

ARGONAUT

In 1994, I didn't know I wanted to be a writer. I didn't know I wanted to be anything, but I did learn that maybe there was something about the process of writing and research that I enjoyed. There was something there, which, maybe, was worth exploring.

That year I was twelve, I was in my last year at primary school and on top of my world. Where I lived was a small town called Kinglake in the north east of Victoria, about an hour or so outside Melbourne. Back then, no one knew where Kinglake was - in fact, I could tell you a range of stories of people who ventured to our town looking for the lake. Which doesn't exist.

It seems crazy now in the age of GPS and Google Maps, but back then, guided by the power of your trusty Melway, people often believed that there was a lake somewhere up at the top of a hill, at about 570 metres above sea level. There is not.

They'd actually get aggressive about it - one time, when a guy towing a boat pulled up at the shops and asked me and my friend for directions to the lake, and we told him there was none, he got angry, cursing us kids for refusing to help. We eventually gave him directions to nowhere - right at the roundabout, left at the end of the street. Wherever else.

Of course, these days, most people know Kinglake because of the 2009 bushfires, in which 173 people were killed, and more than 500 homes were destroyed in the Kinglake region alone, a huge amount for such a small community. My family had moved out years before, but I still had several relatives, and of course friends, up on the mountain. My brother's house burned down. The house I grew up in, which my Dad had built, was also reduced to cinders.

It was surreal seeing the streets I'd known so well, blackened to ash and rolling by on the TV news.

In Kinglake, in 1994, a young girl committed suicide. This, unfortunately, is not uncommon in country towns, but it was significant to us. This was someone we knew, someone we'd seen around. And now she was gone. No one really talked about what happened, for obvious reasons. No one really said much, but it's something that troubled me, that has stuck with me, even to this day.

I only realized this when I came across some old notebooks, school reports and things at the bottom of a box at the bottom of a pile, buried beneath something else. They were in amongst things I'd shifted with me from place to place, with no intention of ever looking at them, those formative artefacts, items so tinged with nostalgia that leaving them behind never even feels like a real consideration.

When I was going through these, I came across a newspaper from the time of the incident, a copy which had the girl's obituary notes inside. I'd kept it, and it haunted me for a long time. I'd avoid it, leave that box alone, push it further back down under the other papers, make sure it was right at the back of the cupboard. But I'd kept it. The pages yellowed, ads for products of the past. Sad messages about the lost girl people had known.

I'd written notes about her death too, handwritten scribbles in which I tried to capture my fragile and confusing emotions about the incident. They were a mess, all over the place, but there was a lot of them, a lot of little sentences and paragraphs which asked questions about what had happened.

Back then, I had no concept of becoming a writer, but in going over these newly discovered notes, I came to realize the significance of this event, and the way it may have even shaped my thinking around future happenings. I wouldn't have had any understanding of how to compose these observations

into something coherent, but I did track them, I did write them down. I did appear to have had some thought around putting them together, an ambitious plan for a school report of some kind. That never came to be.

On re-examination, there seemed to be a broader significance to this event. As noted, suicide is not uncommon in small, remote communities, where it can feel like there's no escape, but it's also not a conversation anyone wants to have. No one wants to discuss it, everyone wants to move on, and in doing so, particularly among impressionable youth, it's possible that we're stigmatizing such tragedy from a very young age.

So I decided to write it. I decided to put down this story, this one telling of such an event, and how it impacted me and the community I grew up within.

As such, the story you're about to read is, for the most part, true. The details have been changed, childish observations clarified, language cleaned up. But this is what happened. In Kinglake, before the bushfires burned it down, before everything changed.

Before all that, this simple story changed me.

1

As soon Mrs. Gray told us about the assignment, I knew what I was going to do.

The assignment was that we had to report on a local event. We had to write about it like they do in the newspaper or on TV, we had to choose something that was happening in town and put together a report on it, then present it to the class. It was due in two weeks.

Straight away, I knew what I would do, I thought of it as soon as she said it. It was something I'd been thinking about already. My report would be on the death of Stephanie Marchant.

Stephanie used to live over the back from us. The way the streets are around our place, we have houses on each side of our yard, except for the front, where the street goes by. The Marchants used to live over the back, over the other side of our old back fence, which is stretched loose in parts and patched with tin panels along the bottom in others, places

where the dog had tried to get out. When we had a dog. Toby died a few years back.

She was really pretty, Stephanie. Everybody said so. They said it more after she'd died, but even when she was alive people did too. She looked like a TV person brought into real life. She had long, dark hair and brown eyes that were kind of orange in the sunlight. She had a heap of freckles too. I guess everyone has freckles, but Stephanie's were different, they suited her face perfectly, like they'd been painted on just right. Lots of them up the tops of her cheeks, only a few strays across her forehead. Like cheetah spots, they were, a constellation of them, like stars.

You couldn't help but look at Stephanie. She was interesting, different.

Stephanie had died a month earlier, on Wednesday the 24th of August, 1994. I remember the exact date because it was in the newspaper, on the obituaries list in the middle. Stephanie was three years older than me, so she was fifteen. She was still a teenager when she died.

Nobody told us what had happened to her, where she went. She was just gone. Whenever you asked what happened, people told you to be quiet, to not say it. They said that it was rude to ask. But I wanted to know. I wanted to find out what happened to her.

I wasn't good friends with Stephanie, because she was older, I didn't know her very well. But I did know her, I waved to her across the street. I walked home with her from the bus stop sometimes. Then she was gone.

As soon as Mrs. Gray told us about the assignment, I knew, and I set about investigating what had happened.

You should know that I'm not very good at school. I'm not a good student by any stretch. I like English okay, and I'm okay at maths, but I don't like school really. I'm not the star of the class. I get in trouble quite a bit.

But this assignment was different. This was the first one I actually wanted to do, and it made me think that maybe this is who I am, what I might want to be. A reporter. A TV journalist.

I didn't know anything about it, but this was the first project that I actually found interesting, that I wanted to get started on, and I knew that Mrs. Gray was excited too when I asked her about it.

She'd told my parents that I can be disruptive in class and that I needed to improve my focus. I heard this from the hallway during parent teacher interview night, me sat out on one of the plastic seats while my parents were in talking to her to her in the classroom. It was hot, the plastic seat

sticking to my legs and I listened in. I listened to what she said.

Mostly, I liked to play sports and ride bikes. I didn't read books. I didn't like homework. No one does, I guess, but I felt like I was different, it was worse for me. I really hated it.

Also, I got into fights. I didn't mean to, mostly, it wasn't me that started them. But I'd been in, like, four fights this year. Mrs. Gray told my parents about that too. My t-shirt sticking to my back in the heat on the hallway chair.

I wasn't very good at school, I probably didn't apply myself enough, another thing she said.

Also, one time I got expelled because I fired a bullet.

I can explain.

3

They were building this new memorial in town. I think that's why Mrs. Gray gave us the assignment, because the new memorial was being built and they were going to do a big unveiling thing on the Sunday before our reports were due.

I think that's why Mrs. Gray gave it to us now, because she knew we'd have something to write about.

They'd been working on the new memorial for ages, and people thought that they were going to open it up on Remembrance Day in November. But they had it ready now. They'd do a big launch, then they'd have the ceremony up there on Remembrance Day in a couple of months.

I say up there because the memorial had been built up on top of the hill, at a lookout where you could see right across the valley, way across to the city. On a good day, when there was no fog.

We live on a hill, a mountain, I guess, right up at the top. The town is about forty minutes away from anything, the

closest major city is over an hour away. That's what you can see from the lookout, right up at the peak. The grey shapes of the buildings poking up on the distance. Sometimes, when they have fireworks on in town, we go up to the lookout and watch across and you can see the tiny flashes of colour popping above the sparkling city lights.

It looks like the sky in reverse at night, like the lights from the houses and buildings and car headlights are stars spread across the ground. You can watch them moving, the cars in the far off streets. It's kinda' cool. It's cooler than it sounds written down.

The new memorial was supposed to open earlier in the year, and it became this big thing, with the local papers running reports about it and people talking about it up at the shops. It had become a big deal, and now, it was close.

I had no idea what it would look like. I knew there was a flag pole, I knew that because we saw them taking it in on a truck. But I had no idea what it would be. But it was a big thing, a big deal in town. Everyone was talking about it. Everyone was going up for the launch.

My Dad was going to wear his father's medals to it. He was going to make me and my brother wear one each, but he decided he would instead, that it made more sense for one person to wear them all. My Grandfather died when I was pretty

young. He was a prisoner of war at some stage, then my Dad joined the army too. He didn't go to war, but he nearly went to Vietnam.

The new memorial was a big deal to him, it was important that we went, same as we did to the dawn service and to the marches in town. My Dad knew all the history, all the things that had happened. He'd been talking to Mum a lot about the memorial.

That's what I think Mrs. Gray wanted us to write about, because everyone was talking about it and it was coming up soon. There was big plans for the grand re-opening of the new lookout, the new flagpole and memorial. People had been talking about it for months.

Mrs. Gray had given us a sheet of instructions for the report project. The instructions were on photocopied paper, that was still warm she handed me mine.

Here's what it said:

For your final project of Term 3, you will be writing a report on a local event or happening, like a newspaper article for our town. Your report can be on any local event you choose, but it has to be something 'newsworthy', like a big event or story.

The idea is to provide a simple summary of the key elements in your report. Here are some tips on how to do it.

- 1. 'Grab Attention' - Outline what your report is about within the first paragraph.*
- 2. 'Set the Scene' - Explain the locations and events with helpful description.*

3. *'Include Relevant Detail' - Details will give your story life and help readers 'see' what you saw.*

We'll go over these and look at some examples to help, over the next two weeks, but get thinking about what you might want to report on - and ask your parents for help if you need.

I tried to keep these notes in mind as I went, especially the details, making sure that I remembered things about how people looked and places were.

One of the examples Mrs. Gray shared was about why you need to include detail:

'If I said that 'a car was driving really fast', that's not as clear as 'a red car with black windows accelerated along the main street.'

The extra parts definitely made it clearer, and it stuck in my head, the importance of adding in what things looked like. *'Painting a picture with your words'* is what Mrs. Gray said.

I thought about that a lot after, and I took in more details than I had before, things that stood out. They were important, it was important to give more than just the basics. Each part felt more important when you thought about it like this.

I tried to add that into my thinking, and include whatever I could where possible. The more specific, I thought, the better, and the easier it would be to explain.

The first people I thought to ask were Stephanie's friends, the high school girls who came in on the afternoon bus up at the shops. I rode my bike up after school and sat on the wooden table up beside the milk bar and I waited, watching the cars go by in the afternoon. We sat up here a lot, just watching out. There wasn't much to do in town. They used to have arcade machines up at the petrol station, but they don't have them anymore.

The high school bus came in just after four p.m. The bus was yellow and white, with darker yellow writing along the side of it, and it pulled in by the shops and hissed to a stop, a dust cloud floating over it. The bus door popped open out the side and all the high school kids got off. This was the last stop before the driver took the bus home and parked it outside his house, then he picked everyone up again in the morning and drove them back down the hill.

The bus pulled in and all the kids got off and I rode over as it rumbled back out, shivering onto the street.

Stephanie had gone to the high school, till she pulled out, and I knew two of the girls she was friends with, Megan and Sarah. They were both walking, side-by-side, when I saw them, their blue school bags hanging over their shoulders, their hair tied up. They were wearing blue and white school uniforms and white socks and black shoes. Megan with yellow blonde hair, Sarah with a black, shining ponytail. They both went to my school a couple of years back, and I rode up behind them, me rolling my bike along the concrete outside the shops, the wheels ticking, and I said 'hey' and they both looked.

'Hey,' Megan's eyes were small, narrowed. She didn't like me much, I don't think. She had this one crooked tooth at the front that stood out when you looked at her.

'Hey,' I said, and I put my feet down, stopped my bike.
'Hey, I need to talk to you about something.'

'Who?' Sarah asked.

'What?'

'Who do you need to talk to?'

'You.'

'Which one of us?'

'Both of you,' I said.

Megan looked disgusted by the thought.

'Why?' Megan said.

'I'm doing this report for school. You might have done it when you were there, it's reporting on a local news story.'

'So?' Sarah looked angry now too, and I thought a moment, unsure what I'd said to annoy them.

'I'm doing a report on Stephanie.'

Megan turned to look at Sarah, who was still looking at me.

'What do you mean?' Sarah asked.

'I mean, I'm doing a report on what happened to Stephanie, how it happened.'

'Don't,' Megan told me.

'Why?'

'Because it's none of your business,' Sarah told me.

'Stay out of it.'

'But it's just a news report. You would have done the project too.'

'Yeah, but...'

Megan stopped, looked away. 'Do a report about the footy team or something. Something else.'

'You could do the memorial,' Sarah said.

'Yeah,' Megan nodded at her.

'Why?' I asked.

'Just do something else, don't write about Steph,' Sarah told me, and she pulled her bag strap up onto her shoulder and turned away. Megan stood looking at me for a moment, then she turned around as well and walked away, past the bakery and onto the footpath, moving along the distance.

The day I found out about Stephanie, we were at my grandma's house. My mum was doing something, so Grandma had picked us up from school, and it was dark outside and we were watching TV, sitting on Grandma's old couch when mum came.

I could hear Mum talking to Grandma in the kitchen.

'No, we have to go home. The neighbours have had a bit of trouble.'

'Really, what happened?'

Mum looked over to me and my brother on the couch. She spoke to Grandma quietly.

'Their daughter died.'

Grandma put a hand over her mouth.

'Oh no. How old was she?'

'She was only fifteen.'

'Oh my god. What happened?'

'I can't talk about it with the kids around.'

Grandma looked over to us. She smiled.

'Okay kids, it's time to get going, have you got your shoes?'

On the drive home, Mum was quiet. She'd turned the radio down and my brother had wound down his window in the back and it was making this flapping noise that mum hated but she didn't say anything. She just stared on ahead, driving through the night.

When we got home, we put our school bags inside the doorway and took our shoes off and we started heading off to our rooms when mum stopped us.

'Boys,' she said. 'Come here.'

Mum leaned over towards us. She looked upset, her eyes shining behind her glasses. She looked over each of our faces for a bit.

'Something happened, to the girl from over the back.'

'Stephanie?' I asked.

'Yes, Stephanie. She had an accident and she died.' The feeling when she said it was strange, a kind of sick feeling, but not in me, in the air around. As if the world around us was sick.

'Her mum is going to be very upset, so you need to take it easy for a while, okay? Just no noise in the backyard, maybe stay inside and play for a while,' Mum told us. 'Okay?'

My brother and I nodded.

Mum knelt further down and opened her arms, then she waved us in towards her. She hugged round us both, wrapped us in.

'I love you, my boys,' Mum said. I could feel the warmth of her voice tickling in up at my ear, could smell her coffee breath. Then she sounded like she was crying.

'I love you both so much,' she said.

Her arms wrapped around us, tighter, held us in.

My brother David is older than me by nineteen months. He's kind of tall, taller than me anyway, and he has dark brown hair that just sort of sits in curls on the top of his head. He wears glasses too, I think it's because he plays on the computer so much. That's what Dad says anyway.

We don't hang out much, but we get along fine. We used to, when we were younger, but we don't now. I think we just like different things. David goes to the same high school that Stephanie did, he catches the same bus in, then he walks home along the dirt street.

We don't really talk outside the house, and I don't think he ever talked to Stephanie much either, which is why I didn't ask him first. But he did know her, he did catch the bus with her every day. He would have seen her at school. Maybe he knew something.

'Hey Dave,' I said to him. David was on the computer, playing some game. His favourite games were Sim City and

Civilization, but he played Doom a lot too, which I thought was alright. The others were pretty boring.

David looked up to me from his game, stared through his glasses.

'Hey, what's going on?' He asked.

'Hey, do you remember Stephanie from over the back?'

'Yeah,' then David turned his attention to the screen again. His villagers were under attack. 'Hang on a sec,' he dealt with the enemy combatants then looked back to me. 'Yeah, Stephanie Marchant, I remember her.'

'Do you know what happened to her?'

David stared at me for a moment, then he shook his head.

'Nah, not really. She hung out in a different group at school, I never really knew her.'

'Who did she hang out with?'

'Just those other girls.' He looked back to the computer screen, the mouse clicking at his side. 'Why?'

'I'm writing a report on what happened to her. For school.'

'I don't think they'd want that.'

'What do you mean?'

