

**THE  
WIMBEROO WHATEVER**



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Author's Note:

Dear Reader,

Right. Before we start, you should know this is a story set in 1960. Later on, the 1960's were called the 'Swinging Sixties', although exactly what it was that swung, I have no idea and it certainly wasn't me.

Okay, I know the Sixties are back in the Dinosaur Era. But nothing ever changes really – except the fashions, the hairdos, the talk we talk and the things we think are cool.

Anyway, keep reading ...

## CHAPTER 1

### Meet the Fuzzheads

*Whatever it was that crash-landed on the mountain had come a long way in search of a home and wanted somewhere to sleep. Somewhere safe.*

*It listened – it had no ears. It heard the chirrup and squawking of birds chattering before they went to bed and the chiming of insects waking up for the evening. It heard the breeze sighing as it blew gently through the trees.*

*It had never heard these things before.*

*The Whatever-it-was smelled the air – it had no nose. It smelled the eucalypts exhaling oils from their narrow pointed leaves into the evening haze. It smelled small, unseen, furry creatures and the slight damp of burrowed earth and the underneath of fallen tree trunks.*

*It had never smelled these things before.*

*The Whatever looked down – it had no eyes. It saw a darkening brown-green valley with a river and swathes of forest. It saw fenced paddocks and a village melting into the night. It saw lights come on in the houses, transforming them into glowing Halloween pumpkins. It saw faint movements behind the curtained windows.*

*It had never seen these things before.*

*The breeze had dropped and the mountaintop was growing cold. Down below, the lights looked warm and safe and welcoming.*

*Fizzing and popping like lemonade, the Whatever went down the mountain.*

*And the trees turned their leaves to watch it tumble past ...*

The school bus was so shiny you could see your face in it. Mr Parsley seemed to spend every day of his life treating that bus like a prize racehorse, washing it down then polishing it with Mrs Parsley's old worn-out unmentionables. ⌚

No one could understand why Mr Parsley thought the bus was worth fussing over, or why he bothered so much about trying to keep it clean; the only road into Wimberoo was a gravel one, and the bus broke down at least once in every two months.

'Everybody onto the bus,' Miss Appleby called to the school Sports Team. 'Really, Mr Parsley, you work like a tiger,' she added. 'But by the time we get to the Bumbalong Oval, the bus will be covered with dust.'



#### ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!

People were a bit inhibited about underwear in the old days. Undies were called 'unmentionables' because, well, you didn't mention them.

Mr Parsley gave the duco one last jaunty flick with the unmentionable. 'No worries. We start off right, that's the main thing.'

Any man who drives a school bus all year round and actually enjoys it, has to be mad as a gumtree full of galahs. As the Sports Team climbed over one another to get to their seats, Ritchie Tyler poked Graeme 'Cap' Hooke in the ribs.

'I bet Parsley can't wait to get the bomb dirty so's he can clean it up again. Don'tcha reckon?'

'Why, though?' said Cap. 'What's the point?'

'Dunno,' said Tyler. 'He's cracked?'

Cap wasn't so sure. Adults always seemed to need something to do even if it was something pointless.

'All right. Now, settle down. Settle down,' Miss Appleby pleaded.

'We're settling,' piped up a heavily disguised voice.

People sniggered.

The teacher's eyes searched unsuccessfully for the voice's owner. 'Now, we're representing Wimberoo School at the sports day, so I want you to be on your best behaviour,' she said. 'We are Bumbalong School's guests, so you should act like good guests. And do your best in the races, but always remember: it's not whether you win or lose that's important; it's how you play the game.'

Someone yawned. It was a loud yawn that had all to do with the fact that the yawner had been forced to get out of bed at five a.m. so the bus could leave Wimberoo by seven. And the disguised voice piped up again, although in an undertone: 'We *are* Wimberoo School. We're all there is.'

This was in fact true enough to be true but not quite. The littlest kids (the under-sevens) were being left at home. In any case there were only five littlies. Wimberoo School had a total of fifteen pupils and one teacher. ⌚

Off bounced the gleaming, elderly bus, jolting along the dirt road. After five minutes, the gleam disappeared under a coating of dust. It was certain that the bus wouldn't last the day out without escaping the inevitable graffiti. Anonymous fingers would draw sad bus-faces, or write witty comments such as 'Wash Me' and 'The Grunge-mobile'. And then the graffiti artists would chortle about it for the next week.

Everybody was talking at once; they all loved a day out. Faintly, just above the thunder of their voices, another voice scraped out a tune. It was Mr Parsley. He always sang each time he drove. Miss Appleby rolled her eyes, folded her arms and stared blankly out the window,

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⌚ ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!

These days you don't see very small schools like this so much. Yonks ago, my Nana went to one. In 1910, at the age of thirteen, she became its Assistant Teacher.

How would *you* like to do that?

looking as if she would much rather be somewhere else, such as at the dentist's getting her teeth drilled.

'What song is old Parsley murdering now?' Tyler asked Cap.

'Hard to tell, but it might be *Jailhouse Rock*.'

'He's insane.'

Jailhouse-rocking in rough rhythm with Mr Parsley's singing and recklessly dodging pothole after pothole, the bus hurtled along. The passengers lurched like spectators at a gripping tennis final: left—right—forward—back. Fifteen minutes into the journey, the bus would stop so that Emily Barras could be sick. This was more than a prediction; motion sickness was Emily's thing, and so they were all ready for it. Bang on schedule it happened every time.

After Emily had waved goodbye to her breakfast and was hunched greyly in her seat again a mood took over the bus like a psychic wave. It was as if all the passengers (but not Miss Appleby) were suddenly inspired by the same idea. Or as if they were sharing a single mind. They were the Wimberoo Sports Team going to beat the pants off the kids of Bumbalong School.

The Team's voices surged in an inspiring war chant:

*'Bumbalong-Bumbalong – Yah! Yah! Yah!*

*Oughta be-Oughta be – Dipped In Tar!*

*Wimberoo-Wimberoo – Yes! Yes! Yes!*

*Wimberoo-Wimberoo – We're The BEST!' <sup>⌘</sup>*

Miss Appleby leaned against the window, furtively holding one hand over her ear while pretending to scratch the other ear with her other hand. It wasn't that she minded her pupils showing real school spirit by singing; she just wanted to keep her eardrums from exploding.

The chanting thundered on.

After a while people began to notice another noise sliding in between the verses. It sounded like *sizzle ... sizzle ... pop ... pop*, and everyone felt a tingle like electricity running up their legs and along their spines.

Silence fell over the Team. The bus rattled blithely around the potholes, and Mr Parsley was too busy murdering another song to notice the sudden quiet. Miss Appleby appeared to have dozed off in self defence.

'What's that?' said Cap. 'My teeth are fizzing.'

Tyler nudged him urgently in the ribs and pointed at the two girls in the seat in front.

'Look at their hair, will you?'

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<sup>⌘</sup> ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!  
The Sixties were so sophisticated.

The girls were Sooz Foy and Ellie Everheart. Sooz wore plaits and her hair always made Cap think of an oil slick it was so smooth and black. But now it wasn't – at least I mean it was still black, but it just wasn't smooth any more. The top of Sooz's head looked like the fuzz on a duckling's bottom.

And – Cap choked on a laugh – her plaits were standing horizontally out from her head.

Tyler was chuckling with evil delight.

'Look. Everheart's gone supernova!'

Ellie Everheart had white-blonde curls that normally flopped down over her face. At the moment, though, every curl was standing to attention. Even as Cap gaped disbelievingly at the curls, they uncoiled and straightened out until Ellie looked like a startled dandelion.

Cap stared some more. Then he glanced at Tyler.

He choked on another laugh. You could have used Tyler's hair to scrub pots with. Pots with layers of glued-on porridge wouldn't have stood a chance against Tyler's hair. Gingerly, Cap reached up and felt the top of his own head. You could have scrubbed pots with his hair, too.

His ears were buzzing and his brain felt as though it had expanded. Wildly, he turned. Every kid on the bus looked as if they'd been playing 'Stick My Finger in the Electric Light Socket'.

He stared at them. They stared at him. Pop-eyed, they all stared at one another.

They had been zapped!

But by what?

Miss Appleby wasn't affected; her hair was its normal wavy self. She hadn't noticed anything either, because she was leaning her face on her hand and had closed her eyes. Mr Parsley just drove, singing happily.

The scenery dashed by in jerks and bounds. Cap found himself thinking: That's odd; there's no wind, but I'd swear the trees are moving and bending—

Naa, that's silly. Trees don't bend to watch you go past.

All this had happened in less than thirty seconds. Then the bus gave a loud *kerblonk*, and stopped. Miss Appleby groaned and covered her face with her hands.

'Not again,' she said. 'This bus keeps breaking down. I'm fed up with it.'

Mr Parsley leapt cheerfully from the driver's seat. 'No worries. Got my toolbox.' In a flash he was outside, and in five seconds had the bonnet up. Miss Appleby got wearily to her feet, and climbed out to watch and give him unwanted advice. She was so distracted she failed to notice the weird condition of her pupils' hair or the strange worried silence inhabiting the bus.

Wimberoo School had never ever been this quiet. Ten mouths hung open with nothing coming out. Not even a squeak. Nobody could believe what they looked like, and everybody was secretly telling themselves that there was no way they looked as ridiculous as the other kids.

Then Emily Barras moaned. 'I think I want to be sick. What's happened?'

## MEET THE FUZZHEADS

The words unfroze them. Wooden tongues flapped. Fuzzy heads waggled. All sorts of wild theories bounced around the bus.

'Maybe it's meteors,' said Tyler.

Cap sniggered. 'Rubbish. They'd've come crashing down.'

'Aliens!' Donny Frick gasped. 'Aliens zapped us with a death ray.'

'Then we'd all be dead,' said Cap. 'Get real.'

'Did we catch a disease?' Peter Smith whispered.

Bug-eyed, Frick stared at him. 'Oh no! It's a disease?'

'Fick's got a disease.' Ben Henderson pretended to be afraid of him. 'It's the frizzy-hair germ; it's going around.'

'You call me Fick, again, and I'll bop you.'

Cap held up his hands for calm. 'Look, it's probably only electrical. In the air. Probably.' He tried not to think about the bending trees, or why his head had suddenly filled with the creepy idea that **SOME THING** had got on the bus at the same time they did.

Ellie Everheart and Sooz Foy swivelled in their seats. Sooz's hands patted her duck's-bottom hair, vainly trying to slick it flat. She held down her plaits, but as soon as she let go, out they popped again.

'Rats!' she said. 'So, if it's electrical then why isn't Miss Appleby affected? And why not Mr Parsley? Why is it just us?'

'Sooz, Mr Parsley is bald,' said Cap. 'I wish I knew. I really do.'

'*Whaa-aa-aa-uh*,' Lisa Jones sobbed. '*Whoo-oo-oooh*. I don't like my hair all funny like this.'

'It sure is. You look like an echidna,' said the ever-helpful Tyler.

Lisa whoo-ooed louder.

Maddie Beckett gave her a friendly shove. 'Shut up, Lisa. You don't have to take that from *Toilet-brush Head* over there.'

'I am not!' said Tyler.

'Are!' said Maddie.

'Not! Anyway, you look like a bush on fire.'

Maddie blushed and tried to force down her flaming red hair.

'They all look like toilet brushes,' said Emily, her glare taking in all five boys.

'What do you look like then? Fuzzhead of the Century?' Frick jeered.

'Yeah,' Henderson chimed-in. 'Fuzzhead! Fuzzhead!'

There was a loud cough as the only person who hadn't said anything yet cleared her throat for an announcement.

'We're all fuzzheads,' said Ellie Everheart calmly. 'And the only thing I know is that unless our hair goes back to normal by the time we get to Bumbalong, we're going to make a **BIG IMPRESSION**.'

There was a collective holding of breath as nine other people thought about the dire implications of this.

Finally, Maddie groaned. 'Oh no, they'll laugh at us.'

'I'm never going to be able to win a race like this,' Smithy whined. 'I'll feel idiotic.'

'They'll laugh us off the sports ground,' said Tyler, in a mournful voice.

Cap thoughtfully tapped his chin. 'Unless—'

'Unless what?' said Tyler.

'Unless we pretend our hair is sort of like a statement. You know ... like it's a team thing. Like we did it on purpose. Um, to show team spirit.'

'You mean like everyone wearing footie colours, or dressing up in the Aussie banner at the Olympics?'

'Yeah. Something like that.'

The Team considered this:

'Maybe ...'

'That could work ...'

'I'd still feel stupid ...'

'Yeah, and they'll still laugh ...'

'Yeah. But it might just work ...'



Cap looked at them. Amazing. People could be facing certain doom, but then you go and give them one stupid idea to hang on to, and suddenly they're grinning.

Then he thought: Did I just think that?

He must have. He was the only person inside his head. As far as he knew, anyway.

But had the Team forgotten they were fuzzheads? Weren't they worrying about being fuzzheads for ever and ever?

## MEET THE FUZZHEADS

Miss Appleby poked her – un-fuzzy – head inside the door. ‘Class, it might be better if—’ her eyes widened. ‘Er, what have you been doing to your hair? Um, how ...?’

‘New style, Miss. For Sports Day,’ Ellie Everheart said quickly.

Miss Appleby just looked bewildered. ‘My goodness.’

Cap thought: Miss is wondering how come she didn’t notice our hair before. She’ll be telling herself that obviously the hair must have been fuzzy when we got on the bus but she didn’t pay attention. Adults are good at dreaming up logical explanations for unexplained things, even if they’re one hundred per cent wrong ninety-nine times out of a hundred.

‘Well, it’s too hot for you to wait in the bus. You should come out and stand in the shade,’ said Miss Appleby. ‘Mr Parsley says this is going to take some time,’ she sighed, ‘and I had hoped ...’

‘We won’t be late for the Sports, will we?’ said Smithy anxiously, afraid that his dream of glory on the running track was going to be hopelessly dashed. Smithy’s great ambition was to win gold at the Olympic Games.

‘I’m sure we won’t,’ said Miss Appleby, though she didn’t sound convinced. ‘I made allowances for an extra hour’s travelling, just in case,’ she added. ‘So we should be all right.’

Yeah, thought Cap. All right. But still fuzzy and still doomed.

CHAPTER 2  
Ghosts, Aliens,  
Or Whatever

Cap stood under the ragged shade of a wattle tree and thought of different ways to get his hair back to normal. He spit on his palms then wiped them over his head a few times. The hair stayed slicked into place for all of one second before he felt a sort of shivering tickle and out sprang the hair again.

No good. It needed stronger stuff than spit to hold it down.

He jerked when something prodded him between the shoulderblades. It felt like someone's finger, yet he was the only person under this tree. He turned. He was alone. There was nothing except the tree. It had a few low-hanging branches but that was all.

Cap shrugged then watched Mr Parsley attacking the bus with a spanner. The Bumbalong Oval seemed a long way off. Like somewhere into next year.

He was prodded again. He twisted—in time to see the air blur and to experience a nagging suspicion that one of the tree's branches had just stopped moving.

That's ridiculous, he thought, although now he was on his guard. Turning away with a theatrical swagger, he tried to spy on the tree out of the corner of his eye. This only made his eyes water; so he gave up and returned to watching Mr Parsley getting upset with the bus.

*Prod!*

This time Cap twisted so fast he saw the tree branch whip back into place.

'What are you up to?' he snapped.

Oops—

I'm talking to a tree. Hope nobody saw.

Hastily, he glanced about. Three of the girls were gossiping in a huddle. They didn't seem interested in him. The boys were either horsing around or watching Mr Parsley. So was Miss Appleby (that is, she was watching the bus driver, not horsing around). Sooz and Ellie were having a conversation too quiet to overhear and Sooz had her back to Cap.

But Ellie looked across Sooz's shoulder and her eyes met Cap's. She had a great big smirk on her face.

Cap didn't like that smirk. Rats! She'd seen him.

Irritated, he turned his back on the tree. No stupid wattle is going to get the better of me.

*Prod!*

Cap spun.

*Twang!* The branch had withdrawn but was still vibrating.

Cap glared and folded his arms. 'Right. What do you think you're doing?'

The tree didn't say anything. Of course, it didn't.

I'm a nong. Did I seriously expect it to? Cap thought. It's a plant, and plants don't talk.

But maybe they could give you ATTITUDE. At least this one seemed to be giving it to him.

The tree stood there, looking—

—let's say that, if a tree could fold its branches and stare innocently at the sky while humming a tune, this tree was doing it right now.

Cap knew when he was beaten. He spread his hands helplessly. 'Okay.' He didn't know what else to say.

'Hey Cap,' said Ellie Everheart's voice, behind him. 'Who're you talking to?'

'Oh!' Cap spun. She's been watching me, he thought.

'I wasn't. Er ... nobody.'

'Really?' said Ellie.

Cap stared at her. She didn't look so much like a dandelion any more because the curls had come back. They stuck out from her head like bed springs and now she looked like an exploding mattress.

Ellie wandered around in the shade. 'Do you feel as if something's changed?'

'In you?' she added, for the benefit of his blank expression.

'What? Besides my hair, you mean?' said Cap.

She nodded.

What's changed? What's changed? What's changed? thought Cap. And I'm not going to mention that wattle.

'Well, um,' he said, desperately searching for an answer that made sense. To him, anyway.

His face screwed up with the effort. 'I think my brain feels, um, bigger than it used to. I've got thoughts in my head that don't seem to be mine. Or they are mine, but I'm thinking them differently.'

'Thinking more,' said Ellie. 'Like you're paying more attention to things.'

'Yeah. Maybe that's it.'

