

Teachers Notes
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Joel and Cat Set the Story Straight by Nick Earls and Rebecca Sparrow

Overview

A leaky pen and a head-cold cause Joel Hedges and Cat Davis to arrive late to their Extension English class, forcing them to sit next to each other. To make matters worse, their teacher, Mr Ashton, announces that the class is to work in these pairs to write a tandem story with each student writing an alternate paragraph.

Joel and Cat are less than impressed at the idea of having to work together as they have consciously avoided each other since the previous year when Cat broke up the relationship between Joel and her best friend, Emma, believing that Joel was seeing someone else behind Emma's back. Left with no choice but to work together, Joel dares Cat to 'amaze me'.

From the very first chapter it is clear that Joel and Cat's story is going to be a battle of wits and wills as each competes for control of the story. Cat's Jane Austen-style musings are quickly sabotaged by Joel's Matthew Reilly thriller, starring Mad Eyes Eislander!

On the home front things aren't going much better. Joel is forced to rescue his mother from a relationship with the hapless and fraudulent Jorge Rivera. Cat's mother walks out on the family in search of her own identity, forcing Cat to take on more responsibility for her five-year-old brother and to cover up for her mother's absence. When Cat's father decides to start dating again, the object of his affection turns out to be none other than Joel Hedges' mother.

As their lives become increasingly complicated and intertwined, Joel and Cat's feelings are reflected in their writing. Lies, misconceptions and personal inadequacies all combine to create an hilariously awkward situation. It is not until the students and their families all join together for the presentation of the tandem stories that truths are finally revealed and the story is set straight.

The Title

To set the story straight is to correct any misunderstandings, to clarify a situation or to tell the truth.

Consider the different ways in which the story goes astray and needs to be set straight in the course of the novel:

- The tandem story that Joel and Cat have to write for Extension English keeps going off track – often because they keep deliberately sabotaging each other's writing. The story constantly needs to be got back on track. This leads to a constant struggle for control over the story.
- Joel and Betty Frost work together to expose the truth behind Jorge Rivera
- Joel believes that Cat's mum is in hospital in a coma
- Cat intentionally broke up the relationship between Joel and Emma, believing, incorrectly, that Joel was seeing another girl behind Emma's back
- Dr Davis believes that Joel and Cat are dating
- Dr Davis and Joel's mother believe Joel has appendicitis

Characters

Cat Davis

- Cat describes herself as '*an ironing board with a blonde wig*'. She collects old movie posters, reads Neil Simon plays and looks for grammatical errors on menus.
- She is clearly responsible, as illustrated by the care she takes of Mark, her brother, her concern for his eating habits etc.
- It is Cat who holds the family together when her parents have their respective breakdowns.
- Cat is a good friend who likes to protect people – hence her determination to break up Joel and Emma.
- Interestingly, Cat never tells Emma that she saw Joel with another girl. Why?

Emma Marchetta

- "*Emma has the body of Megan Gale and the brain of a ham sandwich.*" She is very popular at school.
- Cat believes that her friendship with Emma is a case of opposites attracting.
- She is perhaps more shallow than Cat, being far more looks oriented etc.
- She would appear to be less intelligent than Cat - she is not in the Extension English class, doesn't share Cat's love of literature and loved the movie *Joe Dirt*.

- Emma forces Cat to be less cynical.
- Are the two girls really so different? We only ever see Emma through Cat's eyes. Perhaps Emma doesn't really have everything going for her. Maybe in her eyes she is as insecure as Cat.
- What evidence is there that Emma also suffers from insecurity?

Joel Hedges

- The only child of divorced parents.
- Joel is gentle and likeable – he has great relationships with his mother of whom he is very protective, and his elderly neighbour, Betty Frost.
- He is also clearly quite sociable and has a strong friendship with Luke (and the other boys it would appear).
- He has obviously accepted his parents' divorce and his new family with his step-sister and half-sister.
- Cat always liked Joel. *'He was funny and cool and made a point of including me in conversations and stuff, which is not something you can say for most people's boyfriends'.* (p76)
- Her opinion of him only changed when she caught him cheating. *'He was a bastard in sheep's clothing. That's Joel for you, obsessed with getting his grubby little hands on as many women as possible. That's the problem with guys who know they're good looking. They think they can get away with anything. Bastard!'* (p77)

Luke Pickett

- Joel's best friend
- Provides a means through which Joel can reveal more of his feelings.
- It is Luke who sees through Joel and Cat and exposes their relationship.
- *'I've liked her – liked her in that gut-churning way you think everyone's able to see, but hope they don't – for about an hour now, and Luke's been set to out me for days. All my denials, most of which I meant, and it turns out it's Luke who sets everything straight'.* (p233)

Vanessa and Peter Davis

- Cat's parents
- Cat's mother resents being a 'single parent'
- Her father is a GP who works long hours to pay for their lifestyle
- Both experience their own form of mid-life crisis and react badly to their marital stresses.

