

TATTOO

The principal is staring at my father's arms. My father is staring at my school report. I am staring at the floor. I wish my father had worn a long-sleeved shirt to cover his tattoos. But he's wearing a muscle T-shirt, the black one with Led Zep on the front. His biceps jut out, the snarling face of a tiger on one arm and a pirate ship on the other, black with a touch of green on the sails.

The pirate ship was my father's first tattoo. He got it when he turned eighteen. Him and Uncle Rocko got matching tats one night when they caught the train into the city. Rocko's not my real uncle and it's not a very good tattoo. The lines are all smudged and the colours are dull – that's what you get for having a tatt done when you're pissed, my Dad reckons. He tells me this story so I won't make the same mistake. Says he wants me to make something of my life.

He's not happy with this school report, that's for sure. His eyes flit up and down the page as if he's hoping that the Ds and Es might somehow transform themselves into As and Bs.

I wonder if he ever sat in this office with Grandpa. In BIG trouble with the Principal. He doesn't look comfortable and I can tell he doesn't like Mr Beavis. Maybe being in this office with all the brown furniture and brown carpet and the large round clock on the wall ticking off the never-ending minutes is too much for him. It's too much for me.

Mr Beavis clears his throat. Rattles on for a while about my lack of concentration and my disruptive behaviour. While he talks he touches his tie. His hands are pale and soft and he fingers the tie carefully as if it's a musical instrument like a recorder or a clarinet and he's trying not to play a wrong note.

I sneak a sideways glance at my father. He is flexing his bicep and the pirate ship rocks to and fro. There's a storm coming.

Mr Beavis looks at me. “Is there anything going on at home that the school should know about Jake?”

I just shake my head and say nothing.

Dad's mouth seems too tight for words to come out but somehow they do. “No, nothing going on at home.” He looks at me. “Is there Jakey?”

We walk out to the car park.

There's an old football lying on the gravel, half flat and sorry for itself.

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I kick it hard. It smacks against the windscreen of our car and Dad punches me on the shoulder.

We get into the car without a word.

As we lurch along the dirt road the wheels seem to find every rut and bump.

Dad's hands grip the steering wheel stretching the letters tattooed across his knuckles - 'SUZY' on his left hand, 'LOVE' on the right.

I look out the window at the fence posts and paddocks shuddering by. Summer is on its way but for the time being, everything is still green. Fat cattle lift their huge heads as we drive past and stare at us without blinking. Cockatoos scream overhead.

We reach our driveway and I jump out to unlatch the chain and wrench the rickety gate open. We have an old milk churn next to the gate that we use as a mailbox. I lift the lid and peer inside. There are several envelopes and straight away I can tell they're all bills. There is also a flyer from the Criterion Hotel offering a parma and a pot for \$13. I wait till Dad has manoeuvred the car over the potholes and through the gate, then I re-latch the chain and get back in.

"Nothing from Mum," I say.

Dad rubs at his chin and doesn't answer.

The car struggles up the long hill to the house. The dogs come roaring off the verandah and bounce around the car until we get out. Dad kicks them out of his way but they keep on annoying him anyway.

Lola pushes open the fly wire door.

"Hey" she says.

"Hey" I say.

She raises her eyebrows at me and I know she's wondering about my school report.

"Don't ask" I say.

She makes a sorry face and takes a chomp from her apple. It's alright for her, she got a good report. No letter from Mr Beavis about Lola.

Dad stomps up the steps on to the verandah. Lola leans back against the post.

"Hey Dad."

"How's my girl?" He tugs one of her pigtails. "D'ja go okay with the twins?"

Lola nods. "Yeah Shaunie cracked it when I wouldn't let him climb on top of the chook shed, but apart from that, all good."

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“That's my girl.” He goes inside the house and I can hear the twin's plastic sandals clattering across the kitchen floor and their excited voices rising up to meet Dad's outstretched arms.

Lola bars my way.

“So are they gunna keep you down a grade Jakey?”

“Nah, I'm just on a warning.”

“Well, you'd better pull your socks up.”

Lola is only twelve but I swear sometimes she sounds forty.

I'm thirteen but small for my age. People always assume Lola's the older one.

I push past her and go inside. The house is in its usual bomb site state. Ever since Mum left it's as if all the contents of every cupboard have tried to follow her out the door. There are saucepans and dirty dishes on the floor, piles of washing on the couch, newspapers strewn all over the table and the twin's toys everywhere else.

It's really starting to get me down. I can't find anything anymore. I haven't seen a matching pair of socks for weeks. Every morning I pick clothes up off the floor and sniff them to find the ones that smell least bad. The washing machine is broken and the closest laundromat is forty kilometres away. We have to wash our clothes in the bath and we all hate it because it takes forever and the washing powder makes our skin itch. We used rubber gloves in the beginning but now no one can find them. Same with the scissors, the key to the front door, the TV remote, Lola's sneakers and Shaunie's asthma puffer. Gone. All gone.

Dad moves some clothes and plonks himself down on the couch. Shaunie and Max crawl onto his lap. They're hungry and tired and I know what's coming next. Dad asks me, me being the one with the shit school report, to cook the dinner. I open and close every cupboard in the kitchen. I look in the fridge. There isn't much to choose from.

