

Fiction

80,098 words

**WIMMERA**

By

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‘And it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness.’

*The Stranger*, Albert Camus.

## **Prologue**

Dad told them never to cross the highway.

But the dam hadn't been much good that day. It was a green dam and Jed told Danny there were no yabbies in green dams, only fish if you're lucky.

Yabbies were only in muddy dams. But Danny reckoned he knew better.

They caught nothing, so Jed got bored and reckoned they should go to the river, just for a look. But they had to cross the highway to get there.

'What if Dad finds out?' Danny said.

Jed shrugged. 'How would he?'

They left the nets at the dam and Jed pushed down the lower lines of the barbed wire fence with his foot, so Danny could climb through. They slid and scrambled down the steep, stony embankment to the edge of the highway. A truck howled its horn and Jed could smell the oily wool as it tore past, headed for the abattoir.

Jed was a good foot taller than Danny and could see down the road until it curved away to the west. To the east of the curve was a flat, yellow patchwork of paddocks that disappeared in a shimmer below the stony face of the Grampians, looming like a tidal wave at the horizon.

Above the range, blue-black clouds billowed and ruptured, and a grey veil descended across the mountains. The wind shifted quickly from southwest to south, and Jed could tell the weather was coming soon. He could smell it, like rain on a hot road.

Then, without warning, Danny took off across the highway. Jed called out, but his voice was lost in the wind. And Danny disappeared down the slope on the other side of the road.

The river. *Shit*. Danny couldn't swim.

Jed heard the nearing rumble of another truck, so he ran while he had the chance. The wind blew against him, willing him back. But he was a good runner and he pushed against it, the highway smooth and warm under his bare feet. He made it to the rough grassy edge, eyes watering and chest heaving. The truck's horn blasted as it passed. And he couldn't see Danny anywhere.

'Danny!' he yelled. Across a lazy field of long yellow weeds, a thick row of eucalypts swayed as the air whooshed through their branches.

Just past those trees. He knew that's where it was. That was where the river ran deep and fast.

'Danny!' The wind ripped his calls away and he could hear the coming thunder of another truck headed west.

Jed ran through the weeds and toward the trees, his legs bouncing like rubber. He imagined telling his mum, trying to explain, but she'd never believe him. He would have to run away, go live in the bush somewhere, or the city. He could never go back home.

'Danny!' he screamed. Startled, a cluster of sulphur-crested cockatoos erupted from the high branches of the eucalypts, squawking and screeching, their pure white feathers stark against the blackening sky.

A truck roared past behind him and, in the quiet after, Jed could hear the river rush, hidden deep within the trees and scrub.

As he caught first sight of the water, running beyond a row of trees and thick shrubbery, the wind suddenly relented. He called out again, his throat raw. Then,

near the river, from behind a prickly bush, his brother stepped into view, eyes wide. Jed felt a rush of anger rise in his chest.

‘You’ll pay for that,’ he said. ‘You wait til later.’

Danny smiled. ‘I found something. Come look.’

Jed followed him down to the river’s edge, to where an ancient ghost gum had fallen into purpose. It formed a long bridge across the water, its thick roots upended by rain, the river and time.

‘There!’ Danny pointed.

‘Big deal.’ Jed said. ‘A tree fell down.’ He looked up at the sky closing in – they’d be riding home wet and cold. Danny screwed up his face and pointed.

‘Nah, look properly! Under the tree. It’s stuck.’

Jed looked at the dead tree, the black rush beneath and the gathering yellow foam until he saw what Danny was pointing at – a green wheelie bin, wedged under the middle of the trunk, water streaming along its sides.

‘It’s a rubbish bin,’ Jed said. ‘So what?’

Danny’s face dropped. But Jed was intrigued. What was a town bin doing way out here?

He moved closer to the river, stepping through the low branches and over the rocks to the water’s edge. He took hold of a root, a dead artery, and leaned over the water as close as he could.

Rain began to fall through the canopy of eucalypts, but Jed wasn’t thinking about that now. He climbed aboard the slippery trunk and moved closer, gripping the branches as he went.

Danny watched from the riverbank. ‘Be careful,’ he said. But Jed didn’t hear him.

As he got closer to the middle of the river, Jed thought he could see bolts screwed into the top of the bin. There were a lot of them, all around the edge of the lid.

It looked like someone wanted it closed up really tight. Like they didn't want it ever to be opened.

Like they didn't want what was in there to ever come out.

**PART ONE**  
**1988 to 1989**  
**BEN**

## Chapter 1

Ben saw the ambulance up the street when he was coming home from cricket training, but he didn't think that much of it. When he got inside, his mum and dad were quiet, looking at the telly. *The Wonder Years* was on, but the sound was turned off. Then the phone rang and Ben's mum ran to it, like she knew it was coming.

