

Goody Jackson was a kind of punishment. Even her name – her absurd, 17th century puritan name – was a mortification: a dripping tap of a name that her father would bellow out across the Golden Bay caravan park at all times of night and day, the first syllable drawn out, the second one a slap: Goo-dy. Goo-dy. Goo-dy.

None of us liked her.

It wasn't just that that her eyes were too far apart, that her lips were rubbery, that her tongue did not seem to fit in her mouth. We could have overlooked the way she moved as though she'd only just gotten her body. The problem, for us, was her freckles: she was covered head to toe in those orange splodges like someone had flicked paint at her or not finished colouring her in before her birth. And, each of us being filled with the self-centred obnoxiousity of childhood, we could not forgive her for that.

When she snuffled outside our caravan at breakfast during that first week of the summer holidays, my older brother, Ellis, leant out of the door and told her: 'Shoe!' like she was a stray fox come looking for scraps.

'Don't you talk to her like that.' Our mother jabbed her knitting needle towards him. 'She's a person too. No better and no worse than you.'

'She's a freak, is what she is,' I said through a mouthful of cornflakes. 'A big freckly freak.'

I got a clip around the cheek for that – hardly fair when Ellis was the one who started it.

'You take that back, young lady,' said Ma. 'You treat her like anyone else.' She pointed the needle towards me and then at my smirking brother in the door. 'You – both of you – you treat that girl with kindness and with grace.'

Of course, we wouldn't do that.

Our mother tried her best to turn us into saints. Dragged us into chapel on Sundays, read Scripture aloud every night, lectured us on charity and honesty and

*all those godly things. But grace and kindness would do no one any good on either the Cranton estate where we lived or the caravan site on the coast where all of us decamped for the six week holidays each year (us, courtesy of the grandmother on our absent father's side who we had never even met, others thanks to vouchers that their mams collected from *The Sun*). We could hardly go around those places acting out all Christ-like, bestowing our love on the maimed and the lame and the tainted.*

No, like every kid with any sense, we'd spend our summer dive bombing each other in the on-site pool, or stealing ice-pops from the shop, or coming up with dares involving cigarettes or breaking-in or setting things on fire or doing whatever it was that the Henson Boys desired.

The Hensons were top of the pack. A position they secured a long, long time ago. No one really knew how many Hensons there were – which ones were brothers, which were cousins or which were kids they'd sucked into their sphere along the way, but what we did know for sure, because it had been in the papers, was that the eldest was in prison for armed robbery and that the youngest, Jamie-Lee, had been expelled from every school within ten miles of the Cranton estate by the time he was seven years old.

No. It was not in our interests to be saints.

That summer, down at Golden Bay, the Hensons' game was to climb the cliffs as high as you dared. Then you stood with your arms stretched out to the sides. For some reason you had to shout at the top of your voice: 'They call me Jesus. And this is how I died.' Once you'd shouted it you had to fall forwards – body straight like a tombstone without bending your knees or jumping, without bringing your palms together in a dive.

'But you'll smash right into the water. You'll break yer nose, so.'

'Are ye chicken, like?'

'Cluck. Cluck. Cluck. The little girl's too scared.'

'Ah, feck you, so.'

You could only do it at high-tide, when the waves were licking right up to the rocks and so far, none of us had managed it properly. Not even Jamie-Lee who had spun into a somersault mid-air and sliced into the water feet first.

'What the feck was that?'

'That's was a 9.0 all the fecking way.'

'It's not the Olympics, though is it?'

'Foul. Foul. Foul.'

None of us did it that first day. If the cliffs were straighter, if the waves had been higher, if the seabirds hadn't got in our way... Only Ellis managed the dive – fell forward like a creaking trapdoor, but he hadn't found the guts to shout the words out loud and the Hensons had complained.

'You can't feckin' whisper it like some kind of mouse in the back of yer mammy's chapel.'

'It doesn't count if you don't shout it out.'

Ellis shrugged.

Even sinners sometimes struggle to blaspheme.

We were there again that night. The tide was out by then and we'd scraped holes in the damp sand as armchairs, built a fire from driftwood and were burning bits of bread as toast. Jamie-Lee had brought a half bottle of cider he'd stolen from his Nan and we were taking sips and laughing and calling each other out and all that childish summer-camp stuff. It was the kind of night you'd see in films or read about in books (except of course, we didn't read...not in plain sight, at least).

We were having such a blast that no one noticed when it was that Goody Jackson joined the crew. Perhaps it was the cider but we no one saw her come out of

the shadows or spotted when she sat cross-legged on the sand. Then suddenly she was there.

‘What the feck do you want, Freckle Face?’

The night was fully dark by then and in the flames Goody’s skin seemed to glow.

‘Only looking,’ she mumbled and then she reached into her backpack and pulled out a bottle. ‘You want to be my friends?’

It was Scotch. Almost three quarters full. She must have got it from her Pa.

‘Ooo-eee!’

‘I’ll be yer friend! I’ve always liked yer, Goody J.’

‘Oh, Jaime-Lee! You’ve been outdone, my friend. Put yer Nan’s piss away.’

No one touched the cider after that. Soon we were drunk and dancing round the fire and the flames were licking the sky and Ellis hoisted Goody Jackson up onto his shoulders. She shrieked as they ran around the sand and she giggled with what can only be described as unbridled delight. Like a puppy that has been unleashed.

