

MATTHEW ABUD

*Dive*

He sucked up his air too fast he knew, gulping it with a dry machine wheeze as the needle plunged towards red. He rolled and floundered, looking up as much as down as he tried to blow the water out of his leaky scuba face mask. He clamped his teeth down hard on the breathing regulator in case he dropped it or knocked it out of his own mouth by accident, and heard himself gurgle almost, in the struggle to get his vision sorted.

Then he blew the last of the water out and his mask was clear. He was floating on his back and looking at the sea surface from underneath, watching it wrinkle and roll with the white daylight breaking through.

Billy turned over. Underneath them was a thin promontory that stuck out from the sea floor. They floated straight over the top of it, a two-sided cliff with coral plates, bulbs, and twisty coral trees growing over either face, which dropped down to white sand twenty metres further below. He sank down to it slowly with the other divers, eddies of salt current moving about them as they went.

The scuba tank demanded he breathed, pushing the air past his tonsils; he thought of the membranes in his chest stretching tight with it. Back at the cabin he told his mum how it worked: "Look, you go down and it squeezes you, this is your lung, shrinking and shrinking because the pressure under the water makes the air get smaller." He cupped his hands in a circle and closed them in. "And you know what happens if you hold your breath, and you go up, when the pressure gets released? The air inside you expands – pop! There go your lungs. Busted like a balloon."

He watched her face as he told her. It was a habitual windup, like a reflex: now that she'd finally agreed to let him dive and couldn't change her mind he drove his advantage home, trying to get a reaction. But she didn't stop reading her magazine. "Well," she said, "you better not hold your breath then," and flicked the page like she didn't even care.

He experimented now as he went down, holding his breath for a few moments here and there, just to see if he could tell as the pressure inside his lungs changed. But he didn't notice anything.

There were about ten other divers, most of them couples with plenty of diving experience; he followed his instructor, sticking close. Colour gleamed on the shallow coral and faded with the thinning light the further they descended, and as they approached the promontory the olive sea-snakes appeared and came closer. He saw one diver tense up and try to back away; but humans were so slow, the snake came right up anyway before the diver could gather any speed. He remembered what his instructor had said: Just wait, they're blind, they only come close because they're curious. He watched as a snake approached him and made a loose circle around his arm, almost touching the

back of his hand. It stayed for a few moments and then moved off in a shiny wriggling stitch through the water.

Enamel fish flickered and seeped throughout the coral, and if he swung his arm above them they disappeared beneath his wave. He peered under ledges at crustaceans and nudged fleshy plant fronds, making them withdraw and flinch shut. He prodded at a sea cucumber, and dug up little clouds from the sediment on the bottom. He lolled and spun slowly, looking up again, and saw his first turtle swimming across the top of the promontory, silhouetted against the ocean surface. Billy gazed up through the unreality of depth, letting the turtle pass and watching his own bubbles race away from him.

He pulled his regulator out. He visualised how it would be if he kept his mouth open and swallowed and the water with all that pressure forced its way in, down his windpipe and filling him up like a hose: quiet and fast among the bubbles, everything going white inside him. Still experimenting he loosened his lips, and felt the salt water directly against his teeth and gums.

In later years he remembered every one of those first dives, the shape of the ocean floor and the pathways they swam, right down to individual sea creatures and the signed exchanges between divers. The summer I learned to dive. He didn't remember the holiday for the girl, although the thought of her barely left his brain during those weeks, including when he was under the water. He didn't remember it how Cruskit did either, as the first time they saw a dead person. For him it was just the diving.

On their return to the holiday island the dive boat slowed to navigate the inlet, skirting wide around swimmers, beginner windsurfers, and the handful of jet-skis that churned on the margins like noisy insects. They reversed up to the beach and unloaded the gear, carrying it across the sand to the dive shop and rinsing it off. Then they showered the salt out of their own hair and skin.

His legs felt skinnier and uncertain on land after diving, he couldn't say why. He went down to the beach but the girl wasn't anywhere and he didn't see his own family either. There weren't too many places they could go that were close by; there was the beach itself, with its diving, windsurfing, and jet-ski shops; the cabins behind the scrubby trees; and the snack shop-cum-restaurant. There were other beaches, resorts, or jungle walks across the island a few miles away, but few people went very far. They mostly established a holiday routine, a version of the domesticity they'd travelled to leave behind, and stuck to it.

