

Jessie

There's an old lady outside vacuuming her driveway.

I've seen old ladies do many things, but I've never seen an old lady do this.

It's 3 am. She's across the road at Number 61. She drags a round vacuum cleaner on wheels, sucking up the sand in the cracks of her driveway as a fluffy white cat watches her from the veranda. It's loud, like how a plane sounds as it's taking off. I've been on six planes so I know.

I wonder why Kay hasn't woken up. Maybe she's ignoring it. Maybe the old lady does this often and the other adults on the street have decided to pretend it doesn't happen. Adults do that a lot. Maybe I'm the only one who's ever seen her.

She turns the vacuum off, takes out a pair of glasses from the pocket of her nightie, and inspects her work. She turns the vacuum on again and shuffles back and forth, going over any spots she missed. Once she reaches the front door, she turns it off and pushes it inside. The cat flicks its tail and goes inside too.

From the doorway, the old lady looks out at the street. She can't see me though. There's lace over the window so I can peek out without people seeing me. I smile at her just in case. She doesn't smile back. She just looks, as if she's waiting for someone, and then goes inside. The lights go off at Number 61. The street is quiet again.

I go back to bed. Kay will be angry tomorrow if I'm tired. She's always angry these days. She used to be silly and fun. She used to tell stories about weird old ladies like the one from Number 61. Now she just goes to work and snaps at me and won't let me eat ice-cream, except on weekends. If I'm good.

My name is Jessie and I'm nine years old. I'm good at many things. Like counting. I can count lots of things without losing where I'm up to. I counted all the names on the giant gravestone in the park. There are 298 on the stone spike in the middle: 102 on one side, 102 on another, and 94 on the third side. They are men from Guildford who died in the war. On the fourth side, there's a sign that reads 'THEIR NAME LIVETH FOR EVERMORE'.

Kay says it's a memorial not a grave, but I don't believe they buried all those men in other places and put their gravestone here. I like to guess where they are lying under my feet. I count out every one, taking a big step so they have lots of room between them. There are way too many to be buried under the gravestone itself. I have to go past the footpath and into the park to count out all of them.

Kay won't let me go to the park by myself. She says it's not safe because you need to cross two roads and train tracks. Also, there are strangers around, especially near Alfred's which is a burger place that has a fire outside and ladies who yell numbers at the customers. But I like to go to the park. When it rains, I imagine the ground being eaten away, leaving all the coffins out in the open. Everyone walks past like all those men aren't there. Sometimes I worry I'm being rude by stepping on them. I say, 'I'm sorry, Allan A.M. I'm sorry, Allan G.T. ...' I use their names so I hope they forgive me.

I wish Mum and Dad had a gravestone but Kay said they didn't want to be buried. I want a tomb for them like we saw

in Europe, where people are buried in mini temples called mausoleums. Others are in big marble coffins above the ground with angels, skeletons and Jesuses all around them. In Venice, there's a whole island graveyard. They have plastic lights on the graves that never go out and a huge stone lady in long robes. She looks down and has one hand on a coffin. I wasn't supposed to, but I took a photo of her. Mum said she looked like sorrow. I wanted to remember what sorrow looked like. I want something like that for Mum and Dad. I want everyone to feel sorrow for them too.

Jessie

‘Time to get up, Jessie.’

The first wake-up call. I pull the covers over my face. Kay leaves for five minutes, then comes back and opens the curtains.

‘Come on!’

The light can’t get through my doona but I know what’s coming next. I grip the covers.

‘Get up, Jessie!’

She yanks the doona out of my hands. Bundles it up and leaves. It’s cold and bright. I’m so *so* tired.

Kay’s at the kitchen table, sitting on my doona. I glare at her. She smiles at me, not a proper smile, a fake one. She takes her earphones out of her ears.

‘Morning,’ she says.

I sit down. She pushes a bowl of cornflakes towards me.

‘Eat.’

I nudge the cornflakes with my spoon. They bob up and down in the milk. Some sink when I poke them.

‘You need to stay at school today. I can’t keep leaving work because you decide to go home without telling anyone.’

I fill my spoon with milk and let it slowly drip back into the bowl.

‘Jessie, please,’ Kay says. She looks tired. I wonder if the old lady from Number 61 woke her up with her vacuuming.