Ellie stepped around him to the wattle. 'And I think this tree must like you. It was trying to get your attention.'

He opened his mouth. Did she just say that?

Was she poking fun at him?

'Oh yes, the tree likes you,' said Ellie. 'It's very fond of you.'

Fond? Did she use that word on purpose to tease him?

Or did she really mean it?

Could trees actually like people? Well, lots of people liked trees; so why not the other way round?

THEN CAP HAD A REALLY *TERRIBLE* THOUGHT.



He shuddered – I wish I didn't have so much imagination.

'See ... watch this.' Ellie pointed to the lowest branch, and immediately the branch swayed towards her, its leaves sailing out to touch her finger.

'I saw the trees were bending as the bus went past,' she said. 'Close your mouth or the flies'll get in.'

Cap's mouth snapped shut.

'So did I,' he gasped. 'Do you think anybody else noticed?'

'They don't seem to have.'

All this needed thinking about. Cap pondered the idea of trees moving by themselves. It was unheard of, and thousands of people would call you crazy if you told them you'd seen it happen.

But he had seen it and so had Ellie. Something very strange was going on.

'Maybe Frick was right, we have been zapped,' he suggested after a while.

'Maybe.' Ellie nodded. 'But in a nice way.'

'Huh?' Cap jabbed at his hair. 'You call this nice? I get to look like something you clean toilets with?'

She shrugged. 'Everything has side effects. They might wear off.'

'Might?' said Cap. 'Doesn't it bother you?'

'No. I don't care if they don't. I like the way my hair is now. Now I can see where I'm going.'

Cap had to admit that Ellie had a point. And he'd never noticed before how really blue her eyes were. He hadn't seen them before; the floppy curls had always hidden them.

Something suddenly went *flutter-flutter* in Cap's chest. Ellie was actually quite pretty.

Okay, don't go sappy on me, he warned himself. This isn't the time; we have a serious situation here.

'I don't think it's serious,' said Ellie, exactly as if she had read Cap's thoughts word-for-word. 'But something's happened and it's going to be interesting to see what happens next.'

\*

What happened next was Mr Parsley totally losing his cool.

'You stupid machine!' he shrieked. He kicked a tyre. 'Ow! Ow!' He hopped on one foot, waving the spanner.

Miss Appleby had stepped way back when he'd started to fume. The Team looked on, wide-eyed. When the happiest man in the world turns into an angry raving loony, it's time to worry.

'Calm down, Mr Parsley, please,' said Miss Appleby. 'Getting upset won't fix the bus.'

Mr Parsley sagged like a load of wet washing.

'Nothing does. I don't understand it; all I normally do is tinker with Betty a bit and tap her on the—'

'Pardon?' said Miss Appleby. 'You tinker with Mrs Parsley and tap her on the ...? What has Mrs Parsley got to do with it?'

'What?' He seemed astonished. 'Oh, not Mrs Parsley. The bus.'

Miss Appleby's voice slid up a notch. 'You named the bus after your wife? A bus?'

'Well, it's tradition, isn't it? Like with ships – calling them a "she"?' He looked worried, all of a sudden.

Miss Appleby's voice screwed itself higher. 'It's a machine! You just said so yourself!' She was nearly yelling now. 'Buses are machines. They're things. Your wife isn't a thing, so you don't call things a she. It's – it's – disrespectful!'

'But everybody does it.' Mr Parsley started to edge away.

'That doesn't mean it's right!' Miss Appleby shrilled.

'Erk,' said Ellie, quietly to Cap. 'You could do something—'

'Hey? Like what?' he whispered back. 'I'm not getting involved with them having a fight.'

'I meant you could fix the bus.'

'Me?' Cap exclaimed. People turned and stared at him, so he lowered his voice again and whispered furiously, 'How come you think I could fix the bus?'

'Your dad's a car mechanic,' said Ellie.

Cap groaned. 'So what? That doesn't mean I know how—'

'Anyway, I've got a feeling,' Ellie continued. 'Ever since the bus stopped, I've had it. I think whatever it is that fuzzed our hair is somewhere in the bus and it made the bus stop so that we'd get out.'

Immediately, Cap knew he would regret asking the question, but his mouth took over and asked it anyway: 'Why?'

'Because it wanted us to,' she said. 'So we could see what effect we had on the trees.'

Cap shook his head so hard it was in danger of falling off. 'Excuse me while I go bananas, will you?'

Ellie shoved him. 'Go on. You take care of the bus.'

Cap shoved her back. 'Why? Why me? It's your idea; you do it.'

'Get real,' said Ellie. 'I'm a girl. How do you think Mr Parsley would feel if I miraculously fixed the bus? Men don't like being shown-up by girls. Go on. I'll sort out Miss Appleby.'

And I will miraculously do it? thought Cap. It'd take more than a miracle for that to happen. Ellie was being stupid telling him to fix the bus. He couldn't fix one to save his life. He wasn't mechanically inclined like his dad.

Grumbling to himself, he sidled over to the bus. So what was he supposed to do? Faith Healing? The Laying on of Hands?

Hmm ...

Maybe, if he just—

Feeling like an absolute nong, he reached out hesitantly, flattened his palm against the duco and whispered, 'Er, if you're in there—'

Nong!

He jerked his hand away.

Ellie was talking to Miss Appleby, with one eye still fixed on him.

Sighing, he laid his hand on the bus again.

He coughed. Then, keeping his voice low, he addressed the ???? with: 'Um - well - er - I noticed the trees. I mean we noticed them, Ellie and me. Do you think ... please could you um, er, get the bus back on the road again?'

'Whatcha doing?' said Tyler's voice.

Cap twisted quickly away from the bus. His face was burning like a really bad case of sunburn. He tried to shrug casually.

'Nothing.'

'I heard you say something,' said Tyler.

'No. Didn't say a thing.'

Tyler sniggered. 'You were chatting-up Everheart before.'

'I wasn't. We were just talking.'

'Looked pretty cosy, but.'

'That's stupid.'

Tyler made an idiot-face. 'Touchy! You must be in lur-ve.'

'You don't know what you're talking about. Push off.'

'Okay.'

Still sniggering, Tyler ambled over to the other boys. A few seconds later they were all staring at Cap and chortling like a row of magpies.

Furious, he glared at the bus - it's all your fault.

'Well? Are you in there or not?' he muttered.

Ellie appeared, grinning, beside him. 'How'd you go?'

'Hah! How should I know?' Cap was painfully aware of the other boys making idiotic gestures in the air. 'I don't regularly talk to haunted buses.'

'It's not haunted.'

'How do you know it's not? It could be. There could be a ghost, or whatever.'

'Then I vote for a whatever,' said Ellie. 'Ghosts don't frizz hair and make trees take an interest in people. They just float about going *whooo-hoo* and dripping ectoplasm.'

Eggtoplasm? Wasn't that the slimy white part of an egg before it got cooked? Cap couldn't see why any self respecting ghost would want to drip that stuff everywhere.

'That right?' he said, sarcastically. 'You know everything there is to know about ghosts then?'

'No,' said Ellie. 'I just know that whatever is in the bus isn't a ghost. It's something else.'

Cap gave up. You couldn't argue with someone who was so sure of themselves. And Ellie was always sure. Cap could have disliked her because of that, but he didn't.

Besides, if he stopped arguing then Ellie would most likely give up and leave him alone, and Tyler and the rest of the idiots could stop acting like goofballs. He wished they would.

Not that he wanted her to leave. Cap secretly liked Ellie. A lot.

That doesn't mean you have to agree with her all the time, though, he told himself. I'm still voting for the ghost option. At the moment, anyway.

Or what about Frick's 'aliens'? They're well-known 'zappers' – if you believe what's in the movies. Nah, don't like the alien idea. At least ghosts are human. Or they used to be before they were dead.

Will this bus ever get going?

Cap folded his arms and tried to make his busy mind a blank.

'Mr Parsley? Why not give it just one more try? For luck?' said Miss Appleby, in a voice so loaded with sugar it could have bored holes in her teeth.

'Need more than luck, need a tow truck,' Mr Parsley mumbled. 'Oh, all right.'

Miss Appleby smiled sweetly.

They all looked on hopefully as Mr Parsley tinkered and tapped.

'What did you say to Miss A?' Cap asked Ellie, forgetting his earlier half-baked wish. 'She's changed her tune.'

Ellie rested her infuriatingly calm blue eyes on the teacher. 'You don't want to know.'

'Yes I do or I wouldn't've asked.'

'You don't. Believe me. Anyway, you wouldn't like it.'

'Why not?'

'Trust me. You wouldn't.'

Ah ... something rude about males, Cap guessed.

## THE WIMBEROO WHATEVER

Mr Parsley climbed into the driver seat and had another go at starting the engine. It coughed twice then turned over and began purring like a satisfied cat.

Everybody cheered, including Miss Appleby.

'See. What did I tell you?' said Ellie. You did it, Cap. I knew you could.'

Cap felt briefly pleased before his brain took over again and started worrying. A ghost or an alien or whatever is in control of the bus. Worse, it's in control of trees and other stuff, including our hair.

This led him to even more worrying thoughts. Such as: what did the ghost/alien/whatever want?

And was having a meaningful relationship with trees only just the beginning ...?

## CHAPTER 3

### A Slight Detour

Of course, it was only the beginning; otherwise this would be a very short book.

Cap worried for the rest of the trip. He couldn't even stop worrying long enough to join in the rude songs about Bumbalong School. If Ellie was worrying too, she hid it better than him and bellowed enthusiastically. And tied up big chunks of her curls with the Wimberoo Team ribbons. Cap thought she looked like a clown; but, five minutes later, the other girls had smothered their hair in yellow and blue.

Making a statement, he realised then. So they don't get laughed at.

But they will get laughed at. For a minute or so. And then the Bumbalong girls will wish they'd thought of fuzzy hair with ribbons, too.

Everheart is so smart she's almost annoying.

But us boys can't put ribbons in our hair; that'd be sissy. Anyway, they'd slide off. So we just get to look like complete yoyos.

He sighed, and stared miserably out the window. <sup>⌚</sup>

The bus toiled along a road that was sealed and tarred and had only half as many potholes as the road into Wimberoo. Cicadas rattled in the trees; currawongs currawong-ed; kookaburras kookaburra-ed; and the paddocks rolled past, brown and wispy and dotted over with lazy-looking cows. The hot, earthy, leafy bush smells drifted behind as the bus approached Bumbalong and the sharp salty tang of the ocean replaced them.

*The Whatever smelled the ocean.*

*It remembered tumbling alone through the vastness of Interstellar Space. It remembered meeting with streaking comets and dodging traffic jams of meteorites around moons and planets. It remembered the flash of galactic fireflies delivering their messages of light from star to star.*



ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!

Does this seem like a lot of fuss over nothing to you? Fuzzy spiked hair – so what? But, if you lived in the early 1960's your hair didn't belong to you; it belonged to adults: parents who'd grown up in the days when everybody was neater and a lot better behaved than you and to school principals who had the right to say: 'Get a haircut!'

Boys wore it short and girls had to look like 'young ladies'. This was leftover behaviour from the 1950's, which was leftover behaviour from the 1940's, which was leftover behaviour from the 1930's, and so on.

*It remembered the first sight of the Blue Planet. As it got closer, the blueness became a blue-white glassy ocean. But, slowly, the ocean turned to ice-pink, reflecting the last rays of the setting sun. Then the Whatever tumbled down. Into the living darkness of a mountaintop.*

*And, now, not far away, was the ocean again. The blue, blue ocean shimmering and sparkling under the sun.*

The bus slewed to a halt in the car park, its front wheels digging into the sandy dirt at the edge. Immediately, seagulls raced towards it, anticipating a picnic. They were sadly disappointed when nothing appeared, not even a sandwich.

Everyone sat in their seats, staring blankly across the dune.

'Mr Parsley, what are you doing?' cried Miss Appleby. 'Why did you bring us to the beach?' She gesticulated madly at the window. 'The Oval is that way.'

'I don't know why.' Mr Parsley looked down guiltily at the floor.

Miss Appleby followed his glance. 'You brought your fishing rod? Well, you can go fishing after you drop us off at the Sports. Not now.'

'I didn't mean ...' Mr Parsley shrugged helplessly. 'The bus. Just. Turned.'

'Good heavens,' Miss Appleby snapped. 'We didn't come all this way just so you could go fishing. I'm really disappointed, Mr Parsley. Really, I am.'

Mr Parsley had no idea what was going on. He sighed, and gave up.

*The Whatever spread out to explore the ocean.*

*Strange, wonderful and weird were the beings that lived in and on the ocean. The Whatever liked them. And when the Whatever liked a thing, it wanted to know it. And once the Whatever got to know that thing, it made a copy ...*

'Well, we'd better hurry,' said Miss Appleby. 'To the Oval!'

Mr Parsley nodded. He turned the key in the ignition.

The engine wouldn't start.

He tried the key, a second time.

No luck.

He said, 'Er.'

Miss Appleby groaned. She was practically tearing out her hair.

Speaking of hair, the Team had become aware that their heads were different. Curls had flopped, spikes had fallen – the fuzzies were no more. Everyone looked the way they had done when they started out.

Cap saw Ellie fold her arms and frown; but the others seemed more or less pleased to be back to normal. Some of the girls' ribbons slid off. And Cap thought: Has that WHATEVER gone? and was surprised because he felt a bit disappointed. Then again, did he want to spend the rest of his life as a fuzzhead?

Not the rest of your life, said the voice of his mind. Because, one day – when you're old – your hair will fall out, and that'll solve the problem.

You're insane, he told himself.

Really? said himself. Do you think Mr Parsley always looked like that? I bet he wasn't bald when he was eleven.

Shut up, you nutter, Cap replied.

The bald head of Mr Parsley was glossy with perspiration. It gleamed like an upside-down glass bowl. Muttering to himself, the frustrated man grabbed his toolbox, and clambered from the bus.

Cap pushed the window next to him open and leaned out to watch Mr Parsley try to fix the bus. This might be entertaining. The bus driver might blow his top again and kick the tyres.

Sorry, he thought. Can't help you this time, Mr P.

Tools flew this way and that as Mr Parsley ferreted around in the toolbox, searching for his favourite spanner. It was the one he called 'King Kong'. Mr Parsley seemed to like giving names to everything he owned. Cap personally knew that he'd called his lawnmower 'Roger', because this was the name of his next-door neighbour and he didn't like his next-door neighbour.

If Miss Appleby knew about the lawnmower, she wouldn't be so offended by Betty the Bus, Cap decided. Maybe somebody should tell her. He wondered why Mr Parsley would want to name a spanner after a giant gorilla.

'Aha!' Mr Parsley held King Kong up like a weapon. He waved it in the air, and it gleamed menacingly. Four excited seagulls who had thought the kind human was about to throw them a fish backed off in a hurry. Cap noticed a mad look in the bus driver's eyes – Mr Parsley was becoming unhinged. Maybe the seagulls noticed it, too, because they screeched then flew away.

*Clong! Clong-ng-ng-ng!*

King Kong whacked the bus's engine. Fortunately for Mr Parsley, the noise drowned out his curses – Miss Appleby wouldn't have been too pleased if she'd heard.

Cap was starting to lose interest, when suddenly his head prickled and the rest of him broke out in goose pimples. It felt like someone walking over his grave.

He shivered. No, not someone – something.

Resigned to a future of being called a toilet brush, he reached up and felt his hair. He didn't have to, he knew what it would be like; and anyway, he only had to look around the bus to see that the Whatever had returned. He wondered why it had left them and where it had gone and why it had suddenly come back.

People were groaning quietly; but Miss Appleby was too uptight to pay attention. Ellie shot Cap a Look. He knew what it meant, but there was no way he'd do anything but think words at the Whatever. He thought as loudly as he could and hoping it would work: Please make the bus start. We have to get to the Sports.

After a final *clong-ng-ng-ng*, Mr Parsley got back in the bus. He turned the key; the engine hummed; the bus vibrated into life. He waved his arms in triumph. 'Good on yer, Bet—'

He glanced around with a sheepish face. 'Er – off we go.'

With its driver hunched like a praying mantis over the steering wheel, gripping it like it was an insect struggling to escape, the bus was sure to reach the Oval. Off it rumbled, down the street, just as if it had been meaning to go there all along.

Nobody said much. They were probably too busy asking themselves what was really happening. And as far as the hair was concerned, it looked as though they were stuck with it.

The girls re-tied their ribbons; but the boys were glum – it's hard, knowing that the thing you resemble most is a toilet brush. Miss Appleby sat forward rigidly in her seat, squeezing her handbag so tightly that her knuckles turned white. She was frowning, too, her face all scrunched up as though she was trying to keep the bus moving by sheer willpower. It had been THAT SORT OF JOURNEY, and although she didn't know it yet, it was going to be THAT SORT OF DAY as well.

Cap wondered what sort of day the rest of it would be once they arrived at the Oval. The Sports Day wasn't anything serious or official; it was more of a fun day with events like sack races and egg and spoon races tucked in between sprinting and jumping and relays and a softball match. Then they would all go swimming in the town pool. The day was supposed to be friendly and relaxed because Wimberoo were Bumbalong's guests, and since there were only ten Wimberoo competitors they couldn't be expected to compete on equal terms.

That was the theory, anyway; but it didn't stop the rivalry. Being short on numbers made the Team the natural underdog and they were determined to claim as many victories as they could, and do it in style.

And the Bumbalongers were just as determined to beat them at it. Cap thought gloomily that a bunch of funny hairdos was hardly going to make the job of winning in style any easier.

