

I'm PlayStationed to death and I'm watching the street for entertainment. Drizzle smears the window. Shades of grey smudge into each other and run down the glass. The house feels like a cage.

Across the street a person is framed in a watery yellow square. It's a kid looking out — like me — except his head is wobbling all over the place. He sort of tips it back and then it nods forward on a different angle. I can't see his eyes but I know he's watching, checking out his new neighbourhood. The furniture van was just leaving when I got home from school yesterday. I didn't see any people arrive so maybe he came in the night. I wave but he doesn't wave back. He turns on the spot and slides out of sight. That's what it looked like, sliding, not walking. Weird! I watch for a little longer but he doesn't come back.

Right then, the phone rings. It's Ranga. He wants to come around and have a game on my PlayStation. PlayStation again! I feel like screaming. But knowing Ranga, he'll think of something crazy to do. He always does and then we end up in deep trouble.

'Righto,' I tell him. 'See you soon.' At least I won't be bored.

I go back to the window and watch Ranga running the hundred metres up the street from his house. He runs through the deepest puddles he can find. When he gets closer I can see him grinning. The idiot! But he's having a ball, splashing along with his feet flying out sideways. Classic! I'm grinning, just watching him. It's been like this since I can remember — since I can remember anything at all.

When he turns into our driveway he leans over like a speeding motorbike. I can't hear him but I bet he's making engine noises. It looks like he's changing gear as he passes the letterbox, his hair plastered all over his forehead.

I jump up. He won't just make wet footprints on the floor; he'll make major puddles all through the house. I grab a towel from the pile of unfolded washing on the lounge and meet him at the front door.

'Hey Sticks,' he yells, like I'm kilometres away instead of just in front of him.

I hand him the towel. 'Dry yourself before you come in.'

He scrubs his head with the towel, making his hair stand up like it's on fire. Then he laughs. 'How badly do you want me to kick your butt?' He grabs the PlayStation controls and boots up a game. Somehow the PlayStation is fun again.

I've totally massacred Ranga in three different games and he's dead meat in this one when Mum walks in. A frown darkens her face when she sees Ranga. He has that effect on adults. It takes an effort, but she forces a smile.

'Hello Warren,' she says pleasantly.

Ranga doesn't look up. He's concentrating so hard on the game he hasn't even heard her. I kick him. Lucky he sees Mum before he says anything.

'Hi Mrs Whyte,' he beams at her.

He's got absolutely no idea that she doesn't like him. In fact he'd be amazed if I told him that most adults don't like him. He's got no idea at all. He can be really aggravating, but I know what he's really like. Yesterday he gave his lunch to a little kid who forgot to bring any to school. Ranga went hungry. I'd already eaten mine so he

couldn't share with me but he didn't hesitate. And he'd do it again tomorrow — no worries.

Mum's been shopping and she needs a hand to bring everything in. Ranga's out the door before I can stop him. Sure enough he tries to carry too much and drops a tin of marmalade on the driveway. The rim is dented. Mum looks at it for a while. I think she's about to say something but her face changes when she sees the look on Ranga's face. He looks like a puppy expecting to get smacked.

She shrugs. 'We can always open it at the other end, Warren.' She smiles and I can feel Ranga's relief radiating around the kitchen. She pulls out a tin of Milo and a pack of Milk Arrowroot biscuits. Dip and Gunk. Excellent!

While Mum is making the Milo we argue over the rules. Ranga's always trying to figure out ways to cheat but I'm onto him. I rule out every suggestion for changes that he makes. Then we play scissors paper rock to see who goes first. Ranga loses. He always does. I can read him like a book.

He has to go first, while his Milo is still boiling hot. He holds the Milk Arrowroot biscuit between his thumb and forefinger, loosely, letting it swing a little over his steaming Milo.

He's deadly serious, frowning with concentration,

waiting for me. I click the stopwatch. 'Go!'

Ranga plunges his biscuit into the Milo.

'Past halfway!' I say.

'It is!' he snaps. 'Quiet!' The frown grows deeper. A wet stain creeps up the biscuit from the Milo. Just above the surface of the Milo the biscuit begins to swell

'Ten seconds,' I say.

