was whispering in his ear. Tiffany couldn't hear the words because she was standing too far away. But she guessed. Wilson was reminding Jacko that Dave went to ju jitsu classes, and was supposed to have a brown belt, although Jacko had always insisted it was yellow. Wilson was trying his best to talk Jacko out of a fight he could lose badly. There was no point in messing with someone who did karate or ju jitsu. 'Come on Jacko, he's not worth the trouble. Let's just get down to Burgers.' And after a suitable pause Jacko picked up his bag and said to Poppy, 'Why don't you try and get yourself an Aussie boyfriend instead of that slimy dink?'

He turned and walked off, thinking he had the last word, but Poppy answered him back. 'Hey Jacko Papadopoulos, you speaka da English?'

Wilson said, 'Come on let's get down to Burgers.' Jacko, now in a fierce mood, red in the face, pushed past Tiffany. Elvira tried to change the subject as they moved away. 'Hey, what about that new kid, Quincy? Ain't he a nerd if ever I saw one. Did you see him peeing himself when Mr Harris asked him to bring that note out!' They all laughed as they headed down the street.

Tiffany looked at Poppy and Dave again. They were smiling at each other and holding hands. Tiffany gave a big grin and a wave. 'Nice work!' She picked up her bag and set out for the bus stop alone.

Sixteen and still without a boyfriend. Tiffany figured she must be the most foolish and ugly girl in the school.

19. THE NEW STRAPPER

Tiffany felt strange at school after the holidays. So much had happened—it could have been years. Her life had changed so much in two weeks, yet back at school everything continued on just the same.

Strapper was lurking about. He looked weird now because he had cut his shoulder length hair very short, not far off bald. His skull seemed to show through. His face became thinner each day. No one was able to catch Strapper eating real food. He seemed to live on Coke and chocolate bars. He was just as nervous as ever, but something about him made Tiffany feel sick every time she looked at him.

He was always whispering to other kids. And not just to the rough kids but sometimes he could be seen talking earnestly to the quieter kids. Tiffany watched him and she knew by the expressions on the kids that he was selling them tablets, or a marijuana "stick".

* * *

Monday morning she arrived at school to find Strapper sitting on the steps, his head bent forward, his hands on his forehead. He looked seriously miserable, like he was contemplating suicide.

'Strapper—you okay?'

'Huh? Yeah.'

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Thinking.’

She sat down alongside of him. ‘I’m thinking that I’ve ballsed my life up. Totalled it.’

Tiffany wanted to agree, but instead she said, ‘How do y’mean?’

‘I was lonely, I had no friends ... I wasn’t much good at schoolwork. But I started studying and then some guy called me a nerd. I was so ashamed that I stopped studying. Big mistake. The funny thing was, I later found out that same guy used to study for hours every night—and then pretend he watched TV. I wanted the guys to think I was tough, so I stole some pills off mum and brought them to school. Everyone thought I was shit hot. And I just kept swallowing stuff, marijuana, speed, downers ... and now I can’t live without them. I can’t even sleep without them. I just wanta die. I just wanta die. Do you think I’m tough?’

‘Tough? Not really. I’d think you were tough if you could stop swallowing pills.’

‘Oh I’ll stop one day ... like Mitch Coledale did ... by taking an overdose. Maybe the CIA will kill me, they’re listening to every word I’ve been saying ... ‘ Then Strapper stood up and walked away.

* * *

He distracted her no end, because she found herself looking about for Strapper wherever she went; thinking about Strapper and what he was doing to himself and others. She thought of how he was half mad—imagining that spy satellites were trained on him and that ASIO and the CIA had agents following him about. He believed that secret messages were broadcast to him over the TV during the advertisements.

* * *

Tuesday, Tiffany saw him with Jacko and two of the year nine kids. Jacko was looking over his shoulder as they went into a rarely used art room. Tiffany’s blood was hot, she couldn’t stand it anymore. She’d seen the year nine boys before, they looked clean—and when she thought they could end up going down the same road as Strapper ...

