

For Kevin E and Michael M
The boys who ran into the storm

Author's Notes

Once again the names of a number of New Zealand schoolchildren appear in this book. These children won competitions I run as part of my talks to schools around the country. Congratulations to: Matthew Clay (Wadestown School), Chelsie Burnett (Waikanae School), Stacey Anderson (Limehills School) and Minet Brits (Paraparaumu Beach School) along with the winners from the 2004 Storylines Festival: Tom Prebble, Jordan Hoffman-Herbert and Nicholas Priddey.

Thanks to Laura Falkner for the haiku in chapter 29.

1. Forward – Mind Matters

Where do thoughts come from?

You know, like you're sitting in maths and the teacher is droning on about isosceles triangles and suddenly into your mind pops the thought that you'd really like a big date scone with jam and whipped cream. Which has nothing to do with isosceles triangles.

Or you're sitting on the bus on the way home from school and all at once you imagine that the bus is going to lift off the ground like a UFO and fly out into orbit.

Where do thoughts like that come from? I don't know. I'm not a scientist, or a psychologist or anything like that. I'm just a kid. But I do know where some thoughts come from. Like the time that Fuhrer Blüchner in French class wrote "knickers" on the board instead of "naître". I know where that thought came from. It came from me.

Perhaps I should explain. Lets start with this: My name is Jacob John Smith, and this is the story of the crime of the century.

2. Words of Wisdom

The English language, I decided, was full of long, wise and wonderful words, that were rarely used, even by teachers. As a full-time native speaker of the language I felt it was my duty to use most of these words as often as possible, and all of them at least once in my life.

So after four schools in four years, the library and the dictionary were my best friends.

It isn't easy shifting schools. I had started school with a couple of mates from kindy, and was happily *ensconced* in primary school through the ages of five, six, and part of my third year, when, just after my birthday, my dad's company shifted him from Oamaru to Ashburton.

'He'll make friends easily,' they said; *they* being everyone from my mum and dad, to my new teachers, to my grandparents and assorted aunts and uncles. Only it wasn't easy. Kevin and Mike, my absolute best mates from Kings Road Primary in Oamaru, came to see me off when we left for Ashburton one Saturday morning in July. They waved, and I waved back, and thought about how much I was going to miss them, but I waited until they were well out of sight until I cried. And I kept crying the whole way to Ashburton despite my big sister April threatening to thump me and Mum eventually saying that if I didn't stop it I would miss out on McDonalds for lunch, and Dad saying that if I didn't shut up he was going to leave me on the side of the road.

Even Gumbo, the family dog, lay on the back seat in between April and me and put his front paws over his ears.

April thumped me. I missed out on McDonalds, (we had a dry, papery sandwich from a roadside café instead) but I didn't get left on the side of the road. Things might have been different if I had.

They gave me a school-buddy at Allenton Primary in Ashburton. That's a kid who is assigned by the teacher to show you around. I think the idea is to help you to get to know people and make friends.

The only problem was, my school-buddy was a creep named Alex Kerkoff, and you could have found a worse school-buddy, but it would have taken a lot of trying. I don't

know why he was assigned to me. Maybe it was a punishment, or maybe it was just his turn.

The first lunchtime, Alex showed me where the toilets, library, and sick-room were, then disappeared to play some stupid trading card game with his friends. I sat around on a hard wooden bench for a while, looking at the light, dreary, wintery drizzle that just lay down out of the sky over everything, and after a while I found my way to the library.

At the end of lunch-break Alex was waiting for me outside the classroom door, and we walked in as though we had spent the whole lunchtime together. As if we were buddies. Only we weren't.

I did make friends though, eventually, Sam and Niwa. Andy too, I suppose, and Christian Jobson, although he was in another class. Not quite close friends, like Kevin and Mike had been, but good mates all the same.

So you can't imagine how devastated I was when my mum and dad announced to me, not much more than a year after we'd arrived in Ashburton, that he'd been promoted and we were moving to the capital city of Wellington.

My name is Jacob John Smith, and that's an unfortunate name in some ways. The John was my father's name, that's why I got it for my middle name, and the Jacob was just a name that my parents liked. But there's a kids' song called John Jacob Jingleheimer Smith, and my name was just a little too close to that for comfort.

In my third primary school they used to walk past the library singing it, but changing the lyrics to something much ruder.

John Jacob Jingleheimer Smith, his name is your name too

And you're such a smarty pants

You're a real farty pants

Go home John Jacob Jingleheimer Smith.

I said it was rude. I never said it was clever.

The library, which had been my retreat from boredom, became my refuge from their taunts, from their *derision*. It became my castle.

I don't think I made any friends in Wellington, but I was only there for eighteen months. Dad worked for a nationwide network of radio stations, but they got bought out by some overseas company and half the staff – including Dad – lost their jobs. So we

shifted again, this time to Auckland. I'm sure I would have made some friends if I had stayed in Wellington a bit longer. I'm quite sure of that. Quite sure.

We shifted over Christmas and I think that helped, because when I started at Glenfield Intermediate, on the North Shore of Auckland, I wasn't the only stranger. There were lots of different kids there from lots of different primary schools, and because I started at the beginning of the year I didn't have to break into a class mid-year, and that was much easier.

