

## Derailment

He was voted the senior student most likely to succeed. And he did, at 3.05, right in front of a northbound train.

He had a name. Sparky. A nickname, of course, given by me in a moment of sarcasm, but one I learnt to love because each time I called him, his face lit up like a toy robot.

And now Sparky has gone.

Funny, when you lose a loved one, moments you spent together come flooding in, all the firsts, the what ifs, the last moments together. And after a while you struggle to recall their face and panic creeps in. You hunt for a photo, anything to never forget. Your mind searches for significant memories to tether them to your life as if, somehow, your wholeness depends upon hanging onto that point in time.

I remember the day he turned up at my high school, escorted into biology class by the principal.

“Good morning, students. This is Luke Devereaux.”

I had to stifle a laugh. This guy in jeans and a white shirt with matching bottle-blond hair, looked as though he'd stumbled upon a bunch of aliens. His face resembled one of those floonies – a flour-filled balloon with goggle eyes, designed to be pushed into shape to relieve stress, only in this case, the last frazzled person had left him with an elongated forehead and cheeks that stretched into a wide beak.

Beside me, Kelly elbowed my ribs. She'd sensed a jibe about to erupt from my mouth and did what a best friend does; stopped me making a fool of myself.

Our teacher directed Luke to the seat next to mine.

“You won the lotto, Rachel,” Kelly said under her breath.

“You'll keep.”

Luke unpacked his school stuff and asked if he could share my biology book. He poured over the pages – diagrams of ferns and spore cases, rhizomes from strawberries, pine cones and pollen. Up close, his aftershave, a combination of wild mushrooms and bark, invited me to

take stock of his face, now re-shaped to a more natural form, and his eyes, appeared not so goggly now that he stared at me.

“So, we’re studying reproduction in plants?” he said.

“You’re real bright, Sparky.”

“I like it.” His eyes widened, and his smile pinched at the corner, floonie-style.

“What?”

“The nickname. It’s cool.”

“Whatever.”

So that was our first meeting, and same session, he pulled off the top score in the class for our biology quiz. The next time he spoke, two days later, we both waited at the bus stop after school.

“You catching the bus, huh?” he said with a hint of mischief in his eye.

“Oh, Sparky, is there no end to your intelligence?”

“Nope.”

“You made any friends, yet?”

He dug his hands in his pocket and gazed into the tree canopy. Then a smile snuck into the corner of his lips. “Oscar the Grouch, Cookie Monster and Kermit.”

“Okay.” This guy was nuts for sure. I decided there and then to give him the leper treatment. But he had other ideas. He stalked me for the rest of the week then asked if I wanted to come to his place, Friday after school.

Crikey, did he move fast.

He said, “Feel free to bring a girlfriend. I know how you sheilas like to hunt in packs.”

“I’m not hunting, especially not dorky teenagers.”

Sparky held a hand over his chest and made a faint whimper as though I'd run a knife through his heart. Dorky, quirky, funny. If it weren't for the humour, I'd have sent him packing, but something behind his eyes begged me to be his friend.

"Come on," he said, "You'll be in good company."

"With who?"

"Oscar, Cookie and Kermit."

Not just nuts, the whole blooming bush.

Friday afternoon, relief swept over me that finally I'd be going to Sparky's place with Kelly as chaperone or bodyguard if needed. I just needed to check him out more.

On our way to the bus shelter, Kelly said, "I'm creeped out that you agreed to this. The guy might be a serial killer."

"More like Beaker off the Muppet Show. I think he just needs friends. I heard the guys hid his sports clothes on the first day and he had to come out of the change room starkers to look for them." I laughed, but it didn't feel right.

Kelly said, "And one girl put chunky soup in his school bag."

"That's mean."

Poor guy.

We arrived at the bus stop, but no sign of Sparky anywhere. "Typical, prat, he's obviously forgotten we were coming over. Let's give him twenty minutes. If not, I'll call Mum to give us a lift."

With five minutes to spare, Sparky showed up. Blood soaked his uniform shirt and as he stood there, his cheek darkened, edging closer to his eye.

"What the hell, Sparky? You been mauled by a shark?" I tried to hide my concern in case Kelly thought I was falling for this dude.

He flapped his shirt. "Yeah, ran into a couple of guys. Like concrete they were. Couldn't stop my nose bleeding. But it's all good, I had a towel in my bag."

“What happened to your bag?” I pointed at the rucksack on his shoulder, all shredded to bits.

“This old thing, yeah, it’s on its last legs.” He swung the bag behind him, out of sight.

When we got to his place, he made us milky Milos with thick crumbs on top and toast lathered with butter and sugar. While we ate, I poked around his house, a weatherboard house, sparsely furnished, and what they had, begged for some TLC. Dishes with dried up food sat on the sink edge. And the cat litter tray stank to high hell.

Kelly scoffed her food and said, “So, where are your parents?”

“Just Mum. She works nights in the bottle shop. But she has a boyfriend and stays over sometimes.”

“What about your dad?” My turn to probe.

Sparky shook his head.

Okay, no-go-zone. I get it. “Maybe we play a board game?”

“Sure.”