Tiffany waited outside the door a half minute, trying to control her temper, wondering if it was the right thing to do. Her heart was pumping painfully and then suddenly she burst into the room. They all turned shocked expressions towards her. Their eyes staring at her. Jacko, the grin frozen on his mouth, the two year nine kids like sheep about to be butchered. When Jacko realised who it was he relaxed a little. She focused on Strapper. The others were scrambling to hide pills, but two pills fell onto the floor. One rolled towards her, and she stomped on it with one quick stamp, when she lifted her foot it was powder.

Jacko’s mouth was open, but it was Strapper she grabbed by the shoulder and she didn’t hold back, ‘You’re selling drugs in our school, you shit!’

He wasn’t concerned but looked at her coolly; she wasn’t telling him anything new. ‘Hey, Tiffy—they’re not addictive.’

‘Bullshit!’

She cooled just a little, and spoke calmer but with just as much intensity. ‘Strapper, if you ever, ever, sell drugs at our school again, anything at all, I’m going straight to the cops. Got it?’

She turned and walked out. As she reached the door she heard Jacko’s voice, ‘You wouldn’t go to the cops if you knew what was good for you, Slut.’

Her knees were wobbly, and her voice was trembling as she yelled back from outside, ‘Just test me out!’

20. JENNIFER

The day after sports day there was a terrible story going about. Terrible for Jacko's gang that is. Not only did Dave Trung get into the cricket team, he was made captain! But worse still—the team had played last year's premiers and beaten them by thirty runs. Dave Trung had scored sixty-four runs, the rest of the team sixty-two, then Dave had bowled, taking six for fifty-seven.

Cricket was popular at their school and to captain a winning team automatically put a guy into the hunk class. Suddenly Dave was a new school hottie. No one seemed to notice his skin colour now, besides—being an item with a year twelve class captain made him Joe Cool.

For Tiffany it was more heartache. If there was one thing she just couldn't understand, it was why she had let Jacko's mob of ding dongs talk her into ditching Dave. It was obvious now that Dave was cool. But Tiffany remembered, at the time, belonging to a gang—Jacko's gang—had seemed to be the most important thing in the world.

Tiffany kept watch on Strapper. She knew now that she had done the wrong thing. If she wanted to report him everyone in the school would soon know who dobed him in. No one would ever trust her again. Everyone would think she was a narc, and a teachers' pet. As it was she had no friends; even Pam had faded out of her life.

The guys were keeping away from her—she didn't know why and hardly cared. But a day after her threat to Strapper, a grade ten boy approached her in the playground.

'Hey, Tiffy?'

'Yeah.'

'I wanta root. I've got the two dollars, okay?'

'What are you talking about?'

'The grade eleven kids reckon you do it for two dollars a go. I wanta—'

'Listen, you creep, whoever told you got the price wrong. The price is one million dollars. Cash. Come back when you've got the money.'

That seemed to put an end to the business side of things.

She should have just gone straight to the principal about Strapper, without telling anyone.

She just wished that Strapper would disappear so that she could forget about him, yet he talked of staying on for year twelve. He wanted Austudy money, and he could sell pills at school, besides—who would ever employ him?

It was the Wednesday after she had threatened him, that by some fluke, she noticed him leaving the school, and instead of going down Simmons Street like most people, he turned left into Rail Street. Tiffany wondered what he was up to. Usually he headed straight for Burgers with the others. There was nothing down Rail Street—unless you turned off and cut across the park—the park next to the primary school, where her sister attended! But all the primary kids would be long gone, they got out earlier. She didn't run, but gradually increased her speed, thinking about how she could remain unnoticed. She continued down Simmons Street like everyone else, but when she came to the end she turned left and walked as quickly as she could around the block to the park near the primary school. It was a lot further. But in the distance she thought she could see Strapper. It was funny how you could recognise a person at great distance by little clues. The shape of the body, the posture, gestures, the colour of clothes. And yet you couldn't possibly see the details of their face. Strapper was talking to a group of about four kids who were sprawled out on the ground. As she started to get closer, he turned and walked off without seeming to notice her. In a way she was glad. She

didn't want to catch him selling drugs, she didn't want to go to the cops, and she certainly didn't want everyone at school picking on her and calling her a dobber. Strapper had turned the corner and was out of sight as she approached the kids. No matter, she had to walk past them now to get back to her bus.

