

## Chapter 1 Opening Bowler

*Dear Uncle Frank,*

*I have just bowled the greatest delivery in my career. Correction. I have just bowled the greatest delivery in the history of the universe. Wordpower - you told me never to undersell myself! Anyway, it totally castled Brendon (I think I told you, he's a Grade 2 opening batsman in New Zealand) and if the middle stump had not been attached to the base it would have gone right through the back of the net into the High Street.*

"Too good, mate. I think it reversed."

"The only thing that reversed was you, bro, backing away."

"Where I fell over the big heap of shit you left outside leg stump. You were poop-scared of the piethrower."

"Well, he ain't a piethrower any more. Did you spike his lemonade?"

*Brendon and Daniel argued for a bit but I just stood there after my follow-through, acknowledging the crowd. Except of course there was no crowd, because we were the only people using the nets. This little kid rode by on a bike and I wanted to stop him and say "Did you see that?" but that felt a bit weird so I let him go. Brendon and Daniel stopped arguing and Brendon gave me back the ball.*

"Don't bowl another ball, end it there. Just remember what you did."

*But I can't remember anything. Something just took over and everything felt perfect. Like Frank Tyson, in his book you gave me: "glad animal action." If I could just be a glad animal...*

"You're really only 16?"

"Yeah."

"And you're not playing for a team? You just come to these nets?"

"Yeah. My school didn't have a team, and I did play for two clubs but it didn't work out and I haven't got transport and Dad thinks there's no future in cricket and I'm supposed to get work experience this holidays..."

"Take it easy, mate, you don't have to spill out any personal stuff. Look, Brendon and I are going to find a team to play for this month while we're in

London and we'd like you to play with us and if you bowl like that we'll hire a stretch limo to take you to the matches."

*And I really believed him. And all of a sudden I lost it. I started crying and I couldn't stop. How was I going to explain it to Brendon and Daniel, two strangers I met in the nets a few days ago that they have just changed my whole life? I mean, there's thousands of kids with real problems and I'm strung up just because I can't find a cricket team to play for? They'll think I'm some total saddo.*

"Hey, mate, don't cry, you're not allowed to water the pitch."

*It made me laugh and Brendon gave me a T-shirt to wipe my face. Then Daniel said again "You don't have to spill any personal stuff, but if you do it stays here."*

*And I almost told them right there and then. Everything for the last three years which stops me playing for a team. Why I ran away from you-know-who, why I walk for miles to use these nets instead of the ones nearer home, why I changed schools, what happened when I started playing for the Ahmads, what's happening at home... I felt I could trust them, but why should I park any of that stuff on Brendon and Daniel, they've come all this way from NZ to have a holiday?*

"Sorry. It's just that every time I get into a team a lot of bad stuff seems to happen."

"Steve... Give us your mobile number. When we find a team, we'll call you and we'll see you right, and make sure you play every game. Listen, Daniel's a law student when he's not partying or playing sport. If someone tries to stop you playing cricket he'll sue them for... for... "

"Restraint of trade. Open-and-shut case." *It made me laugh again.*

"Close of play, and the New Zealand batting shattered by that fierce spell from England's teen bowling sensation Steve Helson. None of them will be looking forward to facing the mean machine tomorrow with a new ball in his hand on his favourite pitch with the famous pothole just on a length on off-stump."

*Daniel passed me an address book and a pen. "Phone and email, please?" I wrote them down in the section for H – where there was an entry for Hadlee, Sir Richard!!*

*We packed our kit away and took the stumps back to the office. "Same time tomorrow?"*

"Forecast isn't good, but we'll book anyway." *He rang the bell and the curmudgeonly curator [Wordpower!!] shuffled to the counter. "You know the name now. McConnel."*

"Can't I pay this time?"

"You keep your hand in your pocket. We'll be back when you're 18."

"Now Steve, how are you getting home?"

"Walk."

"Where's home?"

"Kenborne Vale".

"That's a fair step with your kit bag. Are these your nearest nets?"

"No... but they're ... better."

*They didn't really buy that, but they didn't ask any more. We walked out of the park and the McConnel twins turned away. Suddenly my phone rang.*

"It's Daniel. Do me a favour, put that number in your list, and phone it when you get home."

"Don't worry. I've done it loads of times. I'll be right."

"I'll be right'. He's learning our language."