He found both his family and the girl's at the restaurant, an open space with fridges full of drinks and ice-cream stacked along the walls, plastic garden furniture, and the oily holiday smell of potato cakes and chips and burgers. The families were at separate tables; they didn't know each other thank God, at least not yet.

The girl sat with her back to the door in low-cut shorts and a top. He leaned against the doorway to look in at her, keeping just around the edge of the frame so his own mum and dad wouldn't see him. He gazed at her back and the sunburn that showed above her shorts. Could she tell when she was being watched? If she could and she turned around he'd pretend he wasn't looking, that he didn't even notice her, and he rehearsed this action in his head. He didn't really see her parents; they were there, sitting

beside her, but he wouldn't have recognised them afterwards if he met them on their own along the path.

The dad talked and laughed at his own jokes while the girl and her mum ate their chips. He burped and called out to the shop attendant for another beer. "Thanks love, good and cold alright."

The attendant was watching TV behind the counter and raised her eyebrows. She got up, retrieved the beer from the fridge, placed it on the counter and sat down again. The TV rustled static.

Eventually the man walked over and grabbed his beer himself. Billy noticed him then, beefy with a moustache and a bit of a waddle; like some cricketer from the seventies, his own dad said later. He tossed a note down to the counter but the attendant didn't look away from her TV. "Thanks a million." Then he cracked the can open and gulped at it on the way back to his seat.

The girl's family dumped the remains of their lunch on the pile of fish-and-chips paper in the middle of the table and wrapped it up, and threw it in the bin as they left. Billy slouched back against the outside wall and looked at his toes as they passed him, but the girl didn't turn in his direction. He wanted her to make some move, although he couldn't figure out what, or why she'd make it. It left him deflated.

He went inside to his family's table. His mum was cleaning up and said they were nearly finished. "How was the dive?" His dad looked up from his book; reading, always reading. "It was cool," said Billy, and his dad smiled and looked back down again. Cruskit was whining about something. Billy asked if he could get a burger.

"Did you see that guy?" said his mum to nobody especially, leaning back in a lazy stretch. "Bit early for beers don't you think." Dad shrugged without raising his eyes. "It's a holiday isn't it." They weren't going to argue, not just yet. But it was coming. Holidays were only ever half a truce.

Billy got his burger and a milkshake. Cruskit was kicking at the table leg underneath, making the table jolt so that it spilled his drink. "Geez Cruskit. Cut it out wouldja."

"For God's sake," said his mum. "Will you stop calling him that. Your brother has a *name*, remember."

Cruskit kicked once more, harder, and then stopped. Billy kept his smile to himself.

The afternoon was the same as other days, a sleepy white-out on the beach. He lay in the sun but didn't see the girl anywhere. He recognised some of the couples from the morning dive on their patches of sand or wandering across to get a coconut juice, and they sometimes said hello if they passed. Little kids splashed about and became cranky when it got too hot. Occasionally he shifted to lie at the edge of the water, where enervated waves flicked a few inches above the surface to splash at him and withdraw.

He thought about swimming out to the deeper blue where the jet-skis bobbed and coughed, and held his hand out in front of his face to estimate the distance. But in the end he decided not to bother. He dozed, then slumbered, and only woke up when the late afternoon shade reached to where he lay.

In the evening they ate at the restaurant again.

He woke way too early the next morning, staring at the near-dark ceiling where he lay on the top bunk, hearing Cruskit snuffle and grind his teeth on the bed below. Even to himself, he couldn't pretend that he had more sleep in him, holiday or not. Eventually the nagging of his brother's noises got him up.

Tropic holidays meant never needing to change clothes, the same shorts were good for sleeping or swimming or lying on the sand – almost like being naked but not caring, he thought. He wandered to the beach again, absently scratching at himself, and when he got there and saw it empty he started on a slow run.

At home he didn't run for sport, he only ran because it meant he could leave the house and just go, clear out, and get away from the bickering and bullshit. He didn't think when he ran. If people got in his way on the footpath at first he was impatient and wanted to barge into them and force them off; but if he kept going for a while the run built up in him, a rhythm came, and he found himself leaving the arguments behind. He pushed on until he was exhausted, until he reached a tiny endorphin crescendo, a bit of perfection; after that, whatever time he made it back to the house, he didn't hear the fighting any more. He hardly heard anything at all, he put on his headphones and stayed in his room, and felt the blood pump its way through him.