The boys were just sitting around on the grass smoking cigarettes, trying to look tough. They were about ten or eleven. She didn't know what to do. She could hardly ask strange kids if they were using drugs.

'Hi!' She said, but they ignored her. 'I saw you guys talking to my boyfriend, Strapper.'

'So what?'

'Nothing.' They looked at her suspiciously. 'I suppose he was selling you some pills?'

They stared at her tight lipped. 'Happy Pills,' she added. One of the kids allowed a slight smile of recognition to appear on his face. Then she added, 'I bet I can sell them to you cheaper than he can. Go on, what'd you pay? A dollar each? I'll sell them for seventy cents. Just tell me what he charged.'

The kid with the smile let it grow, when it got out of control he began to giggle. Then the others gave a laugh. 'What's up?' Had she made some stupid mistake?

'You can't sell them cheaper than Strapper. He gives 'em to us! Free!'

'Your boyfriend looks like a weirdo, but he's cool. He gave us a packet of smokes yesterday, and today he gave us Happy Pills for nothin'.'

'Don't swallow those pills,' Tiffany warned.

'Why not? They only make you happy.' He sucked on his cigarette.

The bigger kid agreed. 'They sure do. I took a couple yesterday, they're wicked!'

'Oh you idiots! He's tricking you!'

And suddenly she was running, school bag awkwardly in one hand bumping and dragging against her legs, her lungs aching, puffing for air, stumbling and running all the way down to the police station in Zircon Road. And in her mind as she ran was the picture of Strapper giving pills to Jennifer, her ten year old sister.

21. DOBBER!

Thursday, school started the same as any other day. It wasn't until the first period after lunch that the police car pulled up outside the administration building.

Tiffany was in English class—Mrs Hart was explaining how to set out their essays—when the principal came into the room. Strapper was called out, the class goggle-eyed, and led quietly away to the waiting policemen in the principal's office.

It took only one hour for the rumours to start getting back. The first was that Strapper had been taken away by the drug squad. The second was that Strapper had tried to escape and had to be handcuffed. The third was that he had been shot dead while trying to escape. And the final story that afternoon was that Strapper had pulled out a .45 magnum, shot four cops dead, and escaped to South America on a hijacked Qantas jet.

It wasn't until the next day that the rumours started to shrink—ending up with certain facts: Strapper was in custody, and was to be charged with drug dealings. Which particular drugs, no one knew; probably selling a marijuana "stick" to a grade twelve kid. A piece of advice circulated was that anyone who was 'holding' drugs should flush them down the dunny immediately.

A tremor of excitement and apprehension ran through the grade eleven and twelve students. Jacko was seen in conference with his gang: Elvira, Wilson, Roy, Dawn, and a replacement for Pam, Nicol Cory.

Tiffany was very frightened. She knew she would be known as a dobber, and blamed for disrupting everyone's lives—including all the cannabis joints and pills that had to be flushed away. All her fault! The arrest of Strapper by the pigs was an unprecedented evil, caused entirely by Tiffany. She waited, wondering what would happen, but nothing did. No one said a word to her. Mind you that also meant that no one was ever going to speak to her again. But when school finished that day and she was taking the half kilometre walk to the bus stop it happened.

As she walked along, nervous and afraid, she turned and looking over her shoulder, saw that Jacko's gang had formed a solid line across the footpath, and were marching five paces behind her.

Then they started:

'Dobber. Dobber. Dobber.' They chanted in unison.

'Tiffany the Dobber! Tiffany the Dobber! Tiffany the Dobber!