I put the spoon in my mouth. ‘It’s soggy.’

Kay snaps. ‘Well, don’t let it sit then!’

She snatches the bowl and dumps the cornflakes in the sink. She fills it again and shoves it back in front of me. My eyes go blurry with tears. Kay sighs.

‘At least half in the next ten minutes. Please.’

I eat half a bowl. Then she walks me to the bathroom, turns the shower on, checks the water and waits until I get undressed. I don’t like her watching me but this is the rule now because yesterday I sat on the bathmat in my jammies and let the water run for ten minutes. I smile when I remember how angry she was, how she screamed and shut off the shower and said I could go to school smelling like shit. That made her even angrier because she doesn’t swear anymore now that she’s supposed to be a real adult.

So I take off my jammies and get in the shower. I know I’m being annoying but I don’t care. I hate Kay the most in the mornings, when she makes me do the things Mum used to make me do. Since the accident, Kay’s stopped putting on makeup and doing her hair. She doesn’t wear nice clothes or put on nail polish anymore. She wears button shirts she never irons and ties her hair up in a boring ponytail. She looks more like Mum now. She has Mum’s thin brown hair that flops about when she moves. She’s soft and has big cheeks that Dad called puppy fat, even though Kay is twenty now.

Me, I look like Dad. I have his nose. That’s what Grandma said at the funeral. She touched my nose and said ‘Dear Harry’ and cried a lot. I used to have his hair. Dad and I were the only ones with black hair, and we had lots of it. It was thick and a little wavy, not like Mum and Kay with their limp straight hair. Dad called theirs boring hair. Me and him: we were the funky hair gang.

But my funky hair is gone now. The doctors shaved it off.

When I woke up it was gone and everything hurt and there were staples in my head. I have a big scar there now. It runs from the top of my head to my right ear. It goes red in the shower, like it's angry. The hair is growing back a little, but it stays away from the scar. Kay bought me a wig but I lit it on fire in the backyard at our old house.

I get out and Kay helps me dry off and get dressed. My school uniform is red and blue, but Kay lets me wear a pink beanie with sparkly cat ears even though it's not really allowed. I glance in the mirror, seeing the uniform and cat ears. I start to cry again.

'I'm tired.'

'I know,' Kay says softly, and puts my backpack on my shoulders. I let it slip off. She picks it up.

'I'm hungry.'

'There's an extra banana in your bag.'

She takes my hand and leads me to the door. She gets the big umbrella 'just in case'. As we walk to school, I glance at Number 61 and imagine the old lady in there, sleeping with her fluffy cat on the bed, warm and happy and dreaming about vacuum cleaners that can suck up all the sand in the world.

Kay leaves me at school. She puts her earphones in and walks away. I know she can feel me glaring at her.

I hate Wednesdays because Wednesdays are dance days. The dance teacher, Mrs Lornazak, dresses like she stole the craziest things she could find out of the kindy costume box. Today, she's wearing chunky red glasses and a poufy pink skirt with black roses on it. Her shoes are sparkly and red, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and she has hundreds of jangly bracelets.

We go to the undercover area. She makes the boys get in one line and the girls in another. I sit on the concrete in the far corner, leaning against the wooden bench.

'Not today, Jessie?'

She says it every lesson and then touches my arm. I shake my head.

'Maybe next time.'

One of the boys asks why he can't sit out too and she snaps at him to get in line. There are whispers, getting louder as the weeks go by.

It's only cuz her parents are dead.

Miss Sparrow, our normal teacher, isn't at dance. I don't know what she does. Maybe she has lunch. There's another lady in the class who isn't a teacher, and she's always here. Her name is Mrs Armstrong and she does things for the teacher, like photocopying, reading stories, and taking the autistic kid outside when he yells. At dance, she sips her coffee and sits on the bench next to me. Sometimes she asks if I've seen a new movie and then tells me not to because it's 'garbage'. Sometimes she tells me knock-knock jokes that make fun of teachers. But most of the time, she doesn't say anything.