*I'll be right. I will be right. I am a great fast bowler. I've got two real mates, watching out for me. I am free, I have total power. I am a glad animal.*

*I dragged my bag back. Hell, it is a long way home but I didn't notice. I just bowled Brendon in my head over and over again. I finally got to our street and dumped my bag at the corner. I glared at the lamppost. I ran in ten paces, took off and delivered. A gun in each hand. Look over the left shoulder. Left arm high. Shoot him with your left hand. Right arm high. Shoot him with your right hand. Just like you told me. The lamppost had no chance.*

"Where have you been, your dinner's cold?" *Sorry, Mum, the dinner you shopped for with such care and spent hours preparing so lovingly? No, not that dinner. The one that you could have stuck in the microwave whenever you liked, the*

*dinner that could have waited for me. But she cannot take this moment from me. I am still a glad animal.*

*“Sorry. But I just bowled the best delivery in the history of the universe.”*

*Dad had a spreadsheet at the kitchen table and Mum of course had the manuscript of her Novel. “Look how hard we have to work. Can’t even take time off for meals.” I get the message, Uncle Frank. Just like when they told me there would be no summer holiday this year. Apparently we have to redecorate the house, although I haven’t seen any signs of anticipated ameliorations [Wordpower!] I mean, no catalogues, no samples of carpets or fabrics or paint colours, no one measuring things or drawing things. But definitely no summer holiday. I don’t mind really, our summer holiday is just here in a different place.*

*“Did you hear what I said, Steve?”*

*“Sorry, Dad.” He folded the spreadsheet and looked at me directly.*

*“I said, have you just been playing cricket all day or have you done anything about finding a holiday job?”*

*I don’t know where all this has come from, me getting a holiday job. I’ve already agreed to go to business college and forget asking for a trial at a cricket club. So why do I need a holiday job? It’s not about the money. We’ve got money. Hell, I’ve got the money you gave me. Dad doesn’t even have to pay me an allowance. I thought hard and I remembered a notice in the park.*

*“They want sports coaches and play leaders in the park for the kids’ summer scheme.”*

*“Do you think that is a realistic hope when they look at your school record?”*

*That was a low blow. It even made Mum look up from the Novel and Dad made a judicious [Wordpower] retreat. “I’m sorry, son. We said that was past. But it is a practical consideration. It will come up when you look for jobs, especially with children or young people.” Again Mum rattled the pages of the Novel and Dad hurried on. “I don’t mean to go on about getting a job. It’s more about being ready to take on some responsibility.”*

*“They need extra lifeguards in the pool. That’s pretty responsible, isn’t it, making sure people don’t drown?”*

“Don’t be snippy with me. You’re sixteen. You’re about to make your way in a tough world. You need to prepare. You need to make choices that will help you get on in life, not just hang around that park all day.”

*Finally Mum put down the Novel. “For goodness sake, he only broke up a week ago. Can’t he have a little bit of holiday?” I wish I could believe that Mum was actually interested in me. Our family’s a battlefield and I’m just a small hill which each side tries to occupy to fire on the other. [Wordpower? Or showing off? Maybe. But it really feels like that, Uncle Frank. Was it always like that?]*

*“When I was his age I had already worked for three years.” Ah. That’s familiar. Dad, the self-made man, having to carry the selfish wife and the idle, unthinking son. Do you want to trade me? What about one of the other school leavers in my year? Would you prefer Mick the shoplifter, or Denny the pimp, or Carl the drug dealer? No. Don’t get sucked in to the battle on Dad’s terms. Or Mum’s. Open another front.*

*I pushed my plate away and put on my Good Smile. “Thanks, Mum. That was brilliant, even though I let it get cold. Sorry.” I can’t even remember what it was supposed to be. Mum ruffled my hair. “In war the situation changes from moment to moment. Every advantage must be seized, however temporary.” I think that was in your Clausewitz book. Mum is now an ally. I have become the Sensitive Son, appreciating her as a creative artist who still finds time to be a caregiver.*

*“Dad. I know you think cricket’s a waste of time, but it did bring you a big client once.” Dad flushed. I didn’t need to say who that client was, and what happened with him two years ago. I tensed up and I wanted Mum’s hand, like when I was little, but she was back with the Novel. So I swallowed and pushed on.*

*“Dad, can we make a deal? I really want to play cricket in the park with Daniel and Brendon. And then play for their team when they find one. They are quality, Dad, I mean just below first-class in New Zealand, and they really have brought me on in just a few days.” I was losing my audience. “Besides, Daniel and Brendon are really rich, I mean they’re going round the world and their dad owns this giant farm and a winery. I’ll bring them round and you can meet them” and their money. “And there will probably be other rich people in their team and you can meet them as well.”*