'DOBBER! DOBBER! DOBBER!'

They marched and chanted. Then paused for a moment before Jacko called out: 'Tiffany, the slut, Tiffany the dobber!' The others spat at her, some missed, some gobs landed on her clothes, in her hair. Other students attracted by the chanting, realised what was happening—they followed along curious, waiting for the fireworks. Glancing over her shoulder she saw there were now about fifteen kids, chanting and spitting. Her insides shrivelled up with fear and nerves. It was a long, long way to the bus stop—and worse, she still had to go past the park corner—the traditional place for settling arguments.

DOBBER! DOBBER! DOBBER!

And then something weird happened. Quincy Graham, the nerdy new kid, caught up to her and fell into step, walking right alongside of her. Another one come to torment her, she thought.

'What do you want Quincy?'

'I ... d-don't know. I-I g-got to.'

'What's the matter with you? Your face is white. Can't you see this is serious trouble. Piss off. Cross over the road and leave me alone.'

Quincy looked scared, very scared. She looked at him, he wasn't even as tall as her. 'What are you scared for Quincy—it's me they're after not you.'

'I-I know ... but I w-want to help you.' He looked paralysed with fear.

'I don't need your help, Quincy. It's all my own bloody fault. Just take off before it's too late. You can't help me. Go!'

'I can't! God, I wish I could run away. But I can't.'

'Why?'

'Because ... I know I gotta s-stick with you. Even if they ... I've got to try and help you.'

'DOBBER! DOBBER! HEY PISS OFF YOU LITTLE DORK!'

And a gob of spit landed on the back of his head.

'Quincy, these kids are tough. You can't protect me—unless you've got a black belt in karate?'

'N-No, I can't fight at all.'

‘Thanks. See that park, when we get there things will happen. If you go now, I’ll forgive you. I’ll understand. There are too many of them, Quincy.’

As they arrived at the park the chanting stopped. Some of the gang ran around in front of Tiffany and Quincy so she couldn’t escape.

‘You! Nerdface. Piss off now!’

‘Who? Me?’ Quincy was trying to be funny.

‘Get outta the way,’ Jacko said. ‘We want to talk to this dobbing slut.’

‘You m-mind if I listen?’

‘Last chance, Nerd. Or get your lights punched out.’

‘That’s gotta hurt!’ But no one was smiling.

One quick punch from Jacko and Quincy was down on the ground his nose running with bright red blood. He struggled dizzily to his feet.

‘Get lost shithead!’ Jacko spat out.

‘I am l-lost.’ He was crying now, the tears in his eyes mingling on his lips with the blood. But instead of moving off like everyone expected, he moved in front of Tiffany like a mother cat protecting her kitten.

‘Piss off, I said!’ When he didn’t move Jacko lashed out with his fists; a left punch to the mouth, and a right into Quincy’s stomach; down he went again. ‘Got the picture, Arsehole? Piss off now and I won’t hurt you. Just get up and go—this is between me and the slut. It’s nothing to do with you. I could beat you up with one arm.’ Everyone waited, watching Quincy struggle clumsily to his feet.

‘He’s right,’ Tiffany said. ‘It’s not your fight Quincy. Thanks for trying to help. Go home, I’m on my own.’

‘No! You’re not on your own Tiffany. I’m sticking with you.’ Quincy was hunched over, the tears had stopped but the blood was still trickling from his nose and lips.

‘You stupid dickhead! Jacko swung again, but this time Quincy moved back out of fright, the blow swept past without contact, much to Jacko’s surprise. He stood awkwardly off-balance and Quincy punched him in the stomach— unfortunately with little strength. Still, it astounded everyone including Quincy. The cheek of this puny little nerd to punch Jacko, one of the toughest guys in school.

Jacko recovered and punched again. This time it connected and Quincy staggered back with a blow to his ear. His glasses flew off behind his head and onto the grass. There followed a quick flurry of punches to the face and stomach from Jacko. Quincy staggered backwards like a drunk. But at the last moment, out of nowhere, came a short jab from Quincy which landed right on Jacko’s lip.