The beach run was easy and he built up speed gradually. It was so quiet. No people only empty sand and soft air, he felt the sand grains under the pinpoint clench of his toes, and the strength of his legs as they sprang him forward. He ran evenly, keeping his head level, until he reached the rock pools at the end of the beach and then doubled back. When he returned to the path he stopped, walking loose steps to bring his breathing back down and feeling the pulse in his neck.

"Impressive, champ," said the girl.

She was sitting half-hidden by the tussocky grass at the top of the beach; he was breathing too heavily to answer. Her legs were curled up against her chest and she had a singlet on. The powder sand squeaked underfoot as he walked up to her.

They sat. "You're some sporty type then," she said.

He shook his head, nah. "I just like to run. No-one's out here. It's empty." He squinted to look at her.

"Not surprised it's empty this early. You can leave me sleeping past lunchtime any day, no problem." She leaned back on her elbows. "Dad snores big-time when he's hungover but."

"Yeah? My brother snores too, heaps."

She was irritated. But he felt comfortable, his body was loose from exercise and that made his anxiety dissolve.

"I saw you at the restaurant. I mean with your dad too."

"Yeah. Who're you here with?"

"Just us. Mum and dad and Cruskit. We come every year."

"Cruskit? What's that, your dog?"

"My little brother. I just call him that. He doesn't care."

“Poor kid,” she said. “Funny name though.”

Maybe it was a mistake to talk family. It felt wrong to make his brother the conversation piece; but he didn’t know what else to say. The anxiety started to return.

“He’s alright.” He stood up and brushed himself off. “I gotta get back,” he said. “I got diving later,” although that was hours away.

“Ok.” He stood there a second. “I’m Julie,” she said.

“Ok,” he said. “Billy.”

“See you Billy.”

“Ok.”

He turned and had to force himself not to run again along the path.

He was squeezing the wetsuit over himself at the scuba school when her dad arrived at the last minute to join the dive. Bleary but jovial, he assured the instructor he was good to go; Yep heaps of experience, been diving all over the place. The girl wasn’t coming on the dive but she’d tagged along to the shop. He waved to her and she avoided looking at him; but then she waved back later, while her dad was filling in the forms.

Billy had already taken his place at the back of the boat when her dad clambered on board and sat next to him. He squirmed and had an urge to say something, but he had no idea about what, and looked sideways at the man’s thick legs and heavy tanned belly. Finally he decided to stay quiet and keep a wry smile on his face, and stare at the horizon to make sure he wasn’t asked any questions.

But the man paid him no mind, and instead leaned back and called out anecdotes to the instructor and the others, about wreck dives he’d been on, a giant hidden octopus, or the size of the sharks he’d seen. “We had one guy kill himself on a dive up in Bali,” said the dad. “Just got stuck under there, lost his regulator somehow and panicked, didn’t know which way was up. Easy to knock yourself off if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Nobody responded and he chuckled. Billy got an involuntary image of a figure with his foot caught in the coral, waving at an out-of-reach undersea sky.

“We’ll be right,” said the instructor in a grim tone. “Never had anything go wrong on my dives.”

It was a relief to put on the tank and mask and crash through the surface foam. He sucked up air and dropped down quickly, and nearly hit the shallow bottom before kicking his fins and getting his buoyancy worked out. The instructor pointed the direction they were going and set off, his hands folded across his midriff like small closed wings, moving forward with no apparent effort.

This dive site was more like a rock garden, a collection of stone and coral clusters with patches of sand in between them. After a while Billy relaxed, meandered, sinking down to the sea bottom to peer into hidden chambers, or gliding over tiny valleys with his arms outstretched, like flying. His mind ran through the things to look out for. Sharks didn’t worry him, not until he saw them at least. Stonefish were the worst, if you stood on them the spikes went straight through your fins and into your feet, and the protein

poison munched you up one cell at a time – just the idea of that kind of pain was enough to make him wince. He never put his foot down on anything underwater.

His instructor was prodding at something under a ledge, and a few other divers were scattered about, moving from patch to patch like a small herd grazing. Floating in perfect suspension Billy felt a sudden elation, and pushing off he found himself travelling faster than anticipated, gloriously easy. He was getting the hang of it.

The rumpled coral had plenty of crannies and areas to sneak into, miniature secret gardens in abundance. He drifted down to a small patch of sand. There was an odd growth coming from one side of it, like a bit of broken tree trunk. He came closer: it was easily longer than his arm, maybe longer than a leg, with an odd leather-and-splintery look; he got right up to it and could make out tiny notches and spikes on its surface.