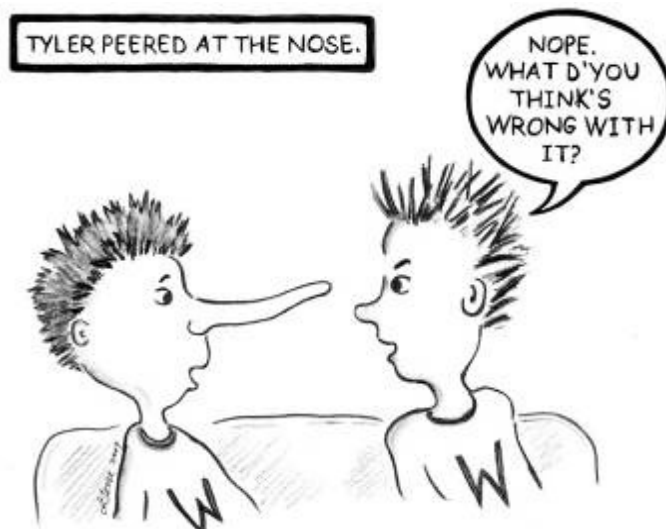
That's odd, he thought then. My nose feels funny.

Actually, his nose felt huge. He touched it experimentally, but it didn't seem different. When he took his finger away, though, the sensation of hugeness returned. The way his nose felt now, he could have sworn it was ten times bigger than his face.

He turned to Tyler. 'Hey, notice anything different about me?'

Tyler had a dreamy expression. 'Huh?'

'Anything odd about my nose?'



Cap pressed his nose again. 'Ah, nothing. I thought it might be a bit swollen, that's all.'

'Looks normal to me. But maybe a bug bit you when we stopped on the road.'

Tyler massaged his arms in a preoccupied way. 'I feel strange. I don't know why. My arms are kinda rubbery.'

'Weak?'

'No.' Tyler frowned. 'Just sort of bendy and loose.'

That sounded weird. And I'm sure there's something strange about my nose, thought Cap. Like it feels as if I've got a giant banana where my nose should be.

Oh no, he panicked. Is this the second stage after the hair fuzzies? I hope not.

He glanced around the bus. What he noticed most of all was not that the Team looked any different but that every one of them was sitting in silence.

Did they all feel strange? No one was saying a word and that was ominous.

Ellie caught him staring across the aisle at her. She raised her eyebrows knowingly.

And nodded.

Cap sagged.

Stage Two – we're in it!

The bus pulled up beside the Oval.

Miss Appleby sighed. 'Finally.'

Standing around the white fence like cows in a paddock, the whole of Bumbalong School turned and watched. Their Principal, Mr Wheeler, who was dressed in some sort of soldier's uniform, glanced pointedly at his watch then hurried over to the bus.

Tyler leaned across Cap to peer out the window. 'What's Wheeler wearing that military getup for?'

'Army Reserves uniform.'

'He's in that? Why?'

'Because he wants to be, I s'pose.'

'No. Why's he wearing a uniform now? Today?'

'No idea. Maybe he's going somewhere later,' said Cap. 'My dad told me he started a cadet corps at the high school.'

'Who's he gonna be then—' Tyler snorted. 'Colonel Huff'n'Puff?'

'It's not a colonel's uniform.' Cap grinned. 'It's Major Huff'n'Puff, that's what it is.'

Miss Appleby got out of the bus and apologised profusely for being half an hour late. Mr Wheeler didn't appear impressed and kept inspecting his watch in a pointed way, while she stumbled, red-faced, through the apology.

'Aw, give her a break, why don't you,' muttered Tyler.

In an unspoken agreement to put off the inevitable until the very last minute, the Team stayed glued to their seats. But when Miss Appleby waved her frantic hands they knew they couldn't stall any longer.

It was time to make the BIG IMPRESSION.

Were they ready for it?

Was Bumbalong ready for it?

Mr Wheeler wasn't.

Smithy was first down the steps. Mr Wheeler saw his hair and frowned. Smithy grinned, self-consciously. As the rest of the Team trooped from the bus, the teacher's disapproving frown turned into an expression of outrage. One kid playing the fool with a ridiculous hairdo was bad enough, but the whole lot of them playing the fool was just too much.

Mr Wheeler looked for someone to blame. 'Miss Appleby, what is the meaning of this?'

By the way he said 'this?' you'd have thought Wimberoo School had turned up at the Sports Day wearing their unmentionables on their heads.

'Oh ... just a little harmless fun. Haha,' said Miss Appleby weakly. 'Youthful spirits – hahaha.'

Mr Wheeler gave her a look that said a lot about what he thought of teachers who allowed their pupils to have 'youthful spirits'. He pushed the peak of his cap back from his thunderous face.

'Humph!'

Then, of course, Bumbalong School reacted.

They started by sniggering.

A second later they were chuckling.

Another second later they were laughing themselves silly.

'Seen a ghost?' shouted a heckler from the crowd.

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 ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!

The School Cadets was a military hang-up from World War 2. Some people thought it would be nice for boys to be moulded into soldiers from their earliest years. What do you think?

Cap flinched when he heard that.

'Bring yer brooms with yer?' yelled someone else, nastily.

'Whad-arrre-ya?' <sup>8</sup> a chorus of voices taunted.

The Team's shoulders sagged. Smithy groaned and Sooz made a little choking noise. This was even worse than they'd imagined. This was total wipe-out.

'Ignore them. Come on,' said Ellie.

She picked up the School Banner – a huge yellow 'W' of embroidered wattle flowers on a blue background – and stalked past the grinning, mocking faces. She draped the banner over the Oval fence then stood there defiantly, with an expression on her face that said: 'Wild fuzzy hair is definitely IN. But ordinary flat hair is boring, boring, boring.'

To more choruses of 'Whad-arrre-ya?' the Team tried some defiant stalking of their own. (At least they tried to try – some of them seemed to find stalking difficult, if not impossible.)

Cap was one of the failures. He still felt strange and realised he was leaning forward because his head felt unbalanced by a nose that seemed too big. And when he walked he was as clumsy as if he had two left feet.

I'm not the only one, he thought. Get a load of Tyler. He's got rubber legs as well as arms.

And what's wrong with Lisa and Smithy? Their faces are screwed up. As though they're hurting.

And Emily is as hopeless as Tyler.

Suddenly, Ben Henderson was down on the grass, doing push-ups. Like a real athlete. He changed to doing them one-handed. Then double-handed again, with a clap in between.

Cap couldn't believe what he was seeing – skinny little Hendy, the boy with the matchstick arms—

'Good heavens, Ben. You must be super fit,' said Miss Appleby. She couldn't believe it either.

Hendy looked up, and grinned.

'Oh!' Miss Appleby jerked back suddenly as if she'd been stung on the nose by a wasp.

Or she's had a big fright, thought Cap, as he watched the grin spread across Hendy's face. No wonder; I've never seen anything as horrible as that, in my life.

Hendy's mouth exploded with teeth. Extra teeth, crowding in with Hendy's normal everyday choppers. Or that's how it appeared. Cap tried to remember where he'd seen a toothy grin like this before. On who.

Or on what.



ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!

Popular insult of the Sixties. Its purpose was to suggest that the person it was said *at* was either a lower life form, like maybe an amoeba, or a bit of chewing gum stuck to the bottom of someone's shoe.

## THE WIMBEROO WHATEVER

A shrill blast of Mr Wheeler's whistle shattered his thoughts. Then Mr Wheeler's voice, coming, pinched and narrow, through a megaphone, announced the commencement of the sports. First up – the running races for boys and girls between the ages of eight and ten.

Miss Appleby finally pulled herself together enough to say, 'Right-o. Ben, Donny, Emily, Maddie, Lisa: are you ready to run?' She waited optimistically for the eager 'Yes!' she expected to hear.

Lisa said, '*Zwiffle-blub.*'

Maddie went, '*Whistle-whistle.*'

Frick cracked his knuckles with a noise like a gunshot.

Hendy snapped his toothy jaws.

And Emily said '*Arf*' instead of '*Barf*'.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Fishy Olympics

Disaster, thought Cap. It's about to happen. To us.

'This is going to be really interesting,' said Ellie, quietly, next to him. 'Why are you leaning forward like that?'

Cap tried to counter the effect of his giant nose and stand up straight. 'The Whatever's done something to us,' he said, desperately. 'Besides the hair.'

'I know. I keep thinking that all I have to do is flap my arms like wings and I'll fly like a bird,' said Ellie. 'A really big bird – a – an albatross,' she added.

'And you don't mind?' said Cap. Now he came to think of it, his arms felt a bit on the flappy side.

'No. It'd be great to be a bird.' Ellie tried an experimental hop-skip-and-flap.

She stopped, and spun round. Her jaw was practically scraping the ground.

'Cap! Did you see what I just did?'

He swallowed. He'd seen, all right. If he could believe his eyes. No one else had seen Ellie, though; every other eye was focused on the boys crouching at the starting line, ready to run their race.

'You – you – flew!' Cap said, keeping his voice down in case someone turned round. 'I mean when you hopped just then, you must have gone three foot off the ground. Easy three foot!' <sup>⌘</sup>

Ellie nodded, eyes blazing with excitement.

Should I have a try? Cap thought. But, at that moment, Miss Appleby turned and looked at him. He smiled guiltily, although he hadn't done anything to be guilty of. Ellie's face was a picture of sunny, blue-eyed innocence.

*Crack!* went the starter's gun.

To the shouts and cheers of the spectators, the Eight-to-Ten runners took off. They sprinted like crazy along the track.

Well, most of them did. Donny Frick was still in the starting crouch; but that didn't mean he was still at the starting line. Cap groaned. The Team groaned. Every Bumbalong kid hooted with laughter.

'What's Frick doing?' Smithy screeched. 'Why's he running like that?'

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<sup>⌘</sup> ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!

Ellie didn't suddenly sprout three legs, although that would have been pretty funny. 'Three foot' was a measurement before we all went metric.

'Like a lobster with backache,' shouted Tyler.

'Oh, dear me,' said Miss Appleby. 'Has he injured himself?'

'He must have,' said Maddie. 'Nobody would run like that on purpose.'

'I don't know ...' Lisa murmured, sounding uneasy. As if she understood ...

Cap and Ellie shared a knowing glance.

Then—

Out of the pack of runners shot a dark streak, bulleting ahead. The figure was a blur of speed. A loud gasp rose up from the spectators. No normal kid ought to be able to run like that.

Everybody forgot about the Incredible Crouching Frick.

Tyler said, 'Look at Henderson.'

'Go, Hendy! GO! GO! GO!' he yelled.

Head pointed forward with deadly determination, Hendy charged along the track. As he broke triumphantly through the finish line, he thrust out his chest and smiled. What a smile it was. Mr Wheeler and the other teachers leaned backwards in horror. No normal kid ought to be able to smile like that. The only place you'd expect to see that sort of smile was on a shark.

Congratulatory hands thumped Hendy on the back when he returned to the Wimberoo Banner. There was a lot of excited talk about the Olympic Games, although Smithy shrugged enviously because Hendy had stolen his dream. Enjoying all the attention, Hendy flashed another smile. Cap shuddered.

No one but Miss Appleby said anything to Frick. The Team were too embarrassed to talk to him. What could they say, in any case? Frick was mumbling 'Dunno what's wrong with me' and relentlessly cracking his knuckles.

Cap and Ellie sidled over to him.

Ellie said, 'Don't worry about it, Donny. It's not your fault.'

He looked up. 'What?'

'It's the thing that made our hair go fuzzy; it's affecting us in funny ways,' she said.

'The alien death ray,' said Cap, believing he was being helpful at this troubled time.

Ellie frowned at him—obviously not.

Frick ignored Cap. 'Not funny,' he sulked. 'I made a fool of myself, out there.'

'And I reckon you won't be the only one,' said Ellie. 'I keep feeling like I'm a bird. What do you feel like, Donny?'

'Breaking something,' Frick growled. His knuckles cracked, ominously.

'Mm,' said Ellie. 'Well, you never know – that could come in handy, later on.'

Frick studied his knuckles with a puzzled expression then looked hopefully at Cap.

Cap just shrugged, as if to say: 'Dunno what she's on about.'

The whistle blew for the next race. Maddie, Emily and Lisa headed nervously to the starting line. Lisa walked like someone wearing concrete unmentionables.

## THE FISHY OLYMPICS

The future didn't look good. Cap wondered what horrors were to come. He dreaded to think, although he was starting to see the funny side of the day. At least until it was his turn to go out there and make a total banana of himself.

Ellie Everheart seemed to be enjoying the weirdness. And why not? If you had to be turned into a bird, an albatross was just about the grooviest thing you could hope for.

Carefully, Cap felt his arms. Flappy? – Yes.

Am I an albatross, too? Or some other kind of bird? I could try a flap and a jump, but Miss Appleby might notice. I'll just wave my arms a bit.

His arms were halfway in the air when Miss Appleby looked over and flashed him a puzzled smile. He dropped them quickly to his sides. He'd just have to think about things instead.

Flappy arms don't tell you much, except that you can fly. How had Ellie worked out she was an albatross? There must have been some other signs.

OK. So. What have I got?

Cap patted his nose – that's a beak, right?

But a really huge beak.

What size is an albatross's beak?

Not as huge as mine—

He was suddenly hot all over. A great big beak; a clumsy walk: oh no, that's not an albatross—

That's—

A pelican.

The Whatever turned me into a pelican!

Cap groaned. He tried to banish the idea from his mind. But the harder he tried to not think it, the firmer the idea stuck, getting bigger with every second.

Like his nose.

I'm a PELICAN!

He made his breathing slow and steady. All right, don't panic; keep your cool. You're not going in the sprinting because you have to save yourself for the hurdles and jumps. That's good, because by the time it's your turn, the weirdness might have worn right off.

It will, won't it? It's not going to last forever, is it?

Cap sighed.

Or maybe it will. And you're going to waddle around like a pelican. Then slowly tip over onto your face.

He shuddered as the ghost of doom flap-flapped across his grave.

And if only – if only – the weirdness had worn off already. Before the girls began their race.

The starter gun fired.

The Bumbalong girls charged. They looked like a herd of elephants and giraffes.

Maddie launched herself after them; away to a good start.

Then suddenly lost interest ...

'What's she doing?' Tyler's voice squeaked from disbelief. 'Mucking about?'

'Swooping,' said Cap. 'She's swooping.'

'Or diving.' Tyler watched. 'Reminds me of a porpoise.'

'Playing,' said Ellie.

A porpoise – having fun.

A light bulb switched on in Cap's head: when the bus went to the beach, the Whatever turned us into things from the sea.

'Ooh, I can't watch.' Miss Appleby covered her face with her hands. But she peeked out between her fingers, to torture herself – the way you do at a scary horror movie. She could hardly bear to look. Because things weren't getting any better ...

While Maddie cut between an occasional sprint and totally ignoring the race, Emily lumbered along as though she'd left her legs behind in the bus. The Bumbalongers laughed hysterically and hooted. The Team cringed.

As for Lisa – Miss Appleby had to stop peeking because it was too terrible to witness – she ran the entire race backwards.

What a race! What a catastrophe for the Team! Jeering and laughter surrounded them, and the once-proud Wimberoo Banner sank rapidly into a dark pit of shame.

Of course, I'm exaggerating. Things weren't that dreadful; it was only a sports day.

Even so, Maddie, Emily and Lisa couldn't look Miss Appleby in the face. And their teacher's face was RED. She had to struggle against losing her temper because she thought the girls and Frick had mucked up their races on purpose. For a joke.

'*Whoo-hoo-oo – hiccup—*' Lisa started to sob.

Miss Appleby calmed down quickly then. She put her arm around Lisa's shaking shoulders.

'There, there, Lisa, never mind; it was only a race. But you're not sick, are you?' she added worriedly.

'No.' Lisa wiped her nose along the back of her hand. 'I don't know what's wrong.'

'Me either,' said Emily. 'I'm so hungry. Can we have fish for lunch?'

'Um, what, dear?' muttered the distracted Miss Appleby. At a time like this, lunch was the last thing on her mind.

'Fish, for lunch.'

'Oh. Er, yes. Fish and chips. I suppose that would be nice.'

'Mm-mm,' said Maddie. 'Lots of yummy fish.'

'Mm-mm,' Hendy agreed.

Sooz choked then made a disgusted face. 'Yuck no! I can't eat a fish. Chips'd be good, though.'

Mm-mm, Cap thought, dreamily. Fish, for lunch. I could murder a nice bit of bream—

Rats! Ellie was grinning at him again.

Cap felt guilty because he was only thinking of himself. He hoped the weirdness would wear off before it was his turn to go onto the track. He felt even guiltier when Tyler and Smithy went off to the starting line for the Senior Boys' Hundred Yards Dash. Poor old Tyler had to make it there with knees like rubber bands.

Smithy walked a bit the same as Lisa, jerking along in shorts made from concrete. The Team watched them mournfully, knowing they were doomed before they even started. Miss Appleby held her head. She kept muttering: 'I don't understand it. I don't understand it.'

Seeing Smithy and Tyler jerking and wobbling towards him, Mr Wheeler turned a worrying purple. 'Later on there are going to be WORDS,' said the face of purple blotches silently.

But now ...

Glaring at them, Mr Wheeler fired the starter gun.

The runners set off.

Well, when I say 'set off', I really mean 'set off more or less'.

'Hahahahaha!' the Bumbalongers screamed.

'Hahahahaha!' as Tyler lurched forward, wobbling like a skyscraper in an earthquake.

'It's Mr Jelly-Man!' yelled someone.