David looked up, over the screen in front of him, then he looked to me.

'I think there's some things that people don't want to talk about.' He screwed his face up after he said this, like he felt sorry for me.

'Yeah, okay. So you don't know anything?'

'Nah,' David looked back to his screen. Computer soldiers were moving across, swooping into position. He clicked more on the mouse.

'Okay, thanks,' I said, then I went to walk out, then David stopped me.

'Wait,' he said. 'You should ask Lee.'

Lee Wallace was one of David's friends who he played computer games with, a short kid with long brown hair. He always wore this long, dark jacket around, even when it was hot. I didn't really like Lee.

'Why would Lee know anything?'

'His Mum and Stephanie's Mum were friends, so he used to go over to their house and she'd come over to his.' David scratched the mouse across, dragging the screen. 'He'd probably know what happened.'

David clicked the mouse harder, leaned closer to the screen. The light of it in his glasses, the little, animated warriors moving across.

Because they lived over the back, you could see Stephanie and her mum's house over our back fence. It was only the two of them. Stephanie's dad used to live there too, but he left a few years back.

I remember when they moved in, seeing Stephanie for the first time. On the first day, I noticed them coming in when I was outside, playing basketball on the hoop that dad had put up on the tree. I saw Stephanie in her bedroom. There were no curtains up or anything because they'd just got there, and Stephanie was carrying in boxes and putting them on the floor. The light was on inside because it was a bit cloudy, overcast outside.

In our backyard, there's our shed, a big silver tin building that's beside the basketball tree, and on that first day, I climbed the tree beside the shed and got onto the shed roof and pulled myself up to its peak, the top of the pointed roof. I peeked over and I could see in. I watched Stephanie

unpacking her things, her long hair shaded red in the light. I watched her put up her posters on her walls, set up her things. I watched her push her hair away from her face as she went.

Mum called me in for dinner, and I slid down the roof and climbed back down the tree and I went inside.

'There's some new people over the back,' I told Mum.

'Oh yeah? Any kids?'

'Nah, just a girl. An older girl, I think.'

We ate dinner and we watched TV and I remember thinking about who she was, what she smelled like. The new girl. I wondered whether I would ever get to meet her.

I didn't understand why they didn't want me to ask about Stephanie. I knew there was something wrong, that everything around it felt uncomfortable and stiff. But I didn't know why.

Why shouldn't I ask about her, about what happened? Why wouldn't anyone say?

Back at home, I watched the Marchant's house out the corner of my eye as I played basketball in the backyard, throwing the ball up towards the hoop in the fading sunlight. It was dirt where I played, and the ground was uneven, but I'd bounced the ball against it so many times that it was hard and shiny and okay to shoot hoops on. I knew all the angles, all the points to bounce the ball on, how it would come back.

I peeked through the trees along the back fence line and watched the Marchant's house. I could see Stephanie's Mum in the lounge room, sitting on her couch. The TV was on in front of her.

She didn't work anymore, Stephanie's Mum. She didn't seem to go out much. She was always just around the house, in her tracksuit pants, her slippers. I'd see her come out to get firewood from their backyard pile, lined up near our fence, then she'd carry it back inside, back through the glass sliding door, and close it behind. The smoke rising up from the chimney on her roof.

I watched the house, and I thought about whether I should ask her. I'd talked to her before, when the basketball had gone over the fence or when mum had seen her at the shops. I'd talked to Stephanie's Mum before. But it felt like the wrong thing to do.

Her sitting by her fireplace, watching the TV screen in the fading orange of the afternoon light. I kept shooting, watching the ball slide through the dirt-stained net over and over again, looking over the back fence, till the ball was dark, not much more than a hard shadow hitting against the backboard. I held the ball and looked across in the darkness, watching the Marchant house.

It felt rude. It felt wrong to ask.

I'd need to find out more before I talked to Mrs. Marchant about what happened.

The next day was a Saturday, and on Saturday the footy is on, when we all go up to the oval to watch the game. Not all of us. Mum and Dad and my brother don't go, but, like, all the people in town. Lots of people.

You have to pay to park your car inside the ground, but you can ride your bike or walk in through the side entrance, the gap in the fence, and then just go in.

The people who drive in park their cars all around the edge of the footy ground and they sit in them when it rains, watching out. They toot their horns and flash their lights whenever the team kicks a goal. It's kinda' cool. They sell, like, pies and sausage rolls at the kiosk over near the scout hall, just near the ground.

The footy would be a good place to ask about Stephanie, I thought, because, as I said, a lot of people go up, and a lot of the guys who play footy would have known her and they might know what happened to her too. They might tell me, I thought.

I started with Dean Lucas and his mates, who I knew from when they went to my school. Dean was older than me, but because we didn't have enough kids at the school, I played on the footy team when I was only in grade three, when Dean was in grade six, so I knew him a bit. Dean was tall with dark brown hair that was sort of long but not hanging down, just kind of flat. He had red cheeks, always, red around his nostrils, like he had a cold or something.

'Hey Dean,' I said as I came up to him.

'Hey mate,' the other guys in his group glanced at me as I walked up, then they went back to their conversation, looking at each other, holding drinks.

'Hey Dean, I'm doing this thing for school, we have to write a report on a local story.'

'Are ya?' Dean took a drink from his water bottle. He wasn't looking at me, watching over somewhere else as he spoke. 'Are you gonna' write about the game?'

'Nah. I'm writing about Stephanie Marchant, what happened to her.'

Some of the other guys stopped talking and looked across to me. Dean was looking at me now too.

'What do you mean?' Dean asked.

'I'm trying to find out what happened to Stephanie, so I can report on it.'

'You don't wanna' know,' one of the other boys said. All of them were looking at me now. Dean stared down at me, then he looked to the other guys, then back to me again.

'What do you wanna' know, mate?' Dean asked.

'I'm just trying to find out what happened.'

'Go ask Hayes about it,' another boy said, I don't know who. I looked across and tried to figure out who said it.

'Who?' I asked.

'She killed herself,' one of the others replied.

And when he said it, it hurt. Not physically, I didn't feel it like that, but something felt wrong, felt sore about the thought. The idea that Stephanie might have taken her own life, might have hurt herself like that. Honestly, it didn't even make sense. I knew that some people did that, that it happened sometimes. There was a couple of kids who'd killed themselves in the town across last year, and Kurt Cobain, the lead singer of Nirvana, he did it too. I knew that it happened, but I guess I'd never considered that Stephanie might have done the same, I'd never thought about it like that.

I thought she'd gotten sick, that she must have had something wrong with her and they just didn't want to tell us. She was only fifteen. What could be so bad that she would want to die? The idea felt strange, like when you wake up from a dream and for a second you don't know if it was real. It was like that, where everything felt uncertain, unsteady. And it scared me. It was frightening to think of death being that close, that someone I knew could do that.

Dean and his mates wandered off, moving between the parked cars around the oval. Dean looked back at me as they went. Me staring back, thinking over Stephanie. The ways she might have done it. I swallowed so hard that my ears popped, the spit warm in the back of my mouth.

It made sense now why they didn't want me to ask about it, I felt bad for asking. But her doing it made no sense, and I still wanted to know. I wanted to try and understand what happened, what would make Stephanie do this.

I wanted to know how she did it. I needed to know.

The air horn sounded to start the game as I rode my bike back out the side entrance and onto the road.

11

The bullet at school. Yes, I fired a bullet, but it wasn't from a gun. I didn't take a gun to school.

What happened is, I took a bullet to school with me. My dad has rifles, he has them up on a gun rack, attached to the wall in our spare room and he has a heap of different bullets in this cabinet. It's locked now, but it wasn't then. One day I took a bullet. It was only a small one, a little, gold and bronze coloured bullet. I don't know why I took it to school, really. There was no real reason.

I took the bullet with me to school, and at first recess, I tried to explode it. I wasn't aiming for anyone, I wasn't trying to get anybody with it. I guess I really just wanted to know what would happen.

First, I put the bullet down onto the ground. I walked over to the far side of the oval first, away from everyone, then I placed it between the grass on the wet ground. I pointed the bullet towards the dirt mounds at the edge of the

oval, there was no one else around, then I grabbed a thick stick and I hit onto it. I belted at the bullet over and over again on the ground. The bullet dented in at the side and got pushed down into the dirt, but it didn't go off.

Some other kids came over and asked what I was doing and looked around and I showed them the bullet. They said I was crazy, then they ran away, back over towards the school buildings.

After that, I found two bricks. I put one brick onto the ground and I put the bullet on top of it. I pointed it towards the dirt mounds again, then I lifted the other brick up and threw it down onto the bullet.

It fired, the gunshot crack echoing all around. Everyone could hear it. Kids came running across the oval and started looking through the grass and crawling all over the dirt mound in front of me, trying to find the bullet hole. A teacher came across, Mr. Aldous. He has red hair and little eyes and thick lips. He was wearing a grey jumper and grey pants. One of the other kids handed Mr. Aldous the dented, now empty bullet casing, scratched with red powder from the brick.

'Did you fire this bullet?' Mr. Aldous asked. He held the casing up to me.

'Yes,' I told him.

'Come with me.'

Mr. Aldous held my arm, up near my armpit, so my shoulder was pushed up, and he lead me back across the oval, towards the school building. Straight into the principal's office.

Here's what I knew about the kids in the next town across, the ones that has killed themselves. My brother was friends with their brother, and he'd been to their house a few times, so I knew who they were ad all, but I didn't know much about them, I guess. I hadn't met them or anything. I saw them one time, when we picked up David at their house.

It was in the newspaper and on the TV news. What happened was, the brother and the sister were supposed to walk to school, and they were only young. I think she was fourteen and the brother was ten. They were supposed to go to school, but they didn't. They walked to the local pine forest instead, then they came back to the house after their parents had gone to work. They went back, and they took one of their dad's rifles, then they walked back out into the pine plantation. Then the sister shot the brother and killed him. Then she shot herself. Because she was the older one, that's what they think happened.

It was a big story, because nothing much ever happens in our town. On the TV, they said it was because of Kurt Cobain. The girl had written down some Nirvana song words in her diary and they thought that was a sign that Kurt Cobain doing it had made them want to do it too. But I don't think that's true.

David stayed at their house one time, and he told me that the dad went into the sister's room at night and locked the door behind himself. He always did it, the girl's brother said.

I didn't know them, so I guess I hadn't thought about it too much. But now, all I could think about were the ways that Stephanie could have done it, could have killed herself. Shooting yourself in the head. Cutting open your wrists. It made me sick, made me scared even thinking of it. The air got thick, warm, harder to swallow. The thought of it going over and over in my mind.

I thought about the sister and brother in the pine forest too. How she could shoot her brother, then herself. Putting your mouth over the metal gun barrel.

I knew why they didn't want me to ask about it now, I could see why. But I couldn't stop thinking about it. I couldn't stop imagining it every time I closed my eyes.

At night, I hung out with Russ. Every other weekend, Russ would stay at mine, or I'd stay at his. And what we'd do is we'd set up the tent in the backyard, or stay in the caravan at Russ' house. Then at night, when the parents were asleep, we'd sneak out and ride our bikes up the street. Cruising along the roads beneath the orange streetlights, out in the cold of the darkness.

There was never much happening at night. A bunch of cars up at the pub, guys from the footy club out drinking. But nothing else. You could ride up and down the middle of the road, weaving back and forth between the white lines. You could yell out and hear your voice echo back.

We'd go up to the bakery, and if you knocked on the back door of it, the baker would open it and sell you doughnuts fresh out of the oven, the paper bag too warm to hold in your hands. I don't know how Russ found out about it, who told him the baker would do this, but we'd go up and we'd buy

doughnuts, then we'd go across and sit on the wooden table over beside the milk bar. Sometimes we'd still be in our pyjama pants when we went, the chill of the breeze coming through on your legs.

We'd sit up there on the wooden table and we'd watch the street, the few cars that'd drift by. The noises calling out from the pub up the way. Also, there were no trees up there, so you could look up and see the crowds of stars shifting so slow overhead.

'Hey, have you started that school report yet?' I asked Russ.

'What report?' Russ answered. His mouth was packed full of doughnut, muffling his voice.

'The report we have to do on a local event.'

'Oh. Nah, I haven't thought about it yet,' Russ swallowed what he was eating, his voice suddenly clearer. 'Have you?'

'Yeah.'

'What are you doing it on?'

'I've been trying to do it on Stephanie. Like, what happened to her and that.'

'Stephanie from over the back of your place?'

'Yeah.'

'The one who died?'

'Yep.'

'Right,' Russ nodded. 'Do you know what happened to her?'

The way Russ said it seemed like he knew something, so I pretended I didn't know.

'Nah, not yet. Do you?'

'She killed herself.'

Again, that sick feeling, like a thickening of the air all around.

'Yeah, I thought that,' I said. 'Who told you?'

'I heard my Mum talking about it.'

'What did she say?'

'Nah, nothing. Just that she killed herself.'

'Oh,' I imagined Stephanie, taking her own life. The red of the blood all around, the smell of gunpowder. A car drove by on the street, its headlights pushing through. 'It's pretty full-on, hey?'

'Yeah,' Russ was biting into another doughnut. 'Must have been something going on. Her dad left and that.'

'Yeah, the dad left,' I nodded to him. 'I wonder if that's why she did it.'

'Dunno'.'

Russ shifted on the wooden table and scrunched up his empty paper bag. He threw the ball of it over towards the bin and it rattled down into the metal can inside. We could hear another car rumbling up, the sound rising on the distance, then it came into view, flashing through the roundabout up the street. It was a green and black Torana with silver mag wheels that shone beneath the streetlights. It was Shaun Hayes, the guy they'd said at the football, who I should talk to about Stephanie.

Shaun Hayes was always driving round the streets in his car, his windows down, playing music loud. He played heavy metal music, Pantera, Metallica, Iron Maiden. He played the songs that we weren't allowed to listen to, the ones with swearing. I had a secret tape of them which I'd blast out of my Dad's old stereo system when me and my brother were home alone, hoping Stephanie might hear.

He was tough, Shaun, though I don't remember anyone ever fighting him. You just knew not to, you know? You knew you should stay away from him. He had longish brown hair that always looked dusty and tanned skin and thin lips. He glared out his windows at you as he drove by.

Shaun's car revved through the roundabout, headlights flashing by, then he accelerated up the street towards the pub, the engine sound roaring up through the darkness. The tyres screeched into the pub car park and he did a burnout on

the dirt and stones, flicking bits all around, then he stopped. The red lights of it like eyes in the darkness, the engine bubbling.

'Cool car,' Russ said.

'Yeah.'

We watched the car's lights turn off, the door opening out the side.

'You should talk to him about Stephanie, he was going with her.'

'What?'

'Yeah.'

'Bullshit.'

'No shit.'

I turned back and watched Shaun Hayes on the distance as he got up out of his car beneath the streetlight, the door reflecting the light as it opened and shut. Shaun was wearing a black jacket and black jeans. He locked his car, then he walked across the car park and went up the steps into the door of the pub.

'He probably knows what happened to her,' Russ said and I looked to him and he was off the table and picking up his bike, getting ready to head back.

'If you've got the guts to ask him.'

I looked back to Shaun's car, rested beneath the light.
The wind pushing through, flapping my pants over my legs.

After I fired the bullet, the school wanted to kick me out. My Dad told me I'd have to move away. He said that I'd have to go live with my Nan, but then they talked to the school and they let me come back.

No one said anything to me about it after that. No one ever said anything about it again, which was strange, I thought. No one wanted to say anything about it.

I remember the smell of the fired bullet, the gunpowder specks burned onto the metal, the smoke leaking out of the casing at the edge of the brick surface.

But I don't remember ever talking about it again after that.

I don't know if anyone ever found a bullet hole in the dirt mound.

There was something about Lee Wallace that wasn't right.

I don't really know what, but he was a bit strange. His skin was really pale for one, because he spent all his time inside on the computer, and whenever he did go out, he wore black sunglasses and this long black jacket. People would look at him, which his long hair and coat, but he didn't seem to care. He used to get teased at school a bit too, but he never did anything.

Lee lived near the primary school, down by the pine plantation. He lived with his Mum and Dad and his brother and sister, who were a lot younger than him. He played Doom heaps, he was always talking about Doom stuff with my brother, all the secret rooms and stuff. That and Wolfenstein, those shooting games. I don't know if I'd ever heard him talk about anything else, but I didn't like him much, so I stayed away whenever he was at our place.

