

# Victim

Oliver Smithfield

They broke out of the building in an increasingly untidy swarm, pushing and jostling. Mr Curtis stood by the door watching them unsmilingly. “Steady, Benda.” He called to a muscly, thick –set boy with a shaved head, who looked at him with an expression of surprise and innocence as if he hadn’t been doing his best to trip the girls moving in an orderly group next to him. “He’s already behaving as if he’s in the wild.” thought Mr Curtis with exasperation, impatient to get to the staffroom to hear the latest news. It wasn’t every day a P.M. was sacked. The boy quietened under the teacher’s steady gaze, and they moved off into the open, the girls branching away to sit safely under a large gum tree in the playground, while the boys made for the bush at the outer edge of the school grounds.

It was there Mickey found the lizard. “Look!” he cried in a high, excited voice. At first they ignored him as they usually did, but then Butch Benda moved across to where he was standing and the other boys followed. They stood in a circle looking at Mickey and the reptile. Even the girls, who usually stayed close to the cream and brown weatherboard schoolhouse, were now overcome by curiosity and drifted hesitantly across the hot bitumen to where the boys were gathered.

Mickey looked around: he was the centre of attention. For once, it felt good. Some of the boys were laughing, it was true, but Mickey felt they were laughing with him not at him. His mother was wrong: it wasn’t dangerous to be with the boys. Pushing his glasses more firmly onto the bridge of his thin nose, he bent down and lifted up the large scaly lizard, the terrified creature trapped until that moment by his foot. He willed himself not to shudder as he felt its skin against his. He swung it towards the girls, who were watching with eyes wide. Mary screamed and jumped backwards, pulling the other girls with her. Led by Butch, the boys jeered.

“He should let it go,” Mary snapped crossly, trying to hide her fright.

“Yes!” squeaked Jane, a plump, pink-faced girl with small protruding eyes. “He’ll only get into trouble.”

Surprisingly, one of the boys spoke. They turned: it was only Ras, who’d walked over from the shade of the school building where he, Mickey and the other outsiders usually sat.

“She is right. It is cruel. They do not do harm. Let it go.” His voice was clam, his dark face expressionless. The girls nodded piously, their faces pink with excitement.

The children wavered. As well as some concern for the lizard, there was always the chance of “Old Curtsy” appearing from the staffroom. Mickey hesitated. Then someone, probably Butch, muttered his hated nickname “Mouse”. The others took up the chant “Mouse, mousey, mousey.”

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A feeling of hopelessness washed over Mickey. He had to do something. “I-I-I’m gonna k-k-kill it!” he cried. Both boys and girls looked furtively excited. “You don’t have the guts,” sneered Butch. The other boys laughed.

“You have no respect, “ said Ras quietly, looking disdainfully at no one and everyone before turning to walk away. The group parted to let him leave. A gasp from the children made him turn back. Colour flooding his thin, usually pale face, Mickey held the lizard aloft as if to smash it down on to the ground. Red-faced, his pale eyes watering, Mickey darted at the children who stood staring at him and the lizard. Now the girls and even some of the boys looked uncertain.

“Michael . . .,” said Ras softly, “It is not the way.”

Mickey flushed with despair. Butch, sensing Mickey’s uncertainty snarled, “You’re such a reject.” They began to close in on him pushing and laughing. Crying now, Mickey put down the lizard, which headed towards the trees to take its chances there.

What’s going on?” shouted Mr Curtis, rapidly crossing the expanse between the neat school buildings and the bush. For a moment only, they hesitated and then, girls in the lead, they stepped away from Mickey, and began to move towards the school house. Only Ras remained. “Come on,” he said to Mickey, “It will be . . .,” he paused looking after the others, and then said knowing it wouldn’t be, “It will be alright.”

“I just wanted . . .,” Mickey gestured helplessly.

Ras nodded. “I know,” he said.

Together, they began walking back towards the school building to take their chances too.