The Bumbalongers fell about, whacking each other and choking on their hysteria. Their teachers gaped in amazement. Mrs Donnelly, of the Junior School, seemed doubled over in agony; but she was only trying not to laugh. Mr Wheeler shot her a furious glare, so she pretended to tie the laces of her sensible shoes.

Meanwhile, Mr Jelly-Man Tyler had got halfway down the track before collapsing in a heap on the trampled grass. Bravely, he picked himself up, and wobbled onwards.

Smithy was doing better. He was famous for his speed; he ran like a greyhound. And now he was running like crazy. But it's hard to keep up with the rest of the pack when you have to do it sideways.

'Crab?' said Ellie. 'One of those little soldier crabs you see running about on the beach?'

Cap nodded glumly. Had to be.

'It's your turn next, you and Sooz,' he said. 'What do you think you'll do?'

'Try my best not to fly, I expect.' Ellie looked round. 'Hey-Sooz. How do you feel?'

'Depressed.'

'I meant about running.'

'Don't know yet. Not till I get out there, I s'pose.'

'You look a bit slippery, to me.' Ellie turned back to Cap and whispered, 'Sooz is like a fish.'

After the boys' race, Mr Wheeler calmed down enough to call for the Senior Girls' Hundred Yards Dash. Sooz and Ellie said, 'Wish us luck,' and went out there. The Team stood around their blue and gold banner, holding their breaths.

At last, something went right for them; and it was the exact opposite of disaster.

Sooz sprinted along the track. The sight of her made Cap think of those streaks of silver scales and fins that dart from light to shadow in rock pools and shallows. She came first, by a

long way; none of the Bumbalong girls could catch her. Sooz was little and slippery and fast. She was a fish.

The Team sighed happily. Sooz's performance had put an end to the Bumbalong laughter and Mr Wheeler's face had toned down from purple to his usual leg-of-ham colour. I guess he was pleased to see that at least one of those wretched Wimberoo kids had decided to take life seriously.

Beaming with relief that she hadn't done anything ridiculous, Sooz rushed back to the Team. They all congratulated her, except for Smithy who was still sulking about his personal disaster. Ellie, though, had come second-last.

'That was disappointing, Ellie,' said Miss Appleby. 'You usually run very well.'

Ellie just smiled and shrugged.

Cap waited until the teacher wasn't listening. 'I saw you nearly take off. A couple of times,' he whispered.

Ellie nodded. 'I had to go slow; otherwise I'd have been flying.'

'The sack race is next,' said Miss Appleby, looking up from Mr Wheeler's specially printed official Order of Events.

That's not so bad, thought Cap. Everybody goes in a sack race and everybody looks stupid. They stagger all over the place and mostly they fall down.

Well, the Wimberoo Team were certainly experts at falling down. Cap found himself flat on his face so many times during the race, that he was on speaking terms with the grass.

Bodies were keeling over like pins in a bowling alley. People hopped crookedly and tripped up or collided with other people. Smithy hopped sideways the entire way, and Lisa tried to do the race in reverse. But in the confusion no one noticed.

During the moments when he could think, Cap decided that Lisa must be a squid. It was the only sea animal he knew of that swam backwards.

Following the sack race, Mr Wheeler announced there would be an egg and spoon race in five minutes time. Miss Appleby said, 'Oh.' After watching her pupils falling like so many chopped daisies she wasn't optimistic. In fact, she looked so uncomfortable that Cap didn't need much imagination to guess what she was thinking.

'Er, who wants to go in this race?' she asked.

Not a single hand shot up.

She glanced nervously in Mr Wheeler's direction. 'Someone has to,' she pleaded.

The Team felt sorry for her, and a few hands writhed at waist level in spite of their owners' resistance. Miss Appleby gazed at the writhing hands and sighed.

'No, not you, Peter. You can have a rest for a while.'

Smithy nodded, relieved.

Emily's finger wiggled. 'I'll have a go, Miss.'

'You will?' Miss Appleby's face was glassy with a mad smile. 'Oh, um, good. But it can't be just one.' She looked around at the Team, but desperately avoided making eye contact with Backwards Lisa.

She pointed – 'Ah ... Ben, Ellie and Graeme.'

Cap groaned.

They stood at the starting line, balancing their eggs in their spoons. At least this race was as silly as the one before, so they might get away without being laughed at. Cap fought for control of his ungainly body. He kept saying: 'I'm a boy. I am not a pelican.'

A Bumbalonger named Johnson, who was standing next to him, looked alarmed then went and stood next to someone else. Unfortunately, that was Ben, who immediately flashed him a toothy grin. Johnson whimpered a bit then crept down to the end of the line.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the line, Emily was staring thoughtfully at her egg ...



'That was amazing. Unbelievable!' Miss Appleby gasped. 'No one can run all that way, balancing an egg on their nose!'

'Emily did, and she came first,' said Ben. 'They shouldn't have disqualified her. It wasn't fair.'

'But you're supposed to carry the egg in the spoon. Technically,' said Smithy. 'That's why.'

'Well, technically or not, she won the race however she did it,' said Ellie. 'Miss, can't you protest to Mr Wheeler?'

Miss Appleby made a face. 'He's not in, um, a very good mood.'

The Team wisely let the matter drop. It didn't take brains to know that, because of them and their antics, Mr Wheeler was teetering on the brink of a total meltdown.

The next event was a friendly tug-of-war, with ten Bumbalongers pitted against the Team. It turned out to be no contest; the Team won, hands down. Or I should say 'claws and tentacles down' – lobster claws and octopus tentacles, thank you very much, Frick and Tyler. And some Hendy shark-muscles, too.

'See, I told you those cracking knuckles would come in handy later on, Donny,' said Ellie smugly.

Frick stared at her. 'Huh?'

She rolled her eyes at Cap – Clueless!

Cap wasn't very interested. He was thinking about something else.

So far, he'd avoided making a fool of himself in public. He was only so-so at running, but was the best in the school at jumping. His father joked that Cap was second-cousin to a kangaroo. He could and would jump anything. He never went through a gate; he leapt the fence instead. He bounced across gutters and bounded over creeks. He jumped up the front stairs of his house and down the back stairs.

Miss Appleby thought it was great. She'd say, proudly: 'I'm sure you must have springs in those legs, Graeme, you're such a fantastic jumper.' She had two hopes of athletic glory for Wimberoo School and they were Cap and Smithy.

Or they had been – until today.

The hurdle races were up next, followed by the long jump and high jump. Cap could see Miss Appleby studying him uncertainly. After Smithy's sideways fiasco, she wasn't certain about anything any more. He looked away; he couldn't stand the hope in her face that somebody else in the Team besides Ben Henderson and Sooz Foy would do it right ...

When doom is lurking around the corner, waiting to pounce, you'd be more than lucky to escape.

Cap's luck had left him and run away. Right now, he was trying to stop his ears from hearing. The hurdle race had finished, but the Bumbalongers' laughter went on and on like a bad dream. Cap had soared effortlessly over every hurdle – like Ellie he'd fought a battle to not actually fly in public – but it was falling face down in the in-between bit that had ruined the race for him.

'Sorry,' he said to the nine mournful faces gazing at him sympathetically.

'Sorry,' he said to Miss Appleby.

'Perhaps you'll do better in the jumping,' she replied, in a flat, listless voice.

'But I thought it didn't matter if we won or lost. I thought what mattered was how we played the game,' said Tyler, which was quite a mean thing for him to say and wasn't like him at all.

'Yes. But you haven't been playing it properly,' Miss Appleby snapped back. She looked suddenly shocked – it's a nasty surprise to find out that you don't really believe what you're always telling other people. At least it was nasty for Miss Appleby because she always tried to be honest.

Quickly, she turned away. Only to see Mr Wheeler rolling across the field towards her like an angry storm cloud.

## THE FISHY OLYMPICS

Mr Wheeler steamed under his military cap. The purple blotches had migrated down his face to his cheeks, where they were having a party with the usual red bits.

'Miss Appleby,' he hissed through tight lips. 'I need to speak with you.'

Miss Appleby said, 'Oh.'

Mr Wheeler took one look at the Team's fascinated faces and ushered her out of earshot.

'Rats!' said Tyler. 'Now I can't hear what he's saying.'

The others mumbled agreement – except for Maddie.

'Can't you? I can,' she said.

Cap thought: Porpoises must be able to hear all sorts of things. 'Tell us, then,' he said.

Maddie translated a mixture of growls and hysterical ranting: 'disgraceful behaviour! ... silly hair! ... taking the mickey! ... if it happens **ONE MORE TIME** this will be the last time I invite Wimberoo School ...!'

The Team stared at one another. Poor Miss A. Poor us. Poor Wimberoo.

Then their heads swivelled straight to Cap—

Now, everything depends on YOU ...

## CHAPTER 5

### Let's Face It, You Really Are a Pelican

Cap took a deep breath through his great big beak. Sorry!—through his nose. And it wasn't big at all; it was just a human nose. An entirely normal human contraption for smelling things with.

He thought: I am not a pelican, but—

He gave his arms a surreptitious flap that he disguised by a big show of stretching and warming up before the long jump. Then he studied the distance between him and the sand pit.

Hmm. Would it be cheating to fly? Just a bit?

Of course, it would mean flapping the old arms and this was bound to cause comment.

Screams of derision were what it actually caused. Great galloping guffaws and cries of 'Hooke, whad-arr-ya?' And Mr Wheeler turning puce on top of his purple blotches.

But when Cap soared across the long jump pitch and nearly over the sand as well, the Bumbalongers had to suck up their laughter.

The Team cheered. The teachers stared. The other competitors in the long jump scowled. So did Mr Wheeler. He and they didn't like being beaten by a clown.

Miss Appleby was clapping with a dazed expression on her face when Cap came back to the Banner. 'Goodness, Graeme. That was, um, splendid. What an original way of jumping. Why did you flap your arms?'

Cap glanced at Ellie for help, but she just grinned like an idiot. 'Er, builds up speed when you do that,' he said.

'Really?' said Miss Appleby, sounding as if she'd never believe this in a million years. 'Well, I hope you do as well in the high jump, but perhaps without the arms ...'

'But he needs to flap,' said Tyler, though he had no clue as to why. 'Momentum,' he explained, loyally.

'Aerodynamic lift,' said Ellie, and snorted with laughter.

Cap tossed her a thousand-dagger glare.

Still dazed, Miss Appleby said, 'Oh.' On a day like today – she'd never had one like it before – 'Oh' was getting to be the only answer she could come up with.

Cap shrugged, apologetically. 'Sorry, Miss, but I do want ...'

'Oh.' In helpless surrender, Miss Appleby rolled her eyes. 'All right then, if you must. Do your best. Flap away.'

Ellie chimed in with: 'Yeah, Cap. Wing it.'

Cap flapped away as he warmed up before the run up to the high jump bar.

Of course, he would be cheating – a bit – but the Team needed another win to boost their morale. They deserved it, after being insulted and hooted at all morning. The hoots and catcalls rang in his ears now, but they sounded a lot less certain than last time. The Bumbalongers were remembering what happened in the long jump.

Flapping madly, he lumbered clumsily towards the bar. Even before he got ready to spring, he felt the air under him, already lifting him off the ground. It was so easy. All he had to do was sail—

—but make it look as though he'd jumped. Like it was one huge, heroic effort.

And this wasn't easy. Cap didn't know what to do with his clumsy pelican-legs. After all, they weren't the things that flew. He sailed high over the bar, while his legs flailed about, pretending to be in charge. They pretended so hard they got in a knot, and when he landed he had to untie them.

Wonder what I looked like jumping, he thought. Could anybody guess what was going on?

The Team's wild cheering made him smile. So did the Bumbalongers' scowls. He liked seeing the grins wiped off those jeering faces.

But Mr Wheeler was crankier than ever. By now, he was convinced that the Wimberoo Team had come to the Sports Day with the intention of sending it (and him) up. He didn't ask himself why Wimberoo School would want to do anything that idiotic, and especially didn't ask why they would be interested in doing it to him. There are always people who like to think that the world revolves around them personally.

Thank goodness then that lunchtime arrived to save the Team from any more awkward situations. Mr Parsley arrived too, and parked the bus next to the Oval. He got out then strolled over to the Banner.

'Howdy all. How's it going then? Beating the pants off 'em, are we?'

The left side of Miss Appleby's face twitched.

Cap rushed in: 'Did you catch any fish, Mr P?'

'Eh?' Mr Parsley looked curiously at Miss Appleby who seemed to be on some other planet.

'Fish – catch any?' Tyler prompted.

'No luck, boys. They weren't biting.' The bus driver's eyebrows wiggled up and down; he knew something was wrong. 'What do we do about lunch?'

'I want fish and chips,' said Emily.

'Me too,' said Hendy. 'I'm starving.'

'So it's down to the Fish'n'Chips, is it?' said Mr Parsley, keeping his interested eye on the spaced-out teacher. When she didn't say anything, he added, 'Shall we all hop in the bus then?'

Miss Appleby came back to Earth with a thud. She cast one long desperate look in Mr Wheeler's direction. 'Er, yes. That's a good idea. Drive us down to the waterfront takeaway, Mr Parsley.'

That's right, thought Cap. As far away from Mr Wheeler as we can get.

When they reached the fish shop, Miss Appleby said sternly, 'Everybody stay on the bus while Mr Parsley and I go to place the lunch orders. I don't want anybody getting off and I don't want any more silly nonsense. You are to sit still and behave yourselves, otherwise there'll be trouble.'

No one said anything. They knew she meant it. She was ashamed of them.

Miserable, the Team sat in the bus.

'It's not fair,' grumbled Maddie. 'Miss is blaming us for everything, but we didn't do it on purpose.'

'Why did we do it? That's what I'd like to know,' said Tyler. 'I mean I didn't want to wobble all over the place like that. I just couldn't help it.'

'I think we really have been zapped,' said Ellie. 'Whatever fuzzed our hair also got into our minds somehow and it's made us feel different.'

'I don't think there's anything wrong with my mind,' said Tyler. 'It's the rest of me that's acting strange.'

'Yeah,' said Hendy. 'I never felt like this before.'

Agreement and arguments buzzed round the bus. Then Cap couldn't stand it any more; he didn't want to say anything, but he had to. He wasn't looking forward to admitting he was a pelican – sort of a one, anyway – but it was time they stopped messing about and started thinking clearly.

'Some thing – I don't know what it is – has invaded the bus,' he said. 'It fuzzed our hair – we all know that – and then it made Mr P. drive it to the sea. Then, somehow, it turned us into sea animals and things.'

Frick choked. 'What?'

Cap looked at the incredulous faces. 'I know it sounds weird and it is. I feel like I'm a pelican—'

'Hahaha,' Smithy cackled.

Cap's face burned. 'You can laugh. You can't even run straight. You keep going sideways. Like a crab.'

Smithy gulped. 'Er ...'

'Yeah,' said Emily. 'And Lisa keeps going backwards—'

'Squid do that,' said Cap.

'Well, Emily balanced an egg on her nose,' said Lisa, blushing furiously. 'And you kept falling on your face, Cap.'

'Pelicans are a bit clumsy on land,' said Cap, apologetically.

'Yeah,' said Ellie. 'But they're great flyers, aren't they?'

Everyone stared at Cap.

Tyler's mouth dropped open. 'You mean that's how ...'

Cap shrugged. 'It wasn't cheating. I just flew. A little bit.'

Then all the Team were talking at once. After about ten minutes they had each worked out what animal they felt like, and now the madness at the Oval started to make sense.

'At least we know why we've been doing these strange things,' said Ellie. 'So we ought to be able to control it.'

'You think so?' said Sooz. 'I don't want to feel I'm a fish for the rest of my life. I used to like eating fish and chips, you know, but now I'm stuck with just chips.'

'I like being a porpoise,' said Maddie, happily. 'It's fun.'

'Erk,' said Frick, mournfully. 'I can't be a lobster forever.'

'You were pretty strong, though, hanging on to the rope in the tug-of-war,' said Hendy.

'You too. And you sure can run fast,' said Frick. 'One day you could even be famous. They'll call you Hendy the Shark.'

Hendy grinned.

'Ugh.' The rest of the Team shuddered.

'Do you think it'll wear off, after a while?' Emily asked Ellie. 'I mean, well, being a seal is okay for balancing stuff, but walking around is kind of clumsy. I don't know if I can get used to that.'

'I wish I knew.' Ellie glanced significantly at Cap. 'Maybe we could ask the Whatever to leave us alone?'

'Yeah. Do it before the softball game this afternoon,' said Smithy. 'I don't want to keep on run—'

A deafening noise drowned him out as twenty motorbikes roared into the car park, and pulled to a halt in a long row of gleaming chrome.

The riders got off their bikes. They had beards and were dressed in grubby black leather and big square boots. They weren't wearing helmets like bike riders do nowadays. Instead, they'd tied bandannas around their foreheads to keep their long oily hair out of their eyes. What with all the hair and flowing beards, there was enough grease between them to start a lube shop.

Each rider's jacket had the same painting on the back. It was of a ghastly white face with huge staring eyes. Underneath the face was the word 'Zombies'.

'Motorbike gang,' said Tyler. 'In Bumbalong?' he added disbelievingly.

'They've started to travel out of the city,' said Smithy. 'My dad said they're not satisfied with making trouble there, now they want to terrorise country towns: that's what he said.'

To the tune of loud swearing and clunking of heavy chains, the bikies sauntered towards the takeaway. Some people eating fish and chips at a nearby picnic table took one look at the bikies and jumped into their car, and drove quickly away.

Miss Appleby and Mr Parsley appeared at the shop door, arms loaded with cardboard boxes. Miss Appleby's eyes bugged when she saw what was on its way over and she nearly dropped her boxes. Cap and Tyler left the bus in a hurry, to help her and Mr Parsley.