I went over to Lee's house with my brother, so they could go play games and I didn't have to stick around. Lee's house was a mudbrick building with black tiles on the floor inside. It was cold and it smelled like concrete and there were little piles of dust gathered into the corners. I didn't like Lee's house much.

In his room, Lee had his own computer set up on a desk next to his bed. He had a heap of computer game magazines and posters up of computer game characters with the magazine name down the bottom. The posters had, like, fold lines from where they came stuck into the middle of the magazines, staple holes poked through. There were half empty glasses of water and ship packets open on top of his bookshelf. It smelled weird in there.

'Hey,' Dave said to Lee. David was sitting on Lee's bed, looking through one of the magazines. 'Tell him about Stephanie Marchant.'

'Tell him what?' Lee was sitting on a wooden chair that looked like it was from a dinner table, placed in front of his computer. He was watching the screen as the computer started up.

'He's doing a report on Stephanie Marchant for school,' David told him.

'Surely not,' Lee didn't look back as he spoke. 'Why?'

'I don't know. He wanted to know what happened to her.'

Lee was watching the screen, didn't respond. You could hear the computer making ticking sounds down by his feet.

'Dave said you used to go over to Stephanie's house, that you used to hang out with her sometimes.'

'Yeah,' Lee laughed, still watching the screen.

'So do you know what happened to her?'

'Yeah,' Lee said. The screen in front of him was black with words up at the top. Lee was typing things in, looking up games, I guess. 'Hey check this out,' he looked to Dave. I don't really know what he was showing him.

'What happened to her?' I asked him.

Lee looked to me. He looked a bit annoyed maybe.

'I don't really know. Mum talked to me about it after, to see if I was okay,' Lee turned back to his screen again. 'She said she killed herself. That was pretty surprising.'

The way he said it made it seem like nothing. It was weird. Like, this is someone he knew.

'Was there anything else?' I asked.

'They asked at school if we wanted to go to counselling, all the kids from the mountain bus, remember that?' Lee looked to Dave, who nodded, reading the magazine.

'No, I mean about Stephanie.'

'Nah,' Lee said. 'We didn't really talk or anything. We just watched TV whenever we went over.' Lee went back to typing, the keys tapping in front. 'She smoked a lot.' He added.

It was clear that Lee couldn't tell me anything, and even if he could, he and Dave seemed pretty distracted with computer stuff.

'It's weird to think, isn't it?' Lee said out of nowhere. 'Steve McLennan's sister and brother did it too, remember that?'

Dave nodded, still reading.

'They killed themselves. She shot the younger brother, they said. That was weird.'

'How's he going?' I asked.

'Who?'

'Steve.'

'Oh, he's damaged. He only comes to school sometimes,' the Doom screen came up in front of Lee, that bullet sound when you select the options. 'He doesn't like playing Doom anymore,' Lee said.

I didn't like talking to Lee about Stephanie. He was always weird, but hearing him talk about what happened, the way he just said it. It felt strange. And David didn't do anything either. It was like they didn't care, like it was nothing, just a thing that happened.

I guess, it sort of was. If you didn't know her. Or if you didn't know the brother and sister. Then it was just a story, like a movie, or something on the news. But they did know them, they'd seen these kids around. Now gone. That didn't seem to matter to them.

Not everyone feels the same, I guess, and I didn't really know the brother and sister, so I didn't feel the same about that. But still, Lee didn't care at all. He'd hung out with Stephanie, he'd been to her house.

I thought about it over and over as I rode home, hoe some people didn't want to know, didn't want to think about it at all. Like, Russ didn't. The guys at the football didn't want

to say anything about it. It felt strange that it was just a story to them, and that they all seemed okay with that.

Why didn't they want to know? How could they just go on without thinking about what might have happened?

17

We don't talk about it.

Don't ask about it.

I don't want to get into it.

Don't bring it up.

Some things are better left unsaid.

Don't mention it.

I don't want to hear you talking about it again.

Please don't ask,

You'll understand when you're older.

Don't say anything about it.

Don't ask.

Don't talk about it.

Don't say it.

Just don't.

It's not appropriate.

It's not something you talk about.

Don't ask about it.

Okay.

Okay.

It seemed like they were always saying it, there was a lot we didn't say.

It seemed like no one wanted to mention it.

I thought of another way to find out, to get more information about what happened.

What I would do is I would look up Stephanie's Dad and I would call him and I'd pretend to be someone else. The police maybe, or a journalist (which was kind of true, so it didn't feel so bad). I would call him up and I'd pretend to be someone else and I'd ask him about Stephanie and what happened, see what he said.

There was a phone box up the main street, a glass walled, rectangle-shaped box with an orange roof and I rode up to it after school and I grabbed the phone book out from the shelf underneath the phone and I looked up Stephanie's Dad. His name was Alex, I knew it because my parents spoke to him when he was still living at the house over the back. He was at work a lot, so I didn't see him much, but I knew his name, and I knew he lived nearby because I'd heard them say it. I looked him up. His name and address were listed in the White Pages.

I put the coins I had into the phone and I dialled in the number.

The phone rang in my ear a few times. Me, scared, my hand shaking the receiver. Then the phone clicked.

'Hello,' a man's voice spoke down the line and the money slid down into the machine, buzzing through. Then I froze for a moment. I wasn't sure what to say.

'Hello, is this Alex Marchant?''

'Yes, speaking.'

'Hello. Hi Alex, my name is Geoff Masters from The Mountain Chronicle.'

Mr. Marchant didn't respond, stayed quiet. Geoff Masters was the real name of one of my G.I. Joe characters.

'Sorry, who is this?' Stephanie's dad asked.

'Geoff Masters. From The Mountain Chronicle.'

'Mountain Chronicle,' he said. 'You sound like a child.'

'Yes,' I could feel myself sweating. 'I get that sometimes.'

'Right,' Mr. Marchant said. 'What is it you're after, Geoff?'

'Well, I'm doing a report on a local story,' then I gulped hard. That sickness in the air again, worse inside the

closed in phone booth. 'I'm doing a story about your daughter, Stephanie.'

Mr. Marchant blew a breath out into the phone, muffling down the line, then he stayed quiet for a moment.

'What was your name again?' Mr. Marchant asked.

'Geoff Masters.'

'Okay.'

Then he went quiet again. The timer on the phone display was counting down, ticking away the seconds, and I put in another coin, dropping into the phone's insides.

'Okay,' I said. 'Um, I was wondering about what happened to your daughter.'

A silence on the line again.

'What happened?' Mr. Marchant asked.

'Yes, what happened to Stephanie?'

'She died.'

'Yes, but, what was the cause, why did Stephanie...?' And I had to stop, I couldn't ask it. I couldn't say the words.

Mr. Marchant didn't say anything. The clock on the screen still counting down, switching through. The thick air inside the glass box.

'I don't know,' Mr. Marchant finally said. 'I really don't.' Then: 'I really don't know.'

'Okay,' I said back. 'I'm sorry to ask.'

'I wonder all the time,' Mr. Marchant said, his voice lower now, more grumbling.

Then he stopped talking again. Something was ticking down the line, me watching the counter on the phone screen.

'How is her mother?' Mr. Marchant asked. His voice was low, quiet.

'I'm sorry?'

'How is Stephanie's mother? I assume you've spoken to her also.'

I didn't know what to say, I wasn't sure how to reply.

'I haven't talked to her yet,' I told him.

'Okay,' Mr. Marchant said.

Then I heard, outside the phone box, the rumbling of Shaun Hayes' Torana as he revved along the main street. The counter on the phone was down to seconds now, about to cut off.

'Um, I'm sorry Mr. Marchant, I'll have to call you back,' and I hung up and cut him off and the phone buzzed and I flipped open the door and got out of the phone booth quick. I

looked back in at the phone, sitting there, bright orange. The display screen still lit up. I was puffing in breaths quick, taking in air. I stared at the phone as the screen light flicked off. The orange receiver rested at its' side.

I stayed staring at the phone for a moment, then I looked across to Shaun's Torana, which was pulling up on the dirt clearing out the front of the milk bar over the road.

When I think about it, I don't really know why people were afraid of Shaun Hayes.

I'd heard stories about how he used to steal things, how the cops had been to his place. I'd heard that he carried a pocket knife and that he'd pulled it out and pointed it another kid one time. But I can't remember anything else. He was just someone you didn't want to mess with.

Here's some more detail on what he looks like: Shaun Hayes is short and kind of big, not skinny but not fat either. He has dark hair that curls up at the ends - it's straight and long at the back, with the edges flicking up along his neck. He has a silver ring in his left ear and he always wears black t-shirts and stained jeans. His hands are always stained too, black from working on cars or whatever he does. I don't know what he does really. He left school early and stayed at home and he seemed to always just be around. I don't know if he works or something else.

Also, he smokes. He was always smoking cigarettes, leaning on his car up the street. Sometimes he wore a black jacket with orange insides.

That's what he looked like I guess. People just knew not to go near him. Only bad things happened to people who hung around with Shaun.

You just stayed away and let him be.

I wanted to go talk to Shaun Hayes, but I didn't. I didn't want to go near him really. I thought he might punch me out or pull a knife (though even when he did use his pocket knife, I heard he only ever cut another kid's hair one time).

I didn't want to go up to him, but I thought I should ask, that he might tell me something. Maybe he would want to tell me. And no one else was saying anything.

I walked across the street from the phone box. I waited for a car to pass by, then I ran over, just as Shaun Hayes was coming out from the shop, carrying a bottle of Coke and a packet of cigarettes in one hand.

'Shaun,' I waved to him.

Shaun Hayes looked up, looked straight at me. His eyes focused in on me. He kept walking to his car, coming out towards me.

'Hey Shaun,' I said and he opened the door of his Torana and threw his cigarettes inside, then he turned his head and looked at me. I was right up near the back part of his car now.

'Are you talking to me?' Shaun asked. His stare was frightening.

'Yeah, how are...'

'Who are you?'

'Oh, um, we met one time before, I...'

'Why the fuck are you talking to me?'

Shaun stared. His eyes were grey blue beneath his dirty fringe. I suddenly felt unsure of what was going to happen next.

'I'm doing a report...' I said.

'A what?'

'I'm doing a report on...'

'What the fuck do I care? Why are you coming up to me?'

I froze. I stepped back from the Torana a bit, moving away. It felt like he might come at me at any moment. Shaun turned his head and looked into his car.

'I'm doing a report on Stephanie Mar...'

Then Shaun Hayes slammed his door shut. He turned back to me, standing up by the car door. He was facing me now, looking straight at me.

'What?' Shaun Hayes said. He stepped towards me, slow, moving beside the car.

'I'm doing a report on Stephanie Marchant...' I told him and I stepped back again, moving away. I looked at Shaun's hands, still holding his Coke in one. The brown liquid in the clear bottle. I thought about his pocket knife. I looked for an outline of it on his dirty jeans pockets.

'Sorry,' I said, and I put my hands up as I moved further back. I shook my head and Shaun moved closer to me, faster, scratching across the dust and stones.

'Why are you asking me?' Shaun Hayes said.

'Sorry,' I was almost standing on the road now, moving further back. I felt a car pass by behind me, the warm wind of it as it rushed by.

'Why are you asking me about her?'

I shook my head, my hands still up.

'Somebody said you were going with her.'

Then Shaun rushed forward, right up close to me and I ducked in.

'Well I wasn't,' he said. Shaun Hayes stood up over me, my feet at the edge of the bitumen. I tilted my head up to look at his face. 'Now, you don't talk to me, right? You don't come talk to me.' Shaun's breath smelled like cigarettes, reminded me of my grandmother. 'The next time you come anywhere near me, I'm gonna' kick your head in. Yeah?'

I nodded, then I kept my eyes down as another car flashed behind me. People don't stay angry as long if you don't look at them. Shaun stood there for a moment, stood over me. Me watching his hands, my hands still up in front of myself. Then Shaun stepped away, pulling his pants up as he went. Shaun Hayes opened his car door and got into his seat. The engine roared as he started it up, then he took off, scraping into the dust and stones with his wheels. His elbow hanging out the side, poking out the open window. I watched the SLR 5000 sticker across the Torana's spoiler shrunk away, down along the street.

I stood there frozen for a moment, watching Shaun's car drive away. Just watching it. I didn't move away or anything, and then I heard a voice. Someone was yelling to me.

'Hey,' I looked across. It was Megan, one of Stephanie's friends. She was standing out the front of the shop, waving at me. Megan was wearing her school uniform, with her school bag hung over her shoulder. Her blonde hair was tied up in a ponytail at the top of her head.

'What the hell are you doing?' Megan asked.

'What?' I said.

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing,' I said.

'Why are you talking to Shaun?' Megan asked. 'He'll kill you, you know?'

I looked back to Shaun's car as it moved around the corner, the engine sound rising, roaring up on the distance. I

noticed I was breathing hard, puffing, and I walked away from the roadside, over towards the milk bar, towards Megan.

'I thought he might be able to tell me something,' I told her.

'Are you still asking people about Steph?' Megan said.

'Yeah,' I said. 'It's for my report.'

'I know, your report,' Megan nodded. 'But you really should just do something else.'

Megan stood looking at me, leaning over slightly as she did. Because her blonde hair was tied up, you could see the lumpy freckles at the side of her neck. Then Megan looked away. She kind of rolled her eyes as she did.

'Jesus,' she said. She looked back to me. 'Why do you need to know so bad?'

I hadn't thought of it in this way, not till Megan said it. I could easily do something else for my report, but she was right, I wanted to know. For myself, more than just for the report. I wanted to understand where Stephanie went, and why. There was more to it, I guess.

'I just want to know,' I told her. Then I looked up the street again, where Shaun Hayes had been. 'Like, she was just gone and then everyone told us not to ask about it.' I shook

my head. I looked at the dusty concrete beneath my feet. 'I just wanted to know, I guess.'

Megan looked down the street in the direction Shaun had driven too, then she walked across and sat down onto the wooden table at the side of the shop. She sat on the table, her feet up on the seat, She looked across to me, waiting. I walked over, closer to her. I kept my head down as I went.

'So what have you found out?' She asked.

'Nothing really.'

'Well maybe there's a reason for that.'

'I guess so,' I looked away. I felt annoyed with myself, embarrassed. It felt like I'd done the wrong thing.

'Who have you asked?' Megan said.

'Just a couple of people,' I told her. 'Some of the guys at the footy, and I talked to Russ about it.' Megan nodded, and I wasn't sure whether to tell her about Stephanie's dad. Maybe it was a bad thing to do.

'I called her dad,' I said quietly.

'What?' Megan sat forward a bit when she spoke.

'I called Stephanie's Dad too.'

'Her dad? Alex. You called Alex?'

I nodded.

'What?' She sat up and she put her hand over her mouth.

'What did he say?'

'Nothing.'

'Well he must have said something.'

'I mean, of course, he said things.'

'Well what, what did he say?'

'Nothing about Stephanie.'

Megan shook her head.

'How did you even get him to talk to you?' She asked.

'I pretended I was a journalist doing a story.'

'Oh my god,' Megan looked away, then she looked back to me. 'You really are going too far.'

'I know,' I said, and again, I felt bad about asking. 'I just...' I flicked one of my hands into the air. 'I don't know.'

Megan sat there for a moment, watching out onto the road, at the cars passing. She smiled slightly, made a noise like the start of a laugh, then she looked at me.

'You know they thought he did it?'

'Did what?'

'The police thought that he might have done it, when it first happened.'

I thought over what Megan was saying.

'Her dad?'

'Yeah,' Megan said. 'Because of how he left and stuff. They thought he might have done something to her. The police interviewed him and all that.'

This was something I hadn't thought about, that maybe people were telling me not to ask because something bad had happened to Stephanie. Maybe someone had killed her.

'I didn't know that,' I told her.

Megan sat nodding, staring off, not saying anything. Her white skin in the afternoon sunlight. She had her hands tucked under her legs now, to keep them warm, then she spoke again.

'I don't think he did though. I mean, when they found her body in the shed, I think they knew.'

I was watching her lips as she spoke, and the words stood out.

'The shed?' I asked her.

When I think about it now, it's strange how things happened. Like, things came up, accidents at school, fights, and then they were gone. No one talked about them again.

I guess, there's not much you can say a lot of the time, but thinking back, there was a lot of stuff that went on that was a bit strange. But I'd just forgotten about them. I didn't ask about them again, and no one ever said.