As he inspected it he sank slowly, barely perceptibly, and he put his hand out towards the ground to stabilise. He glanced down to make sure he didn't place his fingers on top of anything unwanted and saw an outline in the sand, running from where the growth started and then circling back. It showed perfectly the shape of the stingray buried underneath, and framed the leather-splinter tail with its sting that was stuck up right in front of him.

He moved away unhurriedly. When he was a decent distance off, and could see the margins of the whole creature from above and the size of the sting that he'd been inches away from; only then did a small dose of fear make the warm water prickle on him. He tried to get a sense of its scale, to keep it in his mind for later; big as a boat, no, like a double bed. That's how wide it was.

I could have died, he thought. I nearly did. He felt a sense of satisfaction.

He couldn't see any of the other divers. He turned to go back and found himself pushing against current which shoved like a glove in his face, squashing his breath. He realised like a dumb kid why swimming out before had been so easy; now trying to return he struggled, heaved, sucking down air, and once again his gauge quickly dropped. He tried to ration his breaths, keeping them shallow, but after a few inhalations he gasped it in even deeper than before. He pushed harder but went nowhere.

It's ok, he thought. I can just get to the top and wait. He looked up at the surface again, opaque with his bubbles disappearing into it, and at the weight of the metres and metres of water upon him. He started to make his way up, but even just a kick or two higher above the coral put him in the middle of the current's strength. He imagined himself getting to the surface and floating there, able to breathe, but then being carried out, away from the boat and into open ocean where no-one would find him. Panic got into his throat.

The instructor found him, appearing at his side and pointing the way to go with an emphatic gesture, almost a stabbing movement; he was angry. Billy saw he'd been off-course and heading further into the current when he should have been swimming across it; the force of the water dropped now as they progressed. But his air was nearly out, he stopped and made the sign by tapping his fist above his heart, and pointed to go up. He wanted to see the sun, and breathe without that rasping sound in his ears telling him how much air he was using up each time. The instructor shook his head and passed Billy a

spare regulator instead, and Billy held on to the man's tank and shared his air as they travelled the last few minutes, too relieved to feel embarrassment.

They rose and surfaced next to the boat. Billy struggled up onto the deck, using his knees to gracelessly heave himself over the side. He didn't look at the others who were already there, their tanks off and wetsuits half unzipped, sun on their faces and chests. His mind was wrapped up with the stingray and suffocating against the current, and he'd already taken off his own tank and mask and weight-belt, and had sat there waiting for several minutes before he realised that everyone else was waiting too. None of them were talking, they were all watching the water and looking out for the diver who still hadn't come back.

"He just took off," said one of them, and Billy realised it was the girl's dad who was missing. "I didn't have enough air to follow. I came up and tried to spot him, but it was no good."

The instructor watched intently for any bubbles to indicate the missing man's location but none showed. People were quiet, adjusting themselves to the fact that something was happening, silent and out of sight but momentous. It was hot, hotter than Billy remembered from other days on the boat, and after a short while the wetsuit sticking to his skin became unbearable so that he pulled urgently at the rubber to get free of it. He peeled it off and kicked it away, and then at once felt exposed in just his board shorts, with everyone else still geared up and looking serious.

He hugged at his knees. He wondered what he'd say to the girl.

The instructor had grabbed a spare tank and was putting it on to go down and search when the man broke up through the water on the other side of the boat. "Mate," he called out. "I just saw the biggest groper. Huge! Imagine eating that. Bloody great dive. Give us a hand would ya?"

Some of the others, relieved, reached out to help him up; his air was almost through the red to zero. The instructor watched as he hauled himself on board and then told him, "Another stunt like that and you won't be back on this boat."

The dad snorted, caught off-guard more than offended. "Settle down. I know what I'm doing fellas."

It was a silent boat ride going back, with only one or two of the couples talking quietly to each other.

The nervousness from the dive stayed with Billy like something coated on his skin; the images stuck to his vision, of the stingray barb, the strangling current, and searching for the bubbles of a disappeared man. The residual thrill of it made him talk, like he was trying to flush the nervousness out with a stream of words. He told his family about it even though he knew it wasn't smart; he couldn't slow himself down.