Safely in her seat, Miss Appleby peered anxiously out the window. 'Quick, Mr Parsley, start the engine. We're going back to the Oval.' She pulled back sharply when one of the bikies looked right at her as they walked past. There was a loud *slam!* The bikie had whacked the side of the bus with his hand. The other bikies laughed.

Mr Parsley appeared to levitate out of the driver's seat. 'Hit my Betty, will they?' he said hotly.

But he didn't stick around.

The bus pulled up by the Oval's white fence and the Team stayed in their seats. Mr Parsley hated food being eaten in his bus; but, for once he didn't object. He kept turning in the seat and staring at the Team and their hair. Curiosity was written all over his face.

Tyler's mouth bulged with chips. 'Mmmumm ... grop.'

'What?' said Cap.

Tyler swallowed. 'I said: I bet Miss told Mr P about the races when they were in the shop.'

Cap nodded. 'Looks like it.' Mr Parsley seemed distracted, though, as if he might be listening to voices that no one else could hear.

'I think he's been affected, too,' he added. 'He looked pretty strange when we were at the beach. I reckon he knows something really weird is going on, but he can't work out what it is.'

Tyler paused with a chip at his mouth. 'He's not the only one. Cap, do I look octopussy-ish, or anything?'

Cap pretended to inspect him. 'No. Can't see a single tentacle.'

'Ha ha, very funny. But I feel octopussy-ish. Watch this ...'

Tyler laid his greasy fingers on Cap's bare arm. Then, before Cap could react, Tyler lifted his hand high. Cap's arm sailed upwards, with it.

'Hey, get off!'

Cap tried to tug his arm down; but the arm stuck tight to Tyler's hand and he couldn't break free. Tyler waved his hand around like an orchestra conductor. The captive arm waved with it. Cap was like a puppet on a string.

All the girls giggled, and Miss Appleby turned to look.

'Let go. It's not funny,' Cap hissed.

Tyler snorted. 'Yes, it is.'

He blinked and let go. Cap's arm dropped like a dead weight into his lunchbox. Fish fillets and batter sprayed in every direction. A soggy chip stuck itself to the window.

Miss Appleby shook her head frantically: Don't let Mr Parsley see that mess.

Cap hurriedly scraped the chip off the glass. Tyler picked crumbs off his shirt and, with a stealthy foot, pushed a blob of batter under the seat. The girls' laughter rang out again, and Mr Parsley turned round. Cap and Tyler stared innocently through the greasy smear on the window. They weren't really sure, though, if Mr Parsley hadn't been watching the entire performance through the bus's rear view mirror.

Outside, spread like orderly sheep in rows across the grass, the Bumbalongers were eating their lunch.

'Get a load of that,' said Tyler. 'Wheeler's an ace control freak. He can't help himself; he just *has* to organise everyone. Look, he's made them sit in their classes. I bet they're not even allowed to move until he says so.'

Tyler, it seemed, was right. A few minutes later, Mr Wheeler blew a blast on the fiendish whistle then announced that lunchtime was over.

'The softball game starts in fifteen minutes – sharp,' he said. 'Everybody pack up now. I want no litter left on the grass – no paper bags or banana skins. Tidiness, please. We leave the Oval exactly as we found it.'

Slack Bumbalongers who hadn't finished their lunch yet, mournfully packed away uneaten sandwiches. Lines of Bumbalongers trooped back and forward to the rubbish bins, while Mr Wheeler stood guard, on the alert in case anyone had a bad aim. The Wimberooans, though, were still munching their fish and chips.

Miss Appleby daintily picked up a chip, bit a small piece off the end, and chewed it slowly. She swallowed then said, 'Please, don't gobble, children. No need to rush. There's still plenty of time to enjoy your meal.'

Tyler whispered, 'She said that on purpose, to get back at Wheeler. She doesn't like him pushing her around.'

Cap nodded. 'It's like our bus is a foreign embassy and we've got diplomatic immunity.'

'What's that?'

Cap chuckled. 'Wheeler can't touch us while we're in it.'

'Oh. Yeah. But I bet he wishes he could. Get a load of him now.'

Mr Wheeler was standing a short distance away and giving the Wimberoo bus a dark, malicious stare.



'Oh boy, does he look mean. Whatever stuff he's thinking, it's not nice,' said Cap.

'He's plotting something for later, I bet,' said Tyler.

'I hope not. Poor old Miss A. What's *she* thinking?'

Poor old Miss A. was thinking that she should have stayed at home today and, preferably, spent the whole day in bed, with her head buried under the blanket.

She shut her eyes for a second to block out Mr Wheeler then searched for something fascinating to look at on the ceiling. There was nothing up there, but she spent a lot of time looking at it nevertheless.

She sighed: it's going to be a very long, very stressful afternoon.

## CHAPTER 6

### Softball

Actually, it was going to be a very short, very stressful afternoon.

But nobody suspected.

The Team got together for a pre-match conference behind the bus.

'We'll get creamed,' moaned Smithy. 'We're a mess.'

'I don't want to play,' said Lisa. 'I'm going to tell Miss I'm sick.'

'You can't,' said Hendy. 'What about the rest of us?'

'I can if I want.' Lisa pouted. 'Softball's only nine a side. You don't need me. I can be the reserve.'

'That's selfish,' said Smithy. 'We'd all like to dip out, but we can't. Why should you be the one who gets let off?'

Lisa folded her arms and pouted harder.

'Maybe it won't be too bad, Lisa,' said Ellie. 'You're fast and so is Ben. And Smithy, too.'

But I keep running sideways,' Smithy protested.

'Well, that could mean you'd save time—'

'How?'

'You won't need to turn before you run for the next base.'

'There goes your excuse.' Tyler laughed at Smithy. 'Ellie and Cap are birds,' he continued. 'They can catch the high balls in the out-field.'

'Fly, you mean?' said Cap. 'I don't know if—'

'Not exactly fly,' said Tyler. 'Not so anyone notices. The way you did in the jumps,' he explained.

'Yeah.' Hendy grinned horribly. 'Flap, flap, flap.'

Cap made a face at him.

'We've all got—let's say we've got talents,' said Ellie.

'Talents?' said Frick. 'We're freaks.'

'Hahaha! Frick the Freak,' said Hendy.

'Shuddup!'

'Nobody's a freak,' said Ellie. 'Donny's strong because he's got lobster claws. He can bat. And Tyler can be our pitcher.'

'Me?' said Tyler. 'Why?'

'Octopus arms have the longest reach.'

'Oh yeah. That's right. I've got tentacles, haven't I?'

'As long as you remember to let go the ball after you toss it,' said Cap, tossing *him* a sarcastic smirk.

'And if one arm gets tired, he's still got seven more,' said Hendy. 'What about me? What can I do?'

'Bat,' said Cap. 'You've got shark power. You can probably hit the ball into the next State. And then you run like blazes.'

'That's right,' said Tyler. 'And if that doesn't upset the Bumbalongers, you can always smile at them.'

Hendy said, 'Right!'

'Ben, you're freaking me out,' said Maddie. 'Save the smile for the Bumbalongers please.'

'I think I should still be the reserve,' Lisa piped up. 'All I do is go backwards.'

'No. The reserve should be me,' said Maddie.

'Why?'

'Well, I don't think I can take the game seriously. Porpoises aren't naturally competitive.'

'But I'm going to look stupid,' Lisa moaned.

'Running backwards could upset the Bumbalongers' concentration,' said Cap.

'Don't think it'd do much for mine either,' Lisa snapped.

'What about me?' said Emily.

'Fielder,' said Smithy. 'Seals are good at catching balls.'

'Yeah,' said Frick. 'Just don't try it with your nose.'

Emily thumped him, but in a friendly way.

'Look, I don't want to spoil things,' said Sooz. 'I know this all sounds okay, but I don't think Miss is going to be thrilled.'

True. Everybody sagged.

'And if we don't play the game properly, Mr Wheeler will blow his top,' Sooz added.

Double-true. Everybody tried to not imagine what would fly out when the top of Mr Wheeler's head blew off.

'Hmm,' said Ellie. 'We need to control the weird stuff so it doesn't look obvious. Smithy, can you force yourself to run normally?'

'Don't know. I can try, but I don't know. I couldn't do it before.'

'But, before, you didn't realise what was going on. Now you do. You can decide to beat it.'

Smithy shrugged.

'You too, Lisa,' said Ellie. 'Try to not go backwards. I know it's going to be hard, but you've got to try.'

Lisa looked at her sulkily. 'S'pose ... if Smithy can. S'pose I can stop myself when I feel it's going to happen. I hope I can at least.'

Everybody hoped so, too.

## SOFTBALL

Cap thought: This isn't going to be easy. It's like being The Incredible Hulk, with all that amazing power locked up inside you but you can't show it.

You want to, but you can't.

He didn't dare admit to anyone else how amazing that power felt. But he admitted it to himself. Flying over the jumps had been a sensational experience. The absolute best.

He wanted to FLY!

He'd been bitten by the flying bug. Not only bitten, but chewed, swallowed, digested, and pooped out the other end.

The whistle shrilled, jerking everybody to attention. Crunch time had arrived.

'I wish Wheeler would give everybody a break and swallow the pea,' said Tyler.

Wearing fierce expressions of concentration, the Team headed for the softball pitch. Every step they took required them to focus their full attention on making their bodies behave like a normal human person's. In the entire history of the world, no kids ever had minds so razor-sharp and diamond-hard. You could have used the Team's minds to tunnel through a mountain. It was kind of scary and kind of exhilarating.

And also exhausting. The Team didn't know it then, though, that to do more than one thing at a time and do it successfully and well, would not be just difficult, it would be impossible.

They won the toss and chose to bat. Frick was first into bat, and slugged the ball almost to the road. A Bumbalong fielder galloped after it, and ended up poking about helplessly in long grass in a ditch.

Frick crouched like a lobster when he ran for the bases, but the Team shouted happily and made a point of ignoring him. It didn't matter, anyway, because Frick made a home run without the slightest effort. In the minutes it took for the fielder to find the ball, Frick could easily have made ten.

Now it was Tyler's turn. He came to the pad, confidently swinging the octopus arms. He gripped the bat like a weapon; earlier, he'd talked himself out of a fear of wobbly legs. He'd convinced himself that his mind was a powerful searchlight focused on keeping his body under control.

Tyler thought he was going to be crash-hot.

He started off well, hitting a potential home run. Grinning – trying not to laugh out loud because this felt so great – he raced for first base.

After Frick's gigantic wallop into the grass, the Bumbalong pitcher's ears were steaming like a Rotorua geyser. Tyler chortled to himself: 'Hahaha – you'll never beat u-us – hahaha!'

Big mistake, though, chortling. Somebody should have told Tyler what it would do to his concentration.

It made him lose it.

It cut off power to the mental searchlight and allowed his legs to remember they were an octopus's. Back came Mr Jelly-Man with a vengeance.

## THE WIMBEROO WHATEVER

The Team groaned as he floundered to second base then toppled onto it, nose skidding across the pad and ending up in the scuffed grass.

'Whad-arrre-ya?' screamed the Bumbalong pitcher, a tall red-haired kid named Spike.

The other Bumbalongers were collapsing in fits of laughter. Mr Wheeler was collapsing in a fit of rage. Miss Appleby was seen generally collapsing; Mr Parsley had to help her to sit down on the grass.

The Team growled.

Ellie said to Hendy, 'OK, Ben, show them Wimberoo means business. And smile at the lot of them while you're at it.'

'I'll give 'em a real mouthful,' he said.

At the pitch, Hendy stood ready with the bat raised.

The sniggering pitcher wound up his arm.

Hendy smiled ...



The pitcher's face turned chalk white and he tripped over his own feet.

Ellie said, 'Ha!'

'Wake up, Spike,' said the Bumbalong catcher who was behind Hendy and hadn't seen the smile.

Hendy turned slightly and grinned over his shoulder. The catcher toppled backwards and sat down in the grass.

Hendy grinned some more. What a weapon. It was like being given your very own magic wand. A magic wand that turned people into custard.

'Go get 'em, Hendy,' mumbled Tyler. He was still upset about his jelly legs.

'You wait,' said Cap. 'Hendy'll show 'em,'

Tyler sighed.

Then Sooz was jumping up and down, yelling, 'Teach 'em a lesson! Teach 'em a lesson!'

The Team stared at her in surprise. Sooz was normally quiet and reserved. She never did that sort of thing. But it got them all going, and they bounced around in front the Banner, yelling encouragement at Hendy—

—Who didn't need it, because he had his smile.

It should have been wonderful. Spike pitched his best ball, and Hendy hit it into next week. But the moment of triumph was cut short by a terrible noise and an even worse stink of petrol. Everybody forgot all about softball as, like a convoy of doom, the bikie gang roared their motorbikes onto the far end of the Oval.

The Zombies rode in wide, arrogant circles, shouting 'Yeegah!' Their tyres tore up the turf and scored deep gouges as they careered around the Oval then skidded to a screaming halt. They circled again and again and again. The tyres ripped into the grass. Over and over, until the sight and the sound of them made everybody feel sick.

The softball game had stopped; the two teams stood still as statues, watching, and feeling the underlying menace.

Behind the white fence the Bumbalong teachers nervously shepherded their classes into tight, defensive groups. Mr Parsley had hurried off to the bus the moment the bikes invaded the Oval. Now he was standing protectively by Miss Appleby and clutching his King Kong spanner.

There were long minutes of indecision – nobody knew what to do. Down at the other end of the Oval the Zombies kept circling and doing figure-of-eights and yelling above the racket of their engines.

Mr Wheeler started blustering: 'This is outrageous! Disgraceful!' He fished his car keys out of his pocket and said to one of his teachers, 'Miss Jennie, take my car and drive to the police station. Tell the police what's happening and bring them here.'

Miss Jennie took the keys, all the while nervously eyeing the bikies. 'The bikies might see me go, and guess—'

'I doubt that very much,' said Mr Wheeler contemptuously. 'But leave quietly. Just stroll off casually and drive away slowly.'

Miss Jennie strolled off, looking as though she was trying very hard to stop herself from running. She was a bit like the Team, really, fighting hard to keep control. When she'd gone, everybody watched the bikies anxiously and waited. They hoped the Zombies would get bored with driving around in circles and go and do something else.

The Zombies didn't, of course; they didn't have the imagination. Going round and round in circles was what their tiny minds enjoyed. Thank goodness, I say. If they'd been smarter and had more interest in life, then this story would fall flatter than a pizza.

## THE WIMBEROO WHATEVER

The softball game was still stalled. Nobody could concentrate on playing games while they felt so intimidated.

Mr Wheeler was trying to decide what to do.

Finally, he announced, 'This is no good. We can't let those ... people ... spoil our game. Teams, start playing, and I will umpire.'

For emphasis he gave his whistle a short sharp blast. It's just possible he thought that by ignoring the bikie gang and acting as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening, the bikies would melt away like ice creams in the sun.

This is one point of view, anyway: you can ignore trouble and pretend it isn't there. The problem with this point of view is that trouble doesn't always feel the same way about you.

## CHAPTER 7

### Attack of the Zombies

The teams were on edge. They couldn't ignore the roaring motorbikes. Spike rolled out a half-hearted ball that Hendy half-heartedly swung at and missed.

'Strike!' called Mr Wheeler. 'Boys—pay attention.'

It took a moment to sink in that something had suddenly changed. Everybody became aware of a huge silence. The Zombies had stopped circling and were watching the game. They seemed to be quite interested. Had they turned into genuine spectators?

Well, if you believe that, you'll believe anything.

The silence hung in the air like a bomb waiting to explode. Then the bikes snarled into life.

The Zombies charged ...

First to run were the Bumbalong out-fielders. The frantic teachers waved them and the others back to the safety of the fence.

Miss Appleby cried, 'Children ... to me!' and the Team obeyed in a mad scramble of leaping, climbing or slithering over and under the fence.

Still unnerved by Hendy's scary teeth, Spike stumbled and fell. He sprawled on the grass; he'd twisted his ankle. The first motorbike had almost reached the softball pitch, and Spike was laid out like a sacrifice.

Mr Wheeler gave a yell, dashed forward, seized Spike by the arm, and hauled him up. He pushed the boy in the direction of the fence.

'Get out of here,' he hissed.

Spike limped away to safety.

This left Mr Wheeler as a lonely target for the Zombies. In the next second the bikes were roaring around him, circling like sharks around a helpless swimmer.

Lumps of grass and dirt flew up from the screaming tyres. Mr Wheeler kept turning as the bikies zoomed closer with each circuit. The noise was ear-shattering – twenty bike engines all going at once are pretty loud.

Mr Wheeler's face turned a dark, worrying scarlet under his cap.

'Ooh, this is terrible,' Miss Appleby moaned.

What could anyone do?

Mr Parsley crouched forward, shaking King Kong. The expression on his face scared Miss Appleby so much she said to him, 'What are you—'



They watched Zombies ride to a halt, lined up in front of Mr Wheeler. The air throbbed with the deep vibration of their idling engines; then took on a deadly silence once they switched them off.

One of the Zombies said, 'Look – it's a great big soldier. Hey Generalissimo, wanna play wars with us?'

This Zombie kicked his bike into life again, and eased it slowly forward over the grass. Somehow the slow, deliberate way he rode and the puttering growl of the engine were even more threatening than all twenty bikes in full throttle.

He sped up a little when he got near Mr Wheeler. Now he was riding so close that Mr Wheeler had to step back to save his toes. The Zombie circled once, stuck out a hairy hand, and dragged the peaked cap off the teacher's head.