A boy skips over to us at the end of the first dance. I don't know his name, but he's the weirdest boy in class. He's skinny and short. He has a grin that takes up his whole face. He does strange things, singing and dancing on his own in the mornings when he's dropped off. He has a tiny square iPod like Kay's and he sings pop songs in another language. If anyone teases him about it, he asks if he can teach them the words. He doesn't notice when people are annoyed or mean or don't want him around. When I first started at the school, he yelled that my head had a cool line on it and I was bald like his dad. The whole class laughed and Miss Sparrow told him off. He didn't think he did anything wrong. At recess, he asked if we could be friends. I said no. He still bothers me. He bothers everyone.

'You should dance with us!' he says.

I ignore him.

‘Mrs Lornazak doesn’t mind if you don’t do it right.’

I ignore him.

‘Dancing is good for you because dancing is exercise. When you exercise, your brain gets full of happy chemicals called dolphins.’

‘I don’t want dolphins in my brain,’ I tell him.

‘They aren’t like normal dolphins. They’re happy dolphins. Everyone has them!’

I put my head down. All my happy dolphins are dead. Dancing can’t bring them back.

‘Get back to your cha-chas, mister,’ Mrs Armstrong says. ‘How else will you become the next Justin Bieber?’

He explodes with laughter. ‘Justin *Bieber!*’

‘I would have said Fred Astaire, but you don’t know who he is, do you?’

He laughs again and runs back to class.

‘I think he could do with a few less happy dolphins,’ Mrs Armstrong says.

I blink the tears away.

Kay’s not here. The bell went twenty-three minutes ago and she’s not here.

I stand by the gate between the school courtyard and the out-of-bounds area. The principal, Mrs Fraser, tells me to come wait in the office.

I watch the clock. 3:26. Kay’s only been late once before and that was only by three minutes. Normally she arrives before the bell goes. She stands off to the side and doesn’t talk to any of the parents. She always has her earphones in, only taking them out when I come. She asks if I have everything – ‘Is your lunchbox in there? Where’s your jumper?’ – and then we leave. She smiles at anyone who says hello but never stops. She shrugs her shoulders like she’s apologising.

But she’s not here now. The office lady tries to call her but she doesn’t answer.

I hate that Kay drives to work. We don’t need a car. We have the train near our house. It goes right to her work in the city. She doesn’t have far to walk. Too many people use cars and it’s dangerous and bad for the environment anyway.

I try not to think about cars so I look at the pictures on the wall, of all the faded faces from Guildford. I wonder if my picture will be there one day. Maybe girls one hundred years from now will wonder what I was like.

Everything is old here. Even the new things look like they came from a black-and-white movie. The school is the oldest in Western Australia. I think that’s why the heating isn’t good in the classrooms. Grandma told me that many of the houses in Guildford are from colonial times. They have fireplaces that work and little signs that say they’re ‘heritage listed’. The busy road near our house doesn’t have normal shops. There’s a place that sells rusty metal things and broken chairs, and a hotel that was burnt years ago but just got fixed. I went in there last week when I shouldn’t have. There are still burnt bits sticking out of the roof. There’s a bakery too where sometimes Kay will buy me a jam donut, but only if I hold her hand when we cross the road.

Our house is old too. It was Grandma’s place before she went to the nursing home. She went a long time ago, before I was born. We didn’t even know about the house till Kay met with the lawyers. We always just saw Grandma at the nursing home. I think Dad was supposed to sell her house but he never did. When we first arrived, it was covered in dust and the plants were dead except for the ivy, which still covers the veranda and blocks the drains. Small sculptures hide between the weeds. Some are like the statues in Europe with their blank eyes. But there are tiny dragons and jousting knights too. Some are

painted messily, like maybe a kid painted them.

I didn't want to move here but I didn't want to be at home anymore, where we all used to live. Everyone knew about the accident. At school, kids I didn't even know cried like *their* parents had died. They came to the funeral and sobbed and hugged each other. I hated them for it. For weeks, parents from school would drop by without calling and give us big pots of food. It was always the same: 'I made way too much and thought you might like some. It's my kids' favourite, you know. But how are you, Kay? We all miss Jessie at school, she's such a lovely girl. You tell me if you need anything, okay?' Kay started ignoring the doorbell. Then we moved.

The house is surrounded by a fence made of tall iron bars and a gate covered in metal roses, some in full bloom and others just little buds. You need a big key, like the ones you see in movies with castles, to open it. When we moved in, Kay gave me one of the keys. It has a small copper rose on top, its petals only half open. On the handle, there are the strangest words: *Property of A. Mischief.*

'Huh,' Kay said when I first showed her. 'I didn't notice that.'