Like a child.

We woke late the next day, heads cloudy and everything dreamlike. Ma had bacon on the go and the radio on full blast.

‘You two get up now and say your prayers before breakfast,’ she shouted.

I reckon she knew we’d been drinking. We must have stunk the tin-can caravan out.

We’d barely finished our butties when there was a knocking at the door.

‘It’s Goody Jackson,’ said Ma, smiling. ‘Asking if her boyfriend’s here.’

Ellis wouldn't lift his eyes, but from the colour of his cheeks I knew he was raging. 'Tell her to feck off,' he muttered but then Ma waved the skillet in her hand and he shoved his plate to one side.

'Speak to her, Ellis,' Ma raised the skillet an inch.

'She's not my girlfriend.' He eyed me then and I could see that he would kill me dead if I spoke of this to anyone. That he would rather get locked up with the eldest Henson than have this rumour make its way around. 'Tell her to go away.'

This was gold. This was power.

'I'll speak to her,' I said, my voice all sweet. My brother kicked me under the table but we both knew it was too late. 'I'll explain.'

When hightide came we were back at the beach and Ellis was the first one up the cliff.

We could hardly see him in the glare of the sun, but there was something in the way he moved that let us know that today he would go higher, shout louder than anyone.

'You have to say something else,' shouted Jamie-Lee before my brother found his place to jump. 'You have to say your name is Jesus and that you'd fuck Goody Jackson give half a chance.'

'Feck off. I'm not saying that.'

'Say it or you're out.'

'No way.'

'Say it or you're out for the summer.'

But even if he had planned on giving in, my brother Ellis didn't get the chance. From somewhere to the left of him came a thick milkshake of a voice.

'My name is Jesus and this is how I die.'

There. Right at the top of the cliff in the glare of the sun, with her arms outstretched like the Hensons said you were meant to: Goody Jackson.

'Holy shit.'

'She's too high.'

'Don't do it, Goody!' The words were out of my mouth and everyone had heard them. 'You get back up that cliff.'

'My name is Jesus,' she shouted it louder.

'Goody! Stop.'

'And this is how I die.'

She was the only one who did it right. Kept her body straight, her arms out to her side. Tipped forward, didn't arch into a dive.

She smashed into the water with a slap then disappeared beneath the white horse waves.

I turned to Jamie-Lee, but everyone, including Ellis, everyone had gone.

When you save a person's life something shifts between you. It's not that you owe each other anything, but that you become for that moment, one thing. One being that is joined by the tension between death and life. Both of you moving towards this surviving. Both of you in the pumping of the chest and the counting that you learned at school. Both of you in the holding of the nose and the blowing.

This air from your lungs becomes this air in their lungs and there is nothing else between you in those moment. Nothing but the two of you fighting for life.

By the time she was choking up water, the paramedics had arrived. I don't know who called them, though I suspect it wasn't my brother. They took her in the ambulance and later her father came around with a bottle of Scotch that he and my mother drank together then sent me and Ellis out. 'And don't come back until the club is shut.'

'Why did you do that?' he asked me when we were alone.

'Why didn't you?'

Neither of us needed to respond to that and so we didn't speak again.

Mam said I had to spend my days with her.

'She's poorly, love. She needs a friend to help her recover from all that.'

I didn't have a choice. Ellis had already made noises to the Henson boys about me. Sometimes you're better off going along with a story than fighting.

And so there I was, in Goody Jackson's caravan – her showing me the rag doll that was the only toy she had. Me pretending not to mind the smell. Her father in the corner drinking Scotch and leering at us in his underwear.

'Let's play join the dots,' said Goody and she showed me how to draw a pattern in the freckles on her arm. 'A cat!' she said, smiling that goofy smile and looking to her Pa. 'A cat.'

'There is no cat,' he said. 'The cat is dead, remember? I told you that a hundred times.'

He sunk his glass of Scotch then poured another.

'Let's go to the pool,' I said.

I didn't take her there, of course. The Henson Boys and half the crew were hanging from the diving board and so we went down to the sand and leaned against the rocks.

'A hummingbird,' said Goody, tracing the shape of wings and beak in the freckles and the bruises on her thigh. 'A girl.'

She joined the scrapes along her wrists into the shape of a ladder. Made the graze along her shoulder into a cliff.

'Me jumping,' she said.

Then: 'Papa angry.'

She traced a man along her belly. Traced the shape of him down there where he had no business to be.

'Here,' I said. 'Let me.'

Along her wrist I traced the outline of a bear and down her cheek the outline of a butterfly and on her back I traced the outline of a horse, cantering across the beach its mane flying free.

'Is it me?' she asked as I drew. 'Is it me?'

The day after that my mother packed our cases up.

'We're leaving,' she said.

'But why?' complained Ellis. 'There are weeks til the end of the summer.'

'I've had enough,' is all she gave by way of explanation. 'Say goodbye. We won't be coming back.'

And that was that. We got the next bus back to Cranton and spent the rest of the holidays not speaking. None of us.

I never saw Goody Jackson again. But sometimes when the clouds are high I'll look up and see a bird in flight. Or a white horse running for its life.