

The Next Evolution Part I: The Rabbit and the Condor

by Andrew Hutchinson

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It was their biggest basketball game of the year.

The score was 37 to 36 with only seconds remaining, when the coach called a timeout. The boys on each team moved towards their benches - the Jerrin West team in their black uniforms with a white stripe, and the Saint Martins under 14 boys in their grey and red jerseys. A small crowd of Jerrin West students, along with a few parents and teachers, clapped as the two teams cleared the floor.

The boys coming off the court sat down onto the wooden bench seat, the other players on the team standing up, then forming a circle around them. The coach waited for the players to all sit down, then he started talking.

'Okay, good work boys, good work. We've got this, we just need to hold on for a little bit longer.'

Cody's cheeks were red and his blonde hair was all flattened down and wicked together into sweaty spikes. He looked angry.

'What's up Cody?' The coach asked. The coach was also Cody's Dad.

'He keeps hitting me?'

'Who does?' The coach asked.

'Number 26, that big chump,' Cody pointed towards the other bench, where the Saint Martins players were gathered. Number 26 was a big kid with thick arms and a shaved head. The boy also had a big scar down one side of his head, a thin, skin-coloured trail etched through his short hair, which continued along the side of his cheek, just in front of his ear. They'd played against Saint Martins a couple of times during the season, but number 26 was new. They hadn't played against him before.

'Don't worry about it,' the coach said. 'How do we respond when they break the rules?' The coach waited a moment for an answer. None of the boys said anything. 'We respond by outplaying them.'

'But you've seen him, Dad, he throws elbows on every rebound.'

'I know, Cody,' the coach put his hand up. 'I've told the ref. But we can't do anything about it right now. Let's just win the game and make sure that he doesn't get anything out of playing dirty, okay?'

Cody glared across towards the opposite bench.

'Okay,' the coach continued. 'Now, we don't need to score, we just need to keep the ball. Now, Greg...'

Greg looked up. Greg was the tallest player on the team, but he was also the slowest.

'Greg, I need you to take the side ball. You need to pass it in to Cody or William. Will, are you ready?'

William sat staring up at the coach from the bench, his eyes wide.

'Yep,' William nodded. 'Okay.'

'Okay, so Perry and James, you two need to rush back and get their players away from the ball. Cody, you start from the back court and run forward, yes?'

The referee blew her whistle.

'Let's go, guys,' the referee yelled out.

'Okay boys,' coach said. 'We've got this, just a few more seconds of your best effort.' The coach put a hand forward, palm down, and the boys each stacked one of their hands on top of his.

'Ready?' The coach said. 'Break.'

Cody and William stood side-by-side on the court, while Greg, his long, skinny limbs poking out of his black singlet, waited

for the ref to hand him the ball at the sideline. The Saint Martins players walked back onto the court and came across to meet them. Number 26 came by William and Cody and stared down at them both. Number 26 settled in front of Cody, but he kept staring at William as he did.

The referee blew her whistle and gave Greg the ball. Greg held the ball up high above his head, at the end of his long arms, as he looked for a pass. Cody rushed to the side to get the ball, but number 26 stayed up with him, and Greg couldn't pass it, couldn't see a pass, then William ran forward and got free and Greg saw him and threw the ball. William got the pass, but number 26 switched away from Cody at the last second and he got a hand onto the ball also, his long arms reaching out. Number 26 gripped onto the ball, strong, his muscles flexing, and William got both hands onto it, held on. William tried to pull the ball free, but number 26 was tough, and the bigger boy yanked it in hard. William pulled at the ball again, jolted on it with all his strength, and William looked up and number 26 was right up in his face now, right up close.

William could hear his teammates yelling out, the crowd cheering them on. The coach saying something and William stared at Number 26's face. His dark eyebrows, his shaved head. Number 26 narrowed his eyes, and then, for the briefest moment, for only a fraction of a second, number 26 changed. The bigger boy took a breath in through his nose, his nostrils

opening up, his closed lips stretching wide. Then number 26 pulled at the ball again, and as he did, his face seemed to shift. For only a moment, William thought, for just a flash, he looked like an animal, this boy. His face looked, William thought, like a lion ready to roar in anger.

William released his grip on the ball, startled by what he'd seen, and number 26 pulled the ball free, then the bigger boy threw it ahead to a teammate. The other Saint Martins player got the pass, then ran down and scored at the other end.

William watched number 26, his shaved head looking on, watching the play. Number 26 shook his fist in celebration, then he looked back to William. The taller boy with the scar along his head, he smiled at William's shocked face.

The buzzer sounded and the referee blew her whistle and raised her arms. The scoreboard read 38 - 37 in bright red numbers. Saint Martins had won the game.

William stood on the court for a moment, looking over at the Saint Martins players, taking it in. He watched the tall boy moving through the group of them, high-fiving his teammates.

Cody's parents dropped William home. It was dark already outside, and William said goodbye and thank you to Cody's parents, and then he walked along the concrete path from the roadside, carrying his school bag over his shoulder. William unlocked the three front door locks with his keys, then he opened the door and went in.

'William, is that you?' His mother called as William angled his backpack through the open doorway, then he swung the door shut behind him. The heavy wood of it thumped into place. William re-locked the closed door, flicking over the three separate metal switches.

'Yes Mum,' William said. 'Just me.'

'Come through, I've got your dinner in the microwave.'

William could see his dinner already turning in the orange microwave light as he came in and dropped his bag into the corner. His mother had already started eating, her plate half cleared on the table, a knife and a fork balanced on

either side. His mother walked back to the table and sat down onto her chair. She had her long, blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, and her glasses reflected the kitchen light.

'How was your day, my son?'

'Okay.' William leaned onto the wall with one hand and pulled his shoes off one at a time. He didn't bother to untie his laces. 'Same as always.'

'Well what did you do today?' His mother asked. Then she put a fork full of food into her mouth as she watched him across the table. William shuffled in his damp sports socks across to the microwave, which beeped three times as he approached it.

'Just school, basketball, hung out with Cody and them.'

'Oh, how did the game go?' His mother asked. 'You boys were playing Saint Martins, right?'

'Yep,' William put his plate down onto his side of the table, then he dropped into his seat. He rolled his eyes up to look back at his Mum.

'Not good?' She asked.

'Not good, no.'

'Ah well,' William's mother said. 'Don't worry. Saint Martins are always tough to beat.'

'Yeah.'

William poked at his chicken schnitzel with his fork, pulling apart the meat.

'Did you play well?' His mother asked.

William shook his head, his mouth now full.

'Oh, why? Are you okay?'

'I lost the game,' William formed the words around the food still in his mouth, so they sounded hollow, empty.

'William, wait till you've finished what you're eating please,' his mother said. 'Now, what do you mean you lost the game?'

'They had this big kid,' William replied, his words clearer now, his food swallowed. 'They had a new kid and he was big and rough and he pretty much beat us by himself,' William said. 'Then at the end, he took the ball from me when we were up by one. Then they scored, so...'

'Oh,' his mother said. 'No good at all.' William's mother stood from her seat and picked up her plate. She took her dishes across to the kitchen sink.

'Doesn't matter,' She told him. 'It's just a game.' His mother rinsed her plate underneath the running tap.

'It was weird though,' William told her. 'Right at the end, right when he took the ball from me, he looked really weird.'

'What do you mean?'

'It was like his face changed, like he was so angry, so focussed on getting the ball, that he looked different.'

William's mother turned off the tap.

'Different how?' She asked.

'I don't know,' William put another for full of chicken into his mouth. 'It was weird.'

William's mother came back from the kitchen and she sat down next to him, on the nearest seat. William looked at her, then he looked across to the kitchen. Then back to his Mum.

'How was he different?' His mother asked. She was straight-faced, serious.

'I don't know,' William said.

'Yes, you do,' she nodded her head. 'You know what you saw. What did he look like?'

William looked over his mother's face, confused by her question.

'Ah, I don't know, really.'

His mother stayed still, stared at him.

'Well, for a moment, he looked...' William hesitated, watching his mother's dark eyes. 'He looked like a lion. Like there was a lion's face on his.'

His mother closed her eyes.

'Are you okay?' William asked.

She opened her eyes again, focused on him.

'A lion?'

'Yeah.'

'You're sure you saw a lion?'

'Well no, I didn't...' William kept looking at his Mum, waiting for her expression to change. 'Well, I didn't see a lion, I just, I thought...' William thought over what he was trying to say. 'He looked like a lion for a second, in his face.'

His mother stood up from her chair and she stepped across the room, rushed across into the dark hallway and out of William's sight. She came back a few seconds later, quick stepping over to the kitchen. William's mother looked out through the kitchen window above the sink. She angled her head to look up and down and either way.

'Are you okay?' William asked.

His mother came back and sat down onto the seat before William, looking at his face. Her eyes were wider now, more alert.

'William, I need you to be one hundred per cent clear on what you saw. Did you see a lion in his features?'

'I don't...'

William shook his head.

'Did his face look like a lion's face? Is that what you saw?'

William could see the concern in her eyes. She was deadly serious.

'I think so,' William replied. 'That's what it looked like.'

'Okay,' his mother held her stare. She forced a smile, then she lost it again. 'We have to leave. Right now.'

William rushed through his cupboards and his drawers, grabbing fistfuls of socks and t-shirts and underpants and pushing them into his backpack.