'What's A. Mischief?'

'I dunno.'

Maybe Kay's locked out because she forgot her key. Why wouldn't she just come to school and pick me up? We could open the gate together, like we do every day. She makes me put my key in the gate and then puts her hand on mine and we turn it together. I have to do it even if I'm angry with her. I wonder if she's home yet or if she's still on the road in her stupid car.

'Jessie?'

I turn to the office lady. She's on the phone.

'Kay's at home but she's had a little problem. One of your neighbours is going to come get you.'

We don't know any of our neighbours.

'I'm not allowed to go with strangers.'

'Kay says it's okay because Mrs Moran has been helping her.'

'Why can't Kay come and get the neighbour to fix whatever it is?'

The office lady pauses. She purses her lips together like she's trying to decide whether to tell me something bad. 'Kay needs to be the one to fix it. Everything's fine, there are just people she needs to wait for.'

I glare at the office lady and her lie. The best thing to do when adults lie is to be quiet and stare as angrily as you can. She goes back to the phone.

'She's not keen to go with your neighbour.'

Kay says something LOUD because I can just hear her down the phone. The office lady nods a lot and mutters, 'Of course, don't worry, I'll talk to her, don't worry,' and then hangs up.

'Kay says it's very important. She says Mrs Moran is not a stranger, so you can go with her.'

I glare at her until she looks away. Then I look at the clock. 3:41.

At 3:46, I hear a meow. A big one. *MOWW!* The lady from Number 61 comes into the office. Her fluffy cat trots in beside her on a bright pink lead.

'You're Jessie then, are you, dear?'

I nod.

'I'm Mrs Moran,' she says. 'This is Cornelius. Be polite, Cornelius.'

The cat meows and lifts its paw.

'Be a good girl and shake Cornelius' paw.'

I shake the cat's paw. It meows at me again.

'Cornelius says it's very nice to meet you.'

This lady's weird.

'Be a good girl and say "it's nice to meet you too"'

I look at the lady from Number 61. 'It's nice to meet you too.'

‘No, to Cornelius, dear. Say “it’s nice to meet you too, Cornelius”.’

I look at the cat. ‘It’s nice to meet you too, Cornelius.’

The cat meows again.

‘Good, good. Let’s go then.’

The old lady from Number 61 leads me out of the office. We walk towards home, with Cornelius trotting in front of us on his lead. He has a pink harness too, and swishes his fluffy tail at us. It looks like a feather duster dancing.

‘Now, I bet you’ve never seen a cat on a lead before.’

I shake my head.

‘He’s a very clever puss, aren’t you, Cornelius?’

The cat meows.

I wait for a moment and then ask, ‘Is Cornelius a boy?’

‘Of course. A most fine gentleman.’

‘Why does he have a pink lead?’

‘Pink suits him, dear.’

I don’t know what to say to that.

‘Where’s Kay?’

‘Well now, dear, your house has been burgled. It looks like nothing was taken, but your sister arrived as it was happening. She scared the little bugger away but she’s a bit upset so you need to be nice to her, alright? She’s talking to the police now.’

Suddenly I feel sad and angry that we’re here in this strange old place where the locks are no good and people try to rob you.

A police car leaves just as we arrive, but there’s still a white van with blue writing that says BRIGGS AND SONS’ LOCKSMITHS – 24/7 RELIABLE SERVICE. YOUR FAMILY’S SECURITY IS OUR FAMILY’S TOP PRIORITY. Kay is talking with a man who holds a toolbox on his hip.

‘Don’t get me wrong, we can change every lock, but I don’t want to cost you a fortune for nothing. The little shit probably found it under the mat or something. We don’t even need to

change the backdoor lock; he left the key in there.’

‘I don’t care how much –’

Kay sees me and stops. She then leans in close to the locksmith. All I hear is, ‘I’ll pay after-hours, whatever’ and ‘all the windows, doors, everything’. For a while, the man just looks at her. He has that same face that people get when they find out Mum and Dad are dead. ‘It’s pity,’ Kay said to me once. ‘That look is pity.’