Jacko stepped back puffing and rubbed his mouth. This wasn’t what he wanted. The idea was to corner Tiffany, to bust her face up. Everyone taking a punch, then hold her down and cut her hair back to the scalp with scissors; maybe even strip her clothes off and let her walk home naked. But Quincy was delaying everything. Sure Jacko had given him a hiding—but the dickhead was still standing his ground. And of course everyone expected Jacko to win; there were no points in beating up a nerd. Quincy was just making him look awkward. Besides he knew that now he’d have a fat lip from this encounter; everyone would know a nerd had given it to him. Jacko knew he had to finish this geek off quickly.

He came in fast this time, grabbed Quincy by the shirt and began raining blows on his face, chest and stomach. But just as he was getting ready to smash his elbow into Quincy’s eyes, Tiffany

grabbed Jacko's hair and jerked it backwards so hard he actually staggered and fell to the ground. Then Roy and Wilson stepped forward, Roy held her arms behind her back and Wilson punched her in the face. 'DOBBER! Slut!'

She staggered backwards in shock, feeling blood trickling from her lips.

But Quincy, struggling to his feet, seemed to snap. He saw they had punched Tiffany and he flung himself forward like a madman, screaming at the top of his lungs, his fists and feet lashing out in a frenzy. Roy copped the fury and staggered backwards trying to avoid the blows. The crowd scattered around him. Quincy was running in circles, screaming, punching, kicking, biting at anyone near him.

Quincy turned on Wilson—it was as if he had gone insane, he was no longer the timid little nerd. Wilson backpedalled, but Jacko was now on his feet and grabbed Quincy in a bear hug from behind, Roy caught an arm, while Wilson came in to punch him in the stomach. But Quincy was possessed; even the three of them were not able to hold him. He was shouting, kicking, twisting and lashing out at anyone within striking range. His madman strength was five times stronger than normal. Three of them couldn't even hold him. They let him go—and he ran forward like a savage dog to attack the closest four.

The gang, and the observers, scattered. Some of the observers began to giggle, then laugh. Quincy was obviously beside himself, out of his tree. No one had ever seen anyone go berserk like this in a fight before.

They mocked him. 'The nerd's crying! Cry baby!'

'Come on!' Quincy shouted at them. He wanted to fight the lot of them—all at once! Jacko started to go forward—but Quincy ran at him aggressively like a lunatic—fists swinging in the air, blood on his face, his shirt ripped, his glasses missing. Jacko got in another three good punches, but Quincy acted like he couldn't feel anything. Quincy's punches were missing—but they were dangerous; too dangerous to risk getting hit by one of them, and they were getting closer and closer. Jacko grabbed his arm, but Quincy shrugged him off and came at him again swinging punches. Jacko backed off, half afraid of this madman screaming at him. Wilson and Roy approached him cautiously from behind, Roy grabbed one arm, Wilson the other—Quincy swung around snarling and bit Wilson on the forearm. He let go, and so did Roy. Some of the audience thought biting wasn't fair—but then three onto one wasn't fair either was it?

About then a male voice yelled from the house across the road, 'If you punks aren't gone in thirty seconds, I'm calling the police.'

Jacko, puffing and getting angry, yelled at Quincy, 'You're a dickhead!' Then Jacko turned and walked away, out of the park, the crowd following on his heels, talking and laughing. There were enough details to chew over for a week.

After they'd all gone, Tiffany said to Quincy, still swaying on his feet, 'Thanks.'

He was still puffing, but rapidly calming down. 'I didn't. Help. Much.' He gulped down a few deep breaths. 'I made a fool of myself. Again.'

'No, you were very brave. I'm proud of you Quincy! You stood up to all of them, and stopped them by yourself. Here are your glasses, look they're still okay.'

'Thanks.' He put them on, they were dirty and smudged with blood.

'Come over to the tap and I'll help you wash your face. Your nose has stopped bleeding anyway.'