We played the game Headache with the plastic dome that you press and make the dice pop and roll around inside. The game annoyed me cos every time we had to roll, Sparky jumped in and pounded the dome first, even when it was our turn and then he’d laugh, like a maniac munching on peanut butter. He had us in stitches with his silly faces, crazy jokes and mimicking every teacher perfectly. And he was right, he had the trio of stuffed friends from Sesame Street on his bed. But now he had us as friends, too.

For the rest of the afternoon, I couldn’t help but study his actions, every word, small twitch in his face. Something deep inside him resonated a melancholy song, and his face blank as if you’d asked him to pose for a photo and he reluctantly agreed, but then because you struggled to find the right light, the perfect angle, he wished he could have changed his mind but obliged you anyway. And when no one was looking, his face sagged, and his eyes became hollow orbs. During the afternoon, I found myself plugging the gaps in conversation, just to stop him drifting from us. And each time he smiled or laughed, I tried to keep him buoyant, but he kept slipping out of reach.

When we left Sparky around 8pm, I decided I'd made a new friend. To hell with the kids at school. While Mum drove, I just stared out the window, thinking about him. After ten minutes, Kelly tugged my hair and whispered, "You have the hots for him, don't ya?"

"Get real," I said, cos no way would I want to be anything more with him, not when the other students had painted a target on his back. They'd pick on me as well. Or worse.

But over the next few months, Kelly proved right. Sparky had grown on me. We shared our first kiss on the jetty at Rockingham beach. Ate ice-cream at the parlour around the corner. Spent many afternoons watching movies at his place, hardly ever interrupted by his mum. After six months, his moods confused me. One week he acted like hokey pokey ice-cream, the next like warm waffles. I just never knew which one he'd be. Or why.

One day, I picked a waffle moment at ten-pin bowling to broach the subject. "Why don't you ever talk about your family?"

"What's the point?"

"I want to know how you tick, and whirr, and rattle, and shake." I stepped up to the lane with my ball in hand and wiggled my bottom at him, gazed over my shoulder then back at the lane. I stepped forward and flung the ball which landed with a thump. The dumb machine registered another deposit in the gutter. I returned to the seating area and pecked his cheek. "Yeah, nailed it. Can't say I'm not consistent."

"You been drinking, Rachel?"

"I'm serious. I want to know what brings on the black dog."

His eyes clouded. "You want to get inside me and I can't."

Hokey Pokey, or not, I pressed on. "Don't be ashamed of depression. You gotta find something to live for. Make friends."

"As if that can stop you drowning. You've no idea, Rachel."

"Course I haven't, cos you won't talk about it. But with some help —."

"Not doing this." He wrenched his jacket from the back of the chair and made for the exit.

I wanted to let him go, tell him to get stuffed, but knew him leaving was part of some survival mechanism he used to drive off unwanted prowlers, and if I backed away, I'd be like everyone else that abandoned him. So, I followed Sparky out of the bowling alley, determined to get him to open up. I couldn't drop the conversation, could I? No, just had to keep going, thinking I'd crack his Brazil nut exterior. Push him into going to a doctor. And he'd thank me when he started feeling better.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

That was the last time I saw him, before he ended up at the train station. "Fortunate" to have only been clipped by a train. Now I am sitting next to him, in his hospital bed, I tell myself I did the right thing, and if he pulls out of this coma, I damn will let him know that he can't just push me away.

Or checkout.

I scan the equipment that towers over his bed. Little lights, wires everywhere and the blip on the screen brings comfort, he is still with me. I grip his hand and examine every detail – long slender fingers, chewed nails. The raised scars on his forearm press against the inside of my arm. I kiss his cheek and whisper, "If you leave me, Sparky, I will make sure you never rest in peace."

When the hospital door opens, I realise I must have drifted off, lying with my head resting on Sparky's chest. My neck pings straining to see who has entered.

"Hello, Rachel." Sparky's mum hovers near the bed then she reaches out her arms. I stand and cling to her. She doesn't need to talk, her grief seeps into my skin. Her eyes express the regret of allowing herself to lose touch with her son. Tears, the universal language. After five minutes she leaves the room, but only after she presses a book into my hand. Sparky's diary.

At first, I thought it wrong to pry. Diaries are such private journals; nobody has the right to access your uncensored thoughts, to know your secrets, your desires, your pain, without first gaining your trust. Did Sparky trust me? Would knowing his truths give me the insight to help him, should he pull through this horrible mess?

I crack open the cover and glimpse the inscription on the first page.

*Dear Luke, writing offers a profound opportunity to see each new day a little brighter than the last. Julie.*

He often spoke of Julie, the “quack” he’d visited over the past two years. “Tighter than a clam,” she’d said when he first turned himself in. And although she plucked him out of his shell like a periwinkle, nothing could help him from drowning in the emotional tide that swamped him from time to time.

*“Julie says I have to keep a journal and bring it to our sessions. So here it is, Diary of a Nutcase.”*

A few pages in, he’d dog-eared a page and sketched a lightbulb with rays around the glass.