One time I saw a kid at school fighting with a teacher, fully in it with him, grabbing him and all, punching him. Then the same kid was in class again the next day.

One time, another boy pushed a pencil into a kid's arm. He didn't do it to hurt him - the kid, Joel, he wanted to show how tough he was, and he told the other kid to push the point of the pencil into him, push it into his forearm, just down from his elbow. 'Harder', Joel said, as the tip poked into his skin, leaving a black dent from the lead. 'More', Joel said. Eventually, the pencil went right into his arm and blood

bubbled up, squirted up like a fountain on his arm, and they got a heap of paper towels and they held his arm up and they lead Joel out and down the hall to the sick bay. There was a trail of blood dotted along the white tiles in the corridor.

Then Joel was back at school the next week. Like nothing happened.

I guess, there's not much they could say, no one really needed to explain. But things like this happened, then they were gone.

You kind of knew not to ask, and it felt kind of wrong if you did.

So we didn't ask.

Down the road and around the corner, sort of near where the old, abandoned school building was, there was this old hay shed that sat out in a paddock by itself. The shed had been painted red a long time ago, and it was all chipped and rusted away at points, like iron honeycomb eaten into the corners. The front doors of it were locked shut with a chain and a padlock linking it together, but you still get in. What you had to do is, you had to go down the side of the shed and pull back a panel, a piece of the wall that had come loose. You could pull it right back, then you could slide in. You had to crawl to get through, but it was easy get into. And then you were inside.

This is where they found her, Megan told me. This is where they found Stephanie's body.

You have to leave your bike outside the fence down near the road, then climb over the fence and walk up into the paddock, the long grass up the top of the hill. As I walked

in, I could see tyre tracks, where cars had driven, and I thought maybe it was from the police, the ambulance. The patterns of the tread squashed into the mud and grass.

I pulled the tin sheet back at the side and crawled into the shed.

The smell is what I remember first. It smelled like hay, the fresh, dry of it. But there were other smells too, like chemicals. Alcohol as well, maybe. Cigarettes.

Megan said this is where they used to hang out sometimes, her and Stephanie and their friends.

Up near the roof, on each side of the building, part of the metal of the shed had been bent down, so the sun could come in. Streams of the light shining down onto the yellow hay, stacked bales of it along the back wall. The front part had been set up with hay bales to sit on around the edges, a soft layer of hay on the ground in between.

This is where they found her, Megan told me. And when I looked up, I felt cold. I felt dizzy for a moment just looking at it.

Megan told me how Stephanie did it. She told me that Stephanie hung herself. She wrapped a rope up over the rafters, the rust-coloured supports up along the hay shed roof. Then she stood up on one of the hay bales and she jumped off. Her father didn't do it, he didn't hurt her. When they

found her, Stephanie was here, hanging from the roof. Her feet just above the hay floor.

The room felt tiny, closed in as I stared up at the rafters, the zig-zag patterns of the bars across. There was no rope there now, but I imagined where she did it. Where the rope would have been.

There was one single hay bale out of place, near the centre, and I wondered whether that was it. If that was the one Stephanie jumped from.

The wind pushed against the side of the shed, creaking the tin walls, and I stared up from directly beneath the metal rafter, just looking at it. Looking along it. Looking for some mark of where she'd been.

This was where she did it, Megan said. This was the last place she ever saw.

I sat down onto the hay on the floor in the orange afternoon light. Pieces of dried hay poked into my skin, scratched across.

I sat there, and I stared up at the rafters, looked along the welded joints in the metal.

I stayed there for a long time. Just staring. Just looking. Every breath felt heavy, and never seemed to fill enough inside my chest.

It was hard to think of how it could have happened, what could have possibly been so bad to make Stephanie do it. How it would feel to hang by your neck. Till everything stopped.

I thought about this as I shot the basketball in the backyard. The ball was dirty, leaving brown, dotted patterns across my hands. The light was fading now too, it was too dark to see well.

Over the back fence, I could see the Marchant's house, the lights on inside. I could see that the TV was on, but I couldn't see anything else. I peeked through between the tree branches along the fence line. The branches and leaves shook in the wind.

I understand why they didn't want me to ask about it now, why people told you to be quiet when you said anything. I understand why they hadn't told us what really happened, but none of it made any sense. I knew Stephanie, she was always happy, she was always smiling. I knew what she was like.

Why would she want to die, what could have happened to her to make her want to do that?

I watched the Marchant's house through the shaking trees, and I knew that I shouldn't ask. I knew that I shouldn't be doing this. But I still wanted to know. I looked down along the house, to Stephanie's room. The curtains dark, black in the shadows. I still needed to know more about what happened to her.

Whenever people die, they get listed in the newspaper, in the obituaries section which is just after the comics and before the sports part. In the obituaries, they have a list of all of the people who've died at the start, then there are notes for each person, little messages from people who knew them, saying goodbye and things like that.

I'd kept the ones that were about Stephanie. They were listed on August 26th 1994, a couple of days after it happened. I kept the whole paper from that day, but there were no stories on Stephanie's death, there were no reports in the front part. It was just in the obituaries, listed with the other people.

There was a message in there from her Mum:

'To the light of my life, my only reason for anything. My beautiful daughter, gone too soon.'

There was one from her Dad too:

'Words cannot express the loss I feel. You will forever be my little girl. Rest in peace my daughter.'

There were others too, from people in town, names I knew and some I didn't. Some had pictures of flowers, or angels on either side of her name.

I kept the paper from that day in one of the boxes underneath my bed. I kept it right down the bottom, beneath the school books and magazines and other things. Every now and then I got it out and read the notes again, but this time, I was doing it for a different reason. Now, I was looking through the people's names, so I could find out who else I could talk to, who else might be able to help.

Most of them were nothing, no names stood out, messages that I'd read so many times before.

Then I noticed this one:

'Marchant, Stephanie - You were such a bright light, always there with a smile. We will miss the sunshine you brought. Rest in peace. Alan and Noreen Hayes.'

Alan and Noreen Hayes. Could they be related to Shaun Hayes? Could they be Shaun's parents?

If Stephanie was going with Shaun, that might make some sense. Maybe they knew her, and if Shaun wasn't going to tell me anything, maybe they would. Maybe, if I asked them, they might be able to help.

The lookout had been closed off for ages, so they could work on the memorial. You could see in to it, through along the driveway, but you couldn't go in.

They'd put up new fence posts with chains that hung between them, they'd re-painted everything along the way. And you could see where they were working on the memorial, concreting in parts, digging into the ground. But most of the pieces were covered in black plastic, tape wrapped around that. You couldn't see what it looked like.

We rode up there every now and then to see. Me and Russ would go up the hill, which was so steep. You couldn't ride all the way up, you had to walk it come of the way. And coming back down was so fast. You couldn't hear the cars behind you till they were right up on your back, because the wind sound flapped against your ears so hard as you rushed down the road. The wheels humming. Nothing else. If you had to stop quickly, you'd be in trouble.

One thing we'd do is we'd test how long the bikes would go for after the hill, how far we could roll after coming down it. Russ reckons he got all the way home once without pedalling.

Up at the lookout, we stood over our bikes at the entrance, looking in, over to where the memorial would be. It was close now. You could see how everything was in place. The wrapped memorial pillar up at the edge, overlooking the distance.

'Nearly done now,' Russ said.

'Yeah. Still can't tell what it is though.'

'Just, like, a big concrete block,' Russ shaped his hands in the air. 'A big pillar. The Pillar of Doom, my Dad calls it'.

'With names on it maybe.'

'Yeah, something like that.'

There was a lawn mower guy inside, riding across the cut grass, with big, red ear muff headphones on.

'I'm still trying to find out what happened to Stephanie.' Russ didn't say anything in response. 'I think I've found someone who I can talk to.'

'Who?'

'Shaun Hayes' parents.'

'His parents?'

'Yeah.'

'I wouldn't do that.'

'Why?' I looked to Russ.

'It just... I wouldn't.'

I thought for a moment.

'She hung herself, you know?' I told Russ.

'Really?'

'Yeah.'

'How do you know?'

'Megan told me. She told me where too, over in the hay shed on Orchard Road.'

'Geez,' Russ said.

'It's pretty bad.'

'Did you go there?'

'To the shed?'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah.'

'Geez,' Russ looked away. He shook his head.

'What?'

'It's just, that's full on.'

'I know.' Then we watched the lawn mower moving across the grass. 'I need to find out, you know?' I want to know why.'

Russ didn't say anything for a moment, the smell of cut grass rushing at us on the wind.

'Just be careful, hey,' Russ said. 'Shaun won't like it if you talk to his parents.'

Alan and Noreen Hayes lived on a dirt road just outside of the main town. I looked them up in the White Pages up at the phone box after school, they lived up the top if the road that lead down the hill, a side street that went into the bushland, just before the national park. I rode over and I went along their street slow, the wheels cracking along the loose rocks. I looked over the houses, the numbers attached to the letterboxes, trying to figure out which one it was.

I went past their house the first time, to see if Shaun's car was there. I wouldn't go in if it was. I couldn't see the Torana in the drive, so I rode past and then I turned around at the end of the street and went back.

I had to open the gate to get into their yard. It was one of those big, car-sized steel mesh gates with a chain that hooked over through it and onto the fence post to keep it shut. I left my bike outside the gate, laying on its' side the

grass on the nature strip, and I went in. I walked up the driveway towards the house.

I rang the doorbell and a dog started barking and moving around inside. The dog sounded big, then there was a man's voice. The man yelled 'shut up, Bruno' and 'settle down', his voice closer the second time, then he opened up the front door. They had one of those security doors over the wooden one, so when he opened it, he was hard to see through the holes in it, like he was in the shade. The dog, a German Shepherd, was also there. The dog sniffed at the bottom of the doorway.

'Yes?' The man said.

'Yes, hi,' I said. 'I was looking for Alan Hayes?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'Oh,' the dog scratched at the metal of the door, his claws scraping.

'Get off, Bruno,' Alan Hayes said, and he shoved the dog with his foot. The dog hit into the door, then moved in behind him. I looked to the dark outline of Alan Hayes' face.

'I'm doing a report for school and I was hoping I could ask you a couple of questions.'

'A report?' Alan Hayes said. 'What about?'

'Bruno,' a woman's voice called from further back inside the house. I could see her shape appear down a hallway.

I looked back to Alan Hayes again.

'It's about Stephanie Marchant,' I told him.

Mr. Hayes didn't say anything, then the woman called out again.

'Who's at the door?'

'Nothing,' Mr. Hayes yelled back. 'What is this for?' He asked me.

'It's a report for school.'

'What school?' Alan Hayes asked. 'Sorry, who are you?'

'Oh, I go to the local primary school. I knew Stephanie. This is just...'

'So what are you asking?' Alan Hayes interrupted.

'I'm doing a report. I'm writing about what happened to Stephanie, and I...'

'No,' Alan Hayes said. He stood up taller, his dark shape inside the door frame, then he started to close the door. 'You shouldn't ask about that,' he told me.

'No, I was just...'

'Nah, you need to go, thank you,' Then Alan Hayes shut the wooden door, me standing out in front. I could hear him

talking to the woman inside, I assume it was Noreen Hayes. I couldn't make out what they were saying. Then I heard the dog, the German Shepherd sniffing at the gap along the bottom of the door again and I moved away, stepped back off the concrete.

I walked back down the driveway and opened the big metal gate. I closed it behind myself, hooking the chain over onto the latch on the fence post. Then I rode back into town, back along the dirt road, the worn track along the side, down beneath the tall trees.

I played basketball outside after dinner, shooting hoops into the darkness. But I wasn't really playing. Really, I was watching the Marchant's house again, the lights on inside. And I noticed something different. Something had changed between the gaps in the fence line trees. This night, the light was on in Stephanie's room. The curtains open, the brightness beaming out at the far end of the house.

I left the basketball in the dirt and I climbed the tree up beside the shed and got onto the shed roof. You have to be careful on the roof, you have to walk along the nails, stepping line by line, and you can't step on the fibreglass panels either. Otherwise you might fall through.

I made my way up to the peak, the top point of the shed roof, then I lay down on my stomach and hung onto it. I pulled myself up to look over, dragging my body along the metal. The nail heads scratched along my legs, my chest.

From here, I could see into Stephanie's room, the light on inside. It was exactly the same, all of Stephanie's things were still there. Her pink and white drawers with the mirror on top, messages and stickers all across to the glass. Her posters. The big one of an octopus, a sort of multi-coloured picture of an octopus that changed colour in the angles of the light. It took up the biggest part of the wall. Her bed was made, her pink doona cover across it. Her jacket hanging over the back of her chair. Tiny animal statues along the window sill. It was all there, all the same, and I held on to the roof, looking over the peak of the metal. Looking into Stephanie's place.

Then I heard - well I thought I heard - crying. It sounded like someone was crying, but just for a moment, then it was gone again when the wind stopped. The tall trees leaning and rushing in the darkness above. I heard the sound again, then it was gone and I looked around but I couldn't see anyone. There didn't seem to be anyone else out in the night.

I looked back to Stephanie's room and I thought back to when she was there, when she used to be there, inside her room.

Reading. Putting away her things. I didn't stalk her, I wasn't watching her all the time, but every now and then I'd notice her, and I'd look over. Just to see. Just to watch her for a moment.

The first time I ever spoke to Stephanie, it was over the back fence. The basketball had gone over into the Marchant's yard and I jumped the fence to go and get it and Stephanie saw me and she yelled out. I rushed back over the fence quick and then I looked back and there she was, out by her back door. Then she walked over towards me.

'Hey,' she said. 'You live over there?'

I remember her long hair as she walked over. Her smell as she got close.

'Yes. Sorry, I just had to get the ball.'

'No, no, it's fine,' she said. She was right up at the other side of the fence now. 'It's no problem, I just wanted to say hi is all.'

'Oh. Hi.'

'Hi,' she laughed. 'I'm Stephanie.'

She held a hand out for me to shake. She was wearing black, fingerless gloves with coloured bands around the tops of the finger holes. Her fingers felt soft, gentle along my palm. I felt bad because my hands were dirty from the basketball.

That was the first time we talked, in the middle of a cold day, on a weekend. The sunlight in her long hair. She smiled. Her breath fogged with mist.

'That's your room, down the end there?' I asked her.

'Yes,' she looked at the house, then back to me. 'How did you know?

'Oh, I saw when you moved in. You didn't close the curtains.'

'Right,' she nodded. 'I'll have to remember that.'

'Oh,' I realised what she was saying. 'I wasn't looking. I mean, I wasn't spying on you or anything, I just noticed when I was playing basketball.'

'No, you were looking,' she smiled.

'No, I wasn't. I was just...'

'Right, right...' she smiled. 'It's fine,' she waved her hand. 'Yes, that is my room.'

'I like your posters. The picture of the octopus.'

Stephanie laughed.

'Thanks. Yeah, it's kinda' cool.'

'Yeah.'

I felt unsure, nervous talking to her. Like I didn't know what to say next.

'I like your gloves,' I told her.

'Yeah?' Stephanie held her hand up. 'It's cold up here. I need 'em.'

'Yeah, it gets cold.'

'Aren't you cold?' She asked. I was wearing shorts and a t-shirt.

'No. I'm playing basketball, so...'

'Yeah, but your hands are white. Maybe you need some gloves.'

I looked at my hands. I kept my dirty palms out of sight.

'Here,' Stephanie said, and she took off her gloves, pulled them off her fingers. 'You can borrow these.'

'Oh no, it's fine.'

'Just take them,' she said, handing them to me.

I slid my hands into the fingerless gloves. They were warm, fuzzy.

'See. They look good on you,' Stephanie said.

'You think so?'

'Yeah,' she nodded. 'You look cool.'

I turned my hands over, looking at the gloves.

'Well, I gotta' go,' Stephanie said, and I went to take her gloves off.

'No, no, you keep them,' she said as she walked away.

'You can give them back to me next time.'

I waved to her. My warm, gloved hand. The gloves smelled like Stephanie like flowers maybe. I don't know what.

She went in through the sliding door and disappeared inside her house and I put the glove to my face, touching against my nose.

It smelled like her.

It seemed wrong, it felt like the wrong thing to do. But I decided that I was going to go talk to Stephanie's Mum, to ask her about what happened. She was over the back and she was alone. Maybe she'd talk to me.

I rode around to the Marchant's house after school. I could've just jumped the back fence, but it felt like I should go in properly, that I should go to the front door and knock.