Sandra Hind

- Joel's mother
- *"Men are her hobby"*. She works as a New Singles Mentor at a counseling centre. In many ways she would appear to have embraced divorce and be

- comfortable with it – as illustrated by her work. But she is clearly lonely and looking for a new relationship.
- Joel is ‘*coping with the boyfriend issue*’, but clearly her relationships affect Joel. ‘*I prefer life when she’s not feeling like shit.*’ (p103)
 - ‘*Maybe our plan is on track, maybe I’m a mean-spirited, selfish son who’s aiming to stand between his mother, her introverted war-damaged lover and any prospect of happiness.*’ (p49)
 - ‘*Don’t change for these crappy men, I want to tell her. But that’s not the kind of conversation we ever have.*’ (p64)
 - Joel is typically reticent to tell his mother too much about school or his personal life.

Jorge Rivera

- ‘*If Jorge were any more of a slug he’d leave a trail, mostly between the fridge and the widescreen tv.*’ (p12)
- ‘*I can’t guess at Jorge’s story yet, either. I can’t imagine what it is, who he really is, where he goes from here now that he’s heading off into the night. How much of his life is this lie? What’s left of it now that the lie doesn’t work here anymore?*’ (p73)
- Is Jorge any different from the rest of us? Was he really being deceitful or was he just a man looking for love – but going about it in all the wrong ways.
- Is his ‘disguise’ as a Latin lover really any different from Dr Davis’ sudden desire to wear Hawaiian shirts and sport a spray tan?

Themes

- Preconceptions
- Family relationships
- Telling stories
- Teenage love
- Misunderstandings

Pre-conceptions

One cause of tension between Joel and Cat is that they have preconceived ideas of what the other is like.

Is this Cat’s life? This hazy pointless introspection? Surely not. She’s too annoying to be as dull as Elizabeth. Or perhaps not – perhaps another day begins at the Davis house, and it’s all Versace robes and ivory-handled hairbrushes. Cat’s mother feeds four oranges – one for each member of the family- into an expensive juicing device. She cuts grapefruit, pours bowls of toasted muesli. Cat snuffles in, fills the first of the day’s thousand tissues, bitches about something. Where’s the maraschino cherry on my grapefruit? When was the last time you polished the silver? (p63)

The Davis household at breakfast must be even worse than I imagined, all fine china with little fingers extended. (p100)

Cat, in turn, believes that Joel is unfaithful, selfish and spoilt.

I have other more important things in my life right now. Not that he'd understand. He's a typical spoilt only child who probably has nothing to worry about but himself. I bet his mum does everything for him. I bet she makes all his meals and does all his washing and ironing and drives him around. All the stuff my mum used to do for me. (p97)

- Consider the contrast between Joel and Cat's perceptions of each other and the real situation.

Cat says '*I need to figure out how to work Mad Eyes Eislander into Elizabeth's world. How to work Joel's world into mine.*' (p56)

- In spite of their different genders and home lives are Cat and Joel's worlds really that different from each other?

Joel's somewhat flippant response to Cat announcing that she will start the story - '*Amaze me*' - sets the tone for their working relationship.

- Cat sees Joel's story as a bad Matthew Reilly rip-off. She feels that he is being deliberately obstructive, especially when she '*gave him plenty to work with*' and even '*wrote the Charles character especially for him*'.
- Joel's take on the story is '*Her character's spent all week brushing her hair and mine hasn't killed her yet. Other than those two narrative flaws, it's fine*'. (p64)
- Joel needs to get the story back on track, just as he needs to get his life back on track.
- Is Cat's opening paragraph any less obstructive than Joel's reply?

Family relationships

In many ways, Joel plays the parental role for his mother. He is there for her, supportive of her, and looking out for her. When Joel forces his mother to accept the truth about Jorge he feels bad.

'You had to do it, though. You knew he was a fake so you had to let her know. Well, yeah. But I kind of liked it. There was this evil moment of triumph.' (p103)

- Does Joel break up this relationship for his mother's sake or for his own?

Cat too assumes a lot of responsibility.

Consider the following passages from the novel:

'All I can think is that this is what parents are supposed to look like. They're supposed to be at their son's soccer practice. Doing the crossword. Looking daggy in high-waisted jeans. Not hungover. Or in a holding cell at the police station. I feel like I have Britney and K-Fed for parents.' (p85)

'For some reason I can't tell my mum how desperately I want her back. I don't know why. It's like the evil me wants to see how badly I can hurt her feelings – the way she hurt mine by leaving.' (p93)

"Mark shouldn't have to get a train to Toowong to see his mother. He's five years old. You should be at home. With us. With Dad. You don't even look like you're trying to work this out."

"Cat, believe me, I've tried." (p93)

'She has all these unfulfilled dreams as Vanessa Lang – the person she was before she married my father. Before she had us kids and her life became all about lunch boxes and soccer practice.' (p94)

'I feel like my world has officially come apart. And the worst thing is, I caused this. This is my fault. I try and get my parents back together, and somehow my father ends up dirty dancing in a restaurant with Joel Hedges' mother.' (p147)

Cat's mother leaves the family, frustrated that she has put her life, her career and her dreams on hold for them. When she comes back she announces that she is going back to uni part-time.

- Is there a formula that parents are supposed to follow?
- Is anyone really to blame for Cat's parents' break-up?
- What pressures are there on the modern family?
- Although we don't like to think of our parents as being in relationships, are their needs and rights any different from those of adolescents?
- Has life for the modern woman really changed and improved?

Telling Stories

In life we often tell stories both to ourselves and to others in an effort to avoid difficult issues, to make us feel better or simply because we just don't know how to tell the truth.