So the man, with his pity face, nods and says, ‘I’ll do you a quote.’

He goes inside and Kay turns to us. Her eyes are red and she hugs her elbows.

‘Thank you for bringing Jessie home, Mrs Moran,’ she says to the old lady from Number 61.

‘My pleasure, dear. We had a lovely walk, didn’t we, Cornelius?’

The cat meows.

Kay takes my backpack inside and gets me a glass of orange juice for no reason. I sit on the veranda and drink it. More men come, pudgy men who are smiley and hairy like the other locksmith, only younger. They go through the house like it’s theirs. The old lady from Number 61 tells me not to worry, that Kay is being ‘precautious and very wise’. She goes back to her house and brings us cold pasta, which she makes us eat, and puts a tub of fancy ice-cream in the freezer ‘for later’.

When the locksmiths finish, it’s very late. Except for the old gate lock, they really do change everything. Kays pays them from the credit card she’s only used once before and they leave. Then Mrs Moran and Cornelius leave. The house is quiet.

Kay goes into every room and turns all the lights on. She turns the TV on. She checks all the new locks. Then she goes into the kitchen and takes the ice-cream out of the freezer, the fancy one and our regular one.

'We'll let it soften,' she says.

'What happened?'

She won't look at me. 'Do you want Caramel Honey Macadamia or Mint Choc-Chip?'

'What happened?'

She opens the lid on the fancy ice-cream and tests it with a spoon. 'A guy broke in. I scared him away. He didn't take anything.'

'How did he have a key?'

She looks at me now. 'What? He didn't.'

'The locksmith said.'

Kay looks at me like the office lady did. 'He's wrong. I left the backdoor unlocked.'

'Why'd you change all the locks then?'

'The locks were old and needed to be replaced. Now the house is much safer and I'll never forget to lock the door again, promise. You can remind me every time we leave and you can help me check.'

I want to scream YOU'RE A LIAR LIAR LIAR but I don't. Kay looks sad and tired. Her eyes are droopy. So I ask, 'You okay?'

Kay scrunches up her forehead like she might cry. 'I'm okay. This ice-cream isn't very soft though.'

She microwaves both tubs and gives me the bowl she usually uses for soup. She squirts so much Ice Magic on top that it doesn't fully set and then gives me my favourite teaspoon (the one with the cat on it). She takes me to the TV and gives me the remote.

'I'm going to the loo,' she says. But she goes to her room and closes the door.

She's in there for ages. When I finish my ice-cream, I go to her door. She's crying inside, soft, like she's sobbing into her pillow. The last time I heard her cry like this was at the hospital, where she howled and pulled her hair and said sorry a lot. Then

Grandma came and a man in a suit came with papers, and so many people came with papers, and she was always on the phone. She went quiet then, and stayed that way.

I wonder if I should go in there and give her a hug. But I hate people touching me when I'm sad, so I go back to the TV and count how many times the lady on *Lateline* says 'Prime Minister' as she interviews a man in a grey suit (thirteen in a bossy voice like she thinks he's a liar, four in a calm voice, two with a smile).

When I wake up, the TV's still on and it's raining outside. The rain is so loud I can't hear the TV. Kay's still not here. I peek down the hallway. Her bedroom door is open.

I walk down the hall and find her in the study at the front of the house. The study has a whole wall of bookshelves, with books going from the floor to the ceiling, and a fireplace with old photographs of Grandma, Dad and other people I don't know. There's also a desk and a chair, and a pretty couch that's small enough to fit right under the window. But Kay's not sitting on the chair or couch. She's on the floor in the corner of the room. She stares into the other corner. I look too. There's nothing there. Just bookshelves.

Her eyes flutter as I come into the room.

'Hey,' she says quietly.

I sit down next to her. Thunder rumbles in the distance.

'Would you like some ice-cream?' I ask Kay.

'I'm okay.'

She still looks at the corner.

'What are you looking at?'

'The books,' she says. 'Aren't they pretty?'

The books are not pretty. They're covered in dust. The carpet is nice though, red with dark swirls. It lifts up in the corner where Kay is looking.

I point it out. 'Do we need to fix the carpet?'

Kay looks down and frowns. She scrambles over and lifts the carpet like she's peeling off a sticker. It comes away easily. It's not fraying. Part of it's been cut.