'Where are we going?' William yelled.

'Away,' his mother's voice responded from another room.

'But why? What happened?' William said.

'I can't explain,' then his mother appeared in the doorway of his room. She was carrying her own red backpack. 'I can't tell you everything right now, but we have to go. Just get what you need.'

'But I don't know what I need, I...'

'Just...' his mother raised her voice, then she calmed down. 'Just the basics, William. Just grab the things that you'll need.'

William and his mother both filled their backpacks, then they met back up again in the kitchen, where William's mother grabbed two cold bottles of water from the fridge.

'Now,' William's mother said. 'We're going to head out across the backyard, then I'll show you what's next.'

She slotted a plastic water bottle into the side pocket of his backpack, then she pulled on it to make sure it would stay in. She looked at William's face.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I can't tell you where we're going, but you need to just trust me for a minute. Okay?'

William nodded back. His eyes looked worried, but he held it in. She smiled at him.

'Okay,' William's mother said. 'Now follow me across the yard, and keep up. We need to go quick.'

William's mother opened the back door slowly. She opened it just enough for them to slide through, and they both crept out and stepped onto the wood of their back verandah, out in the cold night. His mother looked all around the darkness, then she lifted her nose and she sniffed at the air. William sniffed too. He couldn't smell anything.

'What is it?' William asked.

'Shh,' his mother snapped back. She looked to him. Her face was dark in the shadows.

William's mother looked back out across the yard. The green grass, the edges of it difficult to make out in the darkness. The concrete path that lead along to the empty clothesline. You could hear the skinny arms of the clothesline creaking slightly in the breeze. William's mother looked up to the sky, the clusters of stars all across. The bright moon watching on, beaming down from above.

'Go,' she said, and William's mother rushed forward, moving along the concrete path. She bent down slightly as she went, like she was hiding from something and William stayed close behind. He ducked down slightly also, trying to mimic her movements. William looked around in the darkness, into the black corners of the yard in the night. He'd been in this yard thousands of times, and never once had he felt any fear, any concern about what might be there. Till right now.

His mother stopped nearby the garden shed, a small, silver metal building out in the right corner of the yard.

'Step off,' his mother told him. She was looking down at his feet, at the concrete path, and William looked down, then he stepped off the path and onto the grass beside the concrete. He looked all around him, trying to see what his mother was looking at, then William's Mum knelt down beside the path. She dug her fingers in beneath the concrete panel, got her fingertips underneath it, then she lifted. She pulled hard to raise the large panel, ripping the concrete square up from the grass and the dirt. Thin webs of grass roots dangled down from its edges in the moonlight as it rose up.

William's mother flipped the concrete panel over, the dark, damp underneath of it now facing up to the moon. And on the ground, in the vacant patch of space where the concrete had been, there was a hole, a black, deep tunnel that had been dug into the earth.

William's mother stood alongside him in the darkness, puffing. The two of them looking down on the dark hole.

'William, I need you to listen, and I need you to do exactly as I say,' she told him. 'We're going to go down the tunnel.'

His mother stepped to the side, dusting the dirt from her knees as she went.

'What do you mean?' William looked at the black hole dug into the ground. 'We won't even fit in that.'

'We will,' his mother wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. 'We'll fit.'

William leaned his head forward over the hole, looking down into it.

'Where does it go?'

'It goes through to a bigger tunnel, out through the back of the yard. It's not far.'

'How far?' William asked.

'William, you have to do this. You need to do what I say.'

William knelt down beside the black hole. It looked too small, far too small for him to fit. He put his hands onto the grass, then he sat down and he reached his foot over, into the hole.

'No,' William's mother said. William looked up to her.  
'You won't make it that way. You'll need to go front first.'

William's mother mimicked an action, like diving over.

William brought his foot back, then he crouched down further, got his face down close to the grass and the dirt. He stretched his head over the black hole. It smelled like mud and old grass.

'I won't fit,' William said. He looked back to his mother again. 'I'll never fit in there.'

'You will,' his mother told him. 'Just go.'

William lowered his head in, further down into the blackness of the tunnel. His shoulders hit the sides of the hole as he went, then they slotted in, scraping along the edges.

'It's very tight,' William yelled back, and his voice echoed forward into the depth.

'It's a little tighter than I had planned,' his mother replied. 'But it'll be fine.'

William slid himself further into the dirt tunnel, up to his chest, then his hips. There was barely enough room for him to move, but he could tilt his head to the side just enough to see back, to see the moonlight peeking in through the hole.

Then he heard it. A sound, like the kettle burbling on the kitchen bench. It vibrated the earth all around him.

'What was that?' William yelled.

'William,' his mother replied. 'You need to go.'

'What was that noise?'

'William, follow the tunnel to the end, then push through. There's a cover on the other end, but you'll be able to open it.'

William turned his head as best he could in the hole, looking back to the opening.

'Mum, what's happening?'

'William, you have to go.'

Then he felt his feet pushed, his body sliding further along the tunnel.

'Wait, wait,' William yelled, and he looked back, then the entry to the tunnel disappeared, dropping him into darkness. William lay there, sealed into the dirt tube. Listening. He could hear rumbling, then a screeching sound. The screeching drifted, getting further away. Then something thumped onto the earth above, shaking the dirt all around him, specks of it falling down, falling onto him, and William pushed up his hips and gripped his fingers into the dirt floor and he pulled himself along the narrow, dark tunnel. He

rushed along, as fast as he could, wriggling like a caterpillar in the confined space. He shuffled through, moving further into the blackness all around him.

William could feel the dirt beneath his fingernails, clogging further and further into the gaps. He pushed down onto his elbows and his knees to wriggle along. He could feel the dampness of the dirt seeping through his jumper, his pants. He was moving through the dark tunnel, but he had no way of knowing how fast, everything black all around. The smell of dirt and grass filled through. Something slimy, squishing beneath his fingers. He kept moving.

His mother had dug this tunnel. That was what she said. She had planned this. Why would she have dug a tunnel? Why was there a tunnel in their backyard? William scraped himself along, wriggling further and further, squeezing through.

William shuffled and dragged, bit-by-bit. Tiny pieces of loose dirt crept into his clothes and his shoes. Random tree and grass roots and stones poked at his clawing hands. He kept pulling himself along, his heart racing. His basketball boots

slipped and scratched across the earth as he tried to gain traction.

William hit a wall, a hard edge before him. His fingers felt it first, his knuckles tapping against it. William reached forward with both hands. He could feel a hard, jagged surface up ahead in the black.

Maybe this was the end, the cover that his mother had mentioned. Or maybe the tunnel had collapsed. Maybe was trapped in.

Panic zapped through his body, and William put both of his hands up onto the wall and pushed against it. He pushed as hard as he could, his arms shaking as he strained. He needed to move this, he needed to get through.

It wouldn't budge.

William dug the toes of his basketball boots into the dirt, kicked them in as hard as he could for leverage, then he forced his body forward up against the wall, pushing into it. He pushed harder, his leg muscles flexing. His feet shook against the ground. If he wasn't able to get through, this

might be it, he might be trapped in this tiny tunnel forever, and William pushed harder, gritting his teeth.

Please, William thought to himself.

His whole body started to shake as he forced himself against it

*Please.*

Then the wall popped loose, poked through, and William's body flung forward and flopped out the end of the tunnel. His head and his chest were out in the open now, and he looked around and he saw that he was inside another tunnel, a huge concrete pipe covered in faded graffiti and littered with rubbish at the bottom.

William squeezed himself out of the hole and he slid down the side of the pipe. He sat there, among the dirt remnants and the chipped concrete and he took a moment to catch his breath. There was a large, broken section of the pipe on the ground that he'd just pushed out. It was cracked, the concrete chunk. It had been broken before and then set back into place to cover the opening of the tunnel. There were bent, rusted metal rods poking out from the side of the thick concrete piece.

William sat on the ground and took in some deep breaths as he tried to calm himself down. He could see the opening of the concrete tunnel across the way, the faded shadows of the

night and the streetlights outside. He was free again, released from the dirt.

William looked back to the hole, the entry to the thin tunnel. The black depth of it poking into the side of the pipeline.

'Okay,' William said. And when he looked down, he could see his heartbeat nudging at his jumper on his chest. William looked around to see whether his Mum might be there. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do next.

A flash of car headlights poked into the opening of the pipe, and the beams caught on something shiny, something plastic, maybe, attached to the inside of the broken piece of concrete. William leaned over to it. He swept the dirt away from it with his hand. A clear plastic, re-sealable bag had been taped onto the concrete, onto the part of the pipe which would have faced into his mother's small tunnel. There was folded piece of paper inside the plastic bag.

William pulled the bag away from the concrete and opened it up. He took out the folded white paper and he opened it out. There was writing across it, but it was too difficult to read in the shadows, and William stood up, then he felt dizzy, the blood rushing as he went. William regained his balance, then he walked towards the end of the tunnel, the streetlights out beyond the large opening.

William held the note up in the streetlight, which looked down from above the concrete pipe.

The note, written in his mother's handwriting, in black ink, said

*Head to the street above and go to the bus stop, then catch the 222 train to Greeves Street. From there, you need to catch the train to Starlington, then head to 35 Gower Way. Tell him Mariel sent you.*

William looked over the words, then he folded the note back up and he slid it into his pocket. Up above him, beyond the brightness of the streetlight, the moon was almost full. The white light of it illuminated the roofs of the houses all across the landscape, the dotted patterns of streetlights and the moving car headlights woven in between.