*“So what is the deal?”*

*“I introduce you to a new prospective client and you let me play cricket for the rest of the summer whenever I want. And if I find a job I want to do, you let me do it, no questions, so long as it’s legal.”*

*Dad looked away and said nothing. Good interrogation technique, you taught me. Silence is very powerful. Mum was scrawling something in the Novel. I had to say something to break the silence.*

*"I will pay all my cricket expenses. Kit. Match fees. And travel. I know how much time it takes for you and Mum to take me to matches." This time they both flushed. Weren't you glad, two years ago, when someone offered to drive me everywhere? More silence. Dad is a good negotiator. I suppose you have to be when you build a one-man business. I blurted something else. "You can cancel the deal if I get bad GCSEs. Anything below C." That's a fair offer – I'm doing ten of them. I had to fight that school for the right to take them. It was afraid I would fail and drag it down the League table. "D or below in any subject and I do what you want in terms of holiday job and going to business college afterwards or any other plans you have for me."*

*Another silence. "Agreed. But I have to meet this Daniel and Brendon first." And inspect their money.*

*"Thanks, Dad. You won't regret it. And Mum, it's good for you too. It means I'll be out of the house when the decorators come in." She flushed. Couldn't resist that. Wrong, I know. Your Clausewitz again: "a commander should not waste effort on ephemeral successes." I withdrew from the battlefield lest I dissipate [Wordpower] the real victory. "I'll clear and run the dishwasher."*

*In the kitchen, alone. It never takes me long to clear it up and leave everything spotless. You taught me to be neat and put everything away, just so. When I finish all the chores, I suddenly notice I'm sweating furiously, way more than bowling flat out at Brendon and Daniel.*

*Why do I have to work so hard to get a game of cricket? What's with my dad? I mean, loads of dads dote on their kids playing cricket. In the nets I've seen this fat little kid called Robert and he's got all the best kit, and his dad bowls to him for hours and Robert whines at anything faster than a lollipop and his dad slows it right down so he can hit it back past him. Was I like that with you, Uncle Frank? If so, I'm real sorry.*

*Stop it. Now. You told me ages ago: "Play with the cards you got dealt. Make what you can from them and wait for a better hand". And haven't I just been dealt a great hand? In a team with Brendon and Daniel... It will take me into a new orbit, like the Voyager spacecraft slinging itself round the planet Jupiter [Wordpower!!!]*

*Still the Good Son, I remember to offer them coffee. No takers. Dad is back on the spreadsheet, sipping mineral water and Mum has opened a bottle of white wine to accompany the Novel. Both fighting again on familiar ground. Dad: look how hard I*

*have to work. Mum: you're driving me to drink. But they seem genuinely pleased at my offer. Dad puts down the spreadsheet and clasps me round the shoulder.*

*"Steve. That was a very mature discussion. I'm proud of you." The clasp gets a little firmer. Enough to make me believe it might be a hug. Mum's turn.*

*"Come over here, handsome." She holds my face in her hands and checks it against Dad's. I think she's confirming that her family genes won out. I do look just like you at my age, don't I? Another ruffle of my hair, and a kiss. More than a duty one.*

*Years back, we might have played Monopoly at this stage, but now nobody's sorry that I'm tired and I want to go to bed early. I treat myself to the massage unit on the shower and a very hot full bath with Mum's special oil which she doesn't know I've discovered. Bad Son! Muscles uncoil. Hot, muggy night. I walk naked to my bedroom window and simply drip dry.*

*There's just room enough for my delivery stride. Watch myself in my little mirror, bowling the magic ball once again at Brendon. Glad animal action. Turn to salute the crowd and crash onto the bed.*

*Glad animal inaction.*

## Chapter 2 Match Abandoned

*I woke up in the early dawn. The air in my room was thick and clammy. A miasma [Wordpower!] formed of my sweat and stolen body oil and spilt linseed oil. I stuck my head out of the window. The air outside was no better. It had that metallic smell that you get before a storm. Please not today, I'm meeting Daniel and Brendon.*

*I reached in your trunk for your next book. I told you I finished All Quiet On The Western Front. I really liked the bit where they take revenge on that stupid schoolmaster. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to read all your books, Uncle Frank. I've only finished letter R. But be fair, some of them were well big! "Scribble, scribble, scribble, Mr Gibbon. Here's another damn, thick, square book!" Thanks for giving me the abridged edition! Are there really people who've read the whole lot? Anyway, I'm now past authors R and into authors S. Salinger J D. The Catcher In The Rye. Nice and short. It's about a lonely, misunderstood teenager. I will give it my expert opinion!*

