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“The Gathering Storm”

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ATTACH THIS CARD SECURELY TO EACH PART OF THE PROJECT. DO NOT PIN.	

I turned and looked at Rachel. What on earth had we got ourselves into? What we'd planned to be a nice outing to visit Lisa in Bundeena had turned into the baby-sitting task from hell!

I was never going to be able to explain this one to my family, or anyone. The events just weren't believable - *I* could barely believe them! What were the odds that the Gin bottle in the fridge actually contained Gin? Okay, when put that way, it sounds bad. Lisa's family were known for putting anything in bottles. We naturally assumed that the clear liquid in the bottle clearly marked 'Gin', was water, iced water - just what we craved. In fact, I don't think any of us even noticed the Gin label, it was just a clear bottle with clear liquid and we were in desperate need of iced water on such a hot day; so Frances took a sip. Then we noticed the label.

She said that it was definitely not water but most likely what the label indicated, I didn't believe her. She had taken a full mouthful and hadn't gagged, and Frances had barely ever touched alcohol. So she took another sip to prove it, and another big gulp, to further her case. How that proved it was Gin was beyond me, so I took a sip.

My stomach somersaulted, my chest burned and my throat felt like a sauna. It was Gin.

None of us had any idea that Frances had such a low alcohol tolerance, or that three gulps would send her over the edge; and we certainly didn't think a combined effort from six of us to look after her would still be a little inadequate. Frances, for someone who barely got off her arse when sober, was the most surprisingly energetic drunk.

She was a tornado, whirling in a fury, wreaking havoc. We had to stop her from jumping off the balcony; from giving us a strip tease and keep her occupied so she didn't destroy the house.

So, I found myself hiding with Rachel behind an Otto bin, under the house, amusing Frances as we played Hide and Seek. She'd found everyone except us and every time she wandered past we broke into coughing fits and made as much noise as possible - but she was too busy running around like a child on Halloween to notice.

We'd had plenty of time to sit and chat about the absurdity of the day's events, but we'd opted not to. We gazed blankly at the shabby picket fence that stood before us, waiting for Frances to find us. And she did. Eventually. She chuckled, greatly amused to find us under the house. She'd forgotten we were playing hide and seek.

Relieved that we no longer had to sit in such close proximity to the creepy crawlies that were a little too friendly for comfort, we made our way to where the rest of the troops were. One look at their faces told us exactly what we'd missed and then those creepy crawlies didn't seem too bad. Lisa explained. Apparently, Frances had abused Micky (I found that part quite amusing. He was in a rotten mood and ignoring Frances, which wasn't achieving anything, because she wasn't in a state to notice). She'd also attempted a strip tease that had mortified Lisa and embarrassed Lewis. It seemed that only Rachel and I were prepared to look after her now; the rest had had enough.

I toddled out onto the back balcony carrying a bowl of chips to keep me company whilst keeping sentry duty over the drunk. She came zigzagging towards me

indicating her desire for some of my food. They were just what I'd been hankering for, but I figured they'd probably do her some good. Didn't food absorb alcohol? Grabbing them from me hungrily she staggered over to her glass of water. She eagerly reeled back to show me her 'magic trick'. After counting to three and reciting the 'magic word', she threw both chips and water in opposite directions. My heart sank, and miserably, I watched the chips tumble to their peril.

Noticing my preoccupation with the chips, Frances made a break for the door (we'd made a unanimous decision to keep her outside; there was less to break). Fortunately she wasn't quite co-ordinated enough to make it a successful break, she tripped on the stairs and fell, her head dangling over the edge. Within seconds, she began throwing up her breakfast and lunch... shit, I would be on sentry at a time like this.

I made an educated assessment of the situation at hand and dragged her inside. She liked that idea and it was easier to clean her up in there. I called out to Lisa and after much restraint on Lisa's behalf, we came to a compromise. Frances could stay in the sunroom.

The whole crew gradually gravitated towards the sunroom. I didn't know what it was that enticed them; maybe it was their curiosity or dwindling anger, but something encouraged them to keep Frances company. It was probably her charisma, she had a lot of that, you couldn't help but like her.

Frances suddenly became aware of the lack of attention directed at her; Micky was the only one even thinking of her, despite her very distracting dance movements, and he was only sulking. In an attempt to be noticed, she lay in the middle of the group and wailed. It worked. Whoever was talking stopped mid sentence, they may have even finished their sentence, but I stopped listening as soon as Frances started screaming. Once we were all attentive, she rolled over and curled into a ball, rejecting us. My ears began to detect a tiny whimper and Lisa's must have as well because we simultaneously crawled around to examine Frances' face. Sure enough she was crying. In the back of my mind I knew she was putting it on and I shouldn't fall into the trap she was setting but I couldn't stop myself. We launched into an interrogation to find the source of her sadness;

“What’s wrong Francey? What’s made you so upset?”

“France! Why are you crying?”