Consider the following:

- *'I made up lots of stories, telling them to myself and to everyone else. Stories to patch over the truth, to cover up. Stories to tell myself it would all be ok.'* (p150)
- Joel and Cat are both often unable to say what they really want to say and so rely on saying something totally different - and often inappropriate.
- Cat is unable to tell Emma about her Mum

- Joel wants to be supportive about Cat's mum but finds himself making a wisecrack about seafood extender.
- *'So we fake and pretend and lay on a first meeting that erases a strange week of history. That's how adults do this, from the look of it.'* (p227)
- What stories do the characters tell each other and themselves as a coping mechanism?
- Why, when Emma is her best friend, is Cat unable to tell her about her mother walking out?
- Consider the instances in life when we are likely to tell these sorts of stories. Why do we do this? Are these stories helpful or harmful?

Teenage Love

Joel says: *'The way Cat treats me... it's a veneer of politeness on top of a huge slab of inexplicable hatred. That's the extent of our relationship.'* (p105)

Although Joel and Cat won't admit it to themselves, let alone to each other, it is clear that there is far more to their relationship than that. Even Luke manages to work out what is really going on.

- What evidence is given throughout the story that Cat and Joel like each other?

Misunderstandings

Much of the confusion, unhappiness and humour in this story is caused not by what is said, but by what others think has been said.

Like the game Chinese whispers, conversations, comments and throw-away lines can be easily distorted, misheard or misunderstood.

Our interpretation of things can also be affected by external factors and by how we are feeling at the time.

After the Sizzler fiasco when Joel assures Cat *"we're a team"*, she manages to re-read his chapter quite differently. *'When I read it this morning I was incensed. I still can't believe he turned Elizabeth into a man. But I suppose it is kinda funny. And I guess I did kill off his character and cut off his tongue.'* (p147)

Mr Ashton advises the students that the best writers write about what they know. Luke comments: *'She's working you hard. That's some great team play tossing you that.'* To which Joel replies: *'I'm going to have to take her down. No more Mister Nice Guy.'* (p106)

- To what extent do the characters' personal lives influence their writing?
- Read Joel and Cat's tandem story in its entirety. (attached)
- List the external factors and emotions that influence each of the chapters.

- What misinterpretations are made that cause tensions between Joel and Cat, both personally and within the story? Eg; Cat interprets '*Eislander was armed to the teeth*' as he had a knife in his mouth. Joel thinks that Elizabeth sits brushing her hair, naked.

Writing Style

First person narration always influences the way in which a story is told. The reader hears and sees everything through that character's ears and eyes. The reader can only know what the narrator knows.

In this novel, in each chapter, the reader sees the events of the story alternately through Joel and Cat's eyes. Depending on whose point of view we see, the story can be distorted.

Because no two people will ever see, hear and interpret things in the same way, Joel will report things in a slightly different way from Cat, depending on what background information he knows, how he interprets things and how he remembers things.

EXERCISE:

- Stage an incident at school – eg a thief caught in the act in a locker room; a teacher-student altercation; a fight in the playground etc
- Ask the students to make notes about what they saw ready to hand the information to the relevant authorities.
- Compare the students' accounts. What differences are there? Height, hair colour, age, etc will usually vary relative to the person making the report. Language and aggressiveness will be reported differently etc.

In the novel we hear about the Sizzler dinner through Cat's eyes. Attached is Joel's account of the Sizzler dinner.

- Read Joel's version of the dinner and consider the ways in which the two accounts differ.
- One influencing factor is that conversation and people's reactions to comments and incidents are influenced by what they 'know'.
- Joel knows that Cat's mother is in hospital in a coma.
- Cat knows that Joel is a cheat and a womaniser
- Joel knows that his mother is vulnerable after her relationship with Jorge.

Some of the differences are:

- Joel makes no mention of the waitress Kylie, in spite of the fact that Cat assumes he's ogling her.
- Joel taps Cat's leg to get her attention, as opposed to kicks her in the shins.

- Joel doesn't even notice the pimple on Cat's face in spite of her belief that it is *'the size and colour of a double-decker London bus'*.
- Cat is *mortified by her father's comment that she 'eats me out of house and home'*, which Joel doesn't even notice.
- Joel is concerned for his mother while Cat fears she sees Dr Davis as a meal ticket.
- When Joel bags his writing partner, Cat sees the glance he and his mother exchange as being suspicious. Joel knows the look is *because 'it's not the tone she was hoping for this evening'*.
- The different ways they react to Joel putting his hand on Cat's shoulder.

Consider how and why these differences may have come about.

- What do these differences tell us about each of the characters?
- Given the number of differences between these two accounts, what inference can be drawn regarding the rest of the story?

WRITING EXERCISE:

As their assessment piece, the students are required to write a Companion Essay for their tandem stories that examines the writing process.

Assuming the persona of either Joel or Cat, write your Companion Essay evaluating the process you have undertaken.

Consider the aspects highlighted by Mr Ashton: narrative, characterisation, tone or voice, observation, opening up possibilities and shutting them down, making choices.

Joel and Cat's Tandem Story

She wakes. Disappointment seeps through her body. For a moment she lies perfectly still, her breath low. Deep. Reluctant. She lets herself imagine that what actually lies ahead is blinding light. The feeling of pushing through the finishing-line tape. The sheer and utter relief that it is over. She imagines Christopher. But then the sound of garbage trucks begins. A car horn beeps. A child squeals. A distant phone starts to ring. Her eyes open as though of their own volition. Elizabeth always hated Tuesdays.