He told Julie too, laughing a bit too much. He found her along the beach and they swam together in the shallows. In between telling the story he took puppy-dives and came up shaking himself off, and she swam slow breast-strokes or tipped on her back looking up at the sky. Her midriff had a fresh sunburn streak across it and the parting along her scalp was a thin red too, and when she smiled he saw one of her front teeth

was crooked. He horsed around and splashed a bit, and pushed her sideways in his anxiety to touch her.

After he told her about the coral, the stingray, and the swim back without air against the current, he forgot to stop and told her about her dad's disappearance. He stumbled. "He was alright though. Like, the instructor got a bit mad, but your dad said he knew what he was doing. I mean ... it was funny, the guy getting angry and everything." Finally he managed to make himself stop talking.

The girl turned over again and kicked with a splash. "He's an idiot," she said.

"Yeah I know," said Billy, agreeing before he could reconsider. "Uhm."

They walked across the beach and along one of the pathways leading back through the scrubby trees. He tried to put his arm around her when they were hidden from sight and pull her towards him, but she twisted away so he couldn't. He fumbled.

"I'll see ya later," she said.

"Yeah."

As she left he watched the skinny muscle flex under her bikini where it stretched tight, like she couldn't quite fill it. He felt himself get mad at her, then instantly despair; how could she not know what he wanted? That urgency stuck inside him and looking for a shape.

Cruskit was coming the other way. "I saw youse!" the smaller boy crowed. "You stare at her every day, I seen it."

"You shut up," said Billy viciously. "Or I'll break your fucken arms." He kicked at the boy's shins and tripped him up and left him whining on the path.

Sitting back in the dunes Billy didn't see the accident but he was close enough to hear the voices shout out, and to see people on the beach running. He came down, not hurrying but with a bit of a jog. A group had clustered together further along and a few of them were carrying someone out of the water. Through the gathered torsos Billy could see the figure's arms and legs flopping like splints; one of the people carrying him was holding his head in both hands gently as an egg. They laid him down slowly on a towel that someone spread beneath him.

Billy could see some spots of blood on the figure's shoulders but they were small and insubstantial, it was hard to credit the situation as really bad. Later, when he thought about it, he supposed that the rest of the blood must have been left in the water. The jet-ski that had hit the swimmer was grounded in the shallows, still gently lifting up and down with the waves. He couldn't see who'd been riding it; was it the guy who'd spread out the towel? Some more people came running down, one of them carrying a first aid box, and they started pressing bandages to the guy's head. "Is he breathing?" someone asked. "Is there an island ambulance or something?"

It was wrong to stand and stare but it was wrong to get up and leave too, and Billy wanted to see what happened, which was ok, because so did everyone else. He walked away a little bit and sat on the sand where he could watch. One or two others did the same. Cruskit appeared and sat beside him.

"Is he dead?" Cruskit asked. He rubbed at the bruises on his shin.



“I don’t know,” said Billy. “There’s a lot of people. He’ll be all right.”

The small first-aid group stayed gathered around the figure. Someone dragged down a beach umbrella and planted it in the sand to give some shade. Billy wished he’d thought of that.

Julie arrived and sat down beside them and he told her what had happened. They were quiet for a while before she said, “I don’t want to sit and watch this,” and got up. Billy followed her. Cruskit stayed where he was, digging little shell fragments out of the sand with his toes and watching them go.

She walked quickly and Billy kept pace without saying anything until she slackened her step.

“That guy’s dead, isn’t he.”

“He’ll be alright,” Billy repeated.

It was the mundane quality of the scene that made him insist. There was a figure lying on the sand with people gathered around but there was no blood, really, and no big group crying and yelling and running about. He hadn’t seen any mark on the jet-ski at all, no wreckage. Just a slip and a bump and a crack; the drama simply didn’t measure up enough for him to believe there could be a death right there on the sand.

He wanted her to agree with him and then they could keep walking back through the dunes again. Maybe this time she’d let him put his arm around her.

He reached out and clumsily patted her on the shoulder. “It’ll be ok,” he said.

Like a fucking robot Billy. Her skin was warm.

“I got to go home,” she said.

Around half an hour later he saw the helicopter come in from the mainland and touch down near where the first aiders were still gathered. They brought out a stretcher and gingerly lifted the figure onto it, with the rotors still spinning and flattening the nearest bit of water, but this time he didn’t join the others who got closer for a better look. The helicopter rose and turned around to go back, shrinking until it became a tiny perforation in the air.

It was late by the time he got back to the family cabin. The people he passed gave muted greetings. Everyone was unsure how to respond to the accident, in this place small enough that you recognised everyone after just one day – like in a little gossipy village, except that everybody forgot each others’ names.