Cautiously yet eagerly she unravelled the source of her sorrow. She claimed her parents didn’t care about her, they favoured her siblings and tried to buy her love with gifts. They were never intimate or cuddled her and were constantly leaving her and going overseas. She was being preposterous! Sure, her parents went away on business a fair bit and bought her lots of gifts, but they were the most loving parents I’d ever met. I’d never encountered a happier, more affectionate family. They all got along and had so much support from each other. Admittedly, they had their disputes and weren’t so happy and loving it made you sick, but they were by no means unloving or uncaring. I couldn’t help but think how tormented her parents would feel if they heard this. There was an instinct in me to tape her mouth up to avoid hearing any more absurd slander. She didn’t even know what hardship was in terms of a family: her parents spoke, not only civilly to one another, but also affectionately. Hell! They were still married, and happily!

Frances continued, about how she threw up all the time. I knew this was the time to get over my anger and talk to her, but I couldn't help thinking she was just making this all up, for attention. She'd told us a few times recently that she was depressed and not feeling too well, and we had noticed some slight changes in her. She wasn't as bubbly and energetic as she used to be. She wasn't as enthusiastic to entertain us with her slap stick humour; but I assumed this was all put on, that she had wanted more attention than she was receiving - it wasn't that much of a ridiculous theory, was it? Lisa was obviously buying her story because when I looked at her, she had tears streaming down her face, and I realised my face was damp too. Somewhere in amongst my immense feeling of disbelief, I knew she was telling the truth and I knew it would just be easier to forget about this, pretend it never happened. She wasn't that bad was she? She was just a little down...?

I glanced around the room. Micky and Lewis were staring awkwardly at the walls opposite them. Lewis was the first to realise that he should leave. Rachel squatted beside me and squeezed my hand and for the first time since Frances had begun her outburst, Lisa and I looked each other in the eye. The three of us knew something had

to be done, but what? We'd sworn to Frances not to tell her parents, and if we went against her will, which was probably the most intelligent thing to do, she would never trust us again. She might tell no one, and become worse, then maybe do dangerous things to herself... no, she wouldn't. I had to stop thinking like that.

The only thing we could agree upon was that we had to hand the problem over to someone better equipped to deal with such issues, but we couldn't think of anyone except The Kids' Help Line. The plan of action involved Lisa and the boys keeping Frances entertained down the other end of the house while Rachel and I would make the call from Lisa's bedroom; one of us keeping watch, the other on the phone. We couldn't let Frances know what was happening.

By the time the first available counsellor announced unenthusiastically that his name was Robin and asked how he could help me, I had just about had enough of their hold music, so much so that I had almost forgotten the entire reason I had made the call.

Hold music does that to you. I had a theory that they carefully selected their music to decrease the influx of calls. The music deterred the caller's thoughts from the matter at hand so they forgot what it was they called for in the first place, and hung up. And

it almost worked on me this time but the chilling echo of vomiting that came from the bathroom quickly reminded me.

I commenced a detailed account of our problem to the very disinterested counsellor who, at the end of my tale, told me that:

“...To be bulimic you have to vomit at least once a day...,” so we didn’t have anything “...really serious to worry about...” and if we were still concerned we should “...tell her parents...”.

Robin then wished me a good day and the best of luck with my problem, (for some reason I didn’t think he really meant that) and hung up on me. A lot of help he’d been. Fortunately I’d had luck with The Kid’s Help Line previously and knew they weren’t all that rude. I just hoped he’d remove the carrot that was firmly wedged up his bottom before he had to talk to a kid whom was in dire straits.

Rachel and I wandered out to the living room where everyone was sitting around. I half expected to find Frances swinging from the curtain rod or jumping over the lounges like army personnel, but I was informed that she was “resting” in the

sunroom. She'd passed out about three minutes earlier. The rest of us engaged in hollow, meaningless chatter to disguise the discomfort that flooded the room until a weary and embarrassed figure shrugged up to the entrance of the sun room. Lisa ran over to Frances and guided her back into the sun room, conversing with her for a while, too quietly for the rest of us to hear. Eventually, they rejoined us. Frances seemed quite relieved to see me and nervously bounced over. Grabbing my wrist she dragged me to the front of the house.

“Charlie, what did I do? Lisa told me I've been drunk but I seriously can't remember a thing. Don't lie to me or make anything up, just tell me because it's really scary not knowing!”

Great, she didn't even know she'd told us. We were in a real predicament here.

I recounted everything that had happened... almost everything. It killed me that she didn't know what she'd told us. I had to say something...

“Aaaahh... you also told us some pretty personal stuff. About you not being happy. And throwing up.”

She sheepishly looked me in the eye and then her gaze darted away. I could tell there was a sense of relief in there too. She'd been wanting to tell us for ages. But what could we do?

* * *

What was wrong with Frances? She used to be the most patient, placid person I knew. She used to be my messy pal. She never had one tidy, unstained uniform; everyone of her school books became detached from their covers within the first week of school and her bedroom was a replica of the aftermath of cyclone Tracy. Now her life was so orderly, everything in her room had its place and if it didn't, she hid it so it didn't bother her. At least she still ate like a deprived orphan. And she still had to carry a change of clothes everywhere, to replace the ones she'd spill food on, I guess she hadn't changed that much.

