

Ridgeback Road

Todd had never seen a woman with bigger biceps than his grandmother. Stevo said she got her muscles from wrestling, when she was hot-young-stuff. ‘Ernestine the Undertaker’, that was her moniker. She had tats too, the real deal: ‘Call *that* Big?’ in wobbly letters on her right arm and two dogs fighting on her left one. The dogs were too close to her elbow, so they looked like a Demogorgon with wrinkles whenever she bent her arm. Nobody dissed Narelle. You’d swear her eyebrows were dog hair. The mole on her face blew up like a balloon when she was angry. She dyed her hair a terrifying shade of yellow. Other grandmas just wilted in comparison.

Stevo was a bit of a handful too. He was Narelle’s second husband, and more or less okay, when he wasn’t trying to show Todd how to throw a penknife or land a punch. Then things got hairy. Todd had to remind him, as bravely as he could, that he wasn’t really interested in fighting and target practice—he preferred Xbox, riding his bike and going down the beach. ‘Pig’s arse!’ Stevo would say, or ‘Grows a bit of skin’, or ‘You’ll keep!’ Too wimpy, he was, just like his dad.

So, when the young girl died and they found her face-down in the dunes with all her clothes on but no knicks—well, Todd knew he was out of his depth. His friend Michael’s dad was a Dunstan copper, so Michael had dug out the gory bits.

‘You ready for this, Todd?’ he’d said. ‘The cops think she was strangled with her own knicks and the killer took ‘em as a trophy.’

‘Oh,’ Todd had replied. What else was there to say? You couldn’t laugh, you shouldn’t cry, you daren’t bang on about a real-life dead girl, trashed in the sand. You just felt it deep in your gut, like a snake coming to life after a long, long sleep . . . the sads all mixed up with a very odd kind of excitement.