I rode my bike around the block and left it in the driveway, then I walked up the wooden front steps. I knocked on the door of the Marchant's house.

At first, I didn't think she was going to answer, and I was about to leave when the door opened, just a bit. Mrs. Marchant looked out, her head leaned on an angle to peek around the wood. Her hair was grey, greyer than I remember. Strands of it rising up from her head. She wore big glasses, the kind that changed to sunglasses in the light.

'Yes,' Mrs. Marchant said. I couldn't see her mouth when she spoke, hidden behind the door.

'Hi Mrs. Marchant. I live over the back.'

'Oh,' she opened the door some more, showing her full face. 'Did you need to get the ball from out the back?'

'No, no, it's not that,' I told her and I looked at her face, her eyes looking out through her glasses. It felt wrong to ask, to say anything about it. 'I just wanted to see if you were okay,' I told her.

Mrs. Marchant opened the door wider again, so that I could see inside the house. I could see her fully now, standing there in her dressing gown, her tracksuit pants poking out the bottom, covering her legs, white, woolly slippers on her feet.

'Am I okay?' She asked.

'Yeah. Because I don't see you outside so much anymore, over the fence.' Mrs. Marchant had her head tilted a little, looking at me. 'I just thought I would check.'

Mrs. Marchant stood for a moment, holding onto the door.

'Am I okay?' She said again. 'Yes,' she nodded. 'Yes, I'm fine.'

'Okay,' I told her.

Mrs. Marchant stood still looking at me with her mouth open. She didn't say anything.

'Okay,' I said. 'Well I'll go then. I just wanted to check, is all.'

'Okay,' Mrs. Marchant said.

She stood in the doorway, looking out as I went back to my bike and I picked it up. I clipped on my helmet and I looked back up to the house. She was still there, watching out. I held a hand up to wave to her. She waved back. Then I rode off down the street.

It felt strange talking to Mrs. Marchant, felt wrong. I couldn't ask her about Stephanie. She seemed nice, she wasn't mean or anything. But it felt wrong to ask, like I shouldn't say it. That I should leave her be.

I rode away down the dirt road and pulled a jump up off the tree root on the corner, then I continued down onto the bike path, humming around the corners, moving through. I was thinking about Mrs. Marchant, I wasn't even thinking about where I was going, and I rode down past the old, overgrown nursery, past the bus stop, but the old primary school. I turned in on Orchard Road, the stretching dirt track, and I rode in.

I hadn't really thought about it, but I was riding back to the hay shed, the red building up in the top of the paddock. I got to the edge of the fence line, looking up at it, and I just looked at the shed for a bit. Sitting out by

itself in the paddock. The front of it shadowed in the afternoon light.

I left my bike in the grass outside the fence and I walked in, walked up the grass towards the building. I got to the shed, up at the top of the hill, looking out onto the road below, and I stood outside it. I didn't want to go in. I didn't want to be inside it. So I just stood there, beside the old, red shed. The wind flapping by, muffling my ears. I stood outside and I thought about Stephanie. How this was the last place she'd ever be.

It felt so sad, so pointless. It felt like such a waste.

Why would she do it? Why would she want to leave everything behind?

I put my hand onto the metal of the red building, felt the cold of it. I slid my hand down along it, and then I noticed, in the grass nearby, the tyre tracks. There were new ones, patterns in the mud that hadn't been there last time. Someone had been here.

I followed the tracks along, heading out towards the gate down the bottom, over near the fence. Someone had been in here and I thought I might get in trouble, so I ran away, back down to the fence line and I jumped over the fence and got on to my bike.

What if it was the farmer, come to tell people off for being on his property? What if it was the police?

I got onto my bike and I looked back. The red shed standing out in the paddock. I rode off down the track, down Orchard Road, back towards home.

I heard it well before he reached me, and for a while I wasn't sure if I was imagining it, thinking that he might be following me when he really wasn't. But he wasn't. Shaun Hayes, his green Torana revving, he was tailing behind me as I rode along the path.

The bike path goes alongside the roadway, so he couldn't come up behind me all the way. But his car was tailing just behind on the road, lagging back. He switched his headlights on in the failing light.

I thought maybe he hadn't actually seen me, that he might not have known I was there, and I turned into a side street and hooked around quick. The Torana was there, watching on, rumbling. Its headlights staring through. I rode off fast, scratching across the dirt and stones, and the Torana's sound rose up, moving faster on my tail. He was chasing me. He was after me.

I thought back to the pocket knife.

Shaun Hayes wasn't playing music, he was just driving, just moving along. Following behind.

I rode faster, my bike wheels humming along the bitumen pathway. I rode faster again, flying down the hills. The Torana got louder, moving along behind. My heart was pumping fast, my legs hurt from pushing the pedals up hill, and I stood up to keep pushing, rushing as fast as I could.

I turned into my street, scraping onto the dirt road, and the Torana turned too. There's no bike path along my road, so you have to ride in the roadway, and the Torana got right up behind me now, right up close, too close. I thought he was going to hit me, shove into my back wheel, and I rode faster, as fast as I could, my muscles burning. My eyes watering from the wind, blurring my vision.

I slid around the sharp corner near home and the Torana came up closer behind, so close. I swear it touched my bike.

I rode hard up the street, swinging the bike side-to-side, and I got to my house and rushed into the driveway and the Torana accelerated, roaring up the street.

Me puffing, collapsed over the handlebars. Struggling for breath. My hands throbbing on the grips. I looked back and watched the red lights of the Torana rising up the street and into the distance.

'Are you okay?' Mum asked as I came inside and she got up from her seat, came across to me.

'I'm fine,' I told her.

'You don't look it. What happened?' Mum looked me over, angling round to see. She held my chin and pushed my face around in the light. 'You're as white as a ghost, what happened?'

'Nothing Mum, it's okay.'

'Well where have you been?'

'Nowhere. Just out riding.' She stared into my eyes.

'Nothing happened.'

'Clearly *something* happened.'

I moved away and sat down onto the couch, my legs still hurting from the bike ride, my muscles burning hot inside my legs. Mum watched me. She stood there, waiting for an explanation.

'Mum, nothing happened.'

She stared at my face for a moment, looking down on me. Then she looked away.

'Dinner will be ready in ten minutes. Can you get the knives and forks when you're ready please?' She asked. Then Mum turned away and moved towards the kitchen.

'Wait,' I said and Mum stopped. She looked back across to me. 'Mum, what happened to Stephanie Marchant?'

Mum stood looking at me, not speaking. She turned to face me again, then she stepped towards me.

'Stephanie. From over the back.'

I nodded. Mum looked away. She looked up to the roof.

'She passed away,' Mum told me.

'I know,' I said. 'I know that she killed herself.'

Mum's eyes shot back to me.

'Who told you that?'

'Mum, I know she killed herself. She hung herself in the old hayshed on Orchard Road.'

'Who told you *that*?', Mum asked again, louder.

'Mum,' I said. 'Why did she do it?'

Then Mum looked away again. She stared down at the floor, then looked across to the TV. I don't remember what was on TV at the time.

'I don't know,' she said. She looked to my face. 'It's hard to know. People have a lot of things going on in their lives. We can't know about all of them.'

'But Stephanie was always happy,' I said. And I looked at Mum's eyes, her face looking down on me. She looked concerned, worried. She watched down at me. And I started crying. I don't know why it happened, the tears just came up, out of nowhere. It just happened. I just cried.

Mum stepped forward and knelt down in front of me. She put an arm over my shoulder and pulled me into her.

'Oh honey, it's okay,' she said. She rubbed her hand up and down my back. 'I don't know why she did it. There must have been something that made her really, really sad.'

Mum patted at my back as I kept crying. I couldn't stop.

'Sometimes people just get really sad, about different things,' Mum said.

'But she wasn't sad,' I told her.

'I know,' Mum said. 'You can't always tell.'

Mum pulled me in with both of her arms, hugged me in tight. Her chin rested onto the top of my head. She rubbed at my back and I kept crying. For a long time.

My Dad was out a lot, working. What he does is he fills vending machines, you know the ones where you put a coin in the front and turn the handle and some little plastic ball comes out? Dad fills those. He drives around from shopping centre to shopping centre, taking the money out and weighing it up and refilling the machines.

Sometimes we'd go with him, when he went on big trips where he'd have to stay overnight. He liked to have someone come along and we'd stay in a hotel, somewhere with a pool, and we'd buy dinner out. It was good, it was fun to go with Dad and help him. But we could only do it on school holidays. Most of the time, he was out till late.

It was okay, we would still see him everyday when he came home, but there were times when I missed him. It would have been good to have him around sometimes. Just to have him there.

Sometimes, I didn't really know what to say to him
anymore.

I decided to call Stephanie's Dad again, to ask about her. I rode up to the phone box after school and put my coins in, listened to them slot into the machine.

'Hello,' Mr. Marchant answered.

'Hello, is that Alex Marchant?'

'Yes speaking.'

'Hi, this is Geoff Masters from the Mountain Chronicle, I called you...'

'Oh,' Mr. Marchant stopped me. 'Yes.'

'Hi,' and I froze a moment. 'Mr. Marchant, I just wanted to...' The phone line was silent. Stephanie's Dad pushed a breath into the receiver.

'Mr. Marchant, did you still see Stephanie after you left?'

Silence again. I could hear Mr. Marchant moving, doing something.

'Not as much as I should have,' he said.

'Okay,' I told him. 'I'm just...'

I held the phone to my ear, wrapped the cord around the fingers on my other hand.

'How is her mother?' Mr. Marchant asked.'

'She said she's fine. I talked to her the other day.'

'Oh,' Mr. Marchant said. 'Is she though?'

I noticed the phone counter running down, the seconds ticking away.

'I don't know,' I told him. 'I guess.'

I watched the counter ticking down, listening. Mr. Marchant waiting on the other end of the line.

'I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Marchant, thank you for your time,' and I hung up the phone, held it onto the top. I looked down at the dirt gathered on the ground, blown in through the gaps at the bottom of the side walls.

It felt wrong to ask, it felt like it was making people upset. And no one seemed to know what happened, why Stephanie would take her own life.

Maybe no one did know. Like Mum said, there are lots of reasons. You can't always know what makes someone sad.

Laying in bed at night, staring up at the roof in the darkness. Still thinking about the Torana chasing me, me crying in Mum's arms. Still thinking over everything. It felt like maybe I should stop.

No one wanted to talk about it, no one wanted to say. Maybe I would never know, and that was just how it would be.

I thought that it was time to stop, to think of something else. I still had another week before the report was due, I still had time to choose something else. Maybe I needed to give it a break, stop looking into it.

Then I thought over all the times I'd been with Stephanie, her smiling face. I couldn't imagine anything that would make her so sad.

Probably no one knew, maybe no one could tell why she did it. And I didn't have anyone else to ask either way, no one else who could tell me.

There was no one else.

I stared up at the roof of my room, the glow in the dark stars pressed into pieces of Blu-Tack all across. And I imagined I was speaking to her. Looking down from wherever she was. Sitting up above the stars.

'I miss you Stephanie,' I whispered.

But of course, there was no response.

Sometimes I used to wait around up at the shops for the high school bus to arrive, so I could walk home with Stephanie when she got off.

I only did it a few times, I wasn't weird about it. But sometimes I'd go up after school and I'd sit around on the wooden tables or hang around the shops till the high school bus came in. Just to see her. And then I'd be walking home just when she was too.

'You didn't hang around waiting just so you could walk me home, did you?' Stephanie said once. Of course, I said no. But I did.

We would walk home, wandering along the dirt street, dried white and hardened in the sun. Just talking, just catching up. I'd ask her how high school was and she'd tell me about the classes and the school and how different it was. She said she liked being here, she liked that her family had moved up here. It was quiet, easy.

I waited for her after her Dad left, just to make sure she was okay. She seemed fine. She never said anything about it.

I hadn't walked home with her for a while before it happened, I guess, but I still saw her at least once every week. She still smiled, gave me a wave from over the road.

I asked her if she had a boyfriend once, if she'd found a boyfriend at the high school.

'No,' she laughed. 'Nothing like that.'

Our footsteps crunching along the edge of the road.

'Besides,' she said. 'You're my favourite boy.'

She touched my arm, smiled. Then she walked up her driveway, towards her house. Her blue schoolbag squashing over her long hair. I watched her as she went inside, as she shut the front door behind herself.

I've thought about that, at least once, probably every day since.

'Oh my God, what happened?' Mum rushed across the room to David as he came in the front door, and I turned around on the couch to look. David was standing in the doorway, with the door open, the light from outside coming in. He had a handful of paper towel scrunched up at his face, held over his nose. There was blood shining all down the side of his face, dried into his yellow school shirt, spread down the front.

'What happened?' Mum asked him.

'I got punched,' David's voice was different, pinching his nose.

'You got punched? By who?'

'Some kid at school.'

Mum looked at me as she guided David through to the kitchen table. 'Go shut the door,' she said.

Mum sat David down onto one of the chairs by the dinner table and looked over his face. She angled his head around in the light.

'My God,' she said. 'I don't think anything's broken. What happened?'

'I got punched.'

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean you don't know? How, exactly, did it happen?'

'One of the boys just punched me.'

'Just out of nowhere? For no reason?' Mum was standing up now, looking down at David.

'I don't think so.'

'Well were you talking to him, arguing with him?'

'No.'

Mum reached over and moved David's head around some more. She stood behind her, looking over his face. There was blood all around his nostril, dried blood along his skin. There was a lump at the side of David's eye.

'You need ice on this,' Mum said and she went across to the kitchen and opened the freezer door, leaned in to find the

ice pack. David didn't move his head. He just sat waiting for her to come back. His bloody face. The swollen skin.

Mum rushed back and held the blue ice pack on his head and David put his hand onto it, held it in place.

'What did the teachers do?' Mum asked.

'They gave me some paper towel for the blood.'

'That's it?'

'I was going to miss the bus.'

'But what happened to the boy who did it, did they talk to him?'

'Yes. It's okay, Mum,' David told her.

Mum was standing beside David again now, looking over him. Her face was just above the reach of the light.

'It's not okay, David,' Mum put a hand over her mouth.

'I'm going to call them and find out what happened.' Then Mum left the room.

I kept looking over David's face, the blood up in his nose. The dried trail of it down his chin, his neck, into his shirt. David was puffing out big breaths.

'It was because of your.' He told me.

'What?'

'They came after me because of you. Because you were asking Shaun Hayes questions.'

'Is that what they said?'

David nodded, his eyes closed. He looked like he was in pain.

A huge swell filled through me then, like being dizzy but not. A warmth at the back of my throat, made me swallow. I'd caused this, David getting punched in the face, attacked at school. This was my fault.

I looked over the blood again. The blue ice pack pushed onto David's skin. The white ice like snow on the outside of it, cracked. Orange with blood from his fingers.

'I'm sorry,' I told him.

David shrugged his shoulders, closed his eyes again. He kept them closed. He kept puffing out hard breaths.

It was too much, it had gone too far. No one want to know, no one wanted to say what happened. And now David had been hit. Because of me. This was my fault.

Shaun Hayes chasing me in the street, driving me down in his Torana. It was too much. I didn't want this.

David never did anything. He just played games with his friends, he didn't have anything to do with it. But he got hit. The blood dried into his school shirt.

Tis was too much, and I knew that I needed to stop. I needed to stop this now, stop asking. It's just something I wasn't supposed to know.

Honestly, nothing hurt me more than seeing David's face. The pain. The blood. Nothing made me more scared. Sure, Shaun had chased me, had come after me too. But he didn't do anything. Maybe he would. Maybe this was just the start. I needed to stop, to stop all of this. I needed to stop asking.

Would that be enough? Would he come after me or David again? Who could say? But I needed to stop.

There was nothing else, no one else to ask, there was nothing more I could find out. I needed to stop looking into it.

I kept thinking back to David's bloody shirt, his swollen skin, shining in the kitchen light. Stephanie's body hanging from the roof of the shed.

I had to stop, I had to stop all of this now. Before anyone else got hurt. I had to stop. I needed to stop this.

The footy team had another home game on Saturday, and me and Russ rode our bikes up, going too fast around the corners and swinging across the roadway. Everyone went up to the footy games, there was always a line of cars waiting to get in, and we went in through the side entry and put our bikes over against the cricket nets, up behind the far goal posts, and we walked through.