The 222 bus curved through the nearby roundabout, its insides lit bright up in the darkness. William stood up from the bus stop seat and he raised his hand and the bus slowed, eased into the curb before him. The smell of dust and petrol wafted forward as the huge vehicle came to a halt before him.

The bus door hissed open, and William stepped up onto the stairs. The bus driver watched him from behind a plastic wall which encased him into the drivers' section.

William read the signs, the ticket prices. Then he looked back to the driver.

'I don't have a ticket,' William told the man.

'That's okay,' the bus driver replied. Then he shuffled in his seat, reaching for something at his side. 'It's five dollars.'

William patted at his pants pocket, though he knew there was nothing in it. William shook his head.

'I don't have any money either,' William told the driver.

'Well, I can't help you, mate,' the bus driver said. Then the driver turned his head and re-set his grip on the steering wheel, prepared to depart.

'Wait,' William told him. 'I need to catch this bus.'

'Then you need to bring your money.'

'I know...' William looked down at himself, at his dirt stained clothes. The knees of his pants were darker, smudged with mud and grass. The bus driver looked over, and he looked down at William's clothes as well, then he twisted his face in disgust.

'Geez, what have you been doing?'

'Sorry,' William said. William looked back up to the man. 'Please, I really need to catch the bus.'

'I would like to get home some time today, please,' a woman's voice yelled from further back inside the bus.

The bus driver looked William over again, then he looked out the windscreen. Then the bus driver looked back to William and he nodded his head. The bus driver gestured for William to get in.

The door hissed closed and the bus pulled away, and William took a seat near the front, just up behind sealed off drivers' section.

After he'd thanked the bus driver at his destination, then jumped over the entry gates at the nearby train platform. After he'd got onto the next train, without a ticket, then watched on as the darkened houses and shops passed by outside the dirty carriage window, William reached the stop for Starlington Station and exited the train.

The station platform was empty and dark, a long strip of black bitumen decorated with lonely wooden benches that sat waiting down beneath the orange lights. A wire fence rattled against its metal poles in the wind. William was scared, he was frightened and he was dirty, loose pieces of tunnel dirt still rattling round inside his basketball boots. And William was alone. There was nobody else around in the night. He had hoped that his mother would be here, waiting to meet him, that she would come to get him.

The wire of the fence rattled again as the wind pushed through.

William took the paper note out from his pocket and unfolded it to check the address.

The house at 35 Gower Way was an old wooden building, painted white, with dark brown around the window frames and over the front door. It was a small house with a neat, little garden out in front. There was a small brick fence which divided the front yard from the concrete footpath. The house was dark in the night, but there was a light on in the front room. William could see the brightness of it peeking around the edges of the closed curtains.

William walked up the concrete driveway of the house, then up onto the front step. He opened the mesh security door and it creaked loud and William flinched at the sound. William knocked on the wooden front door, then he closed the security door again, took a step back. He could hear movement inside, the floorboards ticking, footsteps on carpet. Then the front door opened up and an old man looked out through the mesh of the security screen. The old man was taller than William, larger. The top of the man's head was bald, shining red in the light inside, and he had short, white hair along the sides,

near his ears. The old man wore large, gold-framed glasses and he had white stubble along his sagging, red cheeks.

The old man peered out into the darkness, looked William over. He did not look happy to have been disturbed.

'Yes?' The old man said.

William stood on the front step, and he forgot what he was supposed to say for a moment. Then it came back to him.

'Mariel sent me,' William said.

'What?' the old man's cheeks shook when he spoke.

'Mariel sent me,' William repeated.

The old man looked William over again, then he leaned his head back slightly so he could look down through the bottom parts of his glasses.

'No,' the old man said, and he slammed the front door shut, dropping William back into darkness.

William stood on the bricks of the man's doorstep. He was stunned, frozen into place. The sound of the door slam still ringing in his ears. He wasn't sure what to do, where to go next, then he heard the front window of the house creaking. William looked over to it and he could see movement in the bottom corner of the window frame, the curtain jolting. He could hear the window being cranked open from inside, a small gap opening out, then it stopped.

William watched the gap. The closed curtains moved in the night breeze.

'Why are you here?' The old man's voice asked, and William was surprised, startled by the sudden sound.

'I'm sorry?' William asked.

'Why have you come here?' The old man said. William couldn't see him, the man hidden behind the closed curtain.

'I don't..., ' William shook his head. 'I don't know, I got told to come to this address.'

'By Mariel?'

'No,' William said. 'I don't know who Mariel is. I got told to say that Mariel sent me.'

'By who?'

William thought over whether he should say, whether he should tell this man the truth.

'My Mum,' William said to the closed curtain. 'My Mum told me to come here and say it.'

Then there was a silence. The curtain wavered slightly again as another gust flowed through. Then the front door opened again at William's side, just enough for the old man to look out. The man's glasses glinted in the light.

'What happened?' The old man asked.

'What do you mean?' William said.

'I mean, what happened, why did she send you here?'

William thought back to the lion, the tunnel, the dirt raining down onto him inside.

'We had to leave our house,' William said. 'Then my Mum told me to come...'

'No before that,' the old man snapped back. 'Why did you have to leave?'

William shook his head.

'I don't know,' William said. 'I came home from basketball, and I told her that I saw something. Then she just said that we had to go.'

'What did you see?'

William opened his mouth to answer, then the old man spoke again.

'Where is she now, your Mum?' The man asked.

'I don't know,' William replied.

The old man looked up to the roof for a moment. Then he lowered his face again. He watched out through the security screen.

'I told her that I don't want any part of this,' the old man said.

The chill of the night wind sent a shiver through William out on the front step and he shrugged his shoulders through it. The old man watched him, then he let out a breath. The man opened the front door up wider, the light reaching out from inside. The old man up behind the mesh screen, he looked down on William.

'How did you get so dirty?' The man asked.

'I had to go through a tunnel,' William said.

'A tunnel,' the man shook his head. The old man looked up again, as if looking to the night sky. Then he let out another breath. 'Okay,' the man said. 'You can come in.'

The man opened out the screen door and stood aside, guiding William into the light.

'Okay,' the old man said as he walked across from the kitchen. It was a mostly green, small kitchen area, lit up by a bright, white fluorescent tube that hummed and ticked above. The old man placed a steaming mug in front of William, who was sitting at the round kitchen table. William didn't know what was in the mug, nor did he have any intention of drinking it.

The old man settled into a seat on the other side of the table. The old man was wearing a red flannelette shirt and a blue woollen jumper over that. The jumper had a big hole over the elbow, the red of his shirt peeking through. The bald top of the old man's head shined beneath the light.

'I need you to tell me everything,' the man said to William. 'I need to know exactly what happened, why your Mum made you leave and come here.'

William told the old man about the basketball game, how he lost it, and the boy who had looked like a lion.

'A lion?' The man asked.

'Yes.'

The old man looked up to the ceiling.

'Jesus,' the man said. 'Okay, so they found you. They found you both so you needed to leave. Then she sent you here. Why would she send you here?'

But the man wasn't really asking William, he was more just speaking, more saying the question to himself. He wasn't looking at William as he did. Then he looked back to William.

'And you don't know where she went?' The old man asked.

William shook his head.

'She told me to go through this tunnel in the ground, and I did, then there was a noise outside, then the entrance closed off.'

'A noise?' The man asked.

William nodded. 'It was like a kettle boiling. But, like, deeper.'

The man leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest. He was looking over at the kitchen now, staring across the way.

'They would have seen you,' the man said.

'Who?'

The man switched his attention back to William. He looked over William's face. The old man smiled, then his lips straightened out again.

'Okay, we need to go,' and the man stood up from his chair, dragging its legs across the flooring.

'What?'

'We need to leave here, they'll know where you are.'

'Who will?'

'I don't know what your mother's told you,' the old man said. 'So I can't say.'

'She didn't tell me...'

'Come on,' the old man was moving off into the hallway now, shuffling away. William heard a set of keys jingling together. 'Let's get going.'

William sat in the front passenger seat of a car in the old man's garage as the old man packed things into the back of it, the boot door opened up, letting the cool night air in. The car rocked every time the old man dropped something else in. It was a four-wheel drive, the car, an old one. The inside of it smelled of oil and dirt. Thin lines of crumbs were filled into the seams around the gear stick and the handbrake. William looked over everything in the dim interior light.

The metal roller door of the garage started opening out in front, rising up outside the windscreen, the metal of it screeching and scraping as it lifted. Then the old man opened the drivers' side door and dropped into his seat. He was wearing a sleeveless red puffer jacket now, over the top of his blue jumper.

'Sorry I don't have any other clothes for you,' the old man said as he pulled his seatbelt across, shuffling himself

into place. He didn't look at William as he spoke. 'It's been a long time since...'

The old man turned the key and started up the car, then he flicked the headlights on, beaming out into the street. Then the two of them drove out, bouncing over the gutter tip and curving onto the roadway, the long stretch of it reaching into the darkness.

The streets were quiet, empty in the night. The digital clock on the dashboard read 11:15, and William looked up to the green traffic lights as they passed beneath them, then he looked up to the stars, the moon way up.

'Your name is William, right?' The old man said. The old man kept looking straight ahead as he spoke, watching the road before them. A set of oncoming headlights slid over his face.