At dinnertime, his dad put on the black and white telly in the kitchen. The *A-Team* was on and they were making a catapult to help them escape from prison.

Mum and Dad were both still quiet and Ben tried to think of something to say, so he told them about the ambulance up the road. Dad stopped chewing, looked at Mum and said, 'Ah yeah.' Then he went back to his chops and watching the *A-Team*.

After dinner, Mum served ice cream, which was weird because they only ever had dessert on Sundays, when they sat in the special room, which didn't have a telly in it.

It was Neapolitan ice cream, but only the vanilla and strawberry were left. Ben never understood why his mum didn't just buy chocolate, but he never asked about it.

Dad went back to the couch and turned on the big telly, but Mum sat there at the table and watched Ben eat the ice cream until he was finished. Then she told him that Daisy was dead. She hung herself on the clothesline.

No-one said anything else after that.



Daisy Wolfe was fourteen, three years older than Ben, and they got on the same bus at the same stop. One time Tom Joiner, a grade six kid, was gonna bash Ben behind the bus shelter, but she grabbed hold of him and put him in a headlock until he cried. She was pretty tough. For a girl. And Ben kind of fell in love with her a bit after that, but he didn't realise that til after she died.

He wondered why she'd done it. Maybe she was failing at high school or something. Or maybe the kids were teasing her. He didn't reckon it would be that, but. She was pretty good looking. 'Popular with the boys' – that's what his mum said.

She must have been sad about something though. Ben wondered why she didn't just run away. That's what he would do if things ever got really bad. He'd never hang himself. And definitely not in the backyard where his parents would find him.

He tried to imagine her body hanging from that old steel clothesline, creaking as it shifted in the wind. He could see her dark eyes and her legs, perfectly white, swinging in the air. Even though she was dead, her smooth, white legs made him a bit horny when he thought about it.

But then the wind would blow harder, the clothesline would creak, and her summer school dress rippled as the shit and piss slid down those smooth, creamy legs. He knew about the shit and piss because Fab told him that's what happens. And Fab's cousin, Marco, had told him about it. Marco was from Melbourne and he knew about most things, so Fab said it must be true.

Ben imagined that's how her younger brother, Joe, would have found her. Just before she did it, she gave Joe fifty cents to buy mixed lollies from the milk bar. He bought raspberry jubes, jelly teeth and a 'Big Boss' cigar. The milk bar

was opposite the footy ground and Ben had seen him walking past, showing off with his cigar. Joe didn't know then that Ben and Fab had smashed his cubby house at the block over the back. And he didn't know the real reason Daisy had given him fifty cents.

Ben heard his mum say that Joe had tried to wake her up. That he got hold of her legs, tried to lift her, and kept screaming at her to stop mucking around and just wake up. That's how Mrs Pickering, who lived next door, found out. She called the ambulance and all that, but it was all too late. And Mum said that Joe would never recover. But Ben didn't really know what she meant by that.

They buried Daisy quick. That's what Ben's dad said, that it was really quick. Ben's mum said they were doing it quick because of what she did. Ben wondered if it that was because she'd start rotting sooner than normal, but he thought he better not ask.

It was just a couple of days later, a Saturday. It was the only time Ben had ever seen his dad in a suit. It was navy blue and it made him look like the Prime Minister. He even had a tie on.

Mum cooked pancakes, then got all dressed up in a black dress. She even had lipstick on. They hardly said a word.

Ben stayed home, ate his pancakes, and watched cartoons.

The day after the funeral, Ben's dad offered to get rid of the clothesline and Daisy's parents agreed. His dad put his long, blue overalls on and got the angle grinder from the shed. Ben wanted to go with him, but his mum said no. Then his

dad said he could come to the tip after, which was even better. They always picked up some good stuff at the tip.

Ben's dad came back nearly right away. Mum asked what happened and his dad said that Mrs Wolfe told him to *get-the-fuck-away-from-it-you-cunt* in a voice like he'd never heard from a woman before.

So the clothesline stayed in their backyard. And the Wolfes left town.

It was three months later that the new neighbour moved in.

'A Statesman,' his dad said, without shifting his gaze from the telly. It was Friday, so he was drinking a big bottle of beer without a glass. 'Nice car. Must be on good money.' Mum didn't say much about it, but slipped a coaster under the bottle. The news was on. Ben pretended to watch, but it was boring and he was thinking about the new neighbour.

Ben was wondering if the neighbour knew about the clothesline and the last thing that hung there. The clothesline that rattled in the wind when he rode his bike past, like it was calling him. The clothesline with its cold steel poles, bolts and wires, spinning in that relentless southerly wind.

Autumn that year felt more like winter, and the town was shrouded in grey for those days, weeks, and months.

And that nice, shiny blue car just sat there in the driveway.