"See that?" She hissed, her vicious glare directed my gaze to a dirty pink pair of terry towelling slippers, which sat smugly in the centre of the hallway.

“They’re just sitting there... I can’t explain it, they’re just *really annoying* me. I think it’s because they’re that annoying girl’s in the bed next to me.”

Yeah, I could understand that sentiment. I silently cursed the slippers for belonging to such a strange girl.

I told her not to let it get to her, she was just very weird. I felt really uncomfortable. I didn’t know how to behave, I didn’t want to touch anything. Frances’ sector of the hospital ward was *tidy*! No, that’s an understatement. It was *pristine*!

Carefully, I trod across the lino to where my glass of water was waiting for me, checking behind me after each step to make sure I hadn’t left foot prints. When I eventually grasped the glass, I turned around, ever so cautiously, to face Frances. She was fidgeting and her muscles were tense. I sensed she was trying to hold back from doing something, but I wasn’t quite sure what. I caught the direction of her gaze and followed it. That didn’t help much, it just confused me more. She was staring at the neat interior of her personal cupboard. What was aggravating her?

Before I got a chance to ponder the source of her frustration, she unexpectedly sprang across the bed to where the cupboard rested, shoved a bag that was slightly hanging

over the edge of a shelf, as far back as possible and hastily closed the door. She leaned her back against the door and panted, like a victim in a horror movie.

Frances stared at a picture on the wall opposite her, with her back against the screen and her fists clenched so tight her knuckles were white. Her bottom lip trembled as she tried to gather her wits. I awkwardly analysed the arrangement of mould creeping from the corner of the ceiling, searching for nothing in particular. It was an habitual rule of mine; ‘when uncomfortable, look preoccupied’.

* * *

I’d often wondered what people would do if someone just started tap dancing in the middle of the city. Not buskers, just an ordinary person, or maybe even a schoolgirl in her uniform. I thought that today would be the perfect day to test out the hypothesis. I was in the best mood ever and I felt like spontaneously breaking into a rhythmic routine to *My Way*.

about what we were going to wear and predicted with whom each was going to hook up. Lisa's forecast was Lewis; Rachel was allocated Rob William (the most beautiful guy to have ever graced the planet). I was told I could have Steve (the most annoying guy to have ever graced the planet).

"Aaaahhh I don't think so..."

"Oh, come on Charlie! Don't be such a prude! He really likes you. Come on, make the boy happy..."

"Excuse me! Whose birthday is it? Who should be made happy? He wasn't invited for a reason, you know!"

Rachel and Lisa turned away, disgruntled. Their 67th attempt to convince me to go out with Steve had failed. At least as soon as we got to the hospital, I'd have Frances on my side. She understood where I came from. We understood each other. Two of a kind.

Before we entered Frances' ward, the three of us choreographed our grand entrance.

This hospital was fantastic. We could do anything zany, yet we still looked normal next to the people inside; except Frances, she was different to the rest of the patients.

She was only in *there* because it was closer to her home and family. She wasn't crazy.

She was one of us.

Like Bond girls, the three of us cautiously crept up to Frances' bed and then closed the curtains, spy-like. It suitably entertained Frances. She cackled for a bit and then we all started chatting. The level of excitement increased dramatically now that she was in our company. I could tell she was really looking forward to my party... well, she said she was. It was going to be her first night out since being admitted to the hospital. I felt so honoured that it was also going to be my party. It wasn't only my party, but an honest indication that she was getting better, and quickly. They wouldn't letting her out if she wasn't. Would they?

“Francey! Before I forget, we've got something for you!” Squealed Rachel as she rummaged around in her bag. Eventually she pulled out a rolled up piece of card. Lisa and I were on the edge of our seats in anticipation. We'd put a lot of work into this present and we knew she was going to love it.

I watched Frances intently as she unravelled our masterpiece. The three of us were quite good at art, so we had each taken the piece of card for a week to create our masterpiece. It was supposed to represent the feelings and emotions we had for Frances. Rachel started it off with this fantastic centrepiece; a pencil sketch of a huge, old Morton Bay Fig Tree. If you looked really closely, some of the leaves were actually cats up in the tree. It was quite detailed and subtle - her teacher would have drooled over it.

Lisa was really good at technical drawing, not sketches or pictures, but graphics and designs. Along the base of the piece of card, she had drawn this elaborate motif that looked like a cracked desert floor. In random places she'd added a splash of hot pink water-colour paint to her dark pencil lines and in other places, she'd written single sentence anecdotes on some of their fondest memories together - they'd been best friends since year 7. The last addition was mine.