*But I didn't feel like reading right then. My whole body was still alive with glad animal action. I threw on some running stuff, and tiptoed down the house. Past her bedroom. Past his bedroom. Trainers on. Remember my key on the string. Remember to switch off the burglar alarm. Now's your chance, lads! You can steal Dad's spreadsheet or Mum's Novel. Take anything except my cricket bag and my uncle's trunk.*

*Into the street. Check at the corner. Make sure you-know-who's car isn't parked nearby. No worries. There's no one around except the Mad Person and the winos waiting for the corner shop to open. I don't need a warm-up. I just go straight into my action. The commentators on Test Match Special are in rhapsodies again. "Astonishing, the pace this great bowler can generate from just a ten-yard run up. Helson to Brendon McConnel, New Zealand's finest batsman. Beats him, all ends up, full length on off stump, past the outside edge, keeper has to leap to take it..."*

*On my way back to the house, I take the fifth New Zealand wicket. One of the winos applauds. Was he a cricketer once? It makes me sad. I stop bowling and jog the rest. Five for 21, the New Zealand top order blown away by the England opener, already a legend at 16.*

*Let myself in. Remember to reset the burglar alarm. Nothing missing. Shame. Trainers off. AAGH! Not just cheesy, they're positively mephitic [Wordpower!!] Into the bathroom, pinch Dad's special cologne which he doesn't know I've discovered. Bad Son. A splash in each trainer. A splash over me.*

*Back into the bedroom, strip off. A final look at my glad animal action in the mirror.*

*Flop onto bed. The great bowler sleeps. In faraway New Zealand cricket fans view his opening spell on the TV highlights and despair at his carnage of their champions.*

*I wake up and they've gone. He to his office to make more money for rich people. She to her office to market cosmetics. Sorry, Uncle Frank, I know you hate "she". My mother, your sister. But I know that I am "he" to her. I've heard her on the phone to her girl friends. Dad is one kind of "he" and I am another kind of "he." Never Donald or Steve. She doesn't like her job, although I thought it was fun when I had a day in her office. She seems to be really good at marketing cosmetics, but she still hates it. It's as if she were saying "Look what I have to do for you" to Dad. And to me.*

*She's left me a note telling me where to find breakfast. Thanks, Mum, just in case the Bad Breakfast Fairy decided to move it. Pint of milk straight from the carton, banana, muesli, freshly squeezed OJ, wholewheat toast. This great bowler's body is a temple.*

*It's raining hard. Shit! Please lay off in time for me and Daniel and Brendon. A good time to start The Catcher In The Rye. I crack up at the fart in the sermon but I can't sit still. I decide to hit the pool. Walk. I don't mind the rain, I'm going to get wet anyway.*

*A pervo checks me out in the changing room. It creeps me for a minute, then I realize it's not me specially, it's everybody. And besides, who wouldn't check out the physique of this magnificent fast bowling machine? An Italian (I think) boy comes in and gives him a show. Bloody hell, I couldn't wear Speedos like that. The Italian boy asks for 20 pee for the locker and the pervo takes his chance.*

*Oh shit. That bitch Angie's at the fun pool, with some of the other girls from my school. Not swimming, just posing. Before long, they're going to be fat. Head down and walk to the length pool. They won't follow me there.*

*Phil's on duty today. "Hey Psycho!" There were only two kids at school whom I liked to use my nickname. Phil was one and Nick was the other. Me and Nick were Psycho and Weirdo. Phil was called the Sheriff. Two years above us. He hated bullies. Nick and I generally got left alone, because bullies are afraid of kids called Psycho and Weirdo but if we did get bullied we never went to the teacher, we went to the Sheriff and he sorted it. And he was actually interested in the stuff that mattered to us, like if I wanted to talk about one of your books or if Nick wanted to talk about one of his planets or galaxies we would go to Phil again, not to a teacher.*

*So there's Phil. He's a leader with a mind and our school gave him no more aspiration than being a pool attendant. And he is still a pool attendant at the same pool, two years on. All right, he's a bloody good pool attendant, but was that all our school could offer for his whole life after?*

“Howdy, Sheriff.”

“You coming to work here? We’re still short.”