Far above, Max 'Mad Eyes' Eislander, armed to the teeth, plummeted straight as a lance through the pre-dawn sky to earth. Ever since he'd shot his way out of the North Korean torture chamber and crossed the border in the wild forests south of Punchon, there had been only one motive keeping him alive. Revenge. Revenge would be his today, bloody revenge. Ten thousand feet below ... nine thousand ... it was as if not a damn thing was happening in the world. As the wind screamed past his facemask and tugged at the HK XM-8 experimental assault rifle strapped to his back, Eislander knew that was about to change.

Elizabeth slipped out of bed, once again ignoring the pale-blue Versace silk robe and slippers that Christopher bought for her as an anniversary gift last September in Paris. She sits at her dressing table feeling the velvet cushion on her skin, and slowly caresses the antique fittings and solid gold handles. She stares at her reflection and begins to brush, pulling her mother's ivory-handled brush through her long auburn hair. One. She lifts the brush and pulls it through her hair again. Two. This time she feels resistance, a knot. She pulls harder. Three. Her eyes wander over to the photograph of him. Christopher. She is beginning to understand the appeal of living in a fantasy world. The appeal of his complete rejection of everything real and sane, instead choosing to immerse himself in a world where he was the hero and never failed to save the day. The only time she heard the name Mad Eyes Eislander these days was during the monthly visits to the insane asylum before the staff had given him his tablets.

There is a difference between disguise and illusion, between delusion and deep cover, Eislander told himself as he plummeted downwards, stroking the HK MP5 SD silenced submachine gun strapped across his chest. Oh, yes, they'd put him away, but that was all part of the plan. He'd busted out of worse. He'd killed armed guards with his bare hands, driven an icicle through a man's heart. He could feel the cold of the gunmetal through his gloves. He told himself he could squeeze 800 rounds per minute from this baby, easy, and his eyes took on the glint that had given him his name and that only the dead had seen - yellowed eyes with dark slitted pupils, a panther's eyes, the eyes of a trained assassin about to strike. Max 'Mad Eyes' Eislander was ready to kill again. The time had come to settle this once and for all.

A crashing wave of guilt hits Elizabeth as she stares at the black-and-white photograph of Christopher on her dressing table. She walks down the hallway, smiles weakly at Anna who is heading towards her boudoir with the usual tray of Lady Grey tea accompanied by

a selection of breakfast delicacies. With just the merest nod of her head Elizabeth indicates that Anna should set the tray for her in the drawing room. Elizabeth watches Anna's heel turn the corner and then picks up the heavy, gold receiver of the phone, dials the number and makes what will be the first of today's many calls to Dr Manning. There was a small incident last night, he says. Refused a second serving of custard, Christopher put on his Batman costume and then went into the music room and started playing Copacabana over and over and over on the old upright. Dr Manning explains delicately that they had no choice but to sedate him, placing him in a straightjacket and then leading him back to his room. A safe, padded place, where Christopher can't hurt himself. Elizabeth sighs and says, 'Not again.' She had never understood Christopher's love of custard.

Max 'Mad Eyes' Eislander - only the dead had seen his eyes like that. Only the dead and Heinz 'Hands of Doom' Heckler - renegade, master of disguise and Eislander's nemesis. They had stood side by side in the Austrian secret service, taken on aliases together, but that had been years ago. Eislander had been Kristof then, and sometimes Christopher. But he had long since cast such masks aside. Heckler was damaged goods. He had turned to absinthe, had drowned his mother's Cat in a vat of custard - though that had surely been a good thing, since the creature was quite disturbed - and had gone away hallucinating. The things he said were vicious, and made no sense at all. There was trouble brewing, and Eislander had already been sent once to deal with it. For Eislander, Heckler was 'the one that got away'. But no more. The rush of the wind invigorated him, as did the firm pressure of a dozen thirty-round curved box magazines in his pockets. This was truly a day to kill. Heckler was out of control, worse than unpredictable, a warhead, a warhead with the timer set and running. And only Eislander could take him down.

Elizabeth hears a thud. She puts down her teacup and wanders over to the window. There she sees a man, with an unopened parachute strapped to his back, lying motionless on the front lawn, his arms and legs askew like a dropped rag doll. Elizabeth calls for Alfred to dial for an ambulance, tightens the belt on her robe and makes her way outside. Under a clear blue winter sky, Elizabeth stares at the dead man on her lawn and contemplates the stranger's penchant for polyester while at the same time being repulsed by his numerous warts and fishy smell. When the ambulance officers arrive, she sighs and says a prayer, realising that the knife the poor fellow had been carrying in his mouth had cut off his tongue. Even if this mystery parachutist had survived the fall, he would never have been able to speak again.