'Yes,' William answered. The man nodded.

'And your mother's name is Louise.'

'Yes,' William said, and he felt relieved that the man knew her, he felt safer, just a bit. But then, as he thought about his mother, as he thought over where she might be. As he flashed back over all that had happened, everything that had gone on since he'd arrived home that night, William could feel the emotion rising, bubbling up inside. He could feel himself

starting to cry, the tears tickling at the edges of his eyelids.

William tried to hold it in, but he couldn't stop himself, his lip trembling. He looked away, looked out the side window, as the tears spilled out and down his face. He pushed them away, tried not to let the old man see. William's chest pulsed up against the seatbelt as he took in a breath.

'Come on,' the old man said. 'Take a breath.'

William kept crying, stuttering his breaths, tried to get himself under control. He took in deep breaths, blew them back out slow. He pushed away his tears with the back of his hand.

The old man watched the road ahead as they drove further out, away from the houses and the streetlights.

William watched out the side window, his eyes blurry from tears. He looked up to the stars again, to the moon watching on way above. He wanted to ask the old man where they were now, where they were going. He wanted to ask the man who he was, how he knew his name. Why his mother had sent him there. But he knew the man wouldn't say. And part of him didn't want to know. Not now.

And as the car rattled on, bumping off the bitumen streets and onto a dirt path. The white patterns of the dirt sliding towards them through the headlights. As they rolled

along, William could feel himself drifting, fading out.  
Falling asleep in the warmth inside.

William closed his eyes, just for a moment. Just for a  
rest. Just to rest for a tiny bit.

The sun was out when William woke up, the yellow light of the early morning filtering through the fogged over car windscreen. William sat up, and there was a blanket draped across him, over his body, his seatbelt still on. William wiped at the mist on the window at his side and he peeked out. The car was parked in bushland, in the middle of a forest of some kind, huge, dark coloured tree trunks all round, reaching up towards the sky. There was a scattering of small trees all across the ground and large tufts of green and yellow grass that looked like explosions frozen in time.

William could see a tent set up across the way, a small, blue tent with green guide ropes pulled tight. He assumed the old man was inside, gone from the drivers' seat.

William pushed the button on his seatbelt and set himself free. He could still feel where the seatbelt had pushed into his body overnight. William stretched his arms forward, hit his hands onto the roof as he went. He twisted his back,

turned his neck. Then William opened the car door and he stepped out, got out into the cold morning air, the moss smell all around.

There was nothing around them, there were no obvious roads or trails, other than the tyre tracks that the car had indented into the ground on its way in. William looked all around, the repeated patterns of the tree trunks all across the distance. The green branches swayed way up high, opening glimpses of the sky above.

William needed to pee, and he stepped across the damp ground, stepped over the tiny shrubs and plants, and he went around behind a nearby tree, out of sight from the blue tent.

William stood on the other side, thinking over what had happened. The trickle sound of his pee against the tree bark.

'Good morning,' a voice spoke and William looked up and his mother was right there, sitting right above him on a tree branch, in the same tree that he was peeing on. His mother smiled down at him.

'Jesus,' William said, and he turned his body away quickly. 'Mum.'

'Sorry,' his mother said.

William twisted his hips further away. 'Jesus.'

'Well how was I supposed to know which tree you'd pee on?'

'Well why are you even in a tree?' William asked. He finished his business and flipped his pants back up. His mother jumped down from the tree branch, her feet thumping onto the ground before him. She looked down at her son, smiled. She raised a hand towards him.

'My boy,' she said. William moved to her and she wrapped him into her arms. She held him in tight. She leaned her head down onto the top of his.

'Where were you?' William asked.

'I had to go.'

'I was scared,' William told her. 'I didn't know what was happening.'

'I know, my son,' his mother said. 'I'm sorry.'

Then a twig cracked across the way, and William and his mother turned to look. The old man was standing up outside the blue tent. He was looking across to them.

'Dad,' William's mother said.

The old man nodded in response.

The three of them sat on fallen tree trunks over nearby the tent. The logs were slippery, crumbling away on the forest floor. William sat on one log and his mother and the old man sat on another.

The two adults were looking across to him. William's mother rubbed her hands together.

'Okay, um...' his mother looked away.

'Your mother is a shape-shifter,' the old man said. The old man stared across at William, straight-faced.

'Dad,' his mother said, then she looked to William. She smiled.

'Okay, there's a lot you need to know, a lot that I haven't told you.'

'She's a shape-shifter. She changes into things,' the old man pointed to his side, at William's Mum.

'Dad please,' then William's mother looked up to the sky above. Then she looked back to William.

'Okay, um. When I was younger, when I was about your age actually, I had this cat.'

'Oh, the cat,' the old man shook his head.

'We'd had an older cat, and she was very old, and when she died, I begged my parents for a new one, for a kitten of my own to play with,' she nodded. 'They eventually gave in and they got me one, a little ginger kitten named Lexie.'

'Lexie, yeah,' the old man added. William's mother smiled at the memory.

'I loved Lexie. I spent all of my time with her. She would sleep on my bed at night and I'd feed her in the morning. Part of why my parents let me have a kitten at all was that I promised that I would take care of her, that I'd do everything, I'd feed her, I'd change her litter tray. I'd take care of her.' She shook her head. 'I spent all my time with that cat.'

'Whenever she wasn't at school, she was with the cat,' the old man said. William's mother smiled at the old man, then her smile dropped. She looked back to her son.

'One day,' his mother continued. 'I was playing with Lexie on my bed. She was scratching at my hand and I was pulling it away, and then I suddenly felt strange. I felt

something that I hadn't felt before. It's hard to explain, but it felt kind of like falling asleep, but not by choice. I hadn't chosen to go to sleep, it just came over me, and then I faded out. And when I came back, I was...' his mother trailed off, staring at nothing in particular.

'She was the cat,' the old man said.

His mother looked to the old man, then back to William.

William sat silent. He looked over their watching faces.

'What?' William said.

'I know, I...' his mother put a hand up, then put it to her mouth. 'I know it's a lot.'

William shook his head slow.

'What?'

'She's a shape-shifter,' the old man said.

'Dad,' his Mum held her hand up, signalling for the old man to stop.

'This is your father?' William asked, gesturing to the old man.

His mother smiled. 'Yes. This is your grand...'

'What?' William said again. 'You said that he was dead.'

The old man huffed out a breath, then looked away.

'No,' his mother replied. 'He is not dead. I'm sorry, Will.'

William stared back at the two of them, looking over them both.

'You can turn into things?' William asked.

'Yes,' his mother replied.

William shook his head again. 'What does that even...?'

Then his mother suddenly shrunk away, disappeared before him, and an owl remained in her place, standing on the forest log beside the old man. William went to stand up and move away quick, and he stumbled, fell backwards over the log that he'd been sitting on and came crashing back to earth. William sat on the cold ground, his legs, his shoes up over the wood. William stared across at the owl, his eyes wide. The bird tilted its head, standing on the log alongside the old man. The owl had a bright white circle of a face and large black eyes. The bird's skinny legs branched down onto the log's surface, black claws on the wood. Then the owl expanded, changed shape within a split-second, then William's mother was back again, sitting in her place on the log. A small puff of feathers drifted down through the air at her side.

The old man looked at the fluffy feathers, which swayed, side-to-side, as they floated down.

'I'd forgotten about the feathers,' the old man said.

William was puffing now, his elbows, his bottom getting damp on the dirt. He stared at his mother, looked over her features. She smiled back at him. She tilted her head to the side.

'That's...'

William struggled to find words. 'That's not... You can't do...'

William slowly rose back up, first to a sitting position on the ground, then he moved back across to the log. He kept his eyes locked onto his mother as he went.

'What was that?'

'She's a shape-shifter,' the old man said.

'Are you okay?' His mother asked.

'No,' William shook his head, 'You can't do that, that's not...'

Then William stared at the ground, the dead leaves all across. His eyes moved across, but he wasn't really looking at anything, then he looked to his Mum again.

William stood up.

'William,' his mother said.

'No,' William replied. 'Just...'

William started walking, moving away. Then he stepped faster, getting away from the tent, moving into the forest.

'William, where are you going?' His mother yelled, but William ignored her, kept walking away. He couldn't look at

her right now, couldn't look at her face. He couldn't understand it, his mind rushing so fast that it hurt.

'Sit down if you feel too dizzy,' the old man yelled after him. 'You'll pass out.'

William kept walking, further into the bushes, down beneath the tall trees. He stopped a moment and put a hand onto one of the tree trunks, so that he could regain his balance, steady himself. Stop his head from spinning. Then he continued on, walking further into the green forest.

William kept walking till he came to the edge of an open section, a part of the forest where there were no trees, just a patch of long grass. The strands of the yellow grass leaned sideways as the wind pushed through. Further beyond the grassland, there were more trees, the forest rising up again over the other side. There were mountains further beyond that. The huge, grey shapes of them looked like cardboard cut-outs against the blue sky.

William stood looking out over the plain. He leaned up onto a tree, tried to stop his brain from spinning. His head felt hot and he was breathing heavy, puffing.

It felt like this couldn't be real, that this couldn't really be happening. It felt like a dream, like everything would go back to normal at any moment. But it didn't. This was happening. This was real life. There was no going back to normal.

