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books

Big Little Truths

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LBRIS

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9.22 am, D-Day

It was a soft-breezed spring morning on the Pirriwee Peninsula north of Sydney. Bright yellow native wattle lined the winding coastal road. Jacarandas blossomed lush-purple against a cloudless blue sky. Chicks warbled adorably in their nests. A protective magpie, alert to potential predators, swooped like a missile at the helmeted head of an innocent cyclist.

The morning rush was still underway at the beloved beach-side café, Blue Blues, but the beach itself was quiet. A small dog pelted across the flat, firm sand, followed by its guilty owner, leash in hand. Surf conditions were 'clean and peaky'. The main swell was from the east.

A handful of grey-haired surfers sat astride bobbing boards, shielding their eyes to watch a pod of dolphins leap and dive like a line of music across the horizon. Just past the point, unseen by the surfers, a whale ferried her rambunctious firstborn calf through the coastal waters of the 'Humpback Highway'.

At Pirriwee's beachfront park, a circle of new mothers sat cross-legged on picnic blankets, cradling tiny babies and speaking plaintively of sleep schedules, while a nearby tai chi class of senior citizens painted invisible rainbows in the air, smiled at the babies and remembered their own.

Then: a sudden discordant flash of noise and movement.

Footsteps pounded like galloping racehorses.

The new mothers clasped their babies close as a pack of teenagers ran through the park.

Not really a pack. They were not *wolves*, and there were only six of them: three girls and three boys. It just seemed like more. Their legs were so long. Their emotions so seemingly outsized. They bolted down the concrete steps and onto the beach, where they collapsed on the sand, shrieking as if they'd reached safety or crossed an invisible finish line. They were empty-handed except for one boy, who hugged a laptop to his chest. One of them burst into tears, or laughter. It was hard to tell. It seemed possible they were drunk.

The high school where these students were enrolled, and where they should have been at that time, was a ten-minute walk uphill from the beach. Students were pouring noisily out of classrooms like concertgoers attempting to leave a venue. They clogged the hallways and stairwells. It was 'Tech-free Tuesday', so everyone was being discreet about their device usage.

Mrs Lottie Wang, Pirriwee High's administrator and executive assistant to the principal, sat at the reception desk sorting the mail.

She opened a large yellow envelope addressed in black marker to the school principal, Dr Ferdinand Seawright, whom she could hear in the adjoining office, talking loudly to himself as he sat at his desktop computer, which apparently did not fall within the category of 'technology'.

This was Dr Seawright's first year at the school and Lottie had yet to adjust to his habit of speaking aloud as he typed, as if he were dictating the words to himself.

'Once again . . . my patience . . . wears thin,' he said.

Mine too, she thought.

'Parents should . . . be aware . . . this behaviour is not

condoned . . . is *prohibited* by the Pirriwee High School Code of Conduct,' he said.

Lottie sighed.

The yellow envelope contained a white Styrofoam box, a little smaller than a mobile phone box.

She used the point of a pair of scissors to break through the tape holding the two interlocking halves together and pulled them apart.

'Ew!' She recoiled.

A realistic-looking replica of a man's finger, complete with a few black hairs and a nicely filed fingernail, was nestled in a rectangular cut-out cavity in the bottom half of the box. How unnecessary and unpleasant and bad for the environment! The things companies did to get attention with their direct marketing promotions!

She looked for the accompanying letter, which she expected would say something 'clever' like, *Point your students in a different direction*.

Anna Kennard, Head of Science, appeared at Lottie's desk. 'I'm sorry to keep bugging you, Lottie, but I really need to know about the roster for –' She stopped. 'What's that you've got?'

Lottie smiled up at her. 'Oh, it's just some promotional thing. It almost looks real, doesn't it?'

'May I see it?'

Lottie handed her the bottom half of the box. Anna tipped it upside down and the finger fell free. It had been tightly cling-wrapped and sealed smooth like a school sandwich.

Anna carefully loosened and unravelled the cling wrap. She gave it a little shake. The finger rolled slowly onto its side.

Anna took a pen from the container on the reception desk marked *Clean Pens*, held it cap-down, like a scalpel, and tentatively prodded the finger.

It was soft, mottled, with splashes of dried blood below the knuckle.

‘That’s a human finger,’ declared Anna, and she pulled her blouse up to cover her nose. ‘Smells.’

‘No.’ Lottie pushed her chair back, away from the desk. ‘It can’t be.’

‘No doubt at all,’ said Anna. ‘It’s a real finger.’

Lottie shrieked. She stood and swayed on the spot. ‘I feel sick.’ She had low blood pressure.

‘Sit down,’ said Anna reasonably.

‘What’s going on?’ Dr Seawright emerged from his office just in time to catch Lottie under the armpits. Anna rushed to the other side of the desk and they carefully laid her on the floor. Dr Seawright averted his eyes as Anna pulled Lottie’s skirt over her knees.