Mr Wheeler swayed. The Zombie drove round and round him, waving the cap. Mr Wheeler spun and staggered, getting dizzy. The other Zombies laughed.

Everybody watched in horror; they felt so helpless.

The Team were huddled behind the fence.

'Wheeler's in big trouble,' said Cap. 'Can't someone do something?'

'Us?' said Tyler.

'Us?' said Ellie. 'Don't we have special powers?'

Special Powers. Hm.

Like real superheroes?

Ten faces looked startled as ten minds considered the possibilities. Could they? Should they? They didn't like Mr Wheeler very much.

But this was shocking. And –

– said Tyler: 'Wheeler might be a mental, but he's got guts.'

'Yep,' said Smithy. 'The way he rescued Spike—'

'Well, if we're going to do anything, we'd better do it soon,' said Cap.

'We need a plan,' said Sooz, looking straight at Ellie.

'Quickly,' Ellie said.

The Team came out of their huddle.

Miss Appleby gasped as she watched them leap/wobble/lurch over the fence and run onto the Oval.

The Zombie circling Mr Wheeler slewed his bike to a stop and nearly fell off. The bikies gawked. They weren't all that bright, but they quickly spotted that something was very wrong with this scene.

Like – are kids supposed to come charging at us? As if they're not even scared? Shouldn't it be the other way round? We're the Zombies and we do the terrorising, and everybody else gets terrorised. Isn't that how it is?

A hush fell over the Oval. It was the silence of absolute mind-numbing horror. Nobody could believe what their eyes were seeing, least of all the Zombies.

The Team put their hasty plan into action and swooped.

First, distract your enemy—

—Lisa jetted backwards; Maddie pranced and dived.

The bikies stared, astounded. Then fascinated by the sight of Smithy scuttling crabwise across the grass. In a sudden burst of sideways speed, Smithy reached the Zombie holding Mr Wheeler's cap, and snatched it off him.

Smithy tossed the cap to Emily who—

—balanced it on her nose.

Before the bikies could work out what was going down, Sooz and Hendy were zooming around the bikes. Faster and faster, until they were only blue and yellow blurs. Zombie heads jerked madly, trying to keep up. Zombie mouths sagged open; Zombie eyes rolled. Their turn to get dizzy.

Now Cap and Ellie struck!

They took flying leaps – actual flying leaps – landing on the Zombies' backs. They tugged the Zombies' bandannas down over their eyes.

There was no time to shout or fight back. Tyler and Frick went on the offensive. With their powerful tentacles and claws, they pulled the Zombies off their bikes.

The bikes fell over. Metal clanged and tyres spun. The Zombies freaked out – they were under attack. It was worse than war with a rival gang. At least with that, you knew where you stood with chains, knuckledusters and knives.

But, attacks from a bunch of crazed, vicious – flying! – *Fiends from Hell* disguised as kids? Nothing about that in the Bikie-Gang Training Manual.

Now—what next? What new horror was about to descend? The bikies' nightmare came alive with more rushing bodies – real kids this time, screaming at the top of their lungs and racing

in for the kill. There must have been hundreds. Thousands! Not the actual *Fiends from Hell*; however, to the besieged Zombies, they were as good as.

Inspired by the Team, the Bumbalongers swarmed across the Oval, ignoring their teachers' shouts. They couldn't hear them, anyhow, on account of their own bloodcurdling yells drowning out the shouts. Clutching his head, Mr Wheeler staggered out of their way.

It would have been slaughter if the panicking bikies hadn't decided to escape. A good thing they did, because two of the Bumbalong boys had picked up the softball bats, and were getting ready to swing them. And I can't write nasty scenes like that in this book.

The Zombies scrambled for their fallen bikes and hauled them upright. They gunned the engines in a roar of noise, and sped off. In one-minute and thirty-seconds there was nothing left of them but a lingering stink of exhaust fumes, which followed them out of town and all the way back to the city, where they were the *Fiends from Hell*, instead of some horrible, spooky, scary monster-kids.

For another minute there was absolute stillness and silence around the Oval. Then it rocked to the sounds of voices cheering.

'Good riddance to bad rubbish!'

The Team looked at one another.

We were heroes. We saved the day.

Like real superheroes!

Without realising it they were waiting for something. Like, someone saying to them: 'Wow! You were so brave.'

Then, worse luck, before this could happen, Miss Jennie returned with the police.

The officers got out of their car. They had guns and big impressive stomachs. But there were only two of them – two police to face a gang of twenty mean bikies. The rest of the Bumbalong Police Force was busy minding the cop shop. He was a probationer fresh out of the academy.

Surprised and bewildered by a sudden lack of men on motorbikes, Miss Jennie became embarrassed.

'Er,' she said to the frowning officers.

Mr Wheeler grabbed his cap off Emily, and rushed over to explain. Then realised he didn't know how he was going to, because anything he said would sound like nonsense. And as for admitting that children had saved him—

His face turned a sick pink.

The police kept frowning.

'Bikie gang, eh? Which one?' said Senior-Constable Reg Hawley.

'Which – one?' Mr Wheeler mumbled. He was still in shock.

Mr Parsley darted forward. 'The Zombies. That's what they had on their jackets. Have you heard of them, Reg?'

'Uhuh.' Reg Hawley looked surprised. 'Nasty lot. Where are they?'

'Scarpered.' Mr Parsley pointed to the road leading out of town. 'You should've seen how—'

'Ahem. We got rid of them,' Mr Wheeler cut in. He rammed his cap on his head, and gave the peak a perfunctory twist.

Senior-Constable Hawley's eyes fastened on Mr Parsley's hand waving the spanner. Then they swept across all the other saucer-eyed faces, taking particular note of the boys hugging the softball bats.

He folded his arms.

'You're asking me to believe that the notorious bikie gang the *Zombies* came onto the Oval and that you lot frightened them off?' he said.

He glared at Mr Parsley. 'This isn't a wind-up, is it, Jack? We're not Wasting Police Time, I hope?'

'No. No.' Mr Parsley shook his head. 'They were down at the Fish'n'Chips. Just ask Mary in the shop.'

The other officer, Constable Ritchie, had gone onto the Oval to look at something. He called out, 'Boss. Over here. The grass – it's all ripped up.'

So it was.

Senior-Constable Hawley knelt down and solemnly studied each mangled blade of grass. After a long thoughtful while he conceded that bike tyres were, indeed, guilty of criminal damage to the Oval. He wasn't a happy policeman, though. This was because his mind was having trouble dealing with an impossible idea.

His perplexed brain tried to make sense of the picture coming to it through his eyes. Slowly and carefully, it assembled the available evidence:

1. Short, middle-aged and slightly saggy School Bus Driver, Mr Jack Parsley of Wimberoo, with his fist clutched round a jumbo-sized spanner.
2. Mr Gordon Wheeler, Headmaster of Bumbalong School: forty-ish, red-faced and, only a minute ago, on another planet. Now he is trying to act like an Army General instead of a space cadet. But it isn't working, is it.
3. Two Bumbalong lads, whose names escape me at the moment, with softball bats in their hands and looking very toey and suspicious.
4. All the school children wearing extremely keen expressions. A small number of them also have weird hairdos.
5. The Bumbalong teachers, all resembling stunned mullets. The Wimberoo School Teacher, Miss Faye Appleby, resembling two stunned mullets. Reason for this? Unknown.

So, thought the brain, the evidence suggests that this lot couldn't win a fight against bunch of bananas. And yet the tyre tracks in the grass tell another story and you've never known Jack Parsley to be a liar.

Reg Hawley scratched his head. 'This is one for the history books. Amazing.'

He glanced at the spanner and at Mr Parsley's face; then, more uncertainly, at Mr Wheeler. But he totally avoided looking at the boys with the softball bats, because it wasn't a good idea to congratulate children for being violent.

After a considered pause, he said, 'I must say you gentlemen showed some courage.' He included everybody in an approving nod, and added, 'Well done, all.'

And then, for reasons known only to her, Miss Faye Appleby spluttered. She stammered, 'B-b-but ...' her mouth opening and shutting like a gasping fish. Whatever else she said, though, nobody heard a word of, because loud cheers from the children erupted and drowned her out.

## CHAPTER 8

### More Mad Heroics

Actually, not everybody cheered. The Wimberoo Team stayed stone cold silent. But Senior-Constable Hawley didn't notice. Nobody noticed.

The Team looked at one another again.

What?

Has everybody but us forgotten what actually happened? Have they forgotten who ran onto the Oval to save Mr Wheeler? Who did amazingly brave things to the Zombies that sent them riding away in terror?

Or is everybody forgetting sort of accidentally on purpose? The way people do when the truth is mind-boggling or a bit unpleasant, or just too inconvenient to have around? Like, they can't explain how ordinary children could run faster than a speeding bullet, leap bikies with a single bound, and drag grown men off motorbikes with their bare hands. So, because they can't explain it, they pretend it never happened. And if it never happened, then they need to pretend that something else did, for which they can happily take the credit.

Thoughts similar to this ran through each of the Team's heads. They didn't share them aloud, but they were all thinking the same sort of thing. Probably though, at this moment, none of them were in the mood to realise they had just learned an important lesson about the world.

Tyler grunted in disgust. 'What do you reckon people are going to remember about this Sports Day?'

'The bikies came to town?' suggested Maddie.

'No. I mean about us and this Sports Day.'

There was some thought about this.

Then—

'Hair,' said Ellie flatly.

'That's right,' said Tyler. 'Our stupid hair.'

Was there no justice? Anywhere?

After the police left the Oval – Senior-Constable Hawley was determined to interview Mary at the Fish'n'Chips – Mr Wheeler pulled himself together and took command again. He decided against resuming the doomed softball match and said the schools could go swimming in the sea pool. It was a popular decision since everybody needed cooling off after so much excitement.

The Bumbalongers lined up for the fifteen minute march to the pool, Mr Wheeler giving orders to his teachers and shouting at children who dared to move out of line. Miss Appleby told the Team to get on the bus. She seemed really angry, and barked out the order right in front of Mr Wheeler's face. Then she said to him in a sharp voice, 'We'll be going straight home afterwards; so we might as well drive to the pool.'

Cap sat in his seat and stared at the back of Miss Appleby's head. The hostility radiating off her could have powered a nuclear reactor. However, it wasn't radiating at the Team. The bus pulled away from the Oval, and Miss Appleby glowered out the window at Mr Wheeler who tried to pretend he hadn't noticed. But he looked foolish and self-conscious, like someone who knows he's been a Naughty Ungrateful Boy.

Cap also stared at the back of Mr Parsley's shiny bald head. At least the bus driver had had the decency to look embarrassed when the police made the wrong assumption about who chased the Zombies off the Oval. Cap was sure old Parsley had been going to tell the police what actually happened, but Mr Wheeler had butted in and stopped him.

He felt a nudge on his shoulder and turned around. Ellie was grinning at him.

'It's a good thing Mr P. didn't tell Constable Reg about what we did,' she said. 'Otherwise he'd think we're loonies.'

'I was just thinking about that,' said Cap. 'Are you reading my mind?'

She shrugged and gave him a funny look, and he suddenly had the suspicion that the Whatever gave Ellie Everheart a lot more than the ability to fly like a bird. Remember the friendly trees, he reminded himself. Everheart knew what was going on there a lot quicker than you did.

But why just her? Why should she be the only one in the group to have extra powers?

Why can't I read minds? thought Cap. He tried to tune-in to Tyler, but there was only a lot of static. 'Course that might be what's going on inside Tyler's head right now; sometimes he's like a radio you can't turn off—

He saw a dreadful smirk on Ellie's face, and panicked. Is she reading my mind this very minute? Yuk no!

The smell of the sea floated strongly though the windows as the bus drove into swimming pool car park. The car park was at the top of a cliff. The pool was at the bottom, and you went down about a hundred stairs to get to it. It was cut out of a natural rock platform, and the sea washed in and out, so the water was always changing and clean. If the sea was too rough and choppy and the waves too big, you couldn't swim there because it wasn't safe.

Today the sea was blue and gentle. Just right for a lovely cool dip.

Perfect.

Miss Appleby sent the Team to the dressing sheds then sat on a wooden seat at the top of the stairs to wait. She didn't have anyone to talk to because Mr Parsley was reading a newspaper in the bus. But she wished she did have.

I really need someone to talk to, she said to herself.

Then changed her mind.

Now I come to think of it, maybe that's not a good idea. I mean how can you talk about a day like today without sounding as if you're completely and utterly bonkers?

Miss Appleby had decided that she and the Team wouldn't stand around waiting for the Bumbalongers to arrive at the pool. Mr Wheeler would have wanted them to wait, so this was a good enough reason to do the opposite. She was fed up with him; however, she'd never admit that to her pupils.

Her head was spinning. Almost from the start, early this morning, this had been the strangest day of her life. Something seemed to have got into the children – something spooky and unreal. Something – she couldn't imagine what – but it had made impossible things happen.

It's like I've entered the Twilight Zone<sup>8</sup>, she thought.

But, hadn't the children been brave to stand up to that horrible bikie gang? Reckless, but brave. They nearly gave her a heart attack when they ran out onto the Oval.

And, afterwards, when the police came – to see their little disillusioned faces when Mr Wheeler ...

Her thoughts trailed off into disappointment for her pupils. She sighed – I've had enough. She wanted the day to end before any more weirdness happened. She wanted to go home to little and uneventful, sleepy, laid-back Wimberoo. The weirdest thing that'd ever happened in Wimberoo, happened years ago, when old Pete Whatizname got blown away by a freak mini-tornado, and all they ever found of him were his boots and false teeth—

Well, that was actually quite weird, and she wasn't sure if she believed it. It might be one of those Tall Tales that country people like to tell gullible city folk, and then watch their fascinated faces. Anyway, whichever it was – truth or fable – it was the one and only example of weirdness happening in Wimberoo.

The sound of voices wrenched her into the present. Waving towels, the Team poured out of the dressing sheds.

Miss Appleby stood up. 'Right. Are you all ready for some fun?' she said.

'Yes!' they chorused.

Down they trooped, down the hundred steps to the pool. Miss Appleby did her best to ignore the strange ways some of them had of walking. She didn't know why they did it, but there must be a reason.

At least they appear to have cheered up, she thought.



ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!

An old TV show specialising in weird. Miss Appleby was wrong, though; she couldn't be in the Twilight Zone because it was in black and white and she was wearing green.

No one was swimming in the lapping blue water of the big pool. In a walled-off paddling pool, two toddlers splashed about while their mothers watched over them. Miss Appleby nodded and smiled at the mothers then took a deep breath of clean salty air. Maybe the air will fix my head, she thought. She sat down on a damp rock, and hoped for a miracle.

The Team took to the water like they were born to it. Like ducks to a pond. Like pigs to mud. Like polar bears to Arctic ice. Miss Appleby hadn't realised they were such fantastic swimmers, and vaguely wondered when they'd had the chance to practise and where in Wimberoo they could.

She wasn't thinking clearly, and felt dull and drowsy. She half shut her eyes, enjoying the feeling of warm sunshine on her face.

Through her eyelashes and a shimmering haze of sunlit glassy water, she seemed to see fish, seals and bobbing pelicans and other creatures swimming and larking about in the waves. An illusion – she told herself – it's a very large pool and the sun is dazzling, and the day has been so strange and I'm so tired. I'll feel a lot better tomorrow, after I've had a good night's sleep.

Miss Appleby closed her eyes.

Next minute, screams jerked her awake. The mothers at the paddling pool had been being having a conversation and had stopped paying attention to their children. One of the toddlers had toddled down to the big pool, where he promptly – yes, you guessed it – fell in.

The mothers shrieked.

Miss Appleby leapt to her feet, and ran to them.

The toddler's mother raced along the edge of the pool, yelling at the top of her lungs.

Miss Appleby raced after her.

Then—what was that blue flash cutting the waves in half? Speeding across the pool to the toddler? Miss Appleby couldn't believe it; it was Maddie!

No, not just one blue flash, but two blue flashes. Emily sped close behind. She seemed to undulate through the water.

The girls reached the toddler in three seconds flat. Maddie appeared to be buoying up the child and swimming at the same time. Miss Appleby couldn't exactly see how she was doing it, but she did it like an expert.

Then Emily disappeared under the surface of the water.

And came up again ...



MISS APPLEBY'S EYES BOGGLED.  
IT WAS THE EGG AND SPOON RACE ALL OVER AGAIN!

Balancing the toddler as if it was the easiest thing in the world, Emily carried him all the way across the pool, with Maddie gliding next to her like a fish. The toddler laughed and slapped his hands down on Emily's plastered hair. He was having the ride of his life.

At the pool edge, Maddie took over. In a surge of foam she seemed to leap clear of the water with the toddler in her arms, and dumped him at his mother's feet. Water sprayed in a great wet wall, drenching the mother and Miss Appleby.

Miss Appleby staggered backwards. Either her eyes were playing tricks or the cold salty water dribbling down her face made her see things that were not there. She could have sworn that, just for a second, a porpoise had leapt from the water; and that Emily was a—

*Seal?*

Seals? Porpoises? – Miss Appleby could only think this if she made her thoughts really, really tiny. Even then, as tiny and quiet as micro-mice hiding behind the furniture, they were still ridiculous.

I must have been hallucinating, she told herself. I think I need a good lie-down.<sup>80</sup>

The drama was over, but the toddler's mother kept saying 'Thankyou ... thankyou ... thankyou ...' to Maddie and Emily.

They modestly replied, 'That's all right', while the rest of the Team clapped and cheered, and shouted things like 'Good on you, Em.' and 'Nice one, Mad.'