Another gust of wind pushed through, cooled against William's skin.

William heard footsteps approaching from behind, and he turned his head to look. The old man was walking through, stomping across the grass and the dead leaves.

'Come on now,' the old man said. 'Take it easy.'

William shook his head, looking at the man.

'I don't even know you,' William told him.

'I don't know you either,' the old man said. He stopped in the forest, a few metres back from William. 'But I know what it's like to find out, how it feels.'

William looked down at the ground, still leaning up against the tree at his side. The leaves and the grass seemed like they were moving, pulsing in his view.

'Why did she tell me that you were dead?' William asked.

'Different reasons,' the old man replied. 'But mostly she was trying to protect you.'

William closed his eyes, the heat building in his head, rising, made him feel weak. He clenched his teeth together.

'I know it's a lot to take in,' the old man said.

William opened his eyes, looked to the ground again. He shook his head.

'This can't happen,' William said.

'There's a lot of things that can't happen,' the old man replied. 'But they still do.'

William looked to the old man, who was still standing in the same spot, looking across. His red puffer vest over his shoulders. His bald head shining in a sliver of sunlight. The grass and bushes were up to the old man's knees.

'I don't know what this is,' William told him.

The old man tightened his mouth.

'No one does,' the old man said. William held eye contact with the man, staring at him. The old man stood, patient, steady.

'How can this happen?' William asked.

'I don't know,' the old man replied. 'Happens more than you'd think though, other people can do it.'

'Other people?' William said. The old man nodded.

William looked to the ground again. Then he looked back to the old man.

'I don't know what to do,' William said.

'Well, I can't tell you what you should do,' the old man replied. 'But I do know that your Mum wouldn't have sent you to me unless there was something pretty serious going on.'

William looked to the ground again. It seemed more stable now, more still. The heat in his head was easing back. He looked back to the old man.

'Why did she send me to you?'

'I don't know,' the old man replied. 'Maybe you should go find out.'

William and the old man walked back to the tent and the car, the camp site they'd created in the middle of the forest. His mother was there waiting, and she stood up from sitting on her log when she saw them both approaching. She picked up William's red backpack, the one he'd packed, then left behind as he slid into the dirt tunnel.

'I brought your backpack,' William's mother told him. She raised it up in front of herself. 'So there's some other clothes and...'

William moved past her, kept his head down as he went, kept his eyes away from his mother. He sat down onto the same log that he'd been sitting on previously.

'Okay,' William's mother put the backpack down onto the grass. She stepped across and sat back down onto her log, nearby William. He kept his head down, his hands in his pockets.

'Let's go through it,' his mother said. 'Let's get it all out, right now.' William's mother lifted her head, facing him. 'I will answer all of your questions, no matter what they are. I'll explain everything as best as I can, as best as I know.'

William slowly rolled his eyes up. He looked over his mother's waiting face.

'How?' William asked.

'How what?' His mother smiled gently as she spoke.

William glared back at her. As if he really needed to explain.

'Okay,' his mother nodded. 'Well, there's not a lot of study or anything that's been done, but the way that it's been explained to me is that shapeshifting is built into all of us in some way.'

William stared back.

His mother could see the old man over behind her son, watching on from across the way. The old man stared, blank faced.

His mother looked back to William's face. She smiled at him.

'Human beings evolved from fish, right?' William's mother explained. 'So we've all shapeshifted in some form.' Then she

narrowed her eyes. 'Have they taught you that in school, how evolution works?'

William turned his head side to side.

'Right,' his mother said. 'Well, that's the theory. That a long time ago, before humans even existed, there were only fish. Well, like, fish and dinosaurs, I guess. Then eventually, those fish came out from the sea onto land, and they grew legs, and then eventually, over a long period of time, they transformed into humans,' she smiled nervously. 'That's how it works, and some of us, it seems, retained that ability to shift. Do you know what I mean?'

'Some of who?' William asked.

'Some of us,' his mother replied. 'Like, people. Like, some people.'

'Other people?'

'Well, yes,' his mother said. 'Other people can shift too, yeah.'

'What other people?'

'Oh, I mean, there's a lot, it's not that uncommon,' then she saw William's face, his eyes widening in fear. 'Well, I mean, it is, I don't know how many. But other people can do it.'

William looked away, thinking for a moment. Then he switched his eyes back to her.

'So, you can change into anything?' William asked.

'Well, no, not anything,' his mother replied. 'You can only change into certain animals, that you're familiar with.'

'What does that mean?'

'Well, you need to have spent time with the animal, to have made a connection with it, of sorts.' Then William's mother looked up as she thought over how to describe it. 'It's like, you need to learn the animal, to understand it, and then your body can absorb its form, I guess.'

'So you become that animal?'

'Yes,' his mother smiled. Then she thought over what he'd asked. 'Oh no, the actual animal itself still exists, but you become the same animal, but like a copy of it. So the first time that I shifted into the cat, Dad came into my room and he found two cats on the bed.'

The old man laughed slightly behind William, and William looked back over his shoulder to him. Then he turned back to his mother.

'How many animals can you turn into?' William asked.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I've never counted.'

William nodded, looking at his mother's face. Then his eyes narrowed.

'When I was younger, I remember that I was really into elephants, and I remember that one time when we went to the zoo in the city, one of the elephants came up to me at the fence,' William said. 'It didn't go to anyone else, but it came straight to me. Was that you?'

A smile spread across his mother's face.

'No,' she said. 'That wasn't me.' Then his mother raised her head up, looked over to the old man. 'He's got a heck of a memory, huh?' she said.

'Like an elephant,' the old man mumbled in response.

William turned to look at the man again.

'Can you change into animals too?' he asked him.

'No,' the man replied. 'It comes from the mothers' side apparently.'

William turned back to his Mum.

'Where's your mother?' William asked her.

She looked across to the old man, then back to William again.

'She was killed,' she told him. 'By hunters.'

'Hunters?'

'She was not in human form at the time,' his mother explained.

William nodded slow, taking it all in. Then he remembered.

'The lion,' William said.

'Yes,' his mother responded. 'The boy at your basketball game. He was a shapeshifter as well. That's why we had to leave.'

'You said that he was after us.'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

William's mother paused for a moment, looking over her son's face. Then she let out a breath.

'They've been searching for us,' she told him. 'They've been looking for you and I for a long time, for years, and I've been able to keep you away from them up till now. But it seems that they've finally caught up to us.'

'Who?' William asked.

His mother sat up straighter, looking down onto him.

'William, that person, the lion. He works with your father.'

William's mother sat alone at the camp site, watching her son through the gaps between the trees. He'd walked off again, wandered into the forest, and his mother sat looking on, tracking the colour of his clothes as he moved along the dark trunks.

The old man, her father, sat down onto the log beside her.

'It's a lot to take in,' the old man said.

'Yes,' William's mother nodded. Then she looked to him, smiled at her father. 'It certainly is a lot.'

'How did they find you?' The old man asked.

Her face dropped, a look of concern taking over.

'I don't know,' she replied. 'I've been taking thiazide tablets, so that they couldn't find me, so they wouldn't be able to sniff me out.' She looked back to William, his shape moving between the trees. 'It would've taken them a long time,

and they didn't have it exact, they didn't know exactly where we were,' she said. 'But they found us.'

The old man kept an eye on William also, watching him move further away.

'I can't get involved in this,' the old man said. 'I miss you, and it's good to see the boy. But I can't get involved.'

The old man stood up from the log, and William's mother looked up to him.

'I'll stick around for today,' the old man told her. 'Then I'll head out in the morning.'

She nodded in response.

'Thank you,' she said to him.

'Do you know what you're going to do now?' The old man asked, looking down on her on the log. William's mother squinted up to him in the sunlight, looking at his dark shape. She held her stare.

The old man nodded. 'Okay, well I definitely can't be here for that. I'll head out first thing.'

The old man walked away, back across to the blue tent, over beside the parked car.

William's mother stood beside him as they looked over a stream, a thin creek which ran through the middle of the forest which William had come across in his walking. William watched down on the water, rippling by. He was calming down now, trying to take it all in. There was so much, so many things to consider. But he was glad to have his mother with him again. He was glad to have her near.

'What about fish?' William asked as he looked at the clear water. 'Can you turn into a fish?

'No, I can't,' his mother replied. 'But some shifters can.'

'What about a spider?' William asked.

'No,' she laughed. 'People can't shift into insects, they're... too different, I guess.'

'So, just birds and animals?'

'Yeah,' she nodded. 'Pretty much.'

William looked to his mother.

'Can you change into something now? Like a bird, or a bear or...'

'No, William,' she put a hand up. 'It takes a lot of energy to shift, and the resizing of your body bigger and smaller, it wears out your joints, and it hurts after a while.'

'Oh,' William looked back to the stream. 'Okay.'

'It also takes a lot of concentration. You need to stay focused on keeping a balance between you and the animal. If you lose your focus, you change back, that type of thing.'

William nodded. He listened to the water bubbling by.

'Why is he coming after us?'

William's mother looked down at the water, then at the ground. The lush green grass on the creek bank, flattened beneath her feet.

'Because we left,' his mother said. 'Because I left him.'

'Why?'

William's mother looked up again, looked up to the sky and all around. She thought over the best way that she could explain.

'Your father...' then she stopped. She shook her head. 'It's very difficult to explain,' she said. 'You know how I told you about humans evolving from fish?' She asked. 'How humans changed from fish over time, many, many years ago?'

