One

I peered into my backpack. Yes, the little fantail was safe, nestled in blue tissues from the box on Miss Strachan's desk. Dad would love it. Whenever he saw a fantail, he'd always stop to watch it. He loved the way they ducked and dived, turning somersaults in the air. I'd had to make about ten of them till finally I'd ended up with a perfect one, even pleating paper for its tiny tail.

It was late. Mum would be getting worried. I'd been on library monitor duty, helping Mrs Meecham unpack a new box of books when I got side-tracked looking at this incredible book, *The Violin Man*. Mrs Meecham said I could take the book home. I tucked it into my backpack and ran down the library steps into the empty playground.

I was thinking about the amazing pictures in the book, the weird little creatures, surprises on every page. And the old man playing his violin - how he was always alone except for the misty figure of a little girl.

"I am all alone in de vorld," I whispered to myself in a foreign sounding voice, bending over like an old man. I rapped my fingers on my backpack. "Exzept for my violin, my treazshure."

"Talking to yourself, eh?" Neil Barber was on the footpath right behind me.

"I'm practising for a play," I said, the words climbing up like a staircase.

"Oh, yeah. Mad as well, eh?" He skidded his bike around, drawing up the front wheel, making me step back. There was a purple bruise under one eye. He must have been in another fight.

"I am. I'm in a play," I said. It sounded like a lie even to me.

"What a freak! Fuzzy-haired freak!" He raised the wheel of his bike again, swivelling it sideways, blocking my way. "Only freaks have fuzzy hair like yours."

My hair. He would pick on the very thing I hate most about myself. It's the kind of hair cartoon characters have, brown fuzz sticking out around my face.

"Don't be such a bully, Neil Barber." I felt hot and the words came out all squeaky.

"Scared, eh? The Freakgirl's scared." He grabbed at me, snatched my backpack by the strap, whirled it around his head like a lasso and flung it into the middle of the road.

A huge wave of energy surged through me. "Bully!" I yelled. "Just like your brothers."

Neil, astride his bike, suddenly went still. He glared at me. "Don't you ever say that again," he

said very slowly and very quietly. He held up his fist and brought it close to my face. "If you know what's good for you, that is, *Freakgirl*." He said it like a swear word.

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. He shot me a last menacing look, then swung his bike off the path. In seconds he'd disappeared around the corner.

I let out a breath. He hadn't hit me, but it felt like it. I rubbed my hands up and down my arms, hugging myself. Why was he so awful? No one played with him at school. He just kept to himself, his own snarly self, except when he was bullying someone. I didn't know why I'd said that about his brothers. I didn't know much about them, only that they used to go to Beach Road Primary and were always in trouble for fighting and bullying.

I picked up my bag, and my paper fantail spilled out on to the road. I couldn't believe it! It was completely squashed. Dad's birthday present.

I cradled the broken fantail in my hands as though it was a live injured bird and tried smoothing out its crumpled head, but it was ruined. Now I had nothing to give Dad.

Then I saw the library book about the violin man. Its top corners were crushed. I lay the fantail on top of my bag and pressed my thumbs down on the corners of the book, trying to flatten them out. It didn't make any difference. They stayed bent. Now I was really mad. I ran nearly all the way home.

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"You're late," Mum said, looking up from the kitchen bench, kettle in hand. "You look upset. What's happened? What've you got in your hand?"

"That stupid Neil Barber. He ruined Dad's present." I opened my hands like a nest to show Mum the battered fantail.

Mum put her arm around me. "Oh, sweetie. Why did he do that?"

"I don't know. Just felt like being mean, I s'pose. He's like that." Running all that way hadn't stopped me feeling mad with Neil Barber. How did he get away with bullying people like that? Then I remembered the bruise under his eye. Maybe he didn't always get away with it. "He nearly ran me over on his bike too," I said.

Mum looked at me carefully. "Did he hurt you?"

"No. Just called me names." I screwed up my face, but tears squeezed out anyway.

Mum pulled a tissue from the box on the bench, dabbed my cheeks. "What did he say?"

"He called me a freak…because of my hair." I had to grab another tissue. Now my stupid nose was running.

"That wasn't very nice!" Mum frowned. "And you say he nearly ran you over?"

I nodded.

"What a bully!" Mum stepped back, reaching for the phone. "I'll ring the school right now."

I sat down. I wanted Neil to get into trouble. He deserved it. But I suddenly saw myself in the principal's office, trying to explain to Mrs Heaton how I'd been pretending to be an old man when Neil had come up from behind me. It would be too embarrassing. And if I got Neil into trouble, he'd be bound to take it out on me. He'd probably give me a black eye next time.

"No! There'll only be a fuss," I said. What if the other kids got to hear about me bending over like an old man and talking in a croaky voice? "No! I don't want you to."

Mum's forehead creased into lines again. "If he thinks he can get away with it, he might do it again."

"He won't." But he might. He'd almost hit me when I'd said he was like his brothers.

"I'm not happy about letting it go, Lucy. We need to report him." Mum had her hands on her hips now.

"No! Mum, I don't want you to."

"I'll talk to Dad about it."

"No, Mum. If you do, he'll find out about his present. I want to make him another fantail. I want it to be a surprise."

Mum put the kettle on its stand and switched it on. "I don't need to tell him about the fantail."

Then I saw the book about the violin man poking out of my bag. The squashed cover looked bad. If Mum found out Neil had done that too, there'd be no stopping her. She'd be on the phone to Mrs Heaton at once. I grabbed my bag and went to my room.

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That night as I lay in bed, it kept coming back and back. Neil's mean face, his fist, the way he grabbed my bag and threw it on the road. The way he called me a freak as though it was a swear word.

Freakgirl…fuzzy-haired freak. The words kept playing over and over in my head. I couldn't lie there any longer. I switched on the light, grabbed my dictionary off my bookshelf and took it back to bed. The rest of the house was dark and I could hear Dad's rumbling snore coming from the next room. It was the middle of the night.

The word leapt off the page:

Freak*/ a monstrosity, an abnormally developed individual or thing …*

"I am not!" I yelled, shoving the dictionary off the bed. It hit the floor with a thud.

Throwing off my duvet, I looked in the mirror over my chest of drawers. It was me, Lucy. I looked as normal as anyone else. I had two eyes, a nose, a mouth – all in the right places. I had freckles but so did lots of other people. It was just my hair that was weird. A frizzy bush. I didn't know of one other person who had hair like it. No one at school. None of the neighbours, no grown-ups even.

I walked all my relatives like a parade through my mind. I hadn't seen some of them for a while but as far as I could remember not one of them had hair like mine. That couldn't be right. How come I was so different to the rest of my family?

As I climbed back into bed, a feeling like ice washed over me. Could it mean, could it…no…

The word 'adopted' flew at me like an arrow. It was a direct hit.