“Cheesy Mac okay?”

There are loud groans. Even the twins are sick of Cheesy Mac.

Afterwards, I push the advertising flyer under Dad's nose.

“Parma and a pot, Dad. Only thirteen bucks.”

He shakes his head. “I'm a bit stretched this week.” He folds his arms behind his head and yawns. The cobweb tattoos on his elbows stick out like they're trying to catch flies.

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I've never liked the cobweb tats. They make his skin look old. "So what are we gunna do about this school report of yours Jakey?"

I shrug. "Dunno. Guess I'll try harder."

"Yeah well you'd better. Don't want to end up working at the knackers yard."

This was always Dad's worst threat. He'd worked at Dawson's Knackery when he left school. Turned horses into dog food for three hundred bucks a week. He still can't drive past the yard without wanting to throw up.

"Don't worry Dad. I'm not gunna end up at Dawsons."

"That's my boy."

Max pokes his tongue out at me so I rip off his sandal and tickle his foot.

"Jeez Max, look at your filthy feet. You really need a bath."

Dad untangles himself from the two wriggling boys. "Can you run 'em a bath Jakey? I've got to call a couple of blokes about a concreting job tomorrow. Could be good money."

I chase Shaunie and Max into the bathroom and turn the taps on. Neither of them will sit up the plug end of the bath because there's a big brown rust stain that they reckon is poo. So they both squash in up the other end, their skinny arms and legs flailing around as I try to get near them with the lump of yellow soap. Pretty soon the water turns putrid and I hand over the soap.

"Here. You can do your own bums." I leave them to it and try to find some clean towels.

I look in the cupboard in the hallway. That's where Mum always put the towels but there's none in there now. There's just the vacuum cleaner and a whole lot of empty plastic bags. I go into Dad's bedroom. It's dark and smells of his sweat. I pull up the blind and open the wardrobe. In amongst the jumble of windcheaters, jeans and socks, there is a rolled up beach towel. When I shake it out, Mum's old bathers fall onto the floor. The white ones with big red flowers on the front. I pick them up. They smell like the beach.

Heat. Sand. Days full of circling gulls and the crash of waves and the taste of salt. Lola lying stretched out on her orange stripy beach towel. Shaunie and Max screaming as the sea sucks the shells from their sandcastle. I'm watching everything from behind a pair of fake Raybans and the sun is hot on my face. Mum and Dad are standing knee deep in

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the surf looking out to sea. Dad's wearing boardies and the tattoo on his back is shiny with ocean spray. An emerald serpent snakes its way from his right hip, criss-crosses his spine and ends at his left shoulder, its head poised to strike. From up here on the beach the serpent looks like it could easily slither off Dad's skin and slip into the sea. Two women set up beach chairs nearby. One starts to laugh and I hear her say, "Hey check out the bogun with the snake tattoo!" And the other woman starts laughing too. I want to go over there and smash their stupid faces in but just then I see my Mum reach out and hold my Dad's hand. She pulls him towards her and kisses him on the mouth and he throws his arms around her and they just stand there in the surf kissing. That shuts the two women up because I don't think anyone's wanted to kiss them like that in a long while. And I feel happy with the sun hot on my face and my parents kissing each other in the surf. The white bathers and the green serpent and the blue water.

Shaunie and Max are screaming for a towel. I bundle up the bathers and shove them back in the wardrobe, then take the beach towel to the bathroom. The boys have pulled out the plug and are sitting in the bath shivering. I throw them the towel.

"Here, dry off and put your pyjamas on."

They run off down the hallway squealing. I scrape up what is left of the soap and wipe the water that has splashed on the floor. Lola pokes her head in.

"The TV's stopped working again."

"Did you give it a whack?"

"Yeah. Made no difference. Have you been crying?"

"Got soap in my eyes."

She looks at me for a moment. I hope she's not about to say something smart. She doesn't. She pulls her head back around the door and walks away.

When Mum first left I was sure she would be back after a couple of days. It had happened loads of times. A big blazing row. Her and Dad screaming their guts out at each other. Her running off. She'd usually go to her sister's place in town and after she'd cooled off and Dad had been around to apologise, she'd come home and everything would be really good for a while. Like the holiday at the beach. They'd kiss each other a lot and Dad would make stupid jokes and maybe there'd be a game of backyard cricket that would go on until it was too dark to see the ball and then we'd all come inside and

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squish up on the couch together and watch tele. But it never lasted long and soon the fights would start up again. I think maybe we should have gone to the beach more often.

The next day is Saturday. No school.

I lie in bed feeling dozy and warm and happy because I don't have to get up. The sound of cartoons wafts from the lounge room. Someone has managed to get the television working so at least the twins will be occupied.

I open the curtains a chink and see that the car is gone. Dad must have already left to do the concreting job. That means I'm in charge till he gets home. Which really means that I'll pretend I'm in charge but we all know that Lola is actually the boss. I can hear her now, crashing about in the kitchen getting the twins their cereal.