This was surely the greatest disguise of all. Inside the latex death costume, Eislander stirred. Every detail had been worked out, right down to the cow's tongue and the capsule of fake blood he had carried in his mouth. He barely felt the fingers of the ambulance crew on the rubber sheath over his neck and wrists as they searched for a pulse, and soon they were gone. He stood, disengaged his chute, cut himself free of the costume and moved into the shadows. He made his way to the open door unseen. He took the old man out on the steps with the

knife and, as the silver tea tray hit the ground and the teapot shattered into a million pieces that could never ever be stuck back together, he rolled an XM84 stun grenade through the doorway. There was a flash, a crack, and smoke, and as the smoke cleared he saw him. Heckler. In a flowing dress and an auburn wig, and holding an ivory-handled hairbrush. Heinz 'Hands of Doom' Heckler, gone to ground months before and surfacing on the other side of the world as Elizabeth. Heckler was about to hate Tuesdays big-time. But only very briefly, as he was about to die.

Elizabeth adjusts her wig and smooths out the wrinkles from her Laura Ashley dress as she watches the grenade roll towards her feet. She bends down and prepares to peg the grenade back in the direction of Eislander. 'CUT!' The director appears out of nowhere, chewing on a pen, a troubled expression on his face. 'Guys, can we try that again? I know we said we'd try it this way but it's just not working. David?' He looks over at David Spade, who is still peeling latex off his face. 'David, I think we need to stick the original script. This is a modern day love story after all. *Pride and Prejudice* meets *Triple X*. I'm not sure the audience will go for it if we kill off Elizabeth Benetton within the first twenty minutes.'

'I know, I know,' Spade says. 'But I'm struggling, Stephen. Here's my dilemma - do I connect with my inner Heckler or my inner Elizabeth? It was so much easier in *Joe Dirt*, when I had the mullet to work with. You get a lot of guidance from a mullet about where to take a movie. A mullet, some goofy bug eyes, nipples through a wet shirt. Those things are gold. Schneider taught me that. Here I've got the dress, and I've got the bad-ass assassin thing. I'm conflicted, Stephen. Horribly conflicted. I mean, look at these hands. They're fine working hands, but do they say "doom" to you?' The actor playing Eislander shakes his head, but no one notices. It's all about Spade here, all about the big star with his questions about his hands. Spade goes off with Spielberg, and Eislander can hear him making a joke of it, saying, 'Who wrote this? Who put doom in these fine hands?' as he walks to his trailer, with a little-man big-star swagger, still wearing his torn dress, his hands gesturing famously above his head. Everyone laughs, even the guy screwing two poles together who can't have seen a page of the script. Eislander smells food, heads off-set to the buffet. He needs a shower. He's filled the death costume with sweat under the hot lights.

Thank goodness Steven Spielberg is on hand to talk me through the narrative themes thinks Spade. Forgiveness being the main one, of course - how, sometimes, people make mistakes, and how it is important to be forgiving when people think they've done the right thing and are trying to protect, say, one of their friends and in the end only wind up hurting themselves and those around them. No one wants to see their best friend cheated on. 'Do you get that, David?' says Spielberg, slapping the script with the back of his hand. Spade nods and wipes a tear from his eye and says, 'Okay, Stephen. Forgiveness. Yeah. I'm there, buddy.'

Forgiveness? Eislander wasn't so sure about that. The way he read it, it was

about sacrifice – the sacrifices, small and large, that people make every day, often without any recognition. And that would be just the kind of thing these people wouldn't get. Spade would be the hero - that was obvious to them all - but it would be guys like Eislander who took the fall, the bullet, the blast every time. No one thanks the stunt guy as they walk away back-slapping and he's left alone to scoop low-carb Hollywood food onto his plate in the catering tent. What would Spade know about the subtleties of real emotions? What would Spielberg know? Eislander knew - the stars are the heroes, the stunt guy's forever taking it up the ass. That's just how it is.

Spielberg walks back onto the set and snaps the clapperboard. 'All right, people. It's time to do take one of scene fifteen of our movie Let He Who Has Never Sinned, Cast The First Stone. 'I'm ready, Stephen,' Spade says breathily, his torn dress set at just the right angle, a string of pearls – maybe his mother's – hanging loosely in his right hand. 'I'm as sorry as can be, and I'm ready for my close-up.'

Meanwhile, Max Eislander is close to breaking point. He knows they've based the Elizabeth character on his ex-wife, he knows the lies she's told since it ended. In this matter at least, he is completely without sin. Around him, other extras fill their food trays. The stars have eaten and are standing with Spielberg in their costumes, laughing – David Spade in his torn dress, the airheaded bubblegum-popstar bitch Kat Perfect making her debut as the schoolgirl. Eislander can feel the anger rising. His eyes are flaring again, those panther's eyes. The madness is back ...

Kat Perfect sat in the make-up chair and closed her eyes as Charmaine quickly 'touched up' her foundation and lippy before she was required for her scene. Charmaine talked nonstop as she always did about her kids, her arthritic dog, her lazy husband, the cost of petrol, her ongoing frustration at Revlon for discontinuing 'Midnight Rose' and how laughable it was for the company to even suggest that the new 'Sugar Berry' was similar. But Kat just sat there, said 'Mmm' at the appropriate times and contemplated her own loneliness. From the outside her life looked perfect – she was the new 'It girl' who had gone from high-school senior to chart-topping singer and now award-winning actress. She was inundated with thousands of fan letters every day. Girls envied her. Boys adored her. She had already made enough money to retire. And yet she was more miserable now than she'd ever been before. With the death of her grandmother last month, Kat had lost the last person who truly understood her. The only person who knew the deep-seated pain she had felt since she was a child. 'There you go, love.' Kat opened her eyes, thanked Charmaine and lingered by the doorway of the make-up trailer. She took a deep breath, and then forced a big smile onto her face and walked towards the set, signing autographs for fans along the way.