'My nose bleeding? Oh shit! I thought all that blood was from Jacko!'

'But Quincy what made you want to stand up to the gang? You've only been in our school a week. You don't even know what I've done wrong—do you?'

‘No. Was it some thing to do with Strapper?’

‘I might have deserved to be bashed up.’

‘Doesn’t matter. That’s not the point.’ He dabbed water on his face from the tap. ‘I had to help you. All I saw was a gang picking on one person. I couldn’t walk away. I had to stay even if they killed me.’

‘They nearly did, Quincy’

‘Tell me about it.’

They walked slowly towards the bus stop. ‘You were really brave—taking on the three of them.’

‘Nah. I’ve always been a coward. Scared of everyone. That’s why I’m always telling jokes—to make people laugh—so they won’t pick on me.’

‘So what happened this time? Lose your joke book?’

He walked in silence for a while then said, ‘Six months ago, my best mate and I got attacked by a gang of about seven kids. I ... I ran away and left him. I didn’t mean to. I thought he was going to run with me. Anyway they caught him. When I saw they had caught him I stopped ... but my legs wouldn’t let me go back to help him. Then two of them came running towards me ... and I r-ran for my life. They really beat my best friend up.’

‘He didn’t die or anything?’

‘No. But something between us died. I lost my closest friend for ever. Who could blame him? I was such a stinking coward. I hated myself so much I thought of killing myself for months. I don’t ever want to go through that again.’

‘Yeah, but you didn’t even know me. We weren’t friends.’

‘Doesn’t matter! I’m never going to leave anyone to fight a mob by themselves.’

‘Here comes my bus. I’ve gotta hurry. But listen Quincy, let me put you straight. You’ve got more guts than all that mob in Burgers put together.’ Tiffany put her arm around him and kissed him softly on the cut lip.

He cracked a smile. ‘Hey, isn’t there an easier way to get a kiss from you than fighting Jacko’s gang?’

22. MORE ENEMIES THAN FRIENDS

The story soon got around the school about Jacko’s gang. It was said that the gang tried to beat Tiffany and Quincy up, but the two of them had fought the whole of the gang. Jacko kept his distance from Tiffany and Quincy. And that, thought Tiffany, was something to be thankful for. Tiffany still didn’t know what to make of Quincy. But she did admire him. And when he asked her would she like to go to the movies with him on Saturday night, she said “yes” without any hesitation.

In the beginning the class was divided into three groups—about half the class thought Tiffany was a scum-dobber. She had no right to dob Strapper in to the cops. After all he wasn’t ripping anyone off, he wasn’t beating anyone up, and he wasn’t forcing anyone to take drugs against their will. He sold a few marijuana sticks to the year twelves—big deal!

But a quarter of the class thought Tiffany had done the right thing. Strapper was a menace to everyone, and he did it just to make money to supply his own drug habit, which sooner or later would get him into trouble.

The remaining quarter of the class were undecided. Unsure of what Tiffany had done—but certain they could not have done it themselves. Dobbing someone into the police was a very heavy scene.

When Jacko's Gang began to give her a hard time, the rest of the class soon learnt not to get involved. Most of the kids—except Quincy and Dave Trung—kept their distance and waited to see how things would turn out. It was like a struggle between two tigers, no one wanted to go in and try to separate them.

Tiffany, they had come to realise, was not the meek, mousy thing they thought she was. She had challenged Jacko's Gang, the most powerful group in the class. But not only that, she had gotten mixed up with two guys, Dave Trung and Quincy, who everyone had considered to be nerds.

Well, ex-nerds. It just wasn't possible to be captain of a winning cricket team, and an item with the hottest chick in year twelve, who also happened to be the class captain, and still be a nerd. No, that made Dave Trung into Joe Cool. And although Quincy had at first seemed like a nerd, how could he be if he fought against Jacko, Wilson and Roy all at once? Besides he knew all these jokes that kept everyone laughing.

