

What Difference Does Writing Make?

Leading Writers on Writing

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Breaking the Silence

By Daniel Fudge

Two boys walked in silence down the main road, the silent skeletons of discarded and broken streetlights casting shadows across their steps.

"Hey," Johnson said, trying to sound casual as he kicked a shard of glass down the cracked bitumen. "What's up with ya' face, man?"

Ned kept walking, aware of Johnson's sneaked glances up at his face. Ned stared up into the distant night sky. *The bastard for noticing.* He meandered his eyes down the stars, settling on Johnson. "What d'you mean, Magic? Is there summ'in wrong?"

"I dunno ... I mean, like, you look kinda of different, man." Johnson shook his fingers through his sun-bleached hair. "Maybe it's just me, but I swear you got a broken nose ... and maybe a black eye ... Or you could just be wearing ya' mum's mascara," his voice faded off into the silence. Johnson's feeble attempt to make a joke fell flat.

A silence spread between the two boys.

Johnson frantically rifled through small-talk options in his head; anything to try and break the unease in the air. But nothing seemed appropriate: the footy scores, the new girl in class, his dad's deployment overseas. The silence grew deeper as their feet left the bitumen and started pounding down upon the red dirt road.

It was sometime later before either of them opened their mouths to speak, both choosing the same time.

"So, have you seen any good movies lately?"

"It was the old man."

Their words collided awkwardly in the night air, the condensation of their breaths morphing into a barrier between them.

Shit, Johnson thought. “Sorry,” he tried, wincing as Ned veered on to the other side of the road. *Shit!*

He watched Ned walk mechanically, his body shrouded in shadow, his head seemingly unaware of where his feet were taking him. He watched Ned walk up to the massive road sign — Civilisation: 500km —and collapse down underneath it.

He tentatively crossed the road towards Ned, concentrating very hard on the dirt beneath his feet. Leaning up against the sign, he ran his dirty fingers through his hair.

“It was the old man,” murmured Ned, his dark eyes giving nothing away.

“Oh ...” Johnson wrung his hands awkwardly.

“I come home last night an’ ... an’ found him hittin’ Mum.” Ned wrapped his knees up under his chin. “She was in the corner — cryin’. And,” Ned bit his lip. “And he was just ... you know — layin’ into her.” Ned stared up at Johnson. “Bloody pissed again.”

“Shit. Eh?” said Johnson, blowing into his hollow fist.

“Yeah. He was hittin’ and screamin’ at her. So I punched him. Never done that before. I didn’t even think — I punched him hard but, real hard — right on his bloody jaw. He hit his head on summ’in as he went down.” Ned stopped, pursed lips, wandering eyes. Johnson saw Ned’s hand shaking as he struggled to hide it in his pocket.

Unsure of what else to do, Johnson found a patch of dying grass to sit down on.

“I got Mum cleaned up a bit — she were knocked ‘round pretty bad. Ran out of bloody band-aids...” Ned’s wandering hand found a small stick in the dirt and started to slowly twirl it between his fingers. His eyes were far away. Escaping. “I was patchin’ her head up and ... an’ I hear summ’in behind me. So I look round ... and —” Ned stopped. His eyes suddenly back on his friend.

He swallowed.

“Woke up next mornin’ lying on the road outside my place lookin’ like I’d stepped out of the bloody Somme.”

Ned stared at his friend in the silence that followed, craving a response. Johnson looked up and grimaced.

“The what?”

Ned shook his head, breathing out a smile. “Bloody drongo.”

Johnson gave a quick drum-roll on his knees and let out a sigh. *A blank canvas just waiting for me*, he thought, glancing up at the massive sign, his hand reaching into his pack.

Rattle. Spray.

"Hey, Nedley man." Johnson said, heaving himself up. "Do you reckon you could give us a leg-up — I can't reach the sign."

Ned dusted off his pants and stood up, helping Johnson on to his wide shoulders.

On top of Ned's shoulders, Magic was the picture of concentration.

Tongue out, cheeks in, eyes squinted.

"Damn, you're ugly, man," Ned smirked. "If only poor Libby could see ya' now. Don't know what she sees in ya'."

"Yeah, you're real funny man." Johnson shook his head, spray can working furiously. "So ... what do you reckon you'll do?"

"Dunno ... ain't goin' home, but."

Rattle. Spray.

"So you're just gonna bail out?"

Ned bit his lip, *Shit*.

"What 'bout ya' mum."

Rattle. Spray.

Silence.

"Dunno ... Maybe I could, like, call the cops. They could — you know — keep him away from her, eh? Whatcha reckon?"

"Nah man." Johnson's face was centimetres away from both the sign and the spray can ± the side of his face was speckled with black freckles of paint. *Keep concentrated.* "Don't bring them into it. The old man reckons they make things go plum shaped, or summ'in."

Spray.

Silence.

"You finished up there yet? You're gettin' kinda heavy."

"Shut up. You can't rush art." A burst of condensation escaped Johnson's mouth. "Do you reckon you could move to the right a bit cuz?"

"No ... the other way."

Pause.

"... That's left, moron."

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"Yeah, whatever."

Rattle. Spray.

"So, anyway — what do you reckon you'll do? Chuck a runner?"

"Dunno. I got some cousins down the coast. Could maybe go there. I wouldn't stay there but — the surf's a shitter!" They both laughed. "I was thinkin' of goin' to the city and doin' summ'in there. You know — getting' rich an' that. That'd be sweet."

"Yeah, wicked." Johnson stopped spraying and stared blankly at the sign. "Hey, Neddo?"

"Yeah."

"Um ... do you reckon ..." Johnson took a deep breath of the cold night air. "You know ... do-you-reckon-I-could-come?"

Silence.

Johnson rocked slightly on top of Ned's shoulders.

"Like, with you?" Johnson looked down at Ned. "I could just tag along or something. I wouldn't be any trouble or nothing."

He sounded like a child begging to go somewhere he shouldn't. He was a child begging to go somewhere he shouldn't.

Ned's grip on Johnson's ankles loosened. "Why?"

Silence.

Johnson swallowed.

"I gotta get out. I just have to get out of this place ... I'm, like ..." He paused again, sucking in a deep breath, "I'm stuck."

Silence.

Ned smiled, despite the pain in his shoulders.

"Let's bail then, eh."

Jumping down, Johnson was thankful that the darkness hid his smile.

Watch out city, here I come.



Daniel Fudge wrote this essay in 2006 when he was in Year 11 at Southern Highlands Christian School, Bowral, New South Wales.