She stumbled as she walked, feeling the deep-seated pain that only the truly vacuous feel, the deep-seated pain she had felt every day since she was a child, that deep-seated pain in her feet that came from being too stupid to know which shoe went on which foot. Since birth, she had been plagued by the fact that there

was altogether too much air in her head for even the basic life skills to stick. And what was in there that wasn't air was all pretty much meanness and self-love. Even her tiny Chihuahua, Emma, had more to offer, and it had significant behavioural problems. Meanwhile, Max Eislander - victim of circumstance, stifled talent, thwarted hero - opened the case in the boot of his car. He clicked the sleek black thirty-shot magazine into place. Kat Perfect sat there in her school uniform, scolding Emma for soiling herself again. Emma snapped and snarled, and soiled a little more. Kat Perfect looked down at the prefect's badge on her lapel and said, in the air-headed way that had stunned millions, 'Hey, I think they got the E and the R the wrong way round.' She was so caught up with herself that she didn't hear a sound. Didn't notice Eislander's approach. Didn't feel the hail of bullets that scythed her head off like the head of a corn doll. The end.



and

Set the
Story
Straight

Joel's Account of Sizzler

Joel - Wednesday

'Peter, join us up here,' my mother shouts out from the middle of the Sizzler queue to the mildly sleazy looking man with the playfully patterned shirt, who is straining to look as close to sub-forty as he can.

Straining to look sub-forty, while grinning and waving and partially obscuring Cat Davis.

Cat Davis ...

Cat practically collides with Sleazy Pete's big wave, and then gets bumped from behind by a Game-Boy-playing child. It's the uncluttered horror on her face that tells me she's part of the package deal. My mother has cast her net at the support group and snagged Cat Davis's father.

Mr Davis cruises up looking like a game show host, all bright white teeth and a tan I'm suspicious of. Cat follows, nudged along by her little brother whose eyes never leave the screen. She looks at me, then looks away. We both have a powerful need for this moment not to be happening.

'This is my Joel, my son,' my mother's saying, cheerily surging ahead. She turns to Cat. 'And haven't I seen you winning everything at the school swimming championships?'

'Well, freestyle and butterfly anyway,' Peter says without waiting for Cat. It's clear that she and I are incidental to proceedings. 'One and two hundred. But she's taking a break at the moment to concentrate on school.'

They talk about year twelve, and what a big year it is - as if they have any idea - and I want to say, 'The worst bit of it is how excruciating your parents can be. The worst bit of year twelve is happening in Sizzler this very night.'

I can't speak. Cat can't speak. The guy with the Shaun badge at the counter checks we need a table for five, and that's when my mother turns to me and says, 'Pink lemonade for you ...' with a knowing nod.

'I don't think so,' I tell her, because I don't have a gun.

'But you always have ...'

'Mum, this is Sizzler. There's no always. All right? I'll have water. We don't come here, and I'll have water.'

Luckily, Cat's distracted, telling her father she doesn't want anything, and then relenting and going red. Hibachi chicken, with a side order of torture.

What about her mother? That's what I'm thinking as they put their order in. Her sick mother who may still have been in hospital when her father slipped out on Sunday night pretending to be suddenly single and in need of consoling. First chance I get I'm taking my mother aside and setting her straight. No games this time, no googling El Salvador. Peter Davis is the support group's worst nightmare - a married man out for a bit of sly singles action - and as soon as the Davises are at the salad bar, I'm making my move.

We're shown to a booth around the corner. Mark slides in first, his thumbs still mid-game, then our parents move in and sit facing each other, leaving Cat and me to sit

on the ends.

‘Well, this is fun,’ my mother says, because it isn’t.

‘Oh, yeah,’ Peter says, supersizing the volume with gameshow-host enthusiasm.

This is not fun. We are five people in a booth, at least two of whom are prisoners, and there is no fun going on. We don’t even have the damn cheese toast yet.

One of the staff comes up and says her name’s Kylie and she’ll be looking after our table tonight.

‘It’s my first night,’ she says. ‘So tell me any time you think anything’s not right.’

Kylie, everything’s not right. Everything. And without superhero powers, you won’t be changing that.

She talks us through how it all works. She’s learned the list of things to say, but the nervousness doesn’t leave her voice. Peter is winking at my mother, my mother’s suppressing a giggle, Cat’s glaring down at the table. Kylie deserves better. I pay attention, or at least put on a look that says I’m paying attention, and that she’s doing really well. Fascinating at least one out of five of us with the Sizzler preflight checklist.

‘Oh, water,’ she says as she’s turning to go. ‘I almost forgot water. I’ll go and get you some.’

I thank her on behalf of the table and it turns out Cat’s suddenly paying just enough attention to mimic me and then to say, ‘Why don’t you just keep ordering cheese toast until she gives you her phone number?’

‘Cheese toast?’ Sleazy Pete says, distracted for a second from my mother and some tedious conversation about a friend’s muesli recipe. ‘You mean that toast with the fried-cheesy crispness on one side and the butteriness on the other? That’d be the best thing here. Mmmm.’