The sun slides in through the curtain chink and paints a warm stripe across my bare arm. The dark freckles look like a dot-to-dot puzzle. I rummage in the drawer of my bedside table until I find a black biro, then I begin to join up the dots. Nice straight lines, up and down, up and down. I lie back to admire my work. The lines look like a capital M. Without thinking I finish off the word - 'MUM'. Then I get out my coloured pens and decorate the first M with a string of red flowers. Around the second M, I draw a coiled green serpent with a hissy kissy tongue. I hold up my arm so that I can see it reflected in the wardrobe mirror. From this distance it almost looks like a real deadset tattoo.

I pull on a hoodie and head out to the kitchen. I don't want Lola to see my artwork. She is practising ballet and nearly gets me in the balls with her knee.

I push past her pirouette and open the fridge.

"There's no milk left," she informs me mid-twirl. "You'll have to ride into town and get some if you want cereal."

"It's fine. I'll just have a sandwich."

"Whatever." She goes back to her ballet and leaves me to it.

There are a few scabs of pale green mould on the bread but I've eaten worse. I pick off the spots, slather on some peanut butter and then join the twins on the couch. Max snuggles up beside me. It feels nice to have him so close and I put my arm around his scrawny shoulder. He looks up at me.

"What cartoons did you watch as a kid?"

"I dunno," I say, 'Sponge Bob'...'Simpsons'..."

"Did you watch them with Mummy?"

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“Sometimes.”

He lets out a big sigh and buries his head against my chest.

I ruffle his hair and let the sound of the cartoon wash over us.

Later, Lola tells me I have to ride into town and buy milk, bread and biscuits. I don't really want to go but I feel too tired to argue with her.

There's \$4.40 in loose change on Dad's bedside table. That won't be enough. I pull open the drawer and rifle through the tangle of pens, combs, string and paper. There's an envelope tucked away at the bottom of the mess and I recognise Mum's sprawling handwriting on the front. The postmark says Queensland. That's hundreds of kilometres away. My hands are huge clumsy paws as I open the envelope and take out a single sheet of paper. My eyes skim over the spidery black words looking for a chance she'll come home.

But I don't find one. I only find the words can't, won't, don't, not...

Not coming back.

Not

Coming

Back

And then I'm running. Away from the house. Away from those words.

Down to the dam where the long reeds swallow up my shadow. Where I can smell the mud and the rabbit shit and the frogs.

Not. Coming. Back.

The sun is too bright. My eyes ache.

I pull up the sleeve of my hoodie and trace over my mother's name with the point of my pocket knife. Trace over the letters again and again until small petals of blood begin to bloom in the shape of her name. Somehow it feels good, the sharp blade carving at my skin, teasing out drops of bright blood. The pain of it feels good.

Dad arrives home, covered in cement dust and a wad of twenties in his calloused hand.

He's all smiles. Tells us to jump in the car.

“No bloody Cheesy Mac tonight kids! We're going to the Criterion.”

The twins can't shut up all the way into town.

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In the bistro there's a wonderful smell of grilled steak and chips. Dad buys a jug of lemon squash for us and a schooner of beer for him. The twins want to do 'here's cheers' and we all clink our glasses. Then Max collects up as many beer coasters as he can find and invents some complicated game of cards that he always seems to win.

We choose our meals from a list of specials chalked up on the blackboard. Lola wants prawns but Dad tells her to go easy. In the end, the twins have nuggets and the rest of us order chicken schnitzels, chips and salad. There's warm bread rolls and tiny silver packets of butter. And ice-cream afterwards.

On the way home, Dad sings along to the radio and the moon rises up over the trees like a huge yellow eye.

The twins want Milo before they go to bed. Lola opens the fridge.

“Jesus Jake! I thought you got milk.”

My brain feels foggy. “I forgot.”

“But you were gone for ages. What were you doing?”

Dad's ears prick up. “What were you doing Jake?”

There's nothing I can say. I turn away and go to my room.

Later Dad comes in and sits on the end of my bed. He looks knackered. He rubs at his bristly chin. “I know it's hard Jake, with your Mum gone.”

I can feel myself sweating.

Slowly, I pull my arm out from underneath the blanket. My mother's name is a mess of blood.

And then I'm shouting. About the letter. About how I know she's not coming back. I hit him and I keep hitting him. I want to hurt him. I want to hurt him for making her go away. And for lying about her coming back. I want to hurt him. I want him to take the pain away.

He grabs my wrists to stop me from hitting him and takes my damaged arm in his huge hands and just holds it for ages, swaying slowly, his breath coming in shallow gulps. He is sorry. He is sorry for everything.

Morning comes with the sound of rain on the roof.

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My arm feels heavy and hot. I head for the kitchen. Dad is standing at the sink with his hands all sudsy. There is a mountain of washed dishes stacked up and steaming on the draining board. All the newspapers have been put in a neat pile.

Dad gives me a shy smile. "Thought it was about time we got the place cleaned up."

Clusters of raindrops gather on the window pane. Dad shakes the suds from his hands.

I look at his knuckles. 'SUZY' on his left hand. 'LOVE' on the right.

And there on my arm, carved out in blood, my very first tattoo.