“My dad’s not keen. Besides, I’m playing cricket. Met these New Zealand guys at the nets and they are complete gods and they want me to play for them.”

*“Great. You deserve it.” I dove in the fast lane and didn’t bother again with a warm-up, just churned up and down the pool. The pervo (Speedophile?) and the Italian boy wouldn’t let me overtake, but Phil whistled them into the medium lane out of my way. The Test Match Special commentators started up again in my head, praising the great fast bowler’s high arm action. Finally I hauled myself out beside Phil.*

“Hey Steve, what was the hurry? Anything wrong?”

“No way, Phil. I feel great. I’ve taken all ten New Zealand wickets in my first Test innings.”

“I get my break soon. Tell me about it.”

*I met Phil and he bought me lunch at the staff rate and I told him all about the McConnel twins and the best ball in the history of the universe.*

“Steve, I would love to hear more but my break is over and if someone drowns they take it out of my pay.”

“Make it Angie and I’ll pay you.”

“Let her go, Steve. She was a slag and pretty soon she’s gonna be a fat slag. Do you hear from Nick?”

“Not much. He thinks he’s discovered an asteroid. He’s going to name it for me.”

“Asteroid Psycho?”

“Asteroid Toecrusher.”

*The rain had stopped but the sky still looked very portentous [Wordpower!] I got home and had another go at Catcher In The Rye but I dozed off. I was woken by my mobile going off. This does not happen often. I was a bit disoriented.*

“Daniel? Shit! Are you waiting for me?”

“Not in this, mate.” *I looked out of the window and it was chucking down.*

“Shit!”

“Listen, Steve. We want to tell you something. Can you meet us in the Kenborne Arms? Big pub in Rendell Avenue. Can’t be too far from you.”

“I don’t know... I don’t go to pubs.”

“You’re sixteen, you’re allowed. Steve, this is serious and we ain’t got too much time.” *So of course I rushed out and ran to Rendell Avenue and found the pub and Brendon pulled me into a corner booth and Daniel asked what I wanted to drink and I said lemonade because I can never think of anything else and he brought it over.*

“Is this about the team?”

*They both looked really miserable and they both tried to speak at once and finally Daniel said slowly “Steve, we’ve had some bad news from home. Our dad’s had a heart attack. He’s not in danger, but he needs us back home to work the farm.”*

“So, we’re really sorry,” *said Brendon, “But that means no more cricket and we know you must be gutted and we’re gutted too, because we really liked playing with you.”*

*Don’t cry. That would be so selfish. I mean, their dad might be dying and I’m upset about not playing cricket? Anyway, Uncle Frank. I held it together and said “That’s awful. About your dad, I mean.”*

*Daniel said quickly “Look, we didn’t have much time but we got you a few things,” and he reached into a big plastic bag and pulled out this one-day cricket kit in this weird colour.*

“Who plays in this? White coffee.”

"Beige. You're now an official member of the Beige Brigade. That was NZ's one-day cricket kit in the 80s. Isn't that the worst strip ever?" *Then Brendon pulled out a sheaf of comic books.*

"Footrot Flats. A national institution in NZ. That's what life is like on our farm, except that Dad's a lot brighter than Wal Footrot and our mutt's a lot stupider than The Dog. And here's an aerial shot of our farm."

"Bloody hell! How big is that?" *Daniel thought and said* "Let's say you could play five cricket matches at once and still have plenty of room for the stock. Now something else. You've seen what me and Brendon wear round our necks."

"The pendants?"

"That's a maniah. It's a spirit, half man, half bird, and it looks out for you. Now you can never buy one for yourself, someone has to give it to you. So we got you this one." *They handed me one like theirs, only a bit different, and slipped it round my neck.* "Now, all these spirits know each other and they can talk to each other from far away. And they know when it's time to meet again and so they come together."

"But just as a precaution, these are our emails and this is the address and phone number of our place in NZ and when you want to drop by, you get in touch and we'll say 'G'day Steve, what day are you coming?'"

*Then I did lose it and I started to cry.* "You mean... you want me to visit you? But ... you hardly know me. We've just played a bit of cricket. I mean ... do you know I'm called Psycho? You know why I haven't got a team?"

"Don't water that lemonade, the barman did enough of that already," *and I started to giggle.*

*Daniel said,* "Look Steve, we're Kiwis. We say what we mean. Of course you can come to our farm. Mind, it's not going to be a free ride because there's a shit load of work to do on a farm. When you have to carry a wounded sheep up the hill-face, it's not like pushing the supermarket trolley."