I knew Shaun Hayes would probably be up at the ground, and he was, but he was out the front part, away from the crowd. He didn't watch the footy, but he always went up. Sitting on his car or on a wooden bench, smoking. I could see him across the way and I was scared for a moment, but I knew that he wouldn't see me if I stayed up here. He would never do anything with everyone around.

Me and Russ bought cans of drink from the kiosk, where they sell them for fifty cents, and a bag of mixed lollies

each, and we walked around the ground before the game, looking for the best place to sit.

We saw Megan and Sarah there, huddled up in big blue coats. Neesha was with them too, another girl who'd gone to our school.

'Hey,' Megan said as we walked up.

'Hey.'

'You still doing your report?'

I shook my head.

'Nah, I'm gonna' do something else.'

'Why?' Megan asked.

'Just too hard. No one wants to talk about it.' I thought about it a minute. 'It was making people upset.'

Megan looked to Sarah.

'Yeah, well some things people don't want to talk about, you know?' she looked over and smiled at me. 'You'll understand when you get older.'

Says Megan, who's like, three years older.

'What were you doing?' Neesha asked. Neesha was bigger than the other two girls, with long, dark hair and always tanned skin.

'He was doing a school report on Steph,' Sarah told her.

'Marchant?' Neesha asked.

'Yeah,' Megan said.

'Wasn't she pregnant?'

I looked to Megan as she closed her eyes, held them closed.

'What?' I asked.

'Yeah, she was pregnant,' Neesha said. 'That's why she killed herself.'

'Neesha,' Megan said to her.

'What?'

'They're just kids, they don't...'

'Who was the father?' I asked.

Megan looked at me, the way teachers look at you when you interrupt them.

'Who do you think?' She said.

Shaun Hayes was sitting on the bonnet of his car, a group of other kids, all wearing black and dark clothes standing around with him, smoking. The grey smoke clouds were puffing up and away from them and I walked across to them, down from the oval. The air horn sounded to start the game.

'Hey,' I yelled, but they couldn't hear me over the noise. 'Hey,' I yelled again. Two of them looked at me as I got closer, then, as they moved, Shaun Hayes looked right at me. His face shifted as he focused onto mine.

'Did you get her pregnant?' I yelled at him.

Shaun shot a stream of cigarette smoke out of his nose, stayed staring at me.

'Is that true? Was Stephanie pregnant?' I was yelling, loud. The others had followed me down, away from the oval, Megan, Sarah, Neesha and Russ. Other people had noticed us too, were looking over as I was yelling. I kept walking towards Shaun.

'Is that true? Was she pregnant with you?'

It probably wasn't smart to go at him and his mates, but I didn't care. I didn't care if he stabbed me, if he killed me right now. I was so angry with him. His Torana, his music. His long, dark hair, hanging down the sides of his face.

Shaun didn't move as I got up closer, then one of his friends stood in front of me, blocked me from reaching him. It was Dale, a tall, skinny kid with long blonde hair and lots of freckles and pimples.

'What are you doing there, little man?' Dale said. He put his hands onto my chest, held me back.

'Is it true?' I asked Dale, looking up to his face. 'Was Stephanie pregnant?'

Dale shook his head.

'Come on mate. Turn around and walk away.'

More of the people at the footy were looking over now, looking our way. A few adults started coming down the hill towards us.

'Is that what happened?' I pushed against Dale's hands. Behind Dale, I could see that Shaun had stood up from his car now. 'Was she pregnant with you?' I yelled at him.

Dale put a foot in behind my leg and shoved me back, tripping me over and I fell onto the pebbles of the driveway section, onto my butt. The ground was cold against my legs.

I could see Shaun, standing up in front of his car, looking at me, over behind Dale. He had his head tilted forward staring me down.

'Is that what happened to Stephanie?' I yelled at him.

'Hey, what's going on here?' The group of adults had reached us and one of them stood up beside me, looked down onto me. He was tall and bald on the top of his head, with grey hair along the sides. He was wearing a footy club jacket and jeans. He walked like he'd just stubbed his toe.

'What are you kids doing?' The man asked. He looked to Shaun. 'Put your cigarette out for God's sake. What are you even doing here?'

'It's a free country, mate,' one of the other kids said. The man looked down to me again.

'And you, you need to stop yelling about that. People are trying to deal with it, get over it. The last thing they need is some kids making jokes about it at the footy.'

'It's not a joke,' I told him.

'Stop talking about it, okay?' The man opened his eyes wide when he said this. I nodded up to him, his bald head shining in the sunlight.

'Now, all of you, get out of here. You all go that way,' the man pointed. 'And you all go that way, understand?'

The man stood watching as Shaun and his friends climbed into the Torana and I got up off the ground and me and Russ and the girls walked back towards the oval, the game in progress. The Torana spun its wheels on the stones as it took off and drove out the gate and the bald man, still watching on, he shook his head.

'Unbelievable,' the man said.

You could hear the Torana roaring up the street, away from the footy ground.

I didn't want to be at the footy anymore after that, so I went and got my bike and I rode home, back along the winding streets. I took the long way, through the bush tracks, in case Shaun Hayes was looking for me, and I went around through the back streets and got home and put my bike back into the shed. I looked over at the Marchant's house over the back. Quiet. A trail of smoke rising out the chimney on the roof.

I went inside and to my room and I lay onto my bed and I thought about what it all meant, about Stephanie being pregnant. Whether that could be it, why she did it.

I didn't even know she had a boyfriend, but if she was pregnant, that was so much more. I didn't even know that. Why didn't I know that?

Maybe that's why she pulled out of school, why I stopped seeing her around as much. But why would she have killed herself? Did Shaun tell her to go away or something? Did she get in trouble for being pregnant?

I lay on my bed and thought over the questions, the difference this made. No matter which way I lay there, nothing felt comfortable.

It was an Argonaut octopus, the one on Stephanie's wall. The Argonaut octopus looks different to regular ones, it doesn't have the usual round head, and its legs are real thin and kind of creepy looking, trailing out like streamers. It also has this sort of shell bit, made of skin, that it lives inside, which is also part of it. It doesn't look like a normal octopus.

It took me ages to find out what it was. I remembered what it looked like from Stephanie's poster, and I looked through all the books at school, all the magazines. I looked through all books at the library too, then eventually, I found it, one that looked just like it. Except without the multi-coloured paint that Stephanie's one was drawn with on her poster.

I tried to draw a picture of it, but I couldn't. I kept doing the legs wrong so they looked all different sizes, or the eyes looked stupid and out of place. Eventually, I traced

a picture of one and coloured it in. I was going to give it to Stephanie the next time I saw her. But then I never did.

Now I just keep the picture in my wallet, all folded up. The colours have rubbed together a bit and the paper's getting worn out along the folds. But I keep it there, keep it with me. It reminds me of her a bit.

I think that she would have liked it, had I given it to her.

I think she would have wanted to keep it.

Russ came over later in the day. My mum let him in and told him I was in my room.

'Are you okay?' He asked.

'Yeah.'

Then he didn't say anything for a bit.

'Pretty full-on with Shaun, hey?'

'Yeah.'

Russ looked around my room, as if he hadn't seen it a million times before.

'You wanna' go get a movie or something?'

'Yep,' I told him.

We went to the video shop up the road and picked out a movie. Russ' Mum has an account and she lets him get one movie a week. We took the video back to Russ' house and we watched it

with his parents and his sister and their cats. They have five cats, there's always a cat nearby. After that, me and Russ went out to the caravan in the backyard and turned the lights on inside and went in.

Russ didn't ask about Stephanie or say anything about what happened with Shaun Hayes. He knew about the report, that I was trying to find out what happened. But he didn't ask, he didn't say anything about it.

Eventually I brought it up.

'I don't understand it,' I said.

'Don't understand what?'

'Why Stephanie would do it?'

Russ went quiet, sitting at the other end of the caravan, in the table and chairs part. Me down the opposite end, on one of the beds.

'I don't know anything about it, I guess,' Russ said.

'But you knew Stephanie, you knew what she was like.'

'Yeah, kinda'.'

'Don't you want to know why?'

Russ went quiet again, thinking maybe.

'I don't know,' Russ said. 'I don't really want to think about it.'

That seemed to be how most people were, that no one wanted to think about it. So they didn't. They just stopped saying anything about it, stopped thinking of it. Moved on.

Is that how everyone was? Was I strange for wanting to know?

People were trying to get over it, like the man at the football had said. Everyone wanted to move on.

So why did I want to know more?

We snuck out at midnight and went up the street, the trail of the bike path lit up beneath the streetlights.

We knocked on the door at the back of the bakery. You could already smell the bread cooking. The baker opened the door, covered in flour and dough all down his white t-shirt and black tracksuit pants. He sold us two bags of doughnuts, then told us to keep it quiet.

'Make sure you don't tell anyone,' he whispered.

Then he shut the door and we walked our bikes across the street, our doughnut bags in one hand, our helmets in the other, fingers over the handle grips. We got over to the wooden table up beside the shop and rested our bikes onto the nearby fence. You could only see part of the table and the wood bench chairs alongside it in the streetlight, the rest in the shadows, and we sat down on the table, our feet on the seat, and we ate our doughnuts and watched out on the empty main street.

Every now and then, a noise would echo out from over at the pub, a crowd cheering inside maybe, then nothing. Every now and then, a lonely car would flash by and continue off into the darkness.

'Hey, what are you doing your report about?' I asked Russ. He looked up, looked like he was thinking.

'I don't know. When's it due?'

'You've got another few days,' I told him.

'Don't know. Maybe getting doughnuts up the street at night?'

'You can't write that, he told us not to tell anyone about it.'

'I know,' Russ took another bite of his doughnut. 'But they're so good, the people need to know,' he spoke through his food. 'Nah, I'll probably do the memorial opening. Easy.'

Then we heard it, rumbling on the distance. Like how they hear dinosaurs in the movies. We looked at each other as the noise rose louder.

'Shaun,' Russ said, and we both ducked down behind the table, into the wet grass. We could still see through the gap above the wooden seats and Russ put his doughnut bag up onto the seat, rested it there. Shaun Hayes, in his green Torana,

drove through, the engine roaring, echoing off into the paddocks.

The Torana accelerated up the main street, the straight past the shops, then it curved by the pub on the corner and continued on further into the distance.

We both got back up, sat back up onto the table.

'Geez,' Russ said. 'I nearly lost my doughnuts.'

'I know, me too.'

'Did yours go in the grass?'

'Nah, I held them up. They're fine.'

Then the car sound got louder again. Shaun was coming back.

'Geez,' Russ said, and he ducked back down behind the table. But this time, I didn't. This time I stayed, watching out. Sitting up on the wood.

'What are you doing?' Russ said from behind me, and then Shaun Hayes' green Torana came around the corner, onto the straight. It accelerated along, flashing by the shops. I watched it go past. The Torana slowed into the roundabout, then it hooked right around, did a full circle of it, the sound of the car rising, then humming back down. The Torana came around, then it pulled in, out in front of the milk bar. The Torana stopped in front of the wooden table, in front of

me. Rumbling. The dark windows of it beneath the streetlight. Just sitting there.

I didn't want to show that I was scared, I wasn't going to be scared of him. I held my head up, looking at the car. I wasn't going to be scared. The passenger side window of the Torana wound down, and there were two people inside. Dale was in the passenger seat, looking across. Shaun Hayes was driving. He was leaning forward near the steering wheel, looking over to me.

I kept my head up, staring back. I could feel my teeth shaking a bit.

Dale opened the passenger door of the Torana and got out and he stood up beside the car. Shaun stayed like he was, leaning forward in the drivers' seat.

'Hey,' Shaun Hayes said. 'Come for a ride.'

I shook my head. Dale smiled, then he knelt down to look back into the car at Shaun, then he stood up again. Dale stepped forward, towards the table, then he stopped. He was about three metres back from me.

'Come on, get in,' Shaun said.

'Get in, mate,' Dale said.

I looked over at the car. There was a blue light inside, coming from the front of the stereo. It made Shaun's skin look grey, then Dale stepped forward again.

'You scared, mate?' Dale said.

'No,' I told him.

'Then get in, go for a ride.'

Dale stepped closer again and I stood up from the table and down from the seat. I was right up close to Dale now. I couldn't run, Dale would be faster than me. I couldn't get away, even if I wanted to. I stood there, looking up at Dale's face. He smelled of cigarettes and beer. I stared at his face, then I walked past him, walked across to the open door of the car, to Shaun Hayes in his green Torana. And I got in.

I wanted to show him, show them both that I wasn't afraid, that I wasn't scared of them. Of Shaun. And I wanted to tell him that he shouldn't have done it. So I got in.

I clipped in the seatbelt as Dale shut the door over me, looking in at me through the open window. Dale looked across to Shaun.

'I'm going up the pub,' Dale said and Shaun revved the engine. Dale looked to me again. 'You have a good trip, mate,' Dale smiled.

Shaun Hayes skidded the wheels across the dirt as he took off, the engine roaring loud as he accelerated along the main street. He swung the car hard around the corner, throwing me into the glove box between the seats, and the engine sound rose higher again as he drove us into the night.

Because we live up on a hill, there's a track that goes down the side, following the power lines all the way to the bottom. There's this big clearing for them, those big powerline holders that look like giant metal scarecrows or something, all lined along the hillside.

The track is just dirt, it's not a real road, but you can turn in and drive down it. It's very steep and the corners are sharp. You can see right over the sides at the edges, down into the gully below.

Shaun Hayes drove the Torana too fast, the headlights lighting the way, and he turned in at the start of the track that follows the power lines and he pulled up.

You could see how steep it was from here, the white trail dropping down into the night. There were no streetlights, just an outline of the twisting path between the grass paddocks, down beneath the stars and the moon. The metal shapes of the powerline holders buzzing alongside.

Shaun sat behind the wheel of the Torana, his hands gripped on it. His grey skin in the blue stereo light. He stared forward through the windscreen.

'What do you want to know?' Shaun said.

I didn't answer for a moment. I looked around outside the car. The engine rumbling through the seat. Then I asked him.

'What happened with...'

Shaun revved the Torana, the noise rising, the car shaking as he did cutting me off. He pushed it a couple of times, ramping it up, then he let it go, rumbling back down. Shaun didn't say anything. He just sat there watching out. Waiting.

'Was Stephanie...'

Shaun revved the engine again, a long, rising roar of the engine, so loud that you couldn't hear anything else, vibrating through everything, then he stopped. Then he was waiting again.

I wasn't sure what to do, whether I should ask again.

'Is...'

Shaun revved the engine again, and this time he let it go, skidding the wheels and taking off down the dirt track, rumbling along into the night. He drove fast, revving the car, and he swung hard around the first corner, throwing me sideways into the door. I held onto the seatbelt and I was

puffing now, scared at how fast we were going, rushing down the hill. You could feel the car slide out a bit as Shaun hit the next corner, revving it, changing gear and the engine roared so loud as Shaun drove faster and faster again. I was swinging side to side, getting thrown about and puffing. I thought I might cry, I was so scared. Shaun drove faster again, then slid into another corner, jamming the brakes, and then he reached over and pushed the button on my seatbelt, unclipped it. I flung right across into the door, then I crashed forward into the glove box, hitting against my chest as Shaun pulled up, skidding the car to a halt.

I was on the floor in front of the passenger seat, little stones and dirt from the carpet pushed into my hands and my chest was hurting. I could feel where the bruises would be. The car had stopped, the engine still rumbling.

Shaun Hayes sat in the drivers' seat, looking out. He looked down to me, on the dirty floor.

'Leave me alone, understand?' Shaun said. His eyes were wide open, crazy looking. 'Stop asking about it, it's none of your fucking business, right?'

I was looking up to Shaun Hayes from the floor of his car, my arm, my chest hot, hurting. I could feel myself shaking a bit. I didn't know what to say.

'I just...'

'No,' Shaun said. 'Nothing else. Just leave it alone, or next time, I'll take you out into the bush and leave you there.' Shaun Hayes stared at me. It looked like his eyes were shaking in the blue light. 'I'll take you out to the middle of nowhere, where no one will find you. I'll make you disappear if you keep asking about it, do you understand?' He said.

My heart was still rushing from the dirt track, driving too fast. Shaun Hayes staring me down in the darkness, his face shadowed in the blue light. I nodded up to him.

'Okay,' I said.

Shaun Hayes looked back out the windscreen, looking on ahead. He sat staring, waiting. I climbed back up onto the passenger seat, careful not to twist my sore arm, not to push on it. My chest hurt as I shifted into place.