I had a fascination with birds. I loved to watch them fly around in the sky and Frances and I had spent many afternoons after school in the local park watching the birds fly

over our heads. I loved sketching them and I loved to collect bird figurines; I had a total of 47 hanging from my ceiling. I remember Frances telling me once that in some form of tarot they represented the courage and strength to fly over a problem. Initially I had drawn the birds because I love birds, but I also hoped they'd give her strength and courage to pull out of this state, and they seemed to be working. She was getting better. I had drawn them in the left-hand corner and in the right hand corner, rain clouds. I loved winter and I loved the rain. My mother used to tell me a story just before I went to bed about an island where, during summer they'd have heaps of fun and parties, and make a mess of the island; and then when winter came, the rain would wash away all the dirt and the water would cleanse the island. That stuck with me and I've always considered water a soothing, healing, cleansing element. My rain clouds symbolised the healing and cleansing process I hoped Frances would experience soon, when all her problems would be washed away so she could fly over them like a bird.

Frances didn't react the way I expected, or rather hoped she would. She was so... indifferent, unresponsive. It was as though all our hard work had gone to waste and

she didn't really care. We hadn't helped her, we hadn't boosted her with the spirit to survive and fight for the love of life. It was just some doodle the three of us had done.

Rachel and Lisa were just as upset as I was.

"How about I stick it up here for you Frances, on the wall above your bed?"

"Yeah, and whenever you don't feel happy, you can look up at that and remember that we're here, caring for you. You can remember all the good times we've had together and dream about all the ones we're going to have," Rachel said, trying to justify our present.

For the rest of our visit, I stared blankly at the poster, trying to work out where we'd gone wrong. How we could have been so wrong about her reaction. We knew her better than we knew ourselves. What puzzled me even more was that out of the three of us, none of us had even given a thought to the possibility of her not appreciating it... goes to show you how much of someone you could really not know.

* * *

two weeks after I had last seen Frances, I gathered the courage to visit on my own again. I was sitting on the train, on my way to the hospital. I could already smell the stench of ward 34. My stomach was grinding from the sickness, the orange plasticity, the repulsive hospital food, the complimentary biscuits and the groans... the groans...

The groans really bothered me. They weren't groans of physical pain or death. They weren't groans of agony or heartache. I could handle those. The groans were worse than them; they were groans of insanity, groans of anguish, groans of disturbed minds; minds like jigsaw puzzles done wrong - all the right pieces were there, just out of order. Minds that functioned like Picasso's art works looked. They were not minds like Frances'. I knew Frances; I'd known her for the past five years of my life. I'd sat beside her in classes and I knew her mind was no more abstract than mine is.

The train pulled into the station, but it was not until the very final moment that I actually attempted to get out of my seat. I would have liked so much to be able to say, "I missed my stop. It's too late now, I'll have to see you another day." But I couldn't. I had too much of a conscience.

I shuffled to the hospital as slowly as my legs could take me, allowing every invalid and pensioner to overtake; it was about time I started being considerate of others.

Eventually I reached that dull silver doorknob that I had become so accustomed to; scratched all over, like someone or something had been clawing at it.

I couldn't look at the patients. They were no longer a novelty, they were real people and they had all these conspiracies and theories on life which didn't mesh with the 'acceptable' views in society and they got sent here. That's what they did to Frances.

Finally I passed one patient that I could look at, but not in the eye.

"Hey Charlie. Time for your visit already?"

"Hi, Frances." There was an uncomfortable pause as I sat on her bed and stared at the nurses' office. The nurses' office. I never usually stared, I glanced uneasily in their direction, but never stared. And they never usually stared back at me...

"You don't usually sleep here do you?"

"No... They ahh... moved me." She followed up with, "I'm under surveillance." Then begrudgingly, she slowly peeled back her bed sheets, revealing her legs.

They were terrifying! She had scratches all along her shins, like she'd run through a thorny bush. I finally looked her in the eye, but my vision was blurred by brimming tears.

"I did it. About an hour ago." Through a mighty force of will I held the tears back.

She didn't need to see them. I had to be brave.

"The nurse took me to the kitchen to show me the cooking classes they offered and there was a beautiful glistening knife on the bench. I really wanted to pick it up, but she wouldn't take her eye off me; finally she did. I grabbed it and hid it. It was only a split second, but it was all I needed.

"When we came back here I sulked off into the garden and tried to slit my wrists, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't dig the knife in deep enough. I had the power to end all my problems, end everyone's burden, but I was too selfish and too gutless."

She thought she was a burden to us? How could she? When had we ever suggested that?

“I was furious and slashed my shins to punish myself for not doing the right thing when I had a chance.” She looked at me, catching my expression of disbelief and pain. She stared at the floor.

“They haven’t changed the bed sheets yet. That’s what the stains are.”

Absent-mindedly I edged away from the blood spots. I didn’t want anything to do with them. I didn’t want to be contaminated by them. I hated them with all the hatred I could conjure; I looked at Frances. She was on the brink of tears. She saw me looking at the stains with disgust, she saw me flinch when I realised I was touching them and she saw me almost gag. I realised just how pathetic, cruel and unsympathetic I was being. I no longer hated those bloodstains. I loved them, they were part of Frances and I loved her with all my heart.