Miss Appleby, with her hands pressed to her wet, burning cheeks, felt so fond of her little school and its currently strange but wonderful pupils that she threatened to burst from pride.

At this point in the excitement, Bumbalong School, with Mr Wheeler in front, came trailing in a long line down the hundred stairs.

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<sup>80</sup> ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!

If this had happened after 1964, Miss Appleby could have hallucinated that she was watching an episode of 'Flipper', on TV. But since it was only 1960, she had to be content with a more general sort of hallucination.

General Pompous leading an invasion of army ants, said Miss Appleby to herself. Oh boy, have I got it in for him. Well, he deserves it.

She watched him getting nearer, and thought: I believe it's high time we went home. Anyway, once the Bumbalongers get into the pool, there won't be enough room to flap a flipper—

Did I just think that? Craziiness is catching.

Miss Appleby swivelled her eyes from side to side in case she was going mad and someone might have noticed.

When every Bumbalong schoolchild had reached the bottom of the stairs, Mr Wheeler made them line up. Then he strode up and down, organising them and the teachers. They would have to enter the pool in relays of two classes at a time, otherwise they'd risk pool overload. Seeing them crowding onto the rock shelf, the two mothers grabbed their toddlers and escaped.

Very sensible. We'll escape too, while we can, thought Miss Appleby. She signalled the Team to come out, and they dripped their way to their towels.

Miss Appleby noticed that, ever since he'd arrived, Mr Wheeler had carefully avoided looking at her. Embarrassed, she thought.

And he was still pretending she wasn't there.

Well, I'll soon fix that, she decided.

She marched over to him, forgetting that she probably looked like a drowned rat. He stared curiously at the damp dress and limp hair, but didn't say anything.

She gave him a bright, brittle smile without any friendliness in it. She said, 'We'll be going home now. I hope you all enjoy your swim' – in a voice that blew straight in from Antarctica.

## CHAPTER 9

### Goodbye, Superpowers

*The Whatever hovered on the cliff and considered the vast rolling country that was the planet's ocean.*

*Interesting.*

*Deep.*

*Interesting and Deep.*

*The ocean wrapped around the planet like memory around a life. The Whatever knew a lot about memory because memory was what the Whatever was mostly made up of. Memory was a watery sort of experience: the way it could ripple, spreading out in rings; and how it rolled in waves or flowed backwards and forwards across the universe. The Whatever knew all about memory, and by gathering memories, it changed and grew.*

*So the Whatever decided to go down into the ocean, where it could learn more from all the watery fishy things.*

It was more boisterous in the girls' dressing shed than in the boys'. In between getting dried and dressed, Emily and Maddie re-enacted their dramatic rescue of the toddler. The other girls laughed, and cheered them on.

'At least his mother thanked you,' said Sooz. 'No one said thankyou at the Oval.'

'Couldn't, could they?' said Ellie. 'They were too busy pretending it was them.'

'Well, after the police went away, he could have said something,' Sooz replied.

'Too embarrassed by then,' said Ellie. 'A thankyou would sound pretty dreadful coming after that great big pretend.'

Lisa had been rubbing her wet hair with the towel. She felt her head.

'Hey, my hair's dry and it's back to normal. I thought it was going to fuzz out once it dried, but it hasn't.'

'No. Mine hasn't either,' said Maddie. 'Neither has yours,' she added looking at the other girls. 'Are we *normal* again?'

'I wonder,' said Emily. She tried balancing a plastic hair comb on her nose. It clattered onto the floor. She shrugged then picked it up. 'I think we must be.'

'Is it true?' Ellie performed a speculative leap in the air, but came down smartly with a heavy, dead-sounding *thud*.

'Oh.' She sagged onto the bench. Her curls drooped around her face. 'That's a shame.'

'I don't think so,' said Lisa. 'I'm glad I'm back to normal.'

'But I was looking forward to a bit more flying,' said Ellie. 'I didn't get the chance to do much, and it was fun.'

'All right for you, being able to fly,' said Lisa. 'But who wants to go around backwards, like I had to? Not me.'

'Me neither,' said Sooz. 'Be a fish, I mean.'

'But, Sooz, you were really fast at the Oval. You even kept up with Ben,' said Maddie. 'Didn't you like that?'

'Well ... yeah,' said Sooz. 'That was okay. But I really love fish and chips, you know. And I couldn't look a fish in the eye and imagine eating it, without feeling like a cannibal.'

'But fish do eat one another—' Maddie began.

Sooz made a face at her. 'Not this fish. Anyway, I hated how my plaits stuck out.'

Emily sighed. 'I kind of liked being a seal, once I got used to the way it felt. And I reckon I could have controlled it with a bit of practice.'

'Me too,' sighed Maddie. 'I loved being a porpoise. It was fantastic.'

Three were gloomy and disappointed; two were pleased it was all over.

'Wonder what the boys are thinking,' said Ellie as she mournfully tugged on her shoes.

The boys weren't thinking at all. They were arguing instead.

'You think it's fun, being made to run sideways when you want to run straight?' snapped Smithy.

'I just said I wish we hadn't changed back,' said Hendy. 'I was enjoying—'

'Thinking of yourself,' Smithy frowned at him, 'As usual.'

'That's not—' Hendy clenched his jaw. If only he still had his shark-smile; he'd give Smithy a real doozy.

'You are,' Tyler told Smithy. 'You were jealous as hell of Hendy because he ran so great. You thought he'd be the one going the Olympics, instead of you.'

'Because you run like a crab,' jeered Frick. 'You scuttle.'

Smithy glared. 'Not now I don't. And I'm glad whatever it was has gone away. I don't want to go around looking like an idiot for ever.'

'You don't need to run like a crab to look like an idiot,' said Frick.

Smithy's face turned a furious red. 'You ought to talk. Lobster-face!'

'Hey!' Cap put himself between them before things got physical. 'Let's forget it. There's no point in fighting over this stuff. We're all back to normal whether we like it or not.'

Cap didn't like it. Before the Whatever had left him, he'd been busily planning some secret test flights for tomorrow.

The Whatever had left them all. Their hair was flat, as though it had lost all its personality. Boring hair now and no more superpowers. For a few minutes, Cap had hoped that the Whatever would return, the way it did at the beach. But no, it didn't seem to be coming back.

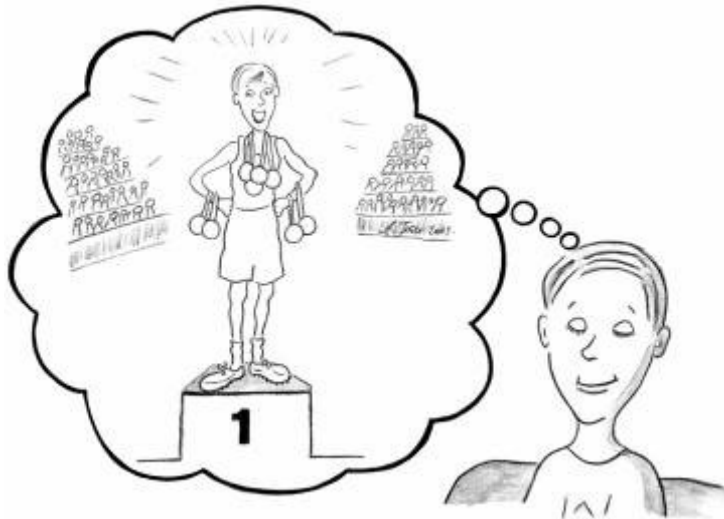
Tyler shrugged. 'Oh well, it was fun while it lasted.' He thought about this for a second. 'Actually, no it wasn't ... most of it ... but some bits were.'

A subdued bunch of former superheroes took their seats in the bus. Miss Appleby couldn't work out why they were so down-in-the-mouth after having cheered up before, and she looked at them quizzically.

Prior to Mr Parsley driving away, she stood in the aisle and said, 'Congratulations to you all. And Maddie and Emily – that was a wonderful thing you did. I'm not sure how you did it, but it was wonderful.'

All she got for this encouraging little speech was a grunt or two.

For quite a while afterwards, nobody said anything. They just stared out the windows at the passing countryside, thinking that, from today on, everything that happened to them would feel like an anti-climax. Except for Smithy. He'd got back his racing legs, and was daydreaming happily.



Gradually, though, the mood in the bus changed. After all, you can't sulk forever; it isn't fun being miserable all the time. The Team began to think and talk about other things.

'Hey,' said Tyler, loudly, to the world at large. 'I've got a question for you. How do cockatoos take a shower?'

Frick leaned across the aisle. 'Dunno. Is this a riddle? How do cockatoos take a shower?'

'They have baths,' said Hendy who was sitting next to Frick. He grinned. 'Bird baths.'

Sooz swivelled her head round. 'It's a trick question. Cockies don't take showers.'

'But they do,' said Tyler. 'I've seen them.'

'What? Like, in your bathroom?' said Frick.

'Sure,' Tyler smirked sideways at Cap. 'No, you idiot. In a tree.'

'How do you take a shower in a tree?' said Ellie.

'If you're a cocky ...' Tyler paused for dramatic effect ... 'you hang upside down in the pouring rain and stick your wings out – like this—' he spread his arms and bounced up and down on the seat, screeching.

Cap ducked. 'Hey, look out! You're gonna knock my head off.'

'It was windy, too,' Tyler explained. 'The branches were whipping up and down, and the cockies were dangling off the ends and flapping their wings and the letting the rain pour over them.'

'Washing under their arms,' said Ellie. 'That's clever.'

'Yeah,' said Cap. 'Clean armpits are better than smelly.'

Everybody laughed.

Miss Appleby had been listening. She turned round in her seat, and smiled.

The laughter lifted everybody's spirits. Mr Parsley began to sing in his cracked, off-key voice. Perhaps that was why the war chant started – to drown him out. Though it seemed to start all by itself:

*'Bumalong-Bumalong – Yah! Yah! Yah!  
Oughta be-Oughta be – Dipped In Tar!  
Wimberoo-Wimberoo – Yes! Yes! Yes!  
Wimberoo-Wimberoo – We're The BEST!'*

Sound rocked the bus along the road as the Team shouted and roared. They added some interesting variations:

*'Zombies-Zombies – Yah! Yah! Yah!  
Oughta be-Oughta be – Dipped In Tar!  
Wimberoo-Wimberoo – Yes! Yes! Yes!  
Wimberoo-Wimberoo – We're The BEST!'*

And the Bumalong Police:

*'Constables-Coppers – Yah! Yah! Yah!  
Oughta be-Oughta be – Dipped In Tar!  
Wimberoo-Wimberoo – Yes! Yes! Yes!  
Wimberoo-Wimberoo – We're The BEST!'*

And then – the Team shouted it so loudly that birds flew screeching from the trees – they chanted:

*'Mr Wheeler-Mr Wheeler – Yah! Yah! Yah!  
Oughta be-Oughta be – Dipped In Tar!  
Wimberoo-Wimberoo – Yes! Yes! Yes!  
Wimberoo-Wimberoo – We're The BEST!'*

## GOODBYE, SUPERPOWERS

That's when they heard – how, I don't know, over the almighty din – another voice joining in.

The Team grinned. Then sang louder and more enthusiastically.

And it was all Miss Appleby could do to keep up with them.

CHAPTER 10  
Zombies Never Die –  
They Just Smell That Way

*The ocean was even deeper and more interesting than the Whatever had expected. It was also unexpectedly VAST.*

*This was a problem. The Whatever had seen enough of VAST. It had spent cold lonely eons travelling through the wilds of interstellar Space, where VAST is only the beginning of Infinity. For a while at least, the Whatever wanted to spend time in something a little more snug.*

*The Whatever wanted WARM.*

*It wanted COSY.*

*It wanted a WELCOME.*

*Besides, the ocean was awfully WET.*

The bus reached the bent fading sign that pointed the way to Wimberoo, and turned onto the old dirt road. It dodged between, though mostly in and out of, potholes, raising dust clouds that floated back down and coated its roof and flanks a deeper brown.

‘What’ll we write on the bus this time?’ said Tyler.

‘We’ll think of something good,’ said Cap. They’d have to be quick, because Mr Parsley wouldn’t waste much time before he whipped out the car wash and his wife’s unmentionables.

Shadows and sunlight dappled the road. The bus travelled between reaches of tangled forest. Cap remembered the trees bending to him, and felt disappointed all over again.

Around the next curve the bus passed by a clearing at the side of the road. It was usually empty – nobody much went to Wimberoo, so nobody much parked there. But it wasn’t empty now.

‘What are the Zombies doing on our road?’ said Tyler. ‘I thought they went back to the city.’

Groans reverberated around the bus – everybody had assumed that.

The Zombies watched the bus drive past. Mr Parsley drove carefully and steadily until he was around the next curve and out of their sight. Then he shouted, ‘Telephone! Got – to – reach!’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> ANCIENT HISTORY ALERT!

No mobile phones, in those days! Mr Parsley was racing for a battered red phone box another ten minutes down the road. It was the only one in existence for miles and miles.

He floored the accelerator. The bus shot forward, hurtling along at a scorching forty miles per hour<sup>8</sup>.

'You think they're headed for Wimberoo?' shouted Miss Appleby anxiously.

'Could be. Could be.' Mr Parsley spun the steering wheel with demon fury, to avoid hitting the potholes. The passengers lurched like sacks of potatoes on a rollercoaster ride. They gripped the bars on the seats in front of them and hung on like grim death.

Five minutes and a lot of rattling teeth later, the bus went *koff - koff - kerfew-ee*.

Then it stopped.

'Oh no!' yelled Mr Parsley. 'Not again! Please, not now!'

Round about now, an eagle was searching for its dinner. An eagle sees a lot of things from very high up. For instance, it could see the road from the Wimberoo turnoff to way past the lonely telephone box. Sometimes, the road vanished under leafy treetops. Sometimes, it stretched and curled across the countryside like a brown ribbon. There were things on it, but the eagle didn't know what to call them, because birds don't understand words like 'bus' and 'motorbikes'.

That's what the eagle saw, looking down.

Then it looked up.

It didn't know what to call the beam of light either. It just saw the beam of light, very, very high up. The light was so far away it was painting spectrum colours on the clouds. But, steadily, it beamed itself lower.

The eagle circled, slowly and patiently, waiting for it.

*On its journey from the ocean, the Whatever encountered new and wonderful creatures. It felt especially close to some, those airy beings that sailed the skies lightly on delicate feathery wings. Others, though, impressed it with their earthy strength.*

*The Whatever slotted them into its memory banks, and travelled on.*

*Then it met the eagle, discovering lightness and strength all wrapped up in a single body.*

*Now, the Whatever was returning to where on this planet it had started. To where it had found a first welcome.*

*With the eagle following curiously, the Whatever beamed down towards the bus.*

In the bus the atmosphere was tense.

Miss Appleby ordered everybody to stay put, but she got out with Mr Parsley, to give him moral support while he tried to fix the engine. The Team could hear him threatening the bus with a close encounter of the King Kong kind if it didn't get going in the next couple of

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<sup>8</sup>That was a bit under 70kms per hour. I was being sarcastic, saying 'scorching'. Poor old Betty the Bus was anything but fast.

minutes. He sounded terribly anxious – Cap and Tyler decided he sounded scared to death – and Miss Appleby didn't even object when he scolded the bus with: 'Come on, Betty-old girl. Play fair.'

Most likely, Miss Appleby wasn't listening to Mr Parsley. She kept turning her head back to the road, back to the way they had come. Listening for the stomach-churning growl of motorbikes.

And they came. Taking up the entire road, they roared around the curve. Mr Parsley had been anxious because he thought the Zombies might terrorise Wimberoo, but they didn't pass the bus and keep going. They screamed to a halt, some of them in front of the bus, some next to it, and the rest close behind.

The Team peered apprehensively through the windows.

'We're surrounded,' Cap whispered. 'Hope Mr P. doesn't try anything with that spanner.'

'There's one of him and twenty of them,' Tyler whispered. 'I don't think he's that dumb.'

'I wish we had our powers, again.'

'Me too.'

The Zombies slid lazily off their bikes, and swaggered over. One of them said, 'Engine trouble?' to Mr Parsley.

'No wonder. What an old bomb,' said another.

Mr Parsley looked pale.

'Didn't we see this old bomb at the chip shop?' said the first Zombie. His black moustache flipped up and down as he spoke.

A third Zombie with long orange sideburns that trailed down his neck and vanished under his jacket, said: 'Yeah. We did. Him and the lady.'

'I meant the bus, you drongo,' said Flippy Moustache.

'Who you calling "drongo"?' said Orange Sideburns. He and Flippy Moustache squared off.

'Not now,' ordered a fourth Zombie. The Team remembered him as the one who'd stolen Mr Wheeler's hat.

'That's the Leader,' whispered Tyler.

Cap was marvelling at Miss Appleby because she appeared so still and calm. Or was she just too scared to move? We ought to do something to help, he thought. Even without our powers.

He said to the rest of the Team, 'Let's get off the bus.'

'And do what?' said Sooz. 'Miss won't like it.'

'What use would we be?' said Frick. 'We can't do amazing things this time; we're just ordinary now.'

'Yeah,' said Smithy. 'And it might make things worse, because of what happened at the Oval. Those bikies must really hate kids, and they might recognise us.'

'That's why we should get off,' said Cap. 'We might be able to spook them into leaving.'

'Us by ourselves?' said Sooz. 'Get real, Cap. They ran away from a hundred kids, not ten.'

'Anyway, they won't recognise us,' said Hendy. 'Because our hair's changed.'

Nobody moved. It seemed that the Team agreed with Sooz. Cap saw Ellie frowning, and knew she was wishing just as hard as him that they could do something to help. He felt hot and sweaty. He wriggled in his seat, feeling like a prisoner.