'It wasn't like that before,' I say.

Kay doesn't seem to hear. She tugs as hard as she can. I grab the corner of the carpet and help. Then I see it.

A trap door.

It's a square in the floor, no larger than two rulers across, with flat metal hinges along one side and a keyhole on the other. I look into the keyhole. Darkness.

'Open it!'

Kay sticks her pinkie in the keyhole. She feels around the trap door's edges.

The keyhole looks familiar. Large and old. Like the gate key.

I'm still wearing my school pants. I take the key out of my pocket.

'That unlocks the gate, silly,' Kay says.

'Can we try it?' I ask.

Kay smiles. 'Sure.'

I put the key into the lock – it fits! – and turn it. Something clicks and when I try to pull the key out, the door swings open.

A book.

Just a single book inside a small box in the ground. A dusty black thing without any words or pictures on the cover. I pick the book up. It's small but heavy.

I look at Kay. She smiles and says, 'Go on.'

I open the book *very carefully* but its spine creaks. I stop.

'It's alright,' Kay says, and I open the book again. The first page is blank. The paper is thick, a very dull dirty white. On the second page, written in pretty black lettering, is the book's title:

The History of Mischief.

Mischief. Like the key.

A small symbol is drawn below it: two curves, like a smile and a frown, joined by a straight line and a little circle, an odd eye, above the smile. I can't help but touch it. I'm very careful and only touch with my fingertips. Kay turns the page. Just a few words:

For Pan and The Blackwood.

'Who's that?' I ask.

'I don't know,' Kay says. 'Turn the page.'

I turn the page. It's a contents page with a long list of names and dates.

Kay points to one of the entries. '336 BC,' she mutters.

'What's BC mean?' I ask.

'Before Christ,' Kay says. 'Two thousand three hundred years ago.'

'This book is over two thousand years old!'

'No, it can't be,' she says, touching the paper.

'Look at all the cracks,' I say, pointing at the spine.

'Yes, but it's too well preserved,' Kay says. 'And look, it says "Transcription Note". It's a copy, not an original.'

'Can we read it?'

Kay turns the page and starts to read out loud.

Transcription Note

The History of Mischief is no ordinary history. It records the secret millennia-old practice of mischief and its practitioners, who, when practising their art, assume the title of A. Mischief.

The original History was a book of signatures that, upon being touched, granted the practitioner unpredictable magical abilities along with the memories of previous mischiefs. Each entry told

of their greatest acts and, as such, the dates listed mark the period of their tenure as a mischief. The History survived thousands of years, but then began to degrade in the nineteenth century. Only some of the histories remained intact. Those that survived were recorded by myself and Chloe McKenna.

The histories here take first person form, as they were observed through the memories and emotions held in the original book. More details of the transcription itself feature in my story, at the end of the History. Chloe believed the original History, with its decaying memories, would restore itself. Until that time, this record shall be its history.

Henry Byron

a.k.a. A. Mischief the Two-Hundred and First

5 August 1966

Kay says, 'That's the year Dad was born.'
And we turn the page.

A. Mischief the First

Athens, Greece 336 BC – 246 BC

Our first day in Athens was fading. The sun was dripping below the horizon, casting a pinky-orange hue across the darkening sky. The bustle of early evening on the agora: food stalls, restaurants, shops. The noise, the blending of human voices, animal cries and slave chains, was life going by. It was the end of the day and, for a moment at least, I was free.

I meandered with a weary, lazy gait towards the Eridanos River. I'd abandoned my shoes as soon as I was given the night off. It was a rare thing, a time where the only one I served was myself. I couldn't remember life outside slavery. I was born into it, or, in my fantasies, perhaps I was the son of a defeated monarch. I was the only slave I knew without a name. I was just 'the boy'. I was a man really, around eighteen or so, but the title hadn't shifted. I smiled to myself, enjoying the feeling of sand between my toes, the scratch of it, the way it stuck to my feet. I felt like the boy of my namesake.

The river came into view. It was not as busy as I expected. There were a few women filling their jugs with water, but no one else. It didn't take long to realise why. An elderly man was resting against the marble steps, completely naked and scratching himself for all the world to see. He held a cup in one hand.

The man's frame was ravaged by hunger, the joints in his