I leapt across the bed and clutched her in my arms. I couldn’t speak. I could say nothing without fear of echoing a character from Degrassi High. We just sat there,

hugging, until my father came to retrieve me. I didn't shed a tear the whole time. I was brave. As we were leaving, I noticed the drawing Rachel, Lisa and I had made was missing.

"Hey, what happened to our picture?" - I had to ask

"I'm not allowed sharp objects, so they had to take away the pins that were holding it up. The psychiatrist likes to see everything I have, but I've hidden that because it's private and special. It's in my secret hiding place, where I keep all my cherished belongings."

I was shaking in the car going home. I wanted to burst into tears and curl up into the foetal position, but I was too shocked. It was like I had withdrawn from the situation, like mentally in another dimension... maybe this was what parallel universes were about, one for the mind, one for the physical body and one for the soul.... Dad was rambling next to me about something; I didn't know what, politics maybe. Had I asked him a question? He might still have been answering it.... I didn't care.

I felt like throwing up, that's what I felt like doing. I wished someone would hit me over the head with a saucepan and take me out of this nightmare.

Frances was my broken glass turtledove, fragile and beautiful. Because of the breakage, the light refracted, creating stunning rainbows, of her true being.

Rainbows... they're wonderful things, in the literal sense, full of wonders. When I was a kid, I spent hours pondering the nature of a rainbow and how from certain angles you couldn't see it. I refused to pay attention in class when we were taught about them because I didn't want my dream to be broken... like Frances.

She told me that day that she didn't have the will to live. It was not so much a matter of wanting to die (most of the time), rather her not being able to see a point to life. I tried, hopelessly to point out how fantastic life was, but if I were staying in the hell hole she was in, sharing it with walking skeletons and women who believed they were giving birth to snakes, I didn't think I'd be able to see the wonders.

I was going to have to explain to mum and dad what happened, but I wasn't up to it just yet. I was definitely not going to school the next day. I couldn't wait to have a shower...

I can never explain it to people why I take so long in the shower. I just tell them I fall asleep, and they buy it. My shower time is sacred to me. It's the only time I have completely to myself. It's the only time I can cry to my heart's desire and not be afraid of someone barging in on me. I can pretend I'm not crying and the tears are just water slithering down my face. And I could wash the stench of the hospital from the crevices of my body.

* * *

Outside it was raining. I had an uncontrollable urge to run - into the rain. I wanted to be there, in amongst the cleansing....I didn't really, I just didn't want to be at the hospital again. My chair was uncomfortable: plastic and a heinous shade of orange, like aged pumpkin. It gave me the sense that some grotty toddler had dragged it

through every germ imaginable and then attempted to eat it - like toddlers do. They're so stupid, I hate them.

I didn't really hate toddlers and my chair wasn't especially uncomfortable - I was. I *really* didn't want to be there. I wanted the waiting room doors to swing open and the doctor to burst through singing, "Good news! She's *all* better!" But they wouldn't. And it'd be a very long time before they did.

I saw Frances' psychiatrist wandering around talking to some loonies. If the psychiatrist... Dr Pretentious-Turd, or whatever her name was... was finished with Frances, why couldn't I see her? Oh no, she was coming my way and she was staring at me. I didn't know why I was afraid, she wasn't going to psychoanalyse me or anything... I knew damn straight why I was afraid. She was going to tell me I could see Frances and I really didn't want to.

"Which one of you is Frances Black's visitor?"

Well, it was hardly the fossil sitting in the corner dribbling and breathing exceptionally loud. Why did she always ask that? As if she didn't remember me from the last week and the week before that and every previous week.

"I am," I responded reluctantly.

"You can go and see her now, but be gentle because she's a bit weary today." As she was every other day. What did that woman think I was? - A fool? I didn't want to know the answer to that.

As I reached Frances' bed, I waited. The curtains were drawn and I could hear voices inside. I didn't want to intrude. I didn't want to see her. What I really wanted was to pretend all this wasn't happening. Actually, that was what I generally did. That's why times like these were so unbearable.

"Can you get me a glass of water?" Oh no! They were going to open the curtains. I was going to have to see Frances and act happy and pretend like that place didn't give me the creeps. I could hide! Where? Behind the arm chair! What was I? A five year old? I'd run back to the waiting room.

Woosh! The curtains were drawn back with great gusto and I now knew what it would feel like to be a thief caught red handed, or an adolescent snared in sexual activity by a parent. I was trapped.

“Charlie! It’s good to see you! Look Frances, Charlie’s here!”

I smiled fakely at Frances and automatically felt like choking myself for being so insincere. She deserved more, but I couldn’t offer it.

“Hey Francey! How’s it going? Ooooh! You’ve painted your nails, very nice!

“Oh! Tah Dar!”

I was over come with relief, she was chirpy. Maybe the doctor would be bursting through those waiting room doors with good news for me soon.