Both his parents were tense with the proximity of the shock and this new reason to worry. His mum wanted to know where he’d been, why was he taking such risks. She said, “How can I trust you? Stingrays and dangerous currents. You nearly got yourself killed too!” She banned him from diving the next day, or maybe the rest of the holidays entirely, she’d have to think about it. His dad spoke up, saying “Come on now, let’s calm down a little shall we,” using the perfect condescending tone to guarantee the exact opposite would happen.

Billy sat outside on the front step as their voices grew louder. The holiday truce vanished, fear and tension taking everything back to its established routine. Over the evening his parents’ argument built and built until finally it generated enough momentum

to keep on running indefinitely, it didn't need help from anybody. Everyone could hear it, in all the cabins, and the people who walked by looked towards the shouting as they passed. He stared at them, challenging them right into their eyes, and they dropped their gaze and gave an embarrassed shrug as they kept on walking.

He was awake early again the next morning, before anyone else. He went down to the beach but instead of running he waited for Julie to turn up, and tried to work out what he wanted to say to her to change things, but she didn't appear.

Daylight swung through the early part of sunrise, past breakfast, and then into ordinary morning. It already felt too late to run. He flopped back on the sand.

He heard steps approaching and sat up just as Julie's dad was almost upon him. "Whoa! Watch it, champ. Nearly trod on you there. Hey you were on the boat, weren't ya? Getting your dive license?"

"Yeah. I guess." He squinted up at the man. "You diving later today?"

"Me? Not with those tightarses. Anyway, seen one fish, seen them all." He pointed to the jet-ski rentals. "Reckon I might have a go on one of those. Whaddya think? Show the punters how to really ride."

He left, and Billy saw him walk down to the jet ski hire place and knock on the door, but nobody answered. The dive place was locked up too. No-one else was on the beach, nobody came even as the hours stretched through morning and towards mid-day; everyone had withdrawn after yesterday's event. Billy wondered who the guy was that had been hit, and did he die in the water or on the sand, or maybe in the helicopter. He guessed, dying in the water would be easier, because it would be quick. But dying in the helicopter, you might get to look out first, and at least see what it was like, flying in a copter, before you went.

He wanted the dive shop to open, desperately. He wanted to take a single breath and keep going on down, past turtles and gropers and whales, past sharks and squid and into blue anonymous space, and find there the little square block of ocean water carved out deep down and completely silent just for him. He wanted it to stop.

Years later, when he'd become almost famous in a way, and travelled around the world to dive dark wrecks miles down, or into underwater caves and alongside the blind sequestered creatures that lived there – then it was only depth that he wanted. He lost all interest in the crowded life that existed in the warm first few feet beneath the ocean's surface. Specialist magazines wrote up his exploits and interviewed him about extreme sport diving, and his dry jokes on risk and thrill made him enigmatic and even marketable, but his motivation had nothing to do with danger, an adrenaline rush was only a way-station for him. It was about getting past that, into the depth and silence and that calmness he found far down.

Cruskit sat next to where he was lying. Billy hadn't heard him approach.

"They still arguing?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Cruskit. He was breathing heavily through a snotty nose, and picked up a twig to start stabbing at a bit of grass in the sand.

"Reckon they'll be good for most of the day then."

“Yeah.” Stab stab.

Billy lay for a bit with his eyes closed. Sand flicked up against his cheek from Cruskit’s digging, irritating him. He brushed it off and stood up and stretched. “Well I reckon I’ll go for a run then.”

Stab. “Ok.” Stab.

Cruskit dug away, all spindly limbs and busy wrists.

“Do you hate it when I call you Cruskit?” Billy asked.

The child kept digging without answering for a few moments. “Don’t care.” Stab. Then, “You can say what you want.” But that part was taken for granted.

Billy looked down the beach, which appeared like it was just the same as it had been yesterday before the accident. It was too hot now to run, it was too hot for anything much.

“Hey. You want to come along? We could go and look around the rock pools.”

Cruskit dropped the twig immediately and stood up. “Ok.”

They walked unhurriedly to the rocks, it wasn’t too far. An old oversized t-shirt flopped around the small boy’s neck, the shoulders worn through to holes that showed up his freckles and sunburn. Such a skinny kid. He kept his head down as he walked, with his long legs stepping like those of a bird, awkward and delicate on the sand.