Tiffany gritted her teeth and decide to wait out the anger directed at her by all sorts of people. There wasn't much else she could do. Her new friend Quincy was a tower of strength. When she walked to the bus stop after school, he always accompanied her. And she noticed Dave Trung with Poppy always waited for her to go in front so they could protect her back. Jacko's Gang didn't dare to attack her again. The rumour around the traps was that Dave Trung had a black belt in ju jitsu, and it was advisable not to mess with him.

Quincy was a real mate. They sat together whenever they could. He was able to make jokes at critical moments, and then everyone ended up laughing instead of being sarcastic. He told everyone his mother was on a new diet: she could eat as much of anything, as often as she wanted—so long as she didn't swallow.

Tiffany was resolved to being an outcast until she left school for uni. But three days after Strapper was taken away by the police another, worse, disaster occurred.

23. SPEED KILLS

Nicol Cory had a brother, Frank, in grade five primary school. He was one of the kids Strapper had supplied with free Happy Pills.

At three-thirty, on Saturday afternoon, he swallowed six Happy Pills. By four p.m. he was running in circles and babbling like a mad chook. At sixteen minutes past four he tried to run across the Princes Highway near Reidtown. He was hit by car travelling south and thrown into the path of a north-bound bus. His head was crushed under the rear wheels, killing him instantly. Frank's friend, Andy, who had only taken three Happy Pills saw what happened and ran to his assistance. He was hit by a south-bound car and had both legs broken.

Monday morning the pupils and teachers at both schools were in a state of shock. The disgust of the school was far more than Jacko, Wilson, Elvira, Dawn, or Roy could handle. They felt involved, not exactly guilty—but it was now known that Jacko's Gang helped Strapper make sales, and sometimes collected money from the primary school as well as the high school.

When it was learnt that Strapper had been giving away speed—amphetamines—to grade five kids, and then when they were hooked charging them ever increasing prices, the disgust multiplied. This was the guy that wasn't hurting anyone, the guy who just took dope to cheer himself up!

Tiffany felt a deep horror. The whole class did because they all knew that it was Nicol's kid brother—not some nameless kid in Afghanistan, but someone who lived right near them at Fernhill.

On Thursday Jacko's Gang was absent, and as it turned out never returned to school again: Jacko, Elvira, Wilson, Roy, Dawn, Nicol, and of course Strapper.

24. MORE TEARS

Friday afternoon Tiffany received another surprise that left her in tears before the whole class. It started while she was writing an essay in Mrs Hart's English class, the last period of the day. There was a soft knock on the door. Mrs Heart walked over, opened the door. The principal was there and he spoke softly to Mrs Heart for a moment, then left. Everyone was wondering what new catastrophe had occurred, or was about to occur.

The school captain, Nadia Hill, the year twelve class captain, Poppy Ambrose, the school vice-captain, and all the year twelves came slowly and solemnly into the room and stood out the front facing Tiffany's class. That in itself was weird. The year elevens were agog.

Mrs Hart said, 'Class, the school captain, Nadia Hill, has a short statement and a presentation to make. This will only take five minutes—so pay attention. Tiffany Edwards, would you please stand?'

Tiffany, more afraid than ever, stood up, her legs trembling.

Nadia smiled at her and began speaking in a clear voice.

'Tiffany, our class heard about the reporting of a guy from this school who was selling drugs to students here and at the Seacrest primary school. I'm sure everyone knows that the person who reported the drug seller to the police was Tiffany Edwards.'

Tiffany's legs wobbled, she reached out and braced herself against the desk, wondering what was about to come.

'Our class felt,' continued Nadia, 'that this was an extraordinary act of courage. An act that, while many year twelve's agreed with it, very few said they would have had the ... guts to do it. It did take guts to go to the police! It took guts to explain to them what was going on. And then it took all the courage a person can have to return to school being labelled a dobber. Now you had to worry about being beaten up by those kids who made a profit from selling drugs.'