* * *

Rachel had collapsed in the arm chair and Lewis was sprawled across the floor. I’d hogged the lounge and Lisa has slowly tottering around the kitchen preparing iced water for us. We were exhausted. The trek down to Bundeena was such an effort. I couldn’t understand how we’d been so enthusiastic about travelling here only a year before. We’d attacked the expedition full of gusto and naiveté, like the young Diggers

going over the trenches in Gallipoli, or the French civilians storming The Prison of Bastille. We'd been determined to get there, ignoring impediments; like Sir Douglas Mawson and his crew journeying into the unknown depths of Antarctica. We'd braved the blustery sea breezes of Sutherland and trudged through the tiring sand on the beach at Bundeena. We were Little Aussie Battlers. Now, we were nothing more than prisoners dawdling in a chain gang, with certain monotony ahead of us. There was no excitement, no spontaneity... Maybe it was just the heat.

The telly quietly broadcast a report about a devastating tornado in America. It flashed images of crying families, piles of bricks that had been houses, upturned cars, and scientific graphs and maps. It was quite a solemn affair that had caused most of the world to pause; but to me, it was just flickering away in the corner of my mind, as significant as a game show.

I went to help Lisa with the water, soon it would be winter and we'd need hot chocolates. I pulled the bottle of water out of the fridge and something inside warned me to check the label. I couldn't shake the feeling, so I obliged. Amazingly, it was

clearly marked 'water', in Lisa's mother's neat and precise handwriting. I didn't know what I had been expecting.

Once the waters had been distributed, it was time to relax. *Time to relax?* It wasn't like we'd been doing anything vigorous, even the conversation had been minimal. I looked around the room. Rachel was perched on the edge of her seat, her new skirt too restrictive to do anything other than stand in, anguished expression on her face. I think blood had stopped flowing to the lower half of her body. Lisa, comfortably loafed on the lounge; stretched across the whole length, on her side, one hand supporting her head, the other holding her iced water. She looked like a seductive mistress or a model posing for a portrait with her long flowing, strategically draped hem resting on the floor. I directed my attention to Lewis, crouched on the foot rest, his knees up to his chest, right arm resting on them, his glass of water held high and close to his mouth, the straw resting on his lips, so when he wants a sip he wouldn't even have to move. Then there was me, comfortably seated in the large arm chair like the villains in *Inspector Gadget* We looked like a bunch of tossers drinking Gin and Tonics!

I couldn't help but laugh, and it felt so weird. Everyone's attention turned to me.

"What?" Rachel giggled

"Us, we look ridiculous!" As they looked around at each other, they saw it too and began to laugh, at first hesitantly. It was so foreign to us. I seriously didn't think I'd laughed since last year. What on earth had happened to us? We had been so bubbly and excitable. We'd become like those crabby teachers at school. I'd always thought ageing was just the process of a decreasing sense of humour! When we were teeny tiny, everything was funny. Someone mentioned the word 'bottom' and we were rolling around in hysterics, now to laugh at words like that was "lame" and "immature". Maybe lame and immature was the best way to be, when everyone could be oblivious to the evils of life. When bad things that happened to people didn't alter someone so much that they forgot how to laugh...

Someone put the telly on mute and turned the radio on, Rachel and Lisa were dancing to Ricky Martin. There was something about that man that made dancing irresistible.

I bounced out of my chair and took Lewis' hand. In a moment we were all twirling

and jiving around the room. Rachel and I dragged the foot rest to the centre of the room and danced on top of it, just like at our year 10 formal when we were centre stage all night, dancing on the tables to Ricky.

The next song came on. It was Josh Abrahams, 'Head Room'. I hadn't heard this one since last summer, when we were once again, in Bundeena and Frances was doing her strip tease to this very song. I think we all remembered that incident at the same time; because simultaneously we coughed or swallowed and sat down again. Lewis went to turn the radio off.

"No! Leave it..." Lisa blurted "I like this song," she continued sheepishly, as though she had betrayed us.

"Remember when Frances stripped to this song last summer?" Lewis piped, in a half hearted attempt at being cheerful. We all glared; the taboo subject.

It wasn't so much a written law that we couldn't talk about Frances, we just didn't.

Well, we did, but only occasionally, at appropriate times. We didn't like to bring the pain and trouble we connected with her into the rest of our lives, it was just a secret

closet in ourselves. I would unlock it when I was in the shower, Lisa visited hers just before she slept. We all had our little moments. When I thought about it, whenever we discussed the situation, it had always been in written form. We had never *talked* about how we felt and what we thought. Lewis had changed this.

“Come on guys, why so glum? It was funny, remember?” He shimmied over to Lisa and suggestively undid the top button on his shirt.

“Oh, put it away Lewy! My eyes!”

Lisa pushed him away and ran into the corner, sheltering her eyes. Rachel laughed so hard she had to stand up, to relieve the pressure of her skirt.

“Leesé, you’re just like Micky! Remember, he had to walk out of the room and nearly cried because he was so mortified?”

That sparked a thunderous roar of laughter.