Mr Parsley had nudged the frozen statue of Miss Appleby to a place between him and the bus. The Zombie Leader came right up to them, and leaned around Mr Parsley to stare at Miss Appleby. Then he pushed his whiskery face close to the bus driver's face.

'Weren't you at that sports ground?' he said.

'Uh-oh,' whispered Tyler. 'Now, we're in trouble.'

The Zombies gathered in a threatening bunch around Mr Parsley and Miss Appleby who both looked small and helpless.

Cap sweated from frustration. 'That's it! I'm getting out.' He started to climb over Tyler.

'No!' chorused the Team, unfortunately so loudly that the sound attracted the notice of the Zombies. A pair of them walked down the length of the bus, scowling at the little faces looking down at them.

Smithy pulled away from the window. 'Cap, you idiot! Now you've done it. Sit down.'

'No!'

Cap toppled into the aisle then hesitated for a moment, getting up his courage. Before he could go anywhere, a hulking, hairy head and shoulders poked through the door; everybody copped a whiff of sweat and greasy leather, and the hairy face rumbled menacingly:



## CHAPTER 11

### Now Who's Crazy?

The Zombie Leader had eyes like hard black stones. They stared at Cap standing in the aisle, and narrowed to slits. Tyler shifted quickly, and dragged Cap down onto the seat. Tyler hoped, like everybody else, that the Zombie would lose interest in them, and go away.

Instead, the Zombie Leader's boots clumped up the steps, sounding like lead hammers slamming down on tombstones. He was big, but round-shouldered. If he'd stood up straight, the top of his head would have scraped the ceiling.

He walked halfway down the aisle, peering at each of the children as if he was trying to decide which one to gobble up first.

Emily's stomach – along with Emily – had been enjoying the earlier singing so much it had forgotten about motion sickness. Now, it suddenly remembered.

Emily said, 'Ur-ugh', and out spewed a fountain of fish-and-chip vomit that landed—  
Guess where ...



Well, it had to happen.

Like a volcano about to erupt the Zombie towered over Emily.

'Sorry,' she squeaked. 'I didn't mean to. Sorry.'

The Zombie's eyes had squeezed up tight, practically vanishing under his eyebrows. A growl came out of his throat. Or maybe it was a groan.

The Team cringed, waiting for the eruption.

Then – in a high, cracked voice that astonished them – 'You chucked on my boots!' he shrilled. 'There's sick on my pants!'

If the situation wasn't so serious, it would've been funny. It was funny, in a way – he sounded as if he was going to cry. But then he turned round, and stomped out of the bus.

Outside, while he wiped his boots on the grass, he kept giving the Team furious, menacing looks. They leaned away from the windows, but it wasn't any use ... he could still see them. And think dreadful things about them, and maybe plan dreadful things ...

'Erk,' said Emily. 'You know, I could see right up his nose. It was all hairy.'

Then the Zombie Leader yelled to the other Zombies, 'We're gonna trash this bomb!'

Tyler groaned. 'Nice timing, Em.'

Her face turned a deep red. 'Sorry. It just sort of came out. I couldn't help it. Sorry. I wish I—'

'Hey, can you feel something?' said Ellie suddenly.

'What?' said Cap. His scalp tingled. His brain fizzed like lemonade.

'Hair!' shouted Hendy.

Together Cap and Tyler punched the air. They shouted, 'Whoo-hoo!'

'We're back!' said Ellie. 'The Whatever has come back.'

The Zombies hadn't hurt anybody yet, but Mr Parsley knew it was only a matter of time before they did. He tried to keep Miss Appleby safe behind him, and wished he hadn't put King Kong away in the toolbox.

Still, what good was even the biggest spanner against twenty bikies armed with chains and knives?

They were going to trash his bus. His dear old bus.

But what was going on in the bus? Something odd. Why were the kids yelling?

No. Why were they cheering?

The Zombies gaped at each other in dismay. Mr Parsley thought: Maybe those bikies are saying to themselves, 'This is the second time today that people haven't been scared of us.'

He felt scared. He'd heard horrible stories about what bokie gangs got up to. But the kids mustn't realise the danger—

I must be imagining things, he thought then. But I'd swear the bus is glowing all over. What is it?

Miss Appleby plucked at his shirtsleeve. 'Why are the children—?'

'Don't know. Something's—'

There was a sound like the clashing of old tins. The bus started to shake. Everything loose that could rattle rattled.

Miss Appleby cried, 'What's happening? Is it an earthquake?'

'Can't be. Ground isn't moving,' yelled Mr Parsley. But he pulled her away from the bus just in case.

The Zombies hurried to their bikes in case they needed to protect them from earthquakes. However, nothing else was shaking anywhere, only the bus. They gawked stupidly at it.

Suddenly, the glow around the bus brightened. The glare became a blinding blue-white wall. The bus was still there, clanking like mad. They could hear it; they just couldn't see it.

Miss Appleby nearly tore Mr Parsley's arm off. 'W-what—?'

Then the glare exploded.

Mr Parsley and Miss Appleby flung themselves into a ditch, and covered their eyes.

A few seconds passed. Or was it hours? Mr Parsley's mind felt muddled. When he realised he wasn't dead or hurt, he decided to chance a look. What he saw made him cover his eyes again.

About thirty more seconds went by. To prove to himself that he wasn't going crazy, Mr Parsley peeked out between his fingers.

He gasped—was he really seeing what he thought he saw?

'I must be off my rocker,' he mumbled. 'Gone right round the bend and back again.'

Miss Appleby started to raise her head. 'What did you say?'

Mr Parsley pushed her face into the roadside weeds along with his.

'Don't look,' he said. 'Whatever you do, Faye, just don't look.'

At last the screaming had stopped.

Twenty tattered and terrified Zombies had frantically gunned their engines, and torn off into the afternoon. They'd escaped in such a hurry, they'd left behind bits of themselves: ripped bandanas, boots, shredded jackets, bent and mangled bike rear vision mirrors, and some rather large hanks of greasy hair.

The birds had fled the trees the moment Team exploded from the bus. Now, there was only silence. And stillness. The stillness of things that are frozen in shock.

The Team stood panting in the middle of the road and staring at the curtain of dust that, even now, still billowed above them. They were speechless, but not from surprise at themselves. It was just that, if they'd opened their mouths to say anything, the sounds that came out would not be human and would scare the pants off Mr Parsley and Miss Appleby.

If they hadn't already.

The teacher and bus driver were sitting in a ditch near the front of the bus. Their faces wore the dazed expressions of people dreaming about being awake when they weren't. Or of people trying to convince themselves that everything that had happened during the last five minutes was only a dream.

The Team hardly noticed the adults' existence. Like their voices, their minds were not entirely human. They had been zapped big time by the Whatever, and it would be a while before the effect wore off.

Some minutes passed. Birds flew back to the trees. The silent Team stretched, turned their heads this way and that, and became people again.

'Wow!' said Tyler.

'You said it,' Cap agreed. 'Wow!'

'I – I was a horse,' said Smithy.

'Me too,' said Maddie. 'And still a porpoise and I—'

'A bull,' Tyler cut in. 'I was strong as a bull.'

'I was a bull, too,' said Frick. 'As well as being a lobster.'

'An eagle,' said Cap. 'That's what happened to me.'

'Me too,' said Ellie and Sooz, at the same time.

'We were seagulls,' said Emily, looking at Lisa who nodded. 'We pecked those Zombies with our beaks.'

'Kangaroo – me,' said Hendy. 'If I'd wanted to, I could have ripped their stomachs open with my big toe.'

'I know what you mean,' said Ellie. 'I'm glad you didn't, though. I'm glad we won without actually hurting anybody.'

Cap picked up one of the twisted rear vision mirrors. A hank of grey-black hair was tangled around it. 'Well ... almost not hurting anybody ... much.'

Tyler snorted. 'They couldn't believe it when we attacked. They were scared silly.'

'I couldn't believe it either,' said Smithy. 'I mean I turned into a horse.' He shot Cap and the others a doubtful look. 'I did, didn't I? I mean I felt I was a horse, the same as when I felt I was a crab. But did I actually turn into a horse? A real horse? Or did I just feel it, the same as before?'

That was a question the rest of the Team were asking themselves. Was it a real transformation this time, or did they just have the powers of those animals?

After the light had exploded, the Team had poured out of the bus in a frenzy of talons, claws, beaks, horns and hooves. That's how it felt, but was that how it appeared? Everything was a blur and happened so fast. They each seemed to see a whirlwind of animals where their friends should be. Is that what the Zombies saw? If it was, no wonder those bikies were falling over themselves to escape.

'Are we still the new animals?' said Cap. He glanced at the dazed Miss Appleby and Mr Parsley then moved around to the opposite side of the bus where they wouldn't be able to see him.

The Team followed.

Cap tried a flap and leap. In the next moment he was grinning from the roof of the bus.

'Show-off,' Tyler cackled.

'Er, Cap ... careful,' Ellie warned, jerking her head at the bus.

Cap knew why. He looked down at the ditch, where Mr Parsley sat rubbing his forehead and Miss Appleby was rubbing the back of her neck. They probably had headaches, and weren't aware of him watching them from above.

He jumped off the roof, landing with style and grace. The clumsy pelican feet had gone, replaced by an eagle's claws. Though he could still feel the hugeness of the pelican beak.

'Looks like the Whatever gave us more powers. We've got extra,' he said.

'That's what I said before,' said Maddie. 'I'm still a porpoise, but now I'm a horse, too.'

'That's right,' said Smithy, joyously. 'When I was a crab, I had to go sideways. But now the horse thing seems to have taken-over, and I can run in a straight line.' His eyes popped from excitement. 'I reckon I can run like the wind. I reckon I could even win the Melbourne Cup.'

Nine other pairs of eyes popped, too, as the Team pictured this scene in their minds.

They all burst out laughing.

'Children ...?'

Miss Appleby's voice came, weak and quivering, from the ditch. The Team looked around. Suddenly they weren't laughing.

'What are we going to do about them?' said Sooz.

'They couldn't have *not* seen what happened,' said Maddie. 'And you know what adults are like,'

'Yeah,' said Cap. 'They'll want to know "how" and "why". They'll want to try to explain it.'

'But we can't explain it; so how could they?' said Hendy.

'They'll ask oodles of questions,' said Ellie.

'And we won't have any proper answers,' said Sooz.

'So they'll keep asking until they get something they can believe,' said Ellie. 'Even if we make it up.'

Tyler blew a blast on the Trumpet of Doom: 'And they'll tell our parents. '

Everybody looked devastated.

'My mum won't let me jump off roofs,' said Cap, despondently.

'Parents will spoil everything,' Tyler agreed. 'They don't understand things like being a superhero.'

Nine heads nodded gloomily.

Sooz groaned. 'My mum'll tell my Aunty Joan, and then the whole world will know.'

Hendy brightened. 'Then we'd be famous.'

'And be on television,' Lisa chimed in.

'Famous?' said Ellie. 'For a while. Then we'd just be freaks. For the rest of our lives.'

'Yeah,' said Frick. 'We'd be like aliens, an' they'd keep us in a laboratory, an' cut us up to see if they could find where our powers came from.'

A huge shudder passed through the Team.

'You've got aliens on the brain,' Cap said to Frick. 'But this time you might be right.'

Lisa's face crumpled. 'I – I don't want to be cut up in a lavatory.'

'Laboratory, you nong,' said Frick.

Lisa started hiccuping.

'Hey, don't.' Recognising the warning signs, Maddie leapt forward to put a stop to the dreaded wails. She glared at the boys. 'Don't take any notice, Lise; they're being silly. Anyway, we won't let that happen, will we?'

'No.' Ellie's voice sounded firm and determined. 'We're going to stop it before it starts.'

'How?' said Tyler.

'Yeah; how are you gonna do that?' said Cap. 'Miss A. and Mr P. saw—'

'I think I can do something,' said Ellie. 'I think there's a way.'

She shot Cap a hard look, and immediately he went on the alert. That look told him for certain what he'd already suspected: Ellie Everheart had got a lot more from the Whatever than the rest of the Team had.

He thought half-heartedly that this wasn't fair; but hey, he could talk to the Whatever and get the bus going. He'd done it before; he could do it again. And he could still fly like an eagle. Or a pelican.

Ellie flashed him a cheeky grin – she was reading his mind again! 'Have a chat with Betty,' she said.

Tyler watched her vanish around the side of the bus. 'What did Everheart say? What's she up to?'

'Yeah. What ...?' Frick started to follow her.

Cap pulled him back. 'Stay here.'

'I just wanna see,' Frick sulked.

'There won't be anything to see,' Cap told him. He was certain about that, although he wondered what there might be to hear.

'Shouldn't we be going home now, Miss?' Ellie said to Miss Appleby. She carefully avoided mentioning the fact that her teacher was sitting in a ditch with the school bus driver.

Miss Appleby stood up, brushing dry grass off her dress. Mr Parsley got up with a groan.

'Those bikies ...' said Mr Parsley. 'The Zombies—'

'Oh, they've gone,' said Ellie.

'But ...' Miss Appleby gaped at her. 'They just went? Just like that?'

Mr Parsley peered away down the road. 'Not to Wimberoo, I hope.'

'No. Back to the main road,' said Ellie. 'They got bored, because we weren't interesting,' she added.

'But they were fighting with something.' Miss Appleby made a face. 'There was all that ... noise.'

'And a light,' said Mr Parsley. 'And dust. A lot of dust and light.'

'Was there?' Ellie gazed up into their eyes. 'Are you sure?'

She knew, without a doubt, that if she turned her head away and looked at the bush, she'd see the trees bending subtly towards her. Or, more accurately, towards the Whatever. In the same way, she knew that all she needed was a wish to make things right; and what she wished now was for Mr Parsley and Miss Appleby to forget all about the last ten minutes.

'I don't know,' said Miss Appleby. Her eyes caught sight of the scattered Zombie remains. 'Goodness me, look at that mess laying everywhere. Really, why do people litter—'

Then she patted her hair and began to tidy it absentmindedly. She glanced at her watch. 'It's getting late. Shouldn't we be heading home?'

Mr Parsley sighed. 'Righto. But I hope the bus will start. It's been so much trouble today. I might have to walk to the phone box yet, and ring up for a tow.'

Miss Appleby wagged her eyebrows at Ellie. 'You've stopped calling the bus Betty, Mr P. So it's not a "she" any more; it's an "it"?''

Mr Parsley shrugged and his face coloured to a faint shade of pink. As he wandered off to find his spanner, Miss Appleby grinned in triumph.

'Well, well. That's one blow struck for equality,' she murmured.

Then, with a satisfied smile, she turned to Ellie. 'So, something positive has come out of this strange day, hasn't it?'

Ellie grinned like a Halloween pumpkin. 'Whatever.'

## What Happened, Later

After the Zombies had skedaddled back to the city, they became changed, um, people. Not only were they suffering from a fear of children and Nature, they also lost all enthusiasm for motorbikes.

The gang broke up and went their separate ways. Most of them cut off their beards and long hair, and some of them even got jobs.

Orange Sideburns didn't. He tried to rob a bank, and ended up in jail.

Flippy Moustache became a postman until the neighbourhood dogs finally beat him; so he went to work in a sausage factory making dogs that couldn't bite – hotdogs, that is.

The Zombie Leader got a very short haircut, and went into politics. He eventually got elected to State Parliament, where his terrorising skills came in handy. But when the Premier made him Minister for Education, and said he'd have to open things like school fetes, and meet with the dear little kiddies, he went totally bananas and punched the Premier on the nose.

Betty the Bus finally broke down for good, and although Mr Parsley was extremely sad, he liked his new bus, which he named Norm, after his favourite football player.

Miss Appleby stayed in Wimberoo for two more years then got transferred to the city where, by an incredible coincidence, she met a man from Bumbalong. They got married, and much later returned to Bumbalong. Then Miss Appleby became Bumbalong School's Principal. (Mr Wheeler had gone off to organise the people in New Zealand.)

Miss Appleby (now Mrs Brakespeare) loved going to the sea pool. She'd sit on the same rock every time, staring at the lapping waves and remembering her time with Wimberoo School and its extraordinary pupils. She'd smile a lot, and think how lucky she'd been to know them. But she would never understand what had really happened on the weirdest day of her life.

The Team had more amazingly awesome adventures as superheros. Then they grew up.

Smithy never ran in the Melbourne Cup, but he did win a gold medal in the Olympics.

Sooz became a high school teacher.

Hendy had a fencing business. He was so strong he could build more fences in one day than the competition could build in a week.

Maddie started a swimming school in the city. It was very successful, and she taught thousands of children to swim and have fun safely in the water.

Frick learned journalism; then he got hired by '*Myths, Mysteries & Monsters*' Magazine to write about Aliens.

## THE WIMBEROO WHATEVER

Lisa studied Science then worked in a laboratory (not in a lavatory).

Tyler went to acting school and afterwards got a job in a TV series, playing a tall, dark and handsome doctor. He also acted in some Hollywood movies.

Emily took up professional cinematography, specialising in underwater subjects. Her films of seals in their natural environments won heaps of awards.

Cap became an airline pilot and got rich. In a surprise move he married Emily, and they bought an island that was home to seals. It also had lots of private green paddocks where certain people could fly like eagles, pelicans and seagulls, and nobody would see them.

Ellie left Wimberoo and travelled the world. Nobody knew exactly what she did, but everywhere she went amazing and interesting things happened to people.

And they still are ...

And what about the Whatever?

—Well, who knows?

The Whatever might be waiting, just around the corner; waiting for the next right moment. It could even be waiting for you.

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