*Brendon said* "But it's not all work. I hope you can swim, because we got the best beach in the world near our place. And you can join our cricket club, and I told you we got the grade system, so you're playing in the same club as first-class and Test players, and you practise with them in the nets regularly and when you're good enough in one grade you go up and eventually you play

with them for real. You'll be playing Tests for NZ in no time, you're better than the piethrowers we got now."

*I started to giggle again but then Daniel said very seriously, "Listen mate, if you go to NZ no one cares about Psycho or any stuff like that over here. No, if you come to NZ all we care about is talent and hard work and character. We'll have you, mate, any day of the week." Then they gave me a giant double hug. I was surprised but I didn't care who saw us. Then they broke away.*

*"We've got a flight to catch and we have to pack." I stumbled out of the pub, with the stuff they gave me. Then you'll be glad to know I remembered and rushed back and hugged them both again and said "Thank you. You're the best. I hope your dad's okay."*

*But when I walked back home in the rain I felt miserable all over again. And I felt like a shit for being so selfish, and then I felt even more miserable. But I just couldn't take another false dawn. As if I could ever get to New Zealand. As if I could call up Daniel and Brendon and say "Remember me? The kid you met in the nets in the park and we played a few times? I've come over to join the rest of your life."*

*When I got home the Western Front was active again and it actually cheered me up to be back in the war zone. Mum opened fire first.*

*"You're all wet. Don't drip all over the place."*

*"Sorry. But I thought we were redecorating so does it matter where I drip?"  
"Fire was successfully returned, and our forces were able to reach their objective [my bedroom] without further opposition."*

*Dinner was pretty much a repeat of yesterday. Dad with his spreadsheet, Mum with her Novel. Dad asked me "Did you see those New Zealand people?"*

*I almost blurted out what happened and then realized that would end the deal with Dad and I would have to look for a job again. "An army faced by overwhelming superiority may practice deception to avoid encirclement and annihilation." Your Clausewitz again – or maybe it's me.*

*"Oh yeah. But they've had to go away to... inspect their property in Ireland. They're an Irish family. The McConnells. They've got a pile of real estate in ... in County Meath." The first Irish county I could remember. "But they would really like to meet you when they get back." That might give me a bit longer.*

*"Irish property is heading for a fall. They should have a spread of securities."*

"I'm sure you could help them, Dad." *Now I'm Dad's Good Son, so naturally Mum is annoyed.*

"What's that round your neck?"

"They gave it to me. It's called a maniah. That's a protective spirit."

"It makes you look like a chav."

"It's actually quite valuable, Mum. It's carved from stereated obsidian."  
*[Wordpower!!! I completely made that up].*

"Do you want to give it to me to put in the safe?"

"No thanks, Dad. That would be really unlucky. In fact, the McConnells would never speak to be again because I would be under a curse." *[Genius!!! Maybe you were right, Uncle Frank, I am going to be a novelist.]*

"Well, take good care of it, at least till they get back."

*Mum decided to abandon this sector of the front (ie me). "I've had a bloody day. I am going to bed."*

"Do you want me to bring you a hot drink, Mum?" *Good Son!*

"No, thank you, sweetheart." *She held out her arms. I went over for the ritual kiss. She fingered the maniah.*

"You know, I take it back. It's really quite distinguished." *She framed my face again and repeated her genetic inspection. "You could make something of your appearance" glaring at Dad, as if to contrast his sartorial nullity [Wordpower!]*  
"Would you like to shop this weekend and have a giant makeover?"

"Mum, that would be awesome." *Good Son! Having partially retaken the lost ground on my sector of the front, Mum withdrew with the Novel. Dad had no better counter than to pick up the spreadsheet and announce that he had a pile of client work to get through in the study. He gave me one of his near-hugs.*

"I'll clear up," *I announced, as if there were massive competition for the task.*

*I left the kitchen immaculate as usual and went up to my bedroom. I stripped naked again and went into my delivery stride again, to bowl the magic ball that castled Brendon.*

*My little mirror showed me no glad animal action. Just a scrawny kid waving his arms. Waving goodbye to life?*

*“You pathetic snivelling little drama queen”, I said to the image and then burst into tears. I said it again when I sobbed into the pillow, and I only stopped when I looked at your photo.*

*Then I said “Dear God, I am not a very nice person and I don’t believe in you but I would like you to give Daniel and Brendon a safe flight home and make sure their dad’s okay.”*