There was a discreet, deep cough, and they looked up to see a whiskery fifteen-year-old holding a red behaviour-monitoring card.

‘Come back later, Ruben,’ said Dr Seawright. ‘Mrs Wang is not well.’

He assumed the gormless expression on Ruben’s face related to the sight of Mrs Wang’s knees. Anna Kennard was unaware that Ruben had witnessed her prodding of the human finger and therefore did not request his discretion, not that he would have given it. He was a gregarious child. His father was a distinguished public radio broadcaster, and so Ruben knew how to deliver breaking news without sensationalism or embellishment.

It needed none.

Within the hour the entire school community was aware that someone had sent the principal a severed finger. Any doubts about the veracity of Ruben’s story disappeared when a police car was seen driving into the visitors’ parking area.

Phones across the Pirriwee Peninsula vibrated ecstatically with the *ping-ping-ping* of parent WhatsApp group notifications. These were caring, involved, hands-on parents, many of whom could have sent their children to private high schools but chose not to for worthy ideological reasons, so were therefore entitled to VIP treatment for not spending the money they could so easily have afforded to spend. All they asked was transparency. If a severed finger had been sent to the school, they should be informed without delay.

Their children, meanwhile, were euphoric about this ghoulish interruption to their day, although some experienced nausea, and the theatre kids, who felt things deeply, wept and fainted, or did their best to faint.

It was one of those days from their childhood every student would remember: that sunny spring day when somebody gave their school principal the finger.

SAFE SPACE STUDENT COUNSELLING SESSION TRANSCRIPT

CONDUCTED BY BRENDA MOORS-CHARLES

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Hello! Good morning! Welcome! Thank you for being here! My name is Brenda Moors-Charles. A mouthful, I know, so please do call me Brenda! I'm from Safe Space Student Counselling and I want you to know this truly is a 'safe space'. Don't keep it G-rated for me! Everything we discuss will be kept confidential. Now, I know you've all spoken to the police about what happened last week –

Josh: D-Day.

I'm sorry – D-Day?

Ziggy: We were calling it D-Day because of Winston Churchill. We chose him for our history documentary because he really fitted the 'misunderstood historical figure' theme. On the one hand he defeated Hitler, but –

Amabella: If we'd stuck with Winston we wouldn't be here today, would we?

Ziggy: Obviously not.

Max: I never saw it.

You never saw what?

Max: The finger. Ruben got to see it.

Well. That's — so before we discuss the, ah . . . the body part . . . if we could back up? Maybe start way back at the beginning? I understand your parents were —

Chloe: Please don't blame our parents for any of this. They knew nothing about anything.

Skye: Especially don't blame Chloe's parents.

Amabella: All our parents have been very distracted this year. They've had a lot on their minds. Their jobs, their tax bills, their appliances, their divorces, their eyelids —

Sorry, did you say eyelids?

Amabella: I think maybe they droop? Which is a problem? Also, there has been a lot of menopause going around.

Skye: Which causes 'brain fog'. Because your estrogen levels drop. Whereas our estrogen —

Amabella: — and there have been some tragedies. RIP, Nana, for example.

I'm so sorry for your —

Amabella: Oh, don't worry, Brenda, I'm not grieving. She was my least favourite grandparent.

Skye: There have been some milestone birthdays too, so I guess all the parents have been thinking about their mortality, you know, what is the point of my actual life, that kind of thing.

Chloe: They take ages to recover from parties. Their hangovers are so dramatic.

Skye: It's because their bodies can't metabolise alcohol anymore. Poor things.

Well, yes, it can be hard for us, but let's start at the beginning –

Ziggy: So that would be Chloe's mum's fiftieth birthday party.

Chloe: It feels like centuries ago.

Skye: It was like, eight months ago but it feels like years.

Amabella: It's been a turbulent time, Brenda.

Madeline

On the morning of her fiftieth birthday, Madeline Martha Mackenzie woke to raised, querulous voices and snapped to attention like an elite soldier. She sat up in bed, tossed back the covers in one swift movement, and swung her feet to the floor, ready to launch herself into the familial fray. She would determine who was right or wrong, who needed to apologise, clean it up or give it back.

But her fifty-year-old left shoulder had other ideas.

The pain was so astonishing she fell backwards as if she'd been shot. Her head slammed into her orthopaedic pillow. *Oh, calamity.*

She had never heard of the term 'frozen shoulder' until her recent diagnosis.

'It doesn't sound real,' she'd said to the physiotherapist who had explained it might take up to a *year* before her shoulder 'thawed'. She was seated on the examination table, while he – muscular, young, unfrozen – sat on a low-wheeled stool that allowed him to scoot back and forth between her and his other patient, an elderly man doing rehab after a knee replacement.

'It's real, alright, very common among middle-aged women,' he said without looking at her, busy scribbling notes on his clipboard, crossing her off his list, content with everything about himself: his youth, his hair, his hormone levels, his plans for Friday night. 'My mother had it a couple of years ago. She's good now.'