And that’s exactly what my mother said about it two days ago. Exactly. And that can’t be chance. The cheese toast has opened a window onto a world of sneaky text messaging and talk that I know must have gone on ever since Sunday night’s meeting. ‘Ooh, Sizzler, yes, don’t you just love the cheese toast. It’s all ... hot and ... buttery ...’

‘How’s Mrs Davis?’ I want to say to him. ‘Is she getting over the operation? It’s unfortunate she couldn’t make it tonight.’

But my mother’s talking cheese toast, and the rest of us are bypassed again. Cheese toast and ha ha ha you’d be mad to make her soufflé - it never rises - etcetera etcetera. Is it just food or some kind of innuendo? I’m not sure, and I don’t want to know.

‘So, do you guys have any classes together?’ my mother says, looking at me, looking at Cat, as if decency requires us to be noticed from time to time.

Cat says, ‘Just Extension English,’ and leaves it at that.

It’s all Sleazy Pete needs to get started again, jumping in and saying Cat’s partner’s a nightmare and a drop-kick. Drop kick? I can imagine her saying it. I tell myself to show restraint, laugh it off, and then I slag Cat off big-time - anonymously - because I’m entitled to and I know it’ll feel a lot better. My partner? Talentless ... lazy ... obstructionist ... all said with a smile and as if it’s about someone unimaginably bad and at least streets away.

I pull it back in when my mother gives me a look. It’s not the tone she was hoping for this evening.

She talks about the Presentation Night and says, ‘Won’t that be good? Hearing all the stories?’

‘Presentation Night? What’s that?’ Sleazy Pete’s frowning. He’s been kept out of the loop.

‘It’s in the letter they brought home this afternoon,’ my mother says, trying to make it better. Making it worse instead, since Cat obviously hasn’t handed over the letter.

And why would she, with the dirty business going on in her family? I’m totally on her side with that one. For all I know, she was sitting in Intensive Care this afternoon, reading the Presentation Night letter aloud, slowly and with feeling, hoping it would be the thing to break through her mother’s dense coma and bring her back to consciousness. But no, there’s just the quiet ping of machines, the background hum of air-conditioning. Cat clenches fingers that don’t clench back, the doctors and nurses retreat from the room.

Peter looks at Cat, Cat looks off into the distance. Yep, her mind’s on the coma, his is on jumping my mum. That’s the world I live in. Cat looks angry, torn. I’m with her all the way.

‘Maybe we could all go together,’ my mother says, masquerading as someone struck by a bright idea. ‘It’s at the school.’

‘And afterwards we could go to that place nearby.’ Sleazy Pete’s in there pitching in an instant, his bad ideas lurching out at higher wattage than even my mother’s. ‘The one that does great panna cotta.’

‘But that’s, like, public.’ I blurt it out, just needing their fun to stop. ‘I mean there’s all the people from school, and then ...’ Wheels spinning, no traction ... ‘I think the school caters. Three courses. They’d be upset if we went somewhere else for food. And the night’s only provisional anyway. It might not happen, if they don’t get the numbers. I think there’s some real doubt about the numbers.’

‘They only sent the letters out today,’ my mother says, distinctly unimpressed with my maneuvering.

In my head I’m shouting, ‘Cat’s mother’s not even dead yet and this man’s making a slimy move on you. Can’t you see that?’

In the real world that is Sizzler Toowong, Sleazy Pete’s back in the conversation going, ‘Some parents don’t even have letters yet,’ with a self-righteous tone that couldn’t be more wrong.

I reach out with my toe and tap Cat’s leg to get her attention. ‘I think I’ll go get some salad.’

She jumps and says, ‘Me too.’

On the way out of the booth, her father calls her back and says something about The Biggest Loser. Cat’s mouth opens, and she blinks. Then she just shakes her head and comes after me, pushing Kylie the waitress aside and barely noticing.

Okay, maybe there’s no coma, but I’m sure she said her mother was sick, and if her mother’s sick we shouldn’t be here doing this. This is all wrong. I’m sure Cat knows that. I pick up two plates, and hand one to her.

‘You have to do something,’ she says. She looks down at the salads, picks up tongs.

‘Me? Is that because you’re looking after your mother and her appendicitis? Your Dad’s two-timing a sick woman.’ My voice starts to rise, Cat starts shoveling salad, looking past me. She lifts a piece of broccoli with plastic tongs, puts it down again.

She admits she made it up. She made up the story about her mother being sick.

She says her mother's moved out, that her parents are having problems. 'But they're going to get back together,' she says. 'So this ... This can't happen. Right?'

'Hey, for a whole lot of reasons this can't happen.'

She's ignoring me, shoveling, shoveling, stacking her plate high. It was years ago when things went wrong with my parents, but I won't forget it. I made up lots of stories, telling them to myself and to anyone. Stories to patch over the truth, to cover up. Stories to tell myself it would all be okay. If it had happened this year, I would have made up stories too. I know I would. You've got to cover your tracks - their tracks - until you've said it to yourself enough times that it doesn't shock you any more. Then you can tell people, maybe.

There was no way back for my parents, but sometimes there is. It's not for me to say to Cat what happens from here. Not for me to say that maybe they won't get back together and maybe it'll be for the best. I can't tell. All I can see that I'm sure of is the stress in the muscles of her face, some of the sleep she's been losing.

'You really like seafood extender, don't you?' is the best line I can manage.