I made friends almost immediately with a red-haired, firecracker of a boy named Tommy Semper. We got along great. We had the same sense of humour, liked (or didn't like) the same sports, and generally had a good time whenever we were around each other.

Only thing was, he didn't return to school after the first term holidays. This time it wasn't me that was transferred away, it was him. Tommy's father was a representative of a big Italian firm, and he got recalled to Italy. The whole family packed up and moved back there in the space of a week and a half, and the first we knew was when Mrs Abernethy, our teacher, called out the roll at the start of class on the first day back. I wanted to skip class that day, I felt sick. But I wasn't really sick and no amount of pleading would convince Mrs Abernethy otherwise. It occurred to me, possibly for the first time, how my life was completely out of my control. People told me what to do. Things happened to me. I had no say in anything. I was just a leaf swept up in a storm.

Andrew Allen transferred into our class during that term, his family had moved up from New Plymouth. For the first couple of weeks he looked as lost and lonely as I was. I didn't try to make friends with him though. Friends moved away. They hurt you, and it wasn't even their fault. Two long years at Intermediate School and I managed to get through them without making a single friend.

The only thing you could rely on, the one thing that was always there, was a library. And the library was full of books, and the books were full of words. Long, wise and wonderful words.

3. The First Clue

The first time I got a clue was in PE.

Physical Education it stands for, although I personally thought Persecution and Excruciation were two more appropriate words. High School was a big change from Intermediate, in many ways, some for the better and some for the worse. One of the worse was PE. Old Mr Saltham, who had been in the navy, was in charge of the Persecution & Excruciation department, and he took our class for PE.

Mr Saltham, 'Old Sea Salt' we called him, because of his time in the navy, barked orders at you as though you were deck hands. If you didn't succeed at something he'd make you do it again, and if you simply *couldn't* succeed at something he'd make you keep trying until you'd humiliated yourself in front of the whole class and then he'd give you detention.

I'm going to be fair here and admit that this approach actually worked on some kids. Some kids who were lacking in confidence would end up succeeding at something they didn't think they could do, and that gave them confidence to try other things they didn't think they could do and before long they were into everything, so Old Sea Salt did have some success.

However that was some kids. Not all kids. For many of us, and you'll notice that I said *us*, Saltham's tactics were terrifying and made us even more convinced that we were useless at anything physically demanding.

Old Sea Salt was short and wiry and what little of his hair was left was so grey that you'd almost call it white, and cropped close to his scalp. He may not have been all that tall, but he seemed twice the size when he started shouting. I suppose he was used to dealing with a tough bunch of sailors so kids like us were easy meat.

One of Saltham's favourite exercises for us kids was a sort of version of bullrush. It was a bit simpler though, and much more violent. He'd line up half of the class on one side of the old weatherboard hall that served as a gym, and the other half of the class on the other side. In the dead centre of the floor was a big circle that was something to do with netball. When he blew his whistle, everybody had to run from where they were to the other side of the hall. But they had to run through the circle. It was like rush hour on

one of those Japanese commuter trains where they pack people in like sardines, only half the people were running in one direction, and the other half were going in the other. If you were on the outside you risked getting bumped out of the circle and having to do push-ups. If you were on the inside it was like being crushed in a lemon squeezer.

The last time we had done the exercise I had been on the inside. That was tough, because I was one of the smaller kids in the class and behind me I'd had a couple of the biggest, while in front of me, going the other way, had been the captain of the rugby league team, Phil Domane, and his huge mate (and star league player) Blocker Blüchner. I'd been squeezed between the two sides until I thought I was going to pop up into the air like an orange pip you squeeze between your fingers. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even get enough air into my lungs to scream, which was probably just as well as they would have thought I was a whooss, and I would have got detention as well.

Just when I'd thought I was dead, the pressure from behind had squeezed me through a small gap between Phil and Blocker, and after taking an anonymous elbow in the side of the head that made my eyes water, and bouncing off a few other guys, I was finally through and over to the other wall.

That had been a week earlier. Now it was PE again, and I was scared out of my wits that we were going to have to go through the same thing all over again. Only this time I might not be so lucky. This time I might not survive.

The lesson was just all the usual tortures until the last five minutes. We finished a long, arduous exercise that involved throwing around medicine balls, and had packed the gear away in the equipment lockers underneath the old stage. Then we just milled around for a moment wondering what Old Sea Salt would set us to do for the last few minutes of the period.

He walked to the centre of the hall, in the middle of the netball circle and looked at us. There were just four minutes left in the period. Saltham never let you go early. That would be undisciplined. I could see him considering, and I knew he was going to make us do the bullrush exercise.

Don't do the bullrush exercise, I thought at him desperately, trying to will him not to. *Let them all go early*. I thought it over and over, staring at him, as if somehow I could make up his mind for him.

‘That’s enough for today,’ he said at last, glancing up at the clock on the wall, ‘Off you go, get changed, see you on Thursday.’

Everybody rushed for the changing rooms, surprised beyond belief. But as Old Sea Salt walked past me, staring straight ahead, I thought he looked a little surprised as well.

I didn’t think much of it though. Just lucky I thought.

Until the next time.