'Yes,' William replied.

'Your father believes that we were never supposed to stop changing, that humans were supposed to keep evolving and adapting, we were all supposed to be able to change and shapeshift,' William's mother said. 'But at some point, people did stop, people stopped evolving. We got comfortable in the lives that we had made, and because we weren't evolving, we started changing the world to suit us, instead of us changing with it,' she explained. 'Your father thinks that's not how it's supposed to be. And he thinks the world is now struggling to deal with it.'

'What do you mean?'

William's mother looked to him.

'Remember last year, when your class did that project on climate change, how the world is getting hotter and the snow is melting away?'

'Yes.'

'That's what your father thinks people have caused by not adapting, by going against the world, against nature. He thinks that we were supposed to keep evolving, but we've

stopped the process, and because the world can't handle it anymore, bad things are starting to happen,' his mother said.

'Does that make any sense?'

'Kind of,' William replied.

William's mother focused onto the water flowing by again.

'Your father believes that we are the next evolution, people who can adapt with nature and grow, and he thinks that those who can't shift, normal humans, are...' William's mother tilted her head, thinking over the right words. 'A problem.'

William's mother looked down to her leg, to the spot where there was a scar up on her thigh, hidden beneath her clothes. Where the hunters had left their mark.

'And because we're different, because we frighten people with what we can do, we've been forced to hide, pretend we don't exist. And that makes him angry,' William's mother said. 'Your father wanted to change how things are, and he was willing to put us at risk to do it. He was willing to put you at risk. He couldn't stop, he couldn't change. So, soon after you were born, I left.'

She held her focus on the clear water, tricking a sliding by over the rocks and reeds.

'Do you understand?' William's mother asked.

'Yes,' William replied. 'I think so.'

William's mother reached to her side and took her son's hand. She held his fingers, warm in her grip.

A wind rushed through the forest above them, cracking old branches in the tops of the giant trees. William looked up. The brittle bones of the tree tops swayed back and forth against the sky.

'Will we be able to go home again?' William asked his mother.

'I'm not sure,' she replied. 'They know where we are now, so...'

William looked back down to the stream, the clear water sliding by.

'Will they find us out here?'

William's mother thought over how she should answer. Then she told him the truth.

'Yes,' she said. 'When you shift, it activates a chemical in your blood, something that other shifters can smell. Normal people can't, but shifters can,' she said. 'I've been taking a tablet to hide it, but because I shifted again...'

'So, they'll be able to track you?' William asked.

'Probably.'

William concentrated on a single spot in the stream before them, a point where the water poured over the surface

of a rock, spilling down it. He stared at it, till it blurred away in his view.

'What are we going to do, Mum?' William asked.

'I'm not sure yet,' she told him. 'But don't worry. I've got you now.'

She squeezed William's fingers harder, let him know that she was there.

'I will always keep you safe,' she told him.

They built a small camp fire in the evening, and the old man poked wood into it, bursting orange sparks up into the darkening sky. William sat quietly on his log, thinking over everything that had happened, everything that had been said. It still felt like a dream, like everything would switch back to normal at some point. Like this wasn't really happening. The strong smell of the bushfire smoke said otherwise, and the sharp heat of the flames felt very real, crackling and ticking in the night.

The old man sat down onto his log over on the other side of the fire, then he squinted at the rising flames. The old man poked a stick forward into the small, burning pile, stoking the flames.

'It's good to meet you, William,' the old man said. William looked across to him. His red face, his skin shining in the light. 'I wish it could have been another way, but...'  
the old man nodded.

William looked over the man's features, the white stubble on his cheeks, the brightness of the flames reflected in his glasses. This was his grandfather. A man he'd never known.

'I'm sorry to hear about your wife,' William said. The old man shook his head, put a hand up.

'No, No, no,' the old man said. 'We don't talk about that.'

William felt bad for raising it, and he looked away, looked into the flames again.

'It's good to just sit with you a while, William,' the old man said.

The two of them sat beside the burning fire in the night, watching the embers float up and fade out way down below the forest canopy. The stars coming out between the gaps in the trees. William was surprised at how comfortable he felt, how relaxed it seemed with the old man. He wasn't nervous about sitting with a strange adult, he wasn't concerned. He felt calm, safe. Despite the lion somewhere out there, chasing after him. Despite his father coming to find him.

He sat with the old man, and he watched the fire burn on, eating along the stacked wood pieces.

The old man was gone in the morning. William woke up inside the tent, the sunlight bright against the thin, blue fabric above his head, and he looked over and he saw that the sleeping bag over the other side of the plastic floor was empty and scrunched up. At first, he assumed that that the old man must have slept in the car instead, but when he zipped down the front of the tent and looked out into the forest, he saw that the car was gone. There were two flattened trails of plants and grass where the car's tyres had rolled through.

William's mother was over by the camp fire, her blonde hair tied up, messy in the early light. She was cooking something over on the small flames. William could smell it.

'Mum?'

'Hey buddy,' she looked over, smiled to him. 'How did you sleep?'

'Where's...?' Then William wasn't sure how to describe the old man.

'He had to go,' his mother answered. 'He had some things he had to do.'

William nodded, looking over the tyre tracks.

'Do you want some breakfast?' his mother asked.

'Is he coming back?' William replied.

His mother forced a frown.

'No, William, he's not.'

William looked back to the tyre tracks again, and he blinked his eyes hard, crunching them together. He looked back to his mother, over by the fire. Then he slipped back inside the walls of the blue tent.

William's mother walked ahead of him, leading him through the mini forest of thin ferns, the dead leaves and sticks crunching beneath her feet.

'It's just over here,' she said.

'What are we going?' William asked. William's hair was still spiked out in the early morning, though he had changed his clothes now. His dirt smudged basketball outfit and his jumper rested in a pile back at the camp.

William's mother stopped walking, then she turned to face him.

'Okay,' his mother said. 'I need to teach you.'

'Teach me what?'

'I'm going to teach you how to shift.'

William suddenly felt scared, his muscles stiffening through his body.

'Me?' He asked.

'Yes.'

'But I can't do that,' he could feel his knees shaking slightly, concerned at the thought.

'You can,' William's mother told him. 'You just don't know it yet.'

'But I shouldn't, should I?' William asked. 'You said that they can find you once you shift, because of what it does to your blood.'

'Yes, that is true,' she replied. 'But they've already found you now, they'll find you again,' she explained. 'And you're going to need it.'

'Mum, I don't...'  
William felt his teeth chattering together when he closed his mouth. 'I don't think that...'

William's mother knelt down before him. She looked into his eyes.

'William, you can do this. You need to do this,' she smiled. 'You'll be fine, I'm right here with you.'

William's mother stood up and moved aside, revealing a plastic box nestled into the grass, down beneath the green fern stems. The plastic box had holes in its sides, and a metal cage door on the end. William's mother gestured for him to take a look, and William stepped forward and leaned down. He peered into the plastic container.

Deep inside the plastic box, right up at the back of it, there was a rabbit, a brown and grey coloured rabbit huddling itself into the back corner. It was small, just a baby bunny. Its nose twitched. Its eyes stared back from the shade of the box.

'A rabbit,' William said.

'Yes,' his mother replied. 'A rabbit.' She leaned down so her face was beside his, looking into the plastic cage. 'I found him, out in the forest.'

William looked over the little rabbit's body, the soft hair over its back, its long, skinny back feet.

'He must have gotten separated from his mother,' William said.

'I ate his mother,' William's Mum said, and William looked to her quick. 'There's a lot you need to learn, William.'

'You ate a rabbit?'

'Come on, William,' his mother said as she stood back up. 'I need you to concentrate.'

'Seriously?' William said.

William looked back in to the small animal, huddling itself as far back from him as it could.

'This rabbit will become your best friend, William. You need to spend time with him, get to know all about him,' his mother said. 'Maybe you should give him a name.'

William stared in at the animal. Their eyes connected, united in fear.

William carried the rabbit box with him as he and his mother walked out into an open field, the long grass swaying across before them. His mother lead the way. Her blonde ponytail flickered sideways in the wind.

'We used to come out here when I was a kid,' his mother said. 'My parents used to bring us out here to go camping, out where no one else ever went.'

William looked in through the holes in the plastic box, checked on the tiny rabbit inside.

'Is that how your Dad knew to bring me out here, how he knew you'd come find us?'

'Yes,' his mother looked back over her shoulder to him as she spoke. 'I knew that he would remember, that this is where I would be.'

William's mother continued on, headed in the direction of the distant mountains.

'We used to come out here and spend weeks just exploring the forest, just like you and I are now.'

William imagined how they would have looked, a child version of his mother, a younger version of the old man. Then William thought of his own father, the man chasing them down.

'Who is my father?' William asked.

William's mother stopped in her tracks. She turned around to face him.

'Your father was...' She was staring away now, looking at nothing in particular. Then she looked back to William. 'Your father was an athlete, like you. He was good at basketball and soccer, he was good at every sport,' she smiled. 'I met him in the city one day, when I was out on a high school excursion, and we immediately clicked. We just connected, just like that.' His Mum reached forward, flattened down his messy hair. She slid her fingers down his cheek. 'You have his eyes, William, you look a lot like him.'

William stared up at his mother, her soft eyes glinting in the sunlight.

