

THE GRAVE DIGGERS CLUB

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At the start of the year Mr Williams claimed that he would 'teach us how to live', 'prepare us for the big wide world' and 'send us on a scavenger hunt of our futures'. It was an optimistic approach for our life skills class, the 12 of us sat fresh faced from the summer ready to make it through one last year. He told us that if we believed in ourselves and trusted our abilities that we could get far in life. Ironic that this was coming from a 35-year-old man who looked like he was written in size 12 Comic Sans font and spends every Friday night at the pub on main street spending 'daddy's' money.

In Term One, Mr Williams made us take personality tests which would help to inform us on suitable career paths. I got a sheep shearer. Anita, who sat two rows in front of me, got a lawyer. Of course she did. Anita was the sort of person to iron her shirts on a Sunday night and buy organic produce from the farmers' market, instead of the mixed frozen vegetable bags they always kept in stock at the Four Square. If I was her, I wouldn't have moved here in the first place, would've stayed in the big city of flickering streetlamps and cafés, where she could have been normal. I guess she feels special here, only one of the 12 of us with a large smile and dreams of a future, as the dumpster fire of life skills class burns in the background.

In Term Two, Mr Williams announced that he would hand out brochures to universities, to inspire us to 'pursue greatness' he claimed as he handed a Vic Uni brochure to Anita. He gave me a one-sided flier for a polytech, like I even had the money to leave this place. I left the flier abandoned on the edge of the desk as I rocked back in the chair, gazing out at the dark storm clouds of late autumn rolling across the horizon.

In week five, Mr Williams asked me if I'd thought anymore about what and who I wanted to be when I left school. I looked him dead in the eyes and told him I wanted to be a gravedigger.

He left me alone after that.

By the time Term Three rolled around, Mr Williams told us that he had an exciting activity for us. One final hurdle before he 'released us upon the real world'. He declared that he would send us out into the community to 'get a job', 'join a club'. It just sounded to me like he wasn't bothered

to teach us anymore. All he specified that we had to do was to get a signed note to him each week from the club or place we worked. I asked him after the class if I had to do it. I didn't want to do it, would rather sit and stare at the clouds reflected in the pond that had formed on the field. He replied with a smirk "And what, you want to be a gravedigger?"

That's how I find myself here each week. Friday afternoons sat at the local cemetery, in the cool shade of the trees and serenaded by the merry gurgling of the river. I don't know if I do it to escape life skills class and Anita's wordy conversations or to prove Mr Williams wrong, call him out on his bluff, my bluff, that I wanted to be a gravedigger.

The cemetery is an odd place, tucked in a small road just off the motorway, with flax bushes that hold the drops of early morning dew and boggy mud that seeps into the edges of my sneakers if I step in the wrong patch. I liked to sit at the bench, not the one by the river edge, eaten by rust and rot, but the one under the gnarled old tree with spindly branches where spiders like to weave their webs. The bench where the mushrooms sprout up for one day a year in the late summer. They're not like the pretty mushrooms found in the faded Science textbooks in the school library, but the dull brown mushrooms that disintegrate into the dirt when you touch them and are a rotting pile of sludge by the next day. I thought that the mushrooms were cool.

The graveyard wasn't big enough to have someone to look after it, just a collection of thirty odd gravestones dotted around the space, colonised by mildew and moss. I like to pretend that there's someone else there, imagine there's an old man with a strong gate strolling through the graveyard with a bucket and a brush to clean the gravestones. Old hands wiping away the dirt, remembering those who were forgotten in this town, maybe even plucking a flower from the patch of overgrown forget-me-nots to place by the grave. Imagine there was someone to sign the note I would hand to Mr Williams claiming I was a part of a club, turn up to my end of year assembly, let me sit in the graveyard forever, watching. Always watching, never doing.

Always doing the minimum amount of work required. Short sentences in class conversations. Anita calls me shallow. Anita speaks in paragraphs. Long flowy words and descriptions, words that remind me of the fresh smell of newspaper, fresh out of print, a crisp pack of cards being shuffled, and sticky words like the sap that soaked my hands after I cut down the tree in grandma's garden last spring. Anita's words don't make sense to me, it's as though she only thinks in short sentences, but puts in effort to speak in paragraphs. She doesn't want to be like

the rest of us no-lifers. Maybe that makes her the shallow one, so focused on her ambition to be better, ignorant of her own life she's living.

Maybe Mr Williams was right. Maybe if I trusted in my abilities that I could get somewhere, I could've tried harder, become a lawyer like Anita.

Maybe Mr Williams was wrong. Maybe I could sit in the graveyard forever, speaking in short sentences, thinking in paragraphs, a statue in the quiet present, taking life at my own pace, making my own decisions.

Maybe Mr Williams didn't know. Didn't know that there were people other than himself, didn't know that not everyone wanted to live the same linear life as him, didn't know that it was my mum who served him his beer on Friday nights at the pub. Maybe he didn't know that I faked the notes I handed him.

I think he did know. I think he knew I faked the signed notes I would hand to him each week. He knew that there was no man who cleaned the graveyard to sign them, no such thing as the grave diggers club. He still let me go and sit there though, let me sit at the graveyard by myself every Friday afternoon. Maybe he saw himself in me, maybe he wished he was young again, maybe he believed in me, believed that I would one day figure out who I wanted to be, that one day I would be more than forged notes signed 'The Gravediggers Club'.