

The Writing Tutor

by Melissa Bruce

'Imagine a forest,' she said, 'a rainforest, tropical, with pythons and fireflies and luminous green vines. Or a vast desert at night, with stars that have fallen, some of them caught on the prickles of tall cactus trees, others in various sizes, scattered across the sand. Or a city,' she said, 'with buildings made of holograms and laser lights that you could walk through, fly through, dissolve into?'

No response. Just the scratchy sound of his pencil on the paper. The boy did not want to imagine.

'Would you rather write about something you know? About something real?'

He kept scribbling.

'Okay, what's your favourite thing in the world? Something you really love.'

He shrugged.

'There must be something you love.'

He shrugged again and started on another area of the paper.

'Are you drawing wheels?'

Shrugged again.

'Is that a wheel?'

'S'pose.'

'What kind of a wheel?'

'A round one.'

'Yes obviously, but what's it for? A car?'

'Nup.'

The pencil did not sit comfortably in his fingers. He pressed hard on the paper to make his marks.

'Is it a bike wheel?'

'Mm.'

'Do you have a bike?'

'Mm.'

'Would you like to write something about your bike?'

'Nup.'

The tutor was often given the difficult kids. You had to find a way into them. If there was one.

'Jackson, I can't keep suggesting things forever. You're going to have to write about something. This is a writing lesson. You may as well choose something that seems interesting to you.'

He shrugged.

The tutor took a moment to look through the Venetian blinds and into the glare of the afternoon light which had the potential to give her a headache today. There was a ghost gum tree in the front garden of the house across the road. It was majestic and totally out of place on this suburban thoroughfare. Lonesome too. She'd come to work one day to find the developers had cut the other one beside it, equally as proud and ethereal, to the ground. The ghost of the ghost gum ... nice story idea. She'd save it for a more enthusiastic student.

'Jackson? Soon I'm going to have to just tell you what to write,' she said though there was no guarantee, of course, that he'd write anything at all. Ever.

He coloured in the tyre. He had blonde hair, messy, and light olive skin. Green eyes. You couldn't deny a raw beauty. She wasn't sure how smart he was yet. All she knew was that he got into trouble often at school. The family wanted to get him into Cranbrook the next year, where his two, much older, brothers from the first marriage had been schooled. Apparently everyone was 'successful' in the family, except him, so far, and his mother, who was currently in a drug rehabilitation facility.

'Jackson? Can you tell me why you think you might need writing lessons?'

'Don't.'

'Well why do you think your parents want you to have writing lessons?'

'Get me out of the house?'

The tutor took a sip of her bottled Fiji water. There were jobs

that could earn you a holiday in the tropics – aquamarine seas ... angel fish ... pineapple sunsets – but this definitely wasn't one of those jobs.

'Can you think of any reason why it might be useful for you to improve your writing skills as you get older?'

'Nuh.'

'Do you think you can get through your whole life without being able to put a proper sentence together?'

'Yep.'

'Do you have any idea what you'd like to do when, if you finish school?'

'Yep.'

'Okay, what would you like to do?'

'Ride.'

'Ride?'

'Mm.'

'Your bike?'

'Mm.'

'Right. Like ride your bike around the block for the rest of your life?'

He turned and gave the tutor a look like she was the most stupid person to have ever landed on this planet. Then he resumed his sketching.

'Where do you want to ride your bike?'

'Anywhere.'

The family had money. They lived in Vaucluse and the brothers had been to an expensive school. The eldest one had dropped him off for private tutorial lessons in a relatively new BMW.

'Jackson, can you think of any situations where your parents need to write things down?'

'Nup.'

'I find that very hard to believe. What does your dad do? Can I ask you that? What does he do for business?'

'Ride.'

'Come on Jackson, I need you to come to the party here. I don't want to waste my time. I'm trying to help you. I'm working

really hard here to try and help you with something that your parents, and I, think you need. I'm trying to help you understand why you need it. I'm not doing this for me.'

'Yes you are,' he said, his pencil poised in the air, his green eyes shooting a laser of unexpected venom through her. 'You're just doing it for the money.'

It was a shock and it hurt a little, partly because it was true and also because of something sad in his early cynicism.

'That's not true,' she said. 'I don't have to be doing this. I do it because I choose to.'

She took a sip from her water bottle ... coconut palms ... suntan oil ... a good novel.

'I certainly don't have to teach someone who doesn't want to be taught.'

He began drawing something different now. Another tutor had started up the kettle in the tea-room next door. You could hear it revving itself into a boil like a tired old engine.

'How does your dad pay all his bills? How is he making his money? From riding his bike?'

'Yep.'

'C'mon Jackson. I'm almost giving up with you. I really haven't got the energy.'

'He does, he rides his bike. He's a racer.'

'What do you mean a racer?'

'He goes in all the races.'

'What do you mean, like the Tour de France?'

'No,' he said screwing up his face like the tutor was a total retard.

'Motorbike racer. He wins most of his races and that's what I'm gonna do.'

The tutor pushed her bottle to the side and laughed.

'Oh sorry! I didn't realise. He's a professional racer?'

'Yep.'

'Right. Well I guess that doesn't involve a whole lot of writing?'

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. He was smiling now. Pleased with how he'd played with his teacher.

'And that's what you want to do?'

'Uha,' he said, no longer drawing, chewing the pencil, checking for her response.

'A high speed racer – like the ones who lean over and almost touch the ground around the corners?'

'Uh-huh.'

'As in terrifyingly fast?'

'Well you're not gonna win if you're going around slowly.'

She laughed again.

'Wow. Isn't that a bit scary?'

'Nuh.'

'Do you worry about your dad?'

'Nuh.' He shrugged. 'He's doing what he loves.'

'Does your mum worry about what he does for a living? Does he really do it for a living?'

'Yep. He's made *heaps* of money from racing.'

'Does your mum wish he did something a little less dangerous?'

'Dunno. He was already racing when they met.'

The kettle next-door began its sixty second workout. The ghost gum leant over a little towards its ghostly friend.

'So that's what you want to do with your life.'

'Yep,' he said, staring at her. 'What do you want to do with your life?'

'What?'

'What do you want to do with your life?'

She smiled at him and reached for her bottle. The kettle finished its climax.

'I think I want to live on a tropical island with luminous vines and angel fish and falling stars.'

'Uh-huh,' he said.

'I guess you don't want to write a story about a bike race?'

'Nup. Do you want to write a story about your island?'