'Tiffany, our class has the greatest respect for your character and courage that enabled you to go through this difficult time. We want to congratulate you on what you did for our school, and we want to show our support for what you did.'

'We are deeply sorry about the death that occurred a few days ago on the Princes Highway. It showed everyone what Tiffany knew all along.'

'But we came here not just to congratulate you for your courage, but to make a presentation. On the advice of a friend of yours, Quincy Graham—so you can blame him if you don't like this—we took up a collection and have arranged for you to have an open order for five hundred dollars worth of CDs at The Music Store. The manager donated two hundred dollars himself.'

Tears were running down Tiffany's cheeks. Nadia walked forward to where Tiffany was standing and held out The Music Store envelope to her. Then, one by one, starting with Nadia, then Poppy—the entire grade twelve class filed past her and shook her hand; each one muttering, "Best of luck" or "You were great, Tiffany". Yet she barely heard them, overcome with emotions. As they filed out of her class, she got another surprise. Quincy sprang to his feet and came around, like the year twelves and shook her hand.

He said, 'Tiffany, you've got guts.' And then added more softly, 'And no taste if you go out with a little runt like me!' No one else heard, except maybe Dave Trung who was next in line to shake her hand, followed by Pam. But, as usual, Quincy had lightened everything by his little joke. As they went past her she found her tears had turned to giggles, and just as well because the whole of Tiffany's class were getting into a line to shake her hand.

And while they were shaking her hand she was thinking about Quincy. She would get him to meet her parents—it would be embarrassing but she felt sure they would like him. And one day, maybe if Quincy could be serious for just two minutes, she would tell him the true story of the beach and Jacko's gang.

25. LOOKING FOR JACKO'S GANG

A month after Tiffany had received the presentation, Pam met Elvira at the hospital. They were both having treatment for a Sexually Transmissible Disease. Unfortunately, Elvira was also pregnant. She had discovered her pregnancy two weeks before the beach camp, but had hoped that it would "go away". It hadn't.

When she told Jacko he said, 'And who's the father? Not me! It could be Fatman, or Strapper, or Reggie Hamilton. Don't try and blame me! I wasn't the only guy who slept with you.'

Elvira was able to tell Pam where Jacko's gang had disappeared to. Jacko, soon after hearing the good news from Elvira, took off for Sydney. His mother got a phone call from him. He told her he was selling used cars in a car yard, making nine hundred dollars a week. But each Monday morning he phoned his mother and begged for twenty dollars to buy food. Eventually he confessed that he was still unemployed. He was squatting in a partly demolished factory with some other kids and some rats—just till he got on his feet. Mrs Papadopoulos, Jacko's mother, wanted him to come home. If he was going to be unemployed it was better to be unemployed at home than in Sydney.

Wilson was still living with his parents—bored and unemployed. Without money, there was nothing for him to do all day except watch TV and argue endlessly with his mother. He was seriously thinking about repeating year eleven.

Roy, Pam's ex-boy friend had also contracted a Sexually Transmittable Disease and Elvira knew he had attended the hospital a few times. He worked in a local factory two days a week sawing up bits of wood. He didn't intend to go back to school.

Elvira had visited Strapper in a special hospital for drug addicts. He was thin, pale and very nervous. He still talked about spies who followed him about and secret messages from spaceships. But he seemed to be getting better. There were still a number of criminal charges against him to be resolved: stealing a video recorder from Dawn's parents, selling drugs to minors, stealing money from his uncle's house, breaking and entering his neighbour's house with intent to steal, and being in possession of drugs.

Tiffany, when she heard all this over the phone from Pam, shuddered. It was a goose dancing about on her grave site. She had a feeling as if she had carelessly ran across the Princes Highway without looking, and found herself by the grace of God on the opposite footpath unscathed. Looking back across the highway she would see heavy trucks and buses, with massive wheels thundering past. It would not be until she turned and looked that she would comprehend the danger.

Tiffany shivered down her spine, thinking of how she had tempted fate during her brief days in Jacko's Gang.

THE END