“That is so in Micky’s character to do something like that, when he isn’t comfortable with the situation, he’ll run away, hide and cry until it passes over like with Frances...”

I sure knew how to kill a good time.

Lewis stopped mimicking Frances and fastened his buttons. Lisa crept into the nearest seat and Rachel took another sip of water. The radio was turned off and the volume raised on the TV...

“The last news from the States shows victims in the midst of the storm. Those that were able to run and hide in the initial stages of the storm have found refuge in underground shelters...”

The news reporter’s voice matched footage of a little girl hugging her teddy bear and crying. We could all relate to her.

Rachel couldn’t bear it any longer, she darted into the sun room. I followed her in to find her sitting cross-legged on the ground, shuffling a set of cards. She didn’t say anything, so I sat opposite her. A Connect Four game waited next to me, so I challenged myself; my left hand was red, my right, yellow. Rachel and I sat there for about five minutes, she played patience, I played the single’s version of Connect Four. Call me stupid, but I decided my left hand was smarter than my right, it won three out of the four games I had played before Rachel spoke.

“Why is it so hard for us to talk about it?”

“About what?” I responded like I had *no idea* what ‘it’ meant. Rachel didn’t bother explaining, she just continued.

“You’d think it’d be more beneficial for us if we’d talk about it. Maybe then we’d be more supportive of Frances and this would have all passed over by now.”

“Rach, you *know* we have no control over how long this thing goes on. Sure, it’d be more beneficial for us and probably Frances too if we talked about how we felt and were open, but it’s not that easy. If that was the solution, don’t you think some genius would’ve worked it out by now and having depression would be like having a cold?

Once you’re diagnosed with it, you’re directed to talk it out of your system?”

She gave me one look that said everything. “What do you think psychiatrists do?”

She’d got ~~me~~. “But what about all the medicine she takes? It’s not just about *talking?*”

I had hit a chord, ~~she~~ rolled her eyes and hissed,

“Yeah and we all know how fucking fantastic those pills are. For every one that she takes she needs about five more to combat the side effects of it, until she’s like a fucking pill popper at a rave.”

I understood entirely, we all did. Memories of chatting to Frances on the phone when she’d defied the psychiatrists and not taken her pills circled in my head, like a tension headache.

I remembered them clearly. I even felt the exact same emotions I felt each time it happened. There was a part of me that was overwhelmed with worry that this was wrong and that she shouldn’t be doing this; then there was the other part of me, so close to crying tears of joy for the first time in ages. When she didn’t take her medicine, she was so happy, so lively... so normal. It was like the Frances I knew was back and she was defeating that monster that consumed her, and then she went back in to wrestle it again and became consumed by the drugs.

As Rachel and I stared intently at the depths of the walls that lay in front of us, shrills from Lisa travelled through the house.

“Hey! How are you? Omigod! Like everyone’s over, you can speak to everyone!”

Like rats entranced by the Pied Piper’s tune, we drifted towards the phone, with naive hopes that what was on the phone was what we’d been wanting to hear for the last 12 months...

We knew it was Frances. It was probably the familiar tone in Lisa’s voice that we all had whenever we talked to her. What we didn’t know was whether Frances was telling Lisa what we wanted to hear or not. Was everything going to be all better? We should have been able to tell the difference between sincerity and phoney happiness, but we honestly couldn’t. It had been so long since any of us had spoken to Frances sincerely, we no longer knew what it felt like.

“Yes, Yes, Charlie’s here. You wanna speak to her? Well, I’ll have to check and make sure she wants to speak to you...”

“Give me the phone you goose and stop taunting her! You there France? Don’t worry about her, she’s just sore because you favour me. It’s understandable though, I *am* so desirable.”

She was happy! At least I thought so, in the excitement of the moment. I was shocked, I didn't know how to respond. She told me how they'd be moving her out of hospital in a few weeks and into a special kind of school for troubled teens. It didn't sound great, but at least there'd be no one above twenty in there and I could complain about school to her without her trying to hold back tears of envy.

"You have to come and drag me out into the rest of the world, because you know how unmotivated I am. I just lock myself in my hole like a hermit and I hate it."

"I'll do my best sergeant."

"You'd better, because only the best will do for me."

"Because you're *simply* the best?"

"Christ Charlie, cut the lame jokes, leave them to Lewis! Speaking of him, is he there?"

The phone was passed around to everyone, like a pass-the-parcel, everyone hesitant to hand it over, just in case the music stopped. Lisa got in once more so she could comment on what everyone else said, she always had to have the last word.

As Lisa hung up the phone, I was overcome by the urge to do something, but I didn't know what. I felt like attacking the blizzards in Antarctica, crossing the Sahara Desert on foot or even attempting that English Project that festered at home. And then something struck me, like a sharp piece of glass wedged in your foot. Frances was one of the best actors I knew and she'd fooled us many times. What made this incident different to all the others? Just like nature, Humans are always deceptive. There are so many possible reactions to every action and only a fool could be assured they've prepared for the right one.