Cat looks down at her plate, at her couple of kilos of faux crab. 'Oh my god,' she says quietly to herself, startled that even this was out of her control, even her own dinner plate and the tongs in her hand.

She puts the plate down shakily, lifts her hands to her face. We can't have Cat Davis crying at the salad bar. There's only so many ways this night can be allowed to go wrong.

My hand goes onto her shoulder then, without me really thinking about it. She doesn't pull away, though I'm sure it's a very strange moment for both of us. How long should it stay there? When should I take it away? What's the deal with hands on shoulders?

I tell her we'll get it sorted out, that I'm sure it's not how my mother's thinking, that she's just being a supportive friend at a time when her father's vulnerable. And prone to coming across sleazily, though I don't say that bit.

Maybe I've assessed him unfairly. Maybe he's doing what he can, riddled with emotional confusion and out on the town in his best, most tragic party shirt and needing some help through this. There's turmoil at the Davis house, and that's easy for no one.

And that's the great charitable thought I'm holding onto when he and my mother loom up on the other side of the salad bar, and Sleazy Pete picks up the nearest decorative flower, clenches it between his teeth and kisses my mother on the hand.

I've wandered my way into some useless talk about teamwork, Cat is audibly groaning. We're done here. I steer her back towards our booth. Mark sits cramming his mouth with cheese toast, his Game Boy slick with food grease and briefly set aside.

'Where's the kibbachi chicken?' he says, through a wad of food and without looking up from his plate, which is heaped with potato skins and a suspicious number of cheese toast crusts. 'How long does kibbachi take?'

'It's a very special ...' Cat says, beginning some explanation to make the wait bearable, and then losing it somewhere along the way.

She's staring past my shoulder. Another of tonight's bad, bad moments is kicking in. I can tell. I turn, and there are my mother and Sleazy Pete, each with a spear of asparagus between their teeth, a slow creepy salsa dance move underway.

'But he doesn't even like asparagus,' Cat says, punching the table and then

wiping her eyes. 'Oh god, oh god. You didn't bring any of those stun grenades did you?'

'Where is that lousy Eislander when you need him?'

'If he was the real deal he'd be here,' she says. 'Taking them down.'

Could it get any worse? Yes. That's when the kitchen doors swing open and the heads of three staff members poke out, all of them staring bug-eyed at the scene at the salad bar.

And from the kitchen comes my mother's amplified voice saying, huskily, 'Oh you naughty, naughty boy ...'

The salad bar attendant has slunk up next to our parents and is fake-tidying, with her headset microphone swiveled round their way.

'I'm going to get more salad,' I tell Cat. 'And, while I'm there, I'm going to kill one of them. I don't know which one yet, but it could be our only way out.'

'Whatever it takes,' she says, and she groans. 'Oh, I want to wake up from this. I want this to be a bad sitcom, and I want us to go to an ad break. Forever.'

I'm already on my way to the salad bar. The fake tidying goes on, the dancing stops as I approach and our parents pretend they're checking out their food options. The attendant knows I'm onto her, swings her microphone back in front of her mouth, digs a scoop into some bacon bits and clatters them helpfully onto the plate of the nearest six-year-old.

I move in between my mother and Sleazy Pete, who turns his attention to the attendant and says, 'I wouldn't mind a few of those.'

My mother's eyes follow him as his charm deploys elsewhere. I don't want to see that. I don't want to see it mattering to her at all.

'So, asparagus,' I say to her. 'How are you going with that?'

'Good,' she says, looking back at me, putting on a smile.

'I didn't know it was such a performance vegetable.'

She goes, 'Hah,' in a caught-out kind of laugh. 'It's just salad.'

'Well next time you need some, let me save you the trouble of getting in and out of the booth. Just tell me what you want and I'll come and get it.'

'No, I'm ...'

'You realise you were miked, don't you? They were listening to you in the kitchen and we could hear it through the door.' The smile empties from her face. The salad bar attendant grabs an almost-finished tray of potato bake from the bain marie and strides towards the kitchen. 'I wasn't going to tell you, but some of us could do without a repeat performance.'

'Right,' my mother says. 'Right, yes. Miked. Hmmm.' She looks around twitchily, as though there could be microphones anywhere. She looks at her plate, looks at the salad bar, and then at the swinging kitchen door. 'That'll do me, I think,' she says.

I follow her back to the booth, where our mains have arrived and Mark's surrounded by potato skin remnants and telling Cat he doesn't need help cutting up his kibbatchi chicken. Peter rejoins us, and slides in opposite my mother. He puts a snake bean between his teeth and gives his eyebrows a jiggle. She gives a very small shake of the head, and he stalls. Another shake of the head, and he frowns and sucks the bean all the way into his mouth and eats it, putting on a look that says the fun's gone out of the evening.

Mark, his entire body mass by now replaced by hibachi chicken, potato skins and

five serves of cheese toast, starts talking about soft serve ice cream and how he had three bowls last time they were here, with chocolate flakes and hundreds and thousands.

‘I suppose you’ll be getting my dessert for me as well,’ my mother says to me.

‘That’s right.’

Cat turns to look across the room and out the window, and she smiles.

‘Hey, where’s the cheese toast?’ Peter says indignantly. ‘We haven’t got the cheese toast yet. Where’s that girl who’s looking after our table?’

and

Set the
Story
Straight