'He wanted to be a biologist,' she continued. 'He wanted to go to Antarctica and study the animals down there, but then...' She dropped her hand away from his face. 'Things changed.'

William's mother looked over his face, her eyes moving all around, taking in his forehead, his nose. The patterns of the tiny brown freckles across his skin.

'It's not easy being different,' his mother told him.

The rabbit scratched, rattled round inside the plastic box at William's side.

'Oh, little one,' his mother said as she looked down, peeking through the holes in the box. 'Have you thought of a name for him yet?' She asked.

'Archie,' William said. His mother looked back to William's face, smiled.

'Archie,' she said. 'That's a good name.' Then William's mother stood up and turned back around. She looked out over the field before them. 'Okay, what we need to do is we need to flatten out a piece of grass here.' She spread her arms out wide. 'We need to flatten down a space.'

The two of them stomped around the dry grassland, squashing it down. They flattened an area, a large space within the field, then the two of them walked back into the middle of their clearing and met up.

William's mother looked all around the area, the long grass leaning at its edges.

'Okay,' William's mother said. 'Now you need to let Archie out.'

'Let him out?' William looked around them, the grass field beyond. 'But he'll just run away.'

'No he won't,' his mother said. 'You know how I said that there's a chemical in your blood that other shifters can sense?'

William nodded.

'Animals can sense it too, and they're draw to it. Especially young ones that are looking for safety.'

William looked down at the plastic box at his side, then back to his mother.

'But I don't have it yet, the blood thing. I've never shifted.'

His mother nodded. 'Archie will sense it in you. Trust me.'

William rested the box down, then he sat down onto the grass beside it. William unclipped the metal cage door and opened it out, then he moved himself back, shifted himself away from the open exit.

The tiny rabbit remained still inside the cage. Then eventually, the rabbit started to move. It started to sniff around, inching closer to the doorway. The rabbit sat in the

open door for a moment, looking out. It looked across to William and his mother, sniffed at the air. Then the tiny rabbit dashed away, bouncing across the flattened grass and out towards the longer section.

'See,' William said. 'He's gone.'

'Wait,' his mother said.

The rabbit got to the edge of the flattened area, then it stopped and looked back at William and his mother. The rabbit twitched its nose at them, then it sniffed at the ground. It sniffed all around, then the rabbit slowly started to hop back, bit-by-bit. Its big back feet moving over the flat grass, moving forward, back towards William.

The tiny rabbit sniffed at the sole of William's basketball shoe.

'See?' William's mother whispered. 'He can sense it.'

William watched the rabbit as it sniffed at his shoe, then it skipped up along the side of his leg. The rabbit hopped up onto his leg.

William looked up to his mother, smiling, excited. He watched the rabbit as it sniffed at his pants.

'Will I change into a rabbit now?' William asked.

'No,' his mother said. 'It takes time.'

The sun was already setting by the time they headed back. Archie settled back into his plastic box, rattling along at William's side. William's mother leading the way, moving between the tall trees.

Back at their camp, William's mother stoked up the fire, and they both sat on their logs alongside and took in its bright warmth. They watched the sparks splitting away from the edges of the flames and rising into the night. Up above, tiny specks of the first stars watched down on them, glittering through above the heads of the gently swaying trees.

William's mother watched her boy, looking up. His eyes tracking the bright bursts up into the night.

'William,' his mother said. William looked across to her, and her face looked wavy in the fire heat, the edges of her cheeks wriggling. 'William, I want to tell you something. About your father.'

William noticed how serious she looked, her eyes steady, her mouth straight.

'He's not all bad,' His mother said. William could see tears in his mother's eyes, glinting in the light from the flames. 'There are things about your father that are good. He can be good. Sometimes. He just...' then his mother looked up, looked all around above them. Her eyes scanned across the darkness, and William looked up too, tried to see what she was looking at. The dark tree tops leaned and receded against the night sky overhead.

William's mother got up from her log and she stepped across, closer to the tent. She picked up a small bucket of water which the old man had left for them, and she lifted the water bucket up and poured the clear liquid out over the camp fire, swirling it all around. The flames shrunk down and away, the burning logs hissing at the water's cold touch. A thick column of white smoke flowed up into the darkness before him.

'Okay,' his mother said. She put the bucket back down.

'What is it?' William asked.

'Shh,' his mother told him. Then she whispered: 'It's time for bed now.' She touched William on the shoulder, prompting him to get to his feet.

'What happened?' William whispered back.

'Nothing. Nothing my son,' his Mum replied. She walked behind him, hurrying him along the forest floor. 'We should just bunker down now, stay safe.'

William's mother guided him over to the tent, and they each climbed into the blue room and lay down onto their sleeping bags. His mother zipped up the front of the tent. The smell of the campfire was all through everything, their clothes, their hair. William lay back on his sleeping bag, looking up at the blue canvas roof. He could see the outline of the moon, way up beyond the leaning, creaking trees.

'Mum?' William said.

'Yes.'

'Are they going to find us?'

'Yes, Will,' she said. 'But we'll be ready next time,' she told him. 'We'll be ready when they return.'

William woke up in the early sunlight, the brightness shining in through the blue tent roof. The outside of the tent wall had trails of drips sliding down it, and William sat up in his sleeping bag and he looked across to the other side, to where his mother should be. She was gone, her sleeping bag flattened down and vacant.

William zipped down the front of the tent and looked out into the forest and just outside the tent, sniffing around the side of the camp fire, there was a fox. There was a red fox standing right there in front of him, barely a few metres away, and William pulled the front flaps of the tent shut and he held them closed.

His hands were shaking the tent, his knuckles wrapped in the wet fabric as he held the opening shut. William held his breath, careful not to make a sound, to alert the animal to his presence. It was so close to him. Then William thought of Archie, the rabbit outside in his plastic box. William looked

over, and he could see the shape of Archie's box outside the wall of the tent. He imagined Archie watching out the cage door, watching the fox stalking along before it.

William slowly eased the tent opening apart, then he peeked out through the gap. He could see the fox sniffing, raising its nose up. It turned its head as it did and William looked to Archie's box again through the side wall of the tent, then he looked back to the fox through the gap. The fox was sniffing for Archie, William knew it. It would find him in a moment.

William had to stop it, had to save his rabbit. William took in a deep breath, then he pulled open the flaps of the tent wide and he yelled out at the red fox, as he rose up, tried his best to scare the animal away.

The fox dropped its head and looked to the sound, its yellow eyes pointed straight at William. William felt scared, felt the fear spike through him, and he yelled again as he stood up out of the tent. William stomped his foot down, scratched his shoe over the sticks and the dirt, then the fox changed, transformed before him. His mother rose up, appeared where the fox had been. She looked at him, her hand raised like a stop sign and William stumbled, tripped backwards into the tent behind him.

'It's okay,' William's mother said. William was looking out through the front of the tent, the flaps falling across his view. His back hurt from hitting the ground beneath the plastic tent floor. William's mother's blonde hair stood out in the early sunlight.

'Sorry Will,' his mother said, still holding up her hand. His mother tapped at the side of her nose. 'Better to smell, sense if anyone's coming.'

William gathered himself and got up out of the tent and his mother stood before him, watching him rise up. William looked her over, still amazed by how she could change so completely. William reached up and touched at her face, her soft cheek. He looked into his mother's brown eyes. They were nothing like the fox's yellow gaze.

'Does it hurt?' William asked. He moved his fingers down her cold cheek.

'No,' his mother replied. 'Not really.'

'How does it feel?' William asked.

'Restrictive,' she replied. 'You'll see.'

William dropped his hand away, looking over her skin.

'I have to go for a bit,' William's mother told him. She looked over the camp site around her. 'I'll only be gone for a moment. I just need to go and check on your grandfather.'

William's mother stepped over and looked at the blackened camp fire, made sure it was safe.

'How will you get there?' William asked. Then he realized. 'Oh right. The owl.'

'Maybe not the owl,' his mother said. 'Not the best for day flight.' She smiled to him. 'Don't worry, you are safe, there's nothing around,' she told him. 'You can stay here with Archie, get to know him a little more.'

'Will you be long?' William asked. He was concerned, scared to be without her again.

'No,' his Mum told him. 'Not long at all. I just need to check in and see that he's safe.'

William took in a breath, held it in.

'Okay,' William nodded. He looked over to Archie's cage. 'We'll be okay.'

William's mother smiled back. She leaned down, gave him a kiss on the cheek.

'I'll be back before you know it.'

William sat on the forest floor, on the sticks and leaves and grass, his legs spread out wide. Archie hopped around in front of him, sniffing at the ground. Eating at the grass. The tiny rabbit propped up on its back legs, sniffed at the air. William reached forward and patted Archie on his head gently, carefully. William felt his fingers along the rabbit's soft, brown fur between his long ears.

William looked through the gaps in Archie's fur as he moved his fingers along, to the pink skin underneath. William looked into Archie's big brown eye, stared into it, and for a moment, William felt himself drifting.

It felt like sleeping, William thought, like when you're falling asleep, fading into dream. Drifting into it. Then William could hear a heartbeat, loud, thumping inside his head. He felt warm, a warmth rushing through his veins, out into his fingers, his feet, filling into him, then William opened up his eyes wide and took in a huge breath and shook

his head. He let his breath back out and he looked down at his hands, palms up. His fingers were shaking. Bubbles of sweat shivered on his skin. William touched at his chest, his stomach. He was puffing, his stomach rising and falling beneath his touch.