The telly was going berserk, flashing bright notices. The solemn news reader was now ecstatic, commentating footage of anguished yet relieved people crawling out of rubble and wreckage.

“The damage is astronomical. People's lives have been destroyed, but the skies are clearing. It looks like things will be all right. The storm is abating.”

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Reflection Statement

Having chosen to write a short story that narrates the journey of self-discovery and awareness of an adolescent girl, investigation and researched has proven to be an important and vital aspect to my project. My narrator, Charlie, has a friend who is suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and my short story is a record of internal monologues over a year period, beginning when Charlie realises her friend, Frances, has a problem. It tracks Charlie's thoughts through to when she eventually accepts that she mustn't allow herself to be consumed by Frances' ordeals if she is to be a supportive friend.

Due to the fact that my project deals with issues that are topical and familiar with a contemporary audience, like personal relationships, and subjects that are extremely technical, like Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder, I embarked on a thorough research of these fields. Through personal experiences with close friends who have suffered depression, I had acquired some knowledge about depression and a lot of memories to start off with. To explore depression in the necessary depth, I wrote to the Department of Mental Health for a copy of their study into Mental Health in Australia from 1999. I also borrowed a Psychology textbook by G C Davison & J M Neale, Abnormal Psychology 3ed. In order to capture the emotions I had experienced and those that I intended my character Charlie to express, I read over personal memorabilia, like diary entries, letters and poems. In addition, I consulted friends and acquaintances who had had similar experiences in order to get a variety of possible reactions and view points.

Once I'd formed a strong factual basis for my story, I began to commence investigation into the short story and my chosen genre - internal monologue and stream of consciousness. I'd read a few short story books prior to this, for example Brian Caswell's A Dream Of Stars and Roald Dahl's Kiss Kiss. I visited the State Library and Fisher Library for books on writing style and the technical aspects of short story writing. The two most useful books I found were P Reckentin's The Shortz Short Story Book and K Friedon's Genius and Monologue. The Shortz Short Story book was helpful on a basic level as it defined the core of a short story, enforcing the trademark features of a short story, such as; its fast pace, limited characters and snappy transitions. It also provided me with a very useful list of grammatical rules that I could resort to. Genius and the Monologue offered a substantial history and explanation of the purpose of the interior monologue writing style. This expanded my understanding of my chosen writing style which strengthened my story, disciplining my structure.

My investigative work into Depression enabled me to write my story with an understanding of the condition about which I was writing, allowing me to create with a convincing tone. I could also select a specific form of depression,

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and aptly describe the conditions which Frances experiences. When I revisited my personal relics, I remembered everything I felt, which Charlie would also feel, and found some excellent ways of expressing these emotions that were true to the heart (as they were originally written from there). These memoirs aided me in other ways, as they provided material to write about, events to base my story around and from which to build the skeleton of my project. This skeleton was strengthened after my research into the short story as a text because an understanding of the technicalities of the short story were acquired, benefiting me by providing the skills to write a successful short story. These built on my familiarity with the text type I had earned after reading various examples of short stories like the aforementioned collections. The 'icing on the cake' came from my exploration into the internal monologue and the stream of consciousness genre. This information helped me build a comprehension of the aims and purposes of the genres and how they evolved, historically. I learned what they were designed to portray and express and was able to duplicate this whilst constructing my project.

By gaining knowledge on Depression and allocating my character, Frances, a specific form of depression, I was able to write with accuracy and precision in terms of descriptions and depictions of her; where as, before I had researched O.C.D, I merely wrote portrayals of her from assumptions and vague memories. My writing was neither convincing nor realistic. As I said earlier, when I read over my personal memorabilia, I was reminded of the emotions and sentiments I felt when I experienced similar ordeals as Charlie. I was presented with honest descriptions and expressions of these feelings that I could replicate in my short story. Before I had looked over these records, my style was lacking honesty and convincing emotion. It was based on vague, distant memories. These memories were hence reinforced, improving the flow and sincerity in my writing. I wrote my introduction prior to researching the stream of consciousness or the internal monologue and the improvement of my writing after researching those genres is evident when comparing my introduction to my conclusion (written after the research). My conclusion shows an understanding and a master ship of the genre in which I am writing. It is more forceful and credible than the introduction; which, at times sounds a bit distant and insincere. My conclusion shows verification that I've acknowledged the purpose of internal monologue to be a representation of internal speech. My conclusion is also an example of how I have attempted to incorporate techniques and skills typical of short stories into my writing. It is more concise than my introduction (however, needs to be panned down further), my transitions are smoother and stronger and whilst creating it, I kept the story as a whole in my mind (so as not to create and holes or loose seams to my story) - like The Shortz Short Story Book recommended.

Over all investigation and research has improved my writing capabilities and confidence a great deal. My understanding and knowledge of my characters has been built and reinforced, my comprehension of the format and genres in which I

am writing has been defined to me, hence allowing me to dabble with them successfully, and belief and faith in my own capabilities has increased. All these improvements combined have led to stronger, credible, sincere attempts of my project.