I pulled the seatbelt across and plugged it in, then I looked at Shaun Hayes, who was still watching out. Then I looked out too, into the night. There was nothing out there, out in the paddocks. Just trees and dust and grassland, glimpses of it in the headlights. The giant powerline holders rising up. I looked up to the sky, the stars up above spread across. I rubbed at my arm, pushed onto the pain point.

Shaun Hayes reversed the Torana, then he turned it around. He revved the car, roaring loud again, then we took off quick, rushing back up the hillside track.

Everyone was heading up to the memorial opening the next day, the big event to unveil the new statue or whatever I would be.

Mum picked out what clothes she wanted us to wear and she laid them out on our beds, all matching, the newest clothes we had. Mum wanted us to look good.

I couldn't stop looking at David's eye as we waited. Sitting on the couch, watching TV. David didn't seem to care about it, it didn't look like it was hurting him. But it did look painful. His skin was all grey and yellow coloured around his eye, red like blood in the lines that curved along underneath and at the edges.

David, my brother. Who got his because of me.

Mum and Dad were getting dressed or in the shower, the smell of Dad's aftershave floating out, and I went over closer to David, sat next to him on the couch seat. David looked at me. The white part of his eye was red on one side.

'I'm sorry,' I told him.

'For what?'

'For your eye, for you getting hit.'

'Oh,' David looked down. 'It's okay.'

'No, it's not. You shouldn't have got hit.'

David kept his face down, looking away.

'It's okay,' he said.

'I'm sorry, David.'

'I know,' he said.

He nodded slow, kept his eyes down. He turned to hide his bruised face.

It looked like everyone in town had come up for the memorial opening, there were cars lined along the side of the road from way back, parked right up to the entrance.

We parked where we could and we walked along the side of the road. Mum told us to be careful of the water, the drain ditch dug along the way. Dad had worn his father's medals, pinned to the front of his good coat. The colours of them stood out in the sun.

As we got closer, we could see all the people gathered round, everyone in a group around the memorial, which was covered in a sheet, or at least, it looked like a sheet. There was a big pillar covered, a flagpole next to that. It was concrete all around, making this kind of platform for it. All the fence posts at the lookout had been re-painted, the chain fences re-done. Everything looked new, smelled of paint and cut grass and fresh wood. You could see the outline of the city way out on the cloudy distance.

Shaun Hayes wasn't there. Or I couldn't see him. There were a lot of people, lots of people we knew of had seen around. But Shaun Hayes wasn't one of them. I kept looking for him, kept looking around, and I stayed up next to Mum and Dad, because Mum asked us to stay close. She put a hand on David's shoulder at one part.

A local councillor talked about the memorial. He stood up in front of it with two other people, then they pulled the sheet down and showed the pillar, a shining, pointed column that stood up at the edge, overlooking the city in the background. The pillar had names on it of people who had died in the war, gold letters that stood out on the rock surface of it. Everyone clapped. My Dad patted me on the back, standing behind me.

Everyone walked around and talked after that, shaking hands and smiling. Old men wore their own war medals. Young kids ran off down the fresh cut grass, the sloping hillside away from the lookout. People leaned forward close to the pillar to read it.

Then after a while, we came home. The new memorial opened. The talk of the town, now here.

'So how is everyone going with their reports?' Mrs Gray asked. This was at the end of the day, after we'd cleaned up our desks and put our books back into our tubs. We were sitting on the carpet now, waiting for the bell to ring. Mrs. Gray was standing up in front, looking over us.

'Does anyone have any questions, anything they need help with?'

Michelle put up her hand. Michelle was tall and had blonde hair that she always had tied back. Mrs. Gray pointed to her.

'In the instructions, it says that we should include descriptions of everyone in the report, and details about things. Does that include horses?'

'Well that depends,' Mrs. Gray answered. 'Are the horses part of the report?'

'Yes,' Michelle smiled. 'I'm writing about the jumping trials at pony club.'

'Well, then the details of the horses are important,' Mrs. Gray said. 'It's the little details that add to your report and give your readers a way to understand what you saw. So the horses would be important in that report. Just don't include too much description of them.'

Mrs. Gray pointed to someone else. 'Yes, Mark.'

Mark was short and rode motorbikes a lot. He always wore motorbike jumpers.

'If you want to, can you add in things that didn't happen, just a little bit?' Mark asked.

'No,' Mrs. Gray answered. 'Because that would be a story. This is a report, so you should only write about things that really happened, things you saw. No jumping cars over on your motorbike in this one, Mark,' Mrs. Gray smiled.

I put my hand up.

'Yes,' Mrs. Gray pointed to me.

'What if no one wants to read your report?' I asked.

'Well, I'm sure someone will want to read it. I'll read it.'

'No, I mean, what if it's about something that people don't want to know about, something they don't want to think about.'

Mrs. Gray looked confused.

'Well there are plenty of reports about things that people might not want to talk about. Sometimes those are the most important ones.'

'But what if it's about someone who died?' I asked.

'Well,' Mrs. Gray said. 'That's okay, you can write about someone who died and talk about their life in a respectful manner.'

'What if it's about how they died?'

Mrs. Gray looked at me. She had her mouth open.

'There are some things you probably shouldn't write about.'

'Can we write about murder?' Mark asked, then the bell rang, buzzing through the speaker on the wall, and everyone stood up and started walking towards the bag room.

'Okay you have four days left,' Mrs. Gray said. 'Come and ask me if you have any other questions.'

On my ride home, I kept thinking about it, thinking about what happened to Stephanie and what Mrs. Gray had said. That maybe there are some things you shouldn't write about. I thought about Shaun Hayes, the look in his eyes in the blue light, inside the Torana. I thought about David's blood on his shirt, the old, bald man at the football. I thought about Alan Hayes too, Stephanie's Dad.

I rode by the Marchant's house, the front of it looking out onto the street, and I decided to go in, to talk to Mrs. Marchant again. I decided to ask her about her daughter.

I left my bike at the bottom of the driveway and went up. I walked up the wooden steps, then I knocked at the front door. My heart was beating faster as I waited for Mrs. Marchant to come out.

She opened the door a little bit, enough to look out, then she recognized me.

'Oh,' Mrs. Marchant said. 'Hello.'

'Hello,' I said.

Mrs. Marchant opened the door wider.

'I wanted to say thank you for coming by the other day,' she told me.

'Oh, it's okay,' I said.

Mrs. Marchant smiled, then she stood in the doorway, holding the door. Looking out at me.

'Mrs. Marchant, what happened to Stephanie?'

Stephanie's Mum leaned back from the door a bit and her face changed. She looked sad, her eyes bigger behind her glasses. Then she looked down at the wood of the verandah, her head down.

'Oh,' Mrs. Marchant said. 'She went away. She had to go away.'

'I know,' I told her. 'I know that she died.'

Mrs. Marchant looked up, looked back to me. She took another step back, still holding the door handle. She looked dizzy maybe, looking all around, up at the roof. She swayed her head a little bit.

'Yes,' Mrs. Marchant said. 'She passed away.'

Then Mrs. Marchant put her head down again, her long, grey hair hanging over. She stared at the floor for a bit.

'She passed away. That's all,' Mrs. Marchant said.

Then we both stood there for a moment, me and Mrs. Marchant. Not saying anything.

'I miss her,' I said.

Mrs. Marchant looked to me. Her eyes looked huge through her glasses.

'Yes,' she smiled with her mouth closed. 'I miss her too. Very, very much.'

We both stood there again for a moment. I was thinking about Stephanie. I think Mrs. Marchant was too.

'Okay,' I said, and I turned to go.

'Wait,' Mrs. Marchant said. Then she let go of the door and she went inside, disappeared from my view. She came back carrying a photo frame.

'Here,' she said, and she handed the frame to me. It was a picture of Stephanie. Stephanie was smiling, looking away in the photo, her freckles showing in the sunlight. Her light green eyes. 'You can have this,' Mrs. Marchant told me.

For a second I just stood looking at it, looking over Stephanie's face behind the glass. I looked back to Mrs. Marchant, her eyes inside her glasses.

'Thank you,' I said. Then I thought quick. 'Wait,' I told her, and I reached down into my pocket and got out my wallet.

I ripped the Velcro on it open, flipped it out, then I took out the folded picture I'd drawn, of the Argonaut octopus, the one I traced and coloured in. I handed it to Mrs. Marchant.

'Here,' I said.

Stephanie's Mum unfolded the paper, opened it out. The fold lines were worn in, rectangle shapes all across the paper. Mrs. Marchant looked at the picture.

'I was going to give it to Stephanie,' I told her.

'It's like the poster in her room,' her Mum said.

'Yeah,' I told her. 'It's an Argonaut octopus. I thought she would like it.'

Mrs. Marchant kept looking over the drawing.

'Her father gave her that poster. He brought it back from Thailand,' she looked to me. 'She would have loved this.'

I smiled, then I nodded to her.

'Okay,' I said. 'I'll see you later then.'

'Okay,' she said. She raised a hand to wave.

I walked back down the steps, back down the driveway, and I picked up my bike and my school bag from the grass. I put the photo of Stephanie into my bag. I looked in on it one more time before I zipped the bag up.

I looked back up to Mrs. Marchant, who was still standing at her door. In her dressing gown, looking out. I waved to her. She waved back. Then I rode off, heading back around the road, back towards home.

I wheeled my bike up the hill to our house. I could feel the photo of Stephanie shuffling around in my bag as I rode and I didn't want to damage it, and I couldn't be bothered pedalling up the hill anyway so I got off and walked alongside, holding the handlebars to push. And when I got up the hill a bit, closer to our house, I noticed a car in the driveway, not our car, but a white one. It was a police car, a police car was parked in the top drive, behind Mum's car. A police car was parked at our house.

Mum met me in the backyard as I came in.

'Inside, now,' she said. She looked angry, serious.

'Why are the police here?' I asked.

'Get inside, quick.'

'I have to put my bike in the shed.'

'Just leave it, get inside, come on.'

I laid my bike down onto the dirt by the back verandah and I went inside. My heart was beating fast, my throat felt clogged up. I didn't know what was going to happen. Every bad thing I'd ever done flashed through my mind.

The police officer was sitting at our kitchen table, his light blue shirt and his name badge and his dark shoulder patches with lines on them right there beneath the brightness of the light. He had short, dark hair that was spiked up at the top and he was leaning onto the table. He had one of our coffee cups in front of him. Steam was rising from it.

Mum guided me through the kitchen, then she pulled out a chair for me at the table, next to the police officer. I took my school bag off and rested it onto the floor, down by my feet.

'What's happening?' I asked.

The officer looked up at Mum, then he looked at me.

'We've had a few complaints,' the officer said. I realized then that I'd seen him before, I'd seen him driving around in the police car. 'Paul Stevens' is what his name tag said. I looked back to Mum who nodded hard towards the officer. She pointed towards him.

'Alan Hayes says that you've been hanging around their house, asking them about Stephanie Marchant.'

'Yes,' I told him. 'I mean, no, I haven't been hanging around, I just went there once.'

'He also says that you've been harassing their son, Shaun.'

'No,' I thought back to the Torana, being thrown around the car in the night, speeding down the powerline track. 'No, he was the one who...'

The officer held up his hand.

'We also have several reports of you yelling about Stephanie Marchant at a recent football game.' The way he said it felt wrong, that wasn't how it happened. 'Why are you asking around about Stephanie Marchant?' The officer asked.

I took a moment to answer.

'It's for a school report,' I could feel myself about to cry. I looked up to Mum again. 'We have to write about a local event.'

'And you chose to write about Stephanie Marchant?' The officer said. I looked to him, sitting across beneath the kitchen table light.

'Yes,' I told him. I flicked away a tear at the edge of my eye. 'I wanted to know what happened.'

I was trying to hold it in, trying to stop myself from crying. I swallowed hard. I opened my eyes up, then re-focused on the policeman.

'Okay,' the officer said. The police officer took out a notepad and a pen, put the pad onto the table. He started writing on it, he looked at his watch first, then he wrote the date and the time on the top of the page.

'You need to leave the Hayes' alone, okay?' The officer said. He kept writing notes. I couldn't read what they said. The police officer looked to me. 'Okay?'

'Yes,' I told him and I pushed another tear away, then I looked up to Mum again. She was watching the policeman. She had her hand up over her mouth.

The officer went back to writing notes.

'The families involved are very upset about the situation, and they'd prefer if they were not asked about it again. Okay?' The officer continued.

'Yes,' I told him. 'I didn't mean to...'

'Maybe you should write your school report on something else that's happened,' the officer stopped writing. He looked across to me again. 'I can give you plenty of local news stories to write about.'

Then the officer stopped talking and just stared at me across the table.

'No,' I told him. 'It's okay.'

Another tear broke. I could feel it sliding down the side of my face.

The officer wrote some more notes, then he stopped and closed up his notepad, then he put his pad and pen back into his pocket. Then he looked to me again.

'I realize that it's not easy to understand, but some things are very private, and can make people very upset,' the officer said. 'Some things you just need to leave alone, okay?'

The officer looked up to my Mum and he smiled, then he stood up from the table, grinding his chair across the floor as he went. I could see his gun in its holster poking out at the side of his hip. His keys rattled as he stood.

'So, just leave them alone, write your school report about something else. Okay?' The officer said.

'Okay,' I told him. I kept my eyes down, away from him. Watching the table, his gun. Then watching the TV screen as he walked away. I stayed sitting at the table and I listened as Mum talked to the officer on the way out, quiet, whispering. She opened the front door for him, then she said 'thank you, sorry again', and she closed the door.

I listened to the engine of the police car starting up,
the wheels of it backing out the drive.

Another tear slid down my cheek, down to my chin.

'Jesus,' Mum said as she walked back towards me. I could
see her pink t-shirt out the side of my eye as she got closer.

'What the hell are you playing at?' she asked me.

Once, when I was outside at night, I noticed movement up by the back fence. A small orange light glowing in the corner of the yard, up behind a tree.

I walked over carefully, quietly, careful not to step on any sticks. And when I got closer, I saw that it was Stephanie. She was over in her yard, in the corner, near our fence. She was smoking a cigarette, the end of it brightening as she sucked it in.

I moved closer, through the trees, then a branch broke as I pushed it, snapped loud and Stephanie jumped and turned around. She looked at me.

'Oh my God,' she said. 'You can't sneak up on people like that.'

'Sorry,' I told her. She turned back to how she was, smoking her cigarette.

'What are you doing out here in the dark anyway?' She asked.

'I was looking for my ball, I didn't want to leave it out overnight.'

Stephanie nodded. She smoked her cigarette again.

The moon was mostly full, so you could see everything outside, once your eyes adjusted. Everything in grey and shadows. Stephanie's eyes shined, lit up by the cigarette. She was looking at me.

'You want a drag?' She asked. Smoke came up out of her mouth as she spoke.

'Sure,' I said.

She handed me the cigarette, pinched between her fingers and I reached over to avoid the burning end, grabbed it from her. I put it in my mouth. It tasted like Stephanie's lips, the cold of it in mine. I sucked in the smoke and it stung, choked up in my throat and I coughed, couldn't stop coughing. I handed the cigarette back, still coughing it out. Stephanie smiled. She sucked on the cigarette again, lighting up her face.

Across the way, her parents were yelling inside their house. You could hear their voices inside the walls. I looked over at the house but I couldn't see them, then I looked back to Stephanie. She was looking up at the stars.

'Bright night tonight,' she said. There were so many stars out, a huge cluster of them up above. Bright, flickering.

I watched Stephanie as she looked, her big eyes, her freckled skin. Her long hair moved in the wind.

She looked across to me as she sucked on her cigarette again. She smiled, her eyes squinted in the cigarette light.

At night, under the reading light attached to the head of my bed, I looked over the photo of Stephanie that Mrs. Marchant had given me. It's in this metal frame and it has these metal flowers all around the edges, all shapes of them moulded in, then the photo is placed in the middle.

Stephanie's not looking at the camera in the photo. She's looking away, at something else, like she was when I watched her looking up at the stars that night.

You can see the detail of her face, and she looks so happy, so interested in the world, in whatever it is she's looking at.

She looks very happy in the photo.

I slid the box out from underneath my bed and I reached down to the bottom, to the newspaper from August 26th 1994, which I'd hidden under everything else. I lifted out the other papers, then I took out the newspaper and I opened it up and I put the photo inside it, in between the folded over part.