Ranga's hand shakes slightly. The biscuit wobbles like jelly. The secret is not to hold it too tight, otherwise it snaps off on the edge of the dry part.

'Fifteen seconds!'

Smoothly Ranga lifts the biscuit out of the Milo and raises it to his mouth. It bobbles around like pale-brown gorilla snot. Just as he gets it above his face a crack appears where the swollen wet biscuit meets the hard dry part, then the wet part drops straight into his mouth. He swallows it whole and grins. 'Your turn.'

Fifteen seconds — the record for this game. It should be easy to beat.

Ranga clicks the stopwatch. I put the biscuit into my Milo so carefully that I don't stir it at all. I've put extra sugar into mine so it's thicker and won't soak into the biscuit as easily. I can't lose.

Ranga tries every trick in the book to put me off but I

am focussed. At fifty-five seconds I open my mouth.

‘Sixty,’ says Ranga. He’s laughing — the mongrel!

I force away the smile that tries to creep onto my face. I lift the biscuit. It’s huge, bloated with Milo — wobbling. I swing it up towards my mouth. In slow motion the crack appears. It widens and then the bottom of the biscuit drops away from my hand. I try to get my mouth under it but it brushes past my chin, splurts down the front of my shirt and splatters all over the table.

‘Ha!’ Ranga’s on his feet pointing at me. ‘Gunk!’ he yells. ‘Gu-unk!’

I smear the remains into a pile with my hands, then I pick up a spoon and scoop some into my mouth. I screw up my face, pretending it tastes bad, swallowing as though each spoonful is a brick.

Ranga is laughing so hard he’s hugging himself. ‘Urgh — gross.’ He acts like he’s vomiting so I pretend some of it wants to come back up and I squish a bit of mush out between my teeth. Ranga’s eyes are watering.

‘What do you think you’re doing, Ian?’ Mum’s standing by the edge of the lounge room, hands on hips, glaring at me.

I wipe the goo from the corners of my mouth with the back of my hand. ‘Dip and Gunk,’ I say.

She stares at me and then at Ranga for a second. It feels like eternity, then she spins on her heels and heads out into the backyard. ‘Clean it up!’

Ranga’s got his hands on his hips, head jutting forward, chin out and eyes glaring. ‘Yes, clean it up!’ he says, pointing at the gunk. ‘You dirty boy!’ He spins around twice like a ballet dancer and stalks into the lounge room, leaving me trying not to crack up and spray gunk out of my mouth.

I’ve just got to the sink and rinsed out a dishcloth when Ranga calls out to me. ‘Hey Sticks, there’s a new kid over the road.’

I wipe up the gunk. ‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I saw him just before.’
‘Does he live there?’

‘I think so. New people moved in last night.’

Ranga comes running into the kitchen. ‘There’s something weird about him, the way he was sitting there. I think he saw me but he didn’t wave. He just went.’

I nod. ‘It was the same before, when I saw him.’

‘He looked like a retard.’

I have this uncomfortable feeling, like something bad is going to happen. Ranga just said what I thought when I saw the kid, but I didn’t say it. Not out loud anyway. I know what Mum would say if she heard me and I can’t

let Ranga say it either. ‘Don’t say that. You don’t know what’s up with him.’

Ranga just shrugs and picks up the PlayStation controls again.

2

It’s a typical Monday morning. We’re in home group just wasting time before our first lesson when the door opens. Mr Sutton, the principal, pokes his head in. ‘I’ve brought the new student, Mr Brown,’ he says.

Mr Brown jumps up. He looks guilty. I bet he was playing Angry Birds on his laptop. He nods. The principal steps into the room, holding the door wide open.

There is a whirring noise and one of those motorised wheelchairs edges its way through the door.

The kid in it is our age. His head is tipped forward and sideways. His hand on the control joystick is clawed and twisted. I can tell he is concentrating as hard as he can to steer the chair. He’s pretty good at it because he makes it into the room without crashing into anything. He drives to the centre of the room and turns to face the class.

The principal clears his throat. ‘This is James,’ he