*“Met a cool chick at school today. Rachel Stedman. She’s pretty with long auburn hair. Brown eyes warm as hot chocolate. I tried talking to her, but she called me a dork. Oh, and Sparky is my new nickname. I like it. Reminds me to lighten up when I’m around her and maybe she’ll like me.”*

I pluck a tissue from the box then reach over and kiss him again. Words blur on the page.

*“Seems like I’m a jerk-magnet, just like my last school. Got thumped three times in my first week. One of the students followed me home and broke a window. Had to get someone out to fix it before Mum came home. Don’t tell her I’m having more issues with bullies, we’ll have to move-house again. Ten times in four years is enough. Crap.”*

I remember those times, but not cos Sparky told me. Some friends heard the culprits boasting. I told the principal, and eventually the bullying stopped, but only after they’d paid Sparky back. They thought he’d doxed.

I wipe my tears with a tissue. Then turn another few pages, skipping some entries.

*“Rachel thinks I’m a funny guy. She’s the first girl to show any interest. I’d love to get to know her better. Maybe this school won’t be too bad after all. Am I cured yet, Doc?”*

*“Homework from school and more from Julie. Have to write daily gratitudes. Here you go: Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. Ditto, ditto, ditto. Done!!”*

*“Picked up a paintbrush again. Been a while since I felt like doing art. But Rachel likes to draw and paint, and she’s got me back into it. Forgot how good it feels to get lost in art. Can’t wait for her to help me with “biology”. (Sorry, Julie. Teenage boy’s random thoughts.)*

Sparky had real talent. He didn’t believe me until he entered the local art award and won first prize for his piece titled, Trains, Planes and Automobiles: a morbid montage showing three ways to die. The irony of the words etched below; *Act, Belong, Commit*, was not lost on me.

More tears.

*“Yay, passed my licence and got my first car. It’s a bit of a rust bucket, but it’ll do the job. May need to take Rachel parking first!!!”*

That so, Mister?

I read more comments, some about me and our fun hanging out together. But despair riddles some of the pages. Abuse by his father and step-dads shadows his life. I linger on those messages, hoping to unlock more secrets. No wonder his mother struggles to face him, and depression swallows him up. So insidious. Medication doesn’t help, he says.

Before I read each diary entry, I can tell his mood by his handwriting; sharp, angular words race across the page, etched deep within the paper like he’d scribed them with ink and a butter knife, unlike the sharp blade when he’d used his body as a canvas to write “useless.”

Useless.

Further into his journal, he spirals into an abyss. Erratic words, incomplete sentences. It’s as if I cease to exist in his life and the world closes around him.

I kind of understand his pain. Since the accident, I’ve lost my friends too, even Kelly. She says her mother thinks it’s for the best. For whom?

*“People say those who suicide are selfish, don’t care about loved ones left behind. They’re right. I don’t give a damn. And neither did Dad, cos he left me, right?”*

I grip Sparky’s hand and whisper, “Not true. We all love you.”

He blinks as though my words reach him, or he recognises my touch.

“Please, come back to us.”



And then my eyes settle on this page, the last entry, two weeks before the accident.

*“I’ve started looking at trees again, thick sturdy ones with high limbs and enormous girths, set back from the road. One has my name on it, a two hundred-year-old Jarrah, daring me to do it. Perfect location. Maybe I’d be concealed from the road and they’ll arrive too late to fix me. No more pain.”*

The date coincided with his mother’s decision to move in with her boyfriend, just before his decision to catch the train, standing in the middle of the railway track.

Oh, Sparky. A small wave of relief washes over me; I wasn’t responsible for his derailment.

After months in a coma in hospital, and six in rehab, he’s recovered some of his ability to walk and read. Doctors release him to move in with me and my family. They say his speech should return soon, but in the meantime, we need to establish normal routines, encourage him to do his exercises, and hopefully set goals for the future.

Sparky came home minus his bleached hair – Now darker brown than mine, and his body scarred and a little leaner; but a run-in with a train and drip-feeding will do that for you.

I push his wheelchair up the path and Mum greets him at the door with a strong hug.

“Welcome home, Luke. So great to have you back.”

Although he can’t speak, the floonie-inspired grin on his face is still there and says he’s happy to be home. If he had a tail, he’d be wagging it, I’m sure.

Inside, I park the wheelchair in the lounge room, swing the foot rests to the side. When I grip Luke’s hands to help him to his feet, he kisses me. So wonderful. Together we shuffle to the armchair by the window and he manages to sit without much support. I set drawing pencils, a notepad and a magazine on the table in front of him, then fetch us a drink and a snack.

When I return with two glasses of milky Milo with thick crumbs on top and toast with butter and sugar, he has jotted a list on his notebook in the scrawliest writing ever, but his message is clear.

- *exciz*
- *get well*
- *see shrink*
- *TAYFE*

- *find job*
- *marry rachll*

Sparky may have gone, but Luke stepped into his place.

Sometimes you can lose a loved one and all that's left is an outer shell. If you're lucky, you get a second chance to reclaim the broken parts, ever so slowly. But if you're blessed, you get to start over where your life derailed, and reshape the future. Best of all, you find your real inner stuffing, whether you're a victim, or a bystander.