I folded it back over the frame, then I put the photo wrapped inside the newspaper back into the bottom of the box. Then I put the other papers back in, back on top. Then I slid the box back underneath, back down under my bed. I lay back in my bed and I thought about the photo for a bit. About Stephanie's face. Her smile. She looked so happy.

Then I turned off the reading light and rolled into the bed.

Mum opened my bedroom door in the morning, woke me up. She looked in over me.

'Phone for you,' she said, then she walked away, disappeared from my view. I looked over to the clock on my desk. It was 7:15am.

I got out of bed and went into Mum and Dad's room and picked up the phone. I covered the speaking part so I could yell out.

'Mum, I've got it.'

On the phone, I could hear Mum hang up the other line.

'Hello,' I said.

'Hey, what are you doing?' It was Russ.

'Nothing. It's seven in the morning.'

'You have to come out. There was a massive fire up at the church last night.'

'A what?'

'A fire. Get ready and meet me up there so we can check it out.'

As we got closer to the church, which was just outside the main part of town, we could see a heap of cars parked along the side of the road, then flashing red and blue lights. The red of fire trucks way up in front. There was a big, white stream of water curving through the air.

When we got up close, we could see the damage. Where the church had been, there was now a pile of black rubble and blackened wood beams broken off and poking up, smoke rising from them in the early morning light. The big metal cross that had been on the roof of the church was rested over on its side, black and burned too. There was this round hoop part at the bottom of the cross that you couldn't see before, because it was covered by the roof. There were fire brigade people out in the wreckage, their yellow overalls between the grey smoke. They were spraying water over the ground, the black and white remains. Spray from the hose touched my arms in the breeze.

There was a crowd of people lined up at the roadside, at the fence line of the church, looking across to the pile of what was left.

The stream of smoke from the remains was thick, rising up into the grey clouds. All you could smell was burnt plastic and smoke.

'Who burns down a church? One of the men looking over said. He had grey hair and wore a red check shirt and jeans.

'Terrible, isn't it?' Another man said. He was wearing a footy club jacket.

There was a police car just inside the church gate, waiting in the driveway, but I couldn't see any police around. The fire brigade truck was noisy nearby, and engine on it powering the hoses, spraying the water across.

'Wonder if they'll be able to recover anything?' Another man said.

'Doubt it, looks like there's not much left,' another man responded.

'Did you hear about the other one?' The first man asked.

'Other what?'

'There was another building fire around the street last night, over on Orchard Road.'

Me and Russ rode quick around the bike track, swerving along beneath the trees. I pushed hard, taking off, pulling away

from Russ, and we came down the hill, then turned up into Orchard Road. We scratched our wheels along the dirt street.

It was the hay shed, the old red building up on top of the hill. Now gone. A stream of smoke rising up from where the building had been. There was another fire truck there, up in the paddock, beside the wreckage, but the firefighters didn't have any hoses on. A couple of fire brigade people were walking around the paddock, looking across the ground. They had backpacks with hoses that came around to their hands.

'Shit,' Russ said. 'Someone's burning down buildings.'

I looked up to the spot where the shed had been, now clear, through to the sky beyond. This was the last place she'd been, the last place she ever saw. Now there was nothing left.

'Who do you reckon did it?' Russ asked and I looked at the ground beside us, the car tyre tracks pushed into the mud. The clear prints squished into the brown dirt. I looked to Russ, then I took off on my bike, back along the dirt road.

I rushed back along the bike path, back up past the shops and through the roundabout, and I rode up into the trees, along the dirt trail worn through the grass at the roadside. I rushed towards the street that the Hayes' lived on, and I got to the start of it, ready to go in, when a police car came up,

came driving up the Hayes' road slow. As the police car got closer, I could see the officer driving. It was the same one who'd come to my house. The officer saw me too, and he stared at me as he drove up and turned onto the road. He stopped the car, looking at me through his open window.

'Where do you think you're going?' The officer asked. Me standing over my bike, frozen in place. There was someone in the backseat of the police car, and I ducked down to see in.

'Hey,' the officer said.

It was Shaun Hayes. He had his head down, sagging over in the seat. He didn't look up.

'Hey, get back on your bike and ride away, now,' the officer pointed at me as he spoke. The officer stayed there, waiting for me to move. 'Now,' he repeated and I turned my bike around and jumped back on, then rode back along the dirt path. The police car moved along the road beside me, Shaun Hayes sitting still in the back, his head down. Then the police car drove on ahead as I continued back along towards the shops.

'Hey, where did you go?' Russ was riding towards me, out the front of the milk bar, and I stopped, waited for him to come up.

'They arrested Shaun Hayes,' I said. I was puffing from riding too fast.

'What?'

'They arrested Hayes,' and my mind was racing, thinking of what this meant.

'Maybe he burned down the church,' Russ said.

I looked up the street, in the direction the police car had gone, moving on around the corner and into the distance.

'What if that's not it?' I said. I looked to Russ, both of us standing over our bikes, leaning onto the handlebars.

'What if he killed her?'

'Killed who?' Russ asked.

'I have to go,' I told him, and I rode off past the video shop, the bakery, and I turned into the side street, rolling down the hill.

I knocked on the door at Mrs. Marchant's house, waited for her to come. Mrs. Marchant opened the door, just a bit, and she looked out. I was still puffing as I spoke to her, worn out from riding too quick.

'Mrs. Marchant, they arrested Shaun Hayes,' I told her.

'What?' She asked me.

'They arrested Shaun Hayes. Maybe it's about Stephanie, maybe she didn't take her own life.'

Mrs. Marchant looked out, looked up and down the street, then she looked back to me.

'What do you mean?'

'Maybe he made it look like it, like she did it. Maybe they arrested him because of it.'

Mrs. Marchant opened the door wider. She was wearing tracksuit pants and a black woolen jumper. Mrs. Marchant was looking down now, at the floor, thinking. She shook her head.

'I don't think that's right.'

'Call them,' I told her. 'Call the police and ask.'

Mrs. Marchant held the phone to her ear as she dialled in the number. Me out on the front verandah, watching in through the open door. There were pictures of Stephanie all along a set of shelves across the way, all different ones in frames. Her face staring out.

'Yes, hello, my name is Alice Marchant, I wanted to speak to Officer Davis please.'

She waited.

'Okay. Well I just had a question. I heard that a young man was arrested this morning.'

She waited again.

'Yes, I realize that, but I just wanted to know if this has anything to do with the investigation into my daughter, Stephanie Marchant.'

Another pause. Mrs. Marchant listening.

'No, I understand. I just want to know is it has anything to do with it.'

Mrs. Marchant looked to me, standing outside, then she looked back to the wall, the floor. Listening to the phone.

'Okay. Thank you,' she said and she put the hand piece back down onto the phone. Mrs. Marchant held the phone there

for a moment, then she let it go and she walked across to the doorway, back to me.

'It's not related,' Mrs. Marchant said.

'What?'

'They couldn't tell me the details, but the officer said they're not connected.'

I thought for a moment.

'But maybe they couldn't tell you everything, maybe they're...'

'No,' Mrs. Marchant said. She looked at me. Her big eyes behind her glasses. 'I know it's hard,' she said. 'But that's what happened. Stephanie took her own life.'

I looked around, thinking, trying to go over it in my head.

'But she couldn't,' I said. 'She wouldn't do that.'

Mrs. Marchant smiled, but kind of in a sad way. She put a hand onto my shoulder.

'I know it's hard,' she said. 'I don't understand it either.'

I sat down onto the wooden porch, my feet on the top step, and I looked out to the road, the trees over the other side. The hills that got bigger the further back across the

distance. Mrs. Marchant came out and sat down onto the dusty wood beside me.

We both sat there, watching the trees, saying nothing for a few minutes.

'Did you know,' Mrs. Marchant said. 'That Stephanie could play the piano?'

I looked to her. I shook my head.

Mrs. Marchant smiled at me.

'She was very good at it. But she stopped playing. She didn't like being the centre of attention.'

I thought of Stephanie sitting behind a piano, playing it.

'I knew she liked music,' I said.

'Yes,' Mrs. Marchant replied. 'She loved music.' Mrs. Marchant looked across to the trees again, the tops of them swaying in the wind. 'She loved all sorts of art, pictures and books and movies. She was a unique soul, her own person. She did things her own way.'

I thought back to the picture of Stephanie. The look on her face as she stared up at the stars.

'She was amazing in every way,' Mrs. Marchant said. 'But she was also very sad.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Lots of things. Things I can't explain.'

I wanted her to tell me, to ask more. But I didn't say anything else.

We sat out on the front step, Mrs. Marchant and me, watching the trees.

Watching them move and shift all across the distance.

I remember walking home with Stephanie, along the dirt road in the hot sunlight. After I'd waited for the high school bus, after the high school kids had come in. I remember how her hair moved on the back of her jumper as she walked, how she had a cut in her stocking that dragged down the lower part of her leg, just above her white socks. She had a star drawn on the back of her hand in texta, black and coloured in, shining in the light. I remember her face, her smile. The colours of her skin. I remember her eyes.

She was older than me, too old probably. I know that. But I remember being around her. How it was those days, walking along the edge of the road. Beneath the trees. Beside the houses. Between the grass poking out the sides.

'Well, I'll see you later then,' she always said, then she'd turn around and walk up her driveway and up her steps.

That was as old as she'd ever be.

I didn't know what to do in the end. It was the night before the report was due, and I hadn't written anything. The blank computer screen staring back.

This was in the lounge room, our computer is over in the corner, and my family was across the way on the couch, watching TV. And I was sitting there on the computer chair, looking at the screen. Trying to figure something out.

'Can I use the computer yet?' David yelled.

I thought over everything that had happened, from asking Megan and Sarah to getting yelled at by Shaun Hayes to standing in the red hay shed. Which was now gone. Burned down, a black mark on the ground where it had once been.

I thought about the Torana and my brother's blood, the police officer at the kitchen table. Shaun Hayes in the back of the police car. The memorial opening, looking out over the city. And that's when I got it. That's when it came to me.

Thinking back through it all, I figured out what my report would be.

This is what I wrote:

This week, a new memorial was unveiled to remember the soldiers who fought in the war. The memorial is a large, shining pillar with names written on it in gold writing, the names of people who died at war, who never came home to their families.

The pillar stands right at the peak of the mountain, looking out over the city, way off in the distance below.

They had a big event to celebrate, with almost everyone in town coming up to see it. The park around it had been re-done, cleaned, re-painted. The local officials talked about the significance of the monument. Everyone shook hands and talked to each other. Some people wore their war medals.

Remembering people who've died is important, because of what they did, but it's also important to remember who they were when they were alive, how it was to be with them.

It's sad when people die. It's hard to lose them, but when you think back, you can remember. It's good to think back, to go over the times you spent.

The memorial is for the soldiers, but it also helps to remember all of the people who've died. And to say goodbye to them in your own way.

It wasn't the same as what I had started out doing, it wasn't close. But I liked it. It was a report, it told a story about a current event. I wasn't sure if it was exactly what Mrs. Gray wanted. But it's what I wanted to write.

Of course, I wanted to write about everything that had happened, all the things that had gone on. I wanted to write about what had happened to Stephanie. But I couldn't. Too many people were upset, they didn't want me to say it.

This felt like the right way, a better way to do it.

I wrote my report and saved it to my folder on the computer, then I printed it out. The paper scratching out through the machine.

It wasn't much, my report, it wasn't the same. But it was something.

I put the paper into my school bag and went in to watch TV in the lounge room. And as I sat there, leaned back on the couch seat, I noticed the colour of the light from the exposed light bulb above the kitchen. I noticed the smell of the refrigerator, the engine whirring inside. I noticed the wood grain in the dinner table, the familiar colour of the

placemats across it. The cracks in the green covering of the couch. I noticed the photo of my family in a brown frame on the wall, the colours of my Dad's record collection up on the bookshelf. The perfect line of his war books, the model of a helicopter up beside them. The old orange blanket that kept us warm and formed a roof for our cubby houses. The tick of the black, pot belly stove, the smell of burning bark coming out the vents. The protective railing constructed around it, the phone on the wall. The crowded cork noticeboard, the boots lined up beside the door. The glow of the hallway light, the lace covers at the edge of the windows. The closed curtains, the stereo, the floor, the carpet.

I noticed everything, every detail. For some reason, it all stood out, everything seemed brighter, more present. I looked across everything, and I thought about my mother, my father. My brother, now over on the computer, loading up some game.

Everything felt different, more real somehow, and my mother walked past, a load of washing piled up in her arms, and she stopped. She looked down at me, narrowed her eyes.

'Are you okay?' She asked.

The memorial stands right up at the top of the mountain, right at the edge of the lookout, and I rode up there and I stood up at the edge of it, at the edge of the concrete. The faded shape of the city on the horizon in the orange afternoon light.

I stood there, looking out, and I imagined Stephanie was there, standing up beside me. Looking out over everything, her long hair moving in the breeze. The last of the fading daylight shining onto her face. The same colour as her freckles.

I looked at the shining pillar and I touched across the gold letters dug into it. And I remembered Stephanie Marchant. Who was beautiful.

Everybody said so.

Most of the other kids wrote about the church fire, the lines of smoke they could see from their houses, the fire trucks rushing by. Hearing the sirens in the middle of the night.

Most of the reports were about the fire, some about the football. Mine was the only one about the memorial.

Mrs. Gray read my report to the class, because I didn't want to. She asked me to, but I said no.

She read it good, it sounded good the way she read it. She told me 'well done', the she pinned my report up on the wall.

Not all of the reports got put up, only the best ones, I think.

Mrs. Gray said my report was very good.

Sometimes I still stop by and visit, stop in to see Mrs. Marchant. She always smiles and says hello. Sometimes I go inside and sit with her for a bit, and she tells me stories about Stephanie and things Stephanie did.

She put my drawing of the Argonaut octopus into a photo frame, set it on the bookshelf in with the photos of Stephanie.

She got a dog last week, a little white and brown puppy that follows her around. It's a Jack Russell, I think. I think that's what she said it was.

She likes her dog, and it's good that she's not always alone anymore. I think Mrs. Marchant likes when I come by.

Stephanie Alice Marchant. That's what it says on the grave. It's written across a black marble headstone, which pokes out from the ground. Mrs. Marchant took me to it. She asked my parents if she could take me, if it would be okay.

It's strange being in a graveyard, looking across the names of the people down beneath. It's sort of like a big garden made of concrete which never grows, never changes. It always stays exactly the same. It's a bit, scary being in the cemetery. I wouldn't want to come at night.

Stephanie Alice Marchant.

I didn't know her that well, I don't know that we ever really even had much of a conversation. But she meant a lot to me. And now she's here. Forever.

Mrs. Marchant brought flowers to the grave. They were red roses she bought, one for each of us, and we put them down onto the grass on top of where Stephanie lay. We stayed there, thinking over who she was, what we knew. Mrs. Marchant cried, but only a bit. She smiled at me when I looked back at her.

Rocky is the dog's name. He doesn't bark at me when he sees me coming up the driveway anymore.

Up at the phone box, I looked up Alex Marchant's number and I put my coins in, dropped them in through the machine. The phone rang a few times, vibrating up against my ear, then Mr. Marchant picked up. The coins slotted into the machine.

'Hello,' Mr. Marchant said.

'Hello, is this Alex Marchant?'

'Yes, speaking.'

'Mr. Marchant, hello, it's me again, I called you a little while back, about doing a story about your daughter, Stephanie.'

Mr. Marchant didn't say anything for a moment. I could hear him breathing.

'Clark, was it?' Mr. Marchant said.

'No, Geoff. Geoff Masters.'

Mr. Marchant went quiet again.

'Geoff,' he said.

I wasn't sure what to say, then Mr. Marchant spoke again.

'How is your article coming along, Geoff?'

'Oh, it's okay. It's done now. I just wanted to call you and let you know that I talked to Mrs. Marchant, Stephanie's Mum.'

Mr. Marchant breathed heavy into the phone.

'How is she?' He asked.

'She's good. She's okay,' I told him. 'That's what I wanted to tell you, because you asked before about her. She's getting better now.'

Mr. Marchant coughed a bit down the phone line, then he went quiet again.

'Thank you,' he said.

'It's okay.'

Then he hung up, the pay phone buzzing in the phone box.

The cars driving by on the street outside. The people walking towards the shops, walking around inside the nursery. The wind rushing up in the tops of the big trees overhead.