'You almost did it,' his mother's voice spoke from above him and William jolted in surprise, which scared Archie, who hopped away then stopped a little further on. William looked up, and his mother was there, perched on a tree branch above him, looking down.

'Oh my God,' William panted.

William's mother jumped down, her feet thumping onto the ground at his side.

'You nearly shifted, my son,' she smiled to him. 'You were close.'

William looked to his mother, then to Archie up ahead. Archie was on his back legs again, his ears pointed up. Archie looked back at William.

'I nearly changed?' William asked. He looked to his hand.

'Yes,' his mother said. 'Into a rabbit.'

William looked back to Archie, who was hopping back now, sniffing at the ground again. William looked up to his Mum.

'It felt weird,' he told her.

'Yes,' she said. 'It does. But then...' then William's mother looked away, looked up to the trees around them. His mother suddenly shifted, shrunk down into a snake, its long, brown, shining body stretching over the dead leaves and sticks at William's side, and William pulled his leg away, scraped across the ground to get away from it. The snake curled forward, then it raised its head up, wavering slightly as it went. The snake flickered out its forked tongue. It shivered its tongue up towards the sky, in and out and in and out again. Then the snake transformed, rose back up into the shape of William's mother, standing up over him. She looked down on William.

'They're coming,' his mother said.

'We need to go, now,' William's mother was searching through the blue tent, looking through her sleeping bag, then she stood back out, leaving William inside. He was looking through his own things, his clothes, his bedding.

'What do we take?' William asked.

'Nothing, just grab Archie and let's go,' his mother said.

William came back out from the tent and he picked up the plastic box from the side by its handle. William turned around, Archie in hand, and a horse stood there before him, looking at him.

'Oh boy,' William said.

William held onto the hair of the horse's mane with one hand, his fingers gripped over the handle of Archie's box with the other, and he tried stay upright on the back of the horse as it rattled through the forest, rushing along the thick trees.

The horse jumped over the small stream and William slid off the side, nearly came off entirely, then he pulled himself back up.

The horse started rushing faster, rattling harder along the earth, and William turned his head to look behind, tried to see why it might have sped up. William could see shadows, shapes moving, but nothing solid, his vision rattling too much.

Then up beside him, through the trunks of the trees rushing by, William saw what he thought was a gorilla, the thick, black arms of a monkey swinging along the low branches. William tried to get a better look at it, tried to focus in, then it was gone.

The horse ran harder again, its feet thumping along the ground. Archie's box rattling alongside.

The horse slowed up. William had his head down now, his ear pushed up against the warmth of the fur on the horse's back. He felt sick from being shaken up and his fingers ached from gripping onto the horse's coarse mane hair. William lifted himself up slow, trying to hold his balance. He saw that they'd stopped moving completely, but his body still felt like it was moving, rattling along.

William sat up straighter on the horse's back and he looked up ahead. They were in a grass plain now, an opening within the forest bordered by trees. And there, standing before them, right out in front of the horse, lower than he was sitting, there was a gorilla. The gorilla was large and black with strong shoulders and long front arms. The gorilla had a sloping, grey forehead and black eyes. It was down on all fours before them, waiting, leaning on its knuckles. The gorilla bared its white teeth as William looked at it.

Beside the gorilla was another monkey, a smaller, grey coloured baboon type with a small, black face and a pink triangle patch in the middle of its chest. William would later learn that this was a gelada, native to the Ethiopian highlands. The gelada was also down on its hands and feet in front of them, and when it bared its teeth, its whole face seemed to flip open, its large, pink gums showing, its sharp fangs poking down from either side. The gelada was frightening, like a devil in real life.

William sat up on the horse's back, one hand still holding onto the handle on Archie's box. The horse made sounds, like screaming with its mouth closed, and the gorilla stood up and smacked at its own leathery chest. The gorilla made sounds too and the horse was unsettled now, stomping and turning, then the gelada surged forward, lashed towards the horse's legs, then moved back again. The gelada was pacing, turning around, then the gelada showed its teeth, its pink gums again, then it rushed forward, close again to the horse's feet.

Then William felt the horse changing, felt its back getting bigger, expanding beneath him. William gripped onto the horse's mane, as he lifted higher on its back, his legs widening out over the animal beneath him. William's fingers were gripped over a thinner set of hairs now, and he was sitting up on top of hard, grey skin. It was an elephant.

William's mother had changed to an elephant beneath him. The elephant stomped hard onto the ground by the gelada, shaking the earth beneath them.

The gelada backed up, moved back over beside the gorilla, and the two monkeys called out, opening their mouths wide, yelling at the elephant. William was looking down on them both now, watching down from the elephant's back. Then the elephant raised its head and called out, loud, its trunk lifting up. It hurt William's ears to hear the sound.

The gorilla and the monkey stopped calling out, and they eased back down onto their knuckles. Then the two animals looked up to the sky. Both of them were watching above, looking at something, and William looked up too, looked around for what they might be watching. Up high, there was a bird, the black shape of a bird with its wings out wide, sailing against the brightness of the sun. The bird was coming in, getting bigger, larger as William watched. The bird curved around and swept in, coming over behind the gelada and the gorilla. The black bird's wings were spread out wide. They were huge, longer than a car sideways.

The bird swooped in, getting bigger and bigger the closer it got.

The bird came in just over the heads of the gorilla and the monkey, the two of them still looking up at it, huffing at

it now, moving aside. Up close, William could see that the giant bird was dark brown, with white stretches underneath its enormous wings. The bird was a condor, and a large one at that, and the condor came in and landed on the grass before the elephant, its huge wings folding in as it went.

The condor was giant, the biggest bird that William had ever seen, and it stood there in front of them, its eye looking them over. The bird's dark coloured head had no feathers, just pale skin and a bright yellow beak, sharp right at its tip.

The bird poked its head forward, its eyes looking all around, then the bird changed, transformed into a man, a tall man with short, dark hair, wearing a white shirt and dark pants. The man now stood in front them, the gorilla and the gelada at his back. The group of them out in the middle of the grass plain.

The elephant shuffled over the ground, stepping, and William held onto its thin hairs, tried to keep himself upright. He could hear Archie's squeals from inside the box.

'You're still so quick,' the man said to the elephant, to William's Mum. 'It takes these guys minutes to switch,' the man looked back to the gorilla and the gelada, which both watched on, puffing, staring at the elephant. The man turned back to the elephant. 'You were always so fast.' Then the man

looked up to William, sitting up on the elephant's back. 'You must be my son,' the man said. William locked eyes with the man. They had the same brown eyes, the same face shape. This was his father, a person he'd never met. 'I've missed you so much,' the man said to William.

Then the elephant stomped again, rumbling through the earth. The elephant raised its head, unbalancing William again, and he held on. The elephant screamed out, blasting noise towards the man.

'I can't talk to you like this,' the man yelled to the elephant, squinting at the sound. Then the elephant stopped and the man straightened up, put his hands behind his back. 'We need to have a conversation,' the man told the elephant.

William felt the elephant beneath him changing again, shrinking, and the surface underneath him switched to soft, brown fur, his legs closing in. His mother had changed back to a horse again, bringing him lower to the ground, then he felt her changing again, shrinking down further, into a person, back into herself, down on her hands and knees on the grass. William was still sitting on her back, holding onto the back of her blonde hair.

William's mother slipped out from underneath William's legs, then she turned around to him. She stayed knelt down, up close to his face.

'Are you okay?' William's mother asked.

'Yes.'

'Okay,' she nodded. 'You and Archie stay in behind me, no matter what. Okay?'

'Okay.' William peeked over to the man behind her, then to the gorilla watching on, staring him down from across the way.

William's mother stood up in front of him, then she turned around, facing the man. The man stood still, watched her as she moved.

'Elliot,' William's mother said.

'Mariel,' the man replied.

The two of them looked over each other, stared each other down in the grass field. The wind rushed across, flickering pieces of his mother's blonde hair across her face. She pushed them away.

'Mariel, I need him to come with me,' the man said.

'I'll never let you take him,' William's mother said.

'He is my son,' the man replied. 'I need him with me now.'

'He's not going anywhere. He won't be any part of it.'

The man shook his head. Then he smiled at her.

'He needs me,' the man told her. 'We need each other for what's coming. If you'd just...'

'You're what's coming,' William's mother said. 'You're the only danger coming his way.' William's mother stood tall in the field, stood strong before the man, the animals looming behind him. 'You need to leave us alone,' she told him.

The man stared back. He looked angry, upset. This man. William's dad.

'Give him to me,' Elliot said.

Then William's mother transformed, switched to a tiger, a large, orange and black-striped Sumatran tiger standing before the man, its bright, yellow eyes staring him down. The tiger lowered its head and raised its strong shoulders up. The tiger opened its mouth, revealed its teeth.

'Okay,' the man said.

The gorilla and the gelada behind him were calling out now, shuffling around, getting edgy. The gelada paced back and forth. 'Have it your...'

Then the tiger shrunk away, transformed into a bird, a tiny needletail which whipped off and rushed up and away into the sky. Elliot tracked the bird, watched it flash by him, then he looked back to where William's mother had been. The plastic rabbit cage was all that remained, the shining cage door opened out. The box was empty, rested on the grass.

Neither William nor Archie was anywhere to be seen.

