



The Sugarcane Kids and the RED-BOTTOMED BOAT

Shortlisted
for the
Text Prize



Charlie Archbold

Jacob Wilson Is Cool

Bad things happen to good people.

This is a hard truth, and it hits everyone at some time.

It's hitting my best friend, Eli Kelly, right now. I watch it sting him like a hornet. The shock of it blisters as tries to eat his birthday cake. It's meant to be a happy family party, but the yells from the grown-ups are just too much.

'No way. You've gotta be kidding me!' His Uncle Samson has just got a call from the

courthouse. ‘Jacob’s trial is in a month! Why so quick? That’s not enough time to get a proper defence together!’

Eli scrunches up his mouth in an I’m-okay face, but I know he’s not.

Jacob Wilson is Eli’s cousin, and he was arrested for theft last week.

The adults flood in from the front yard, Eli and I sit stunned on the lounge. Beside us Baby Morris starts to howl and Eli’s grandmother, Turtle, hauls him up. Baby Morris is covered in green icing. Turtle spits on her hand and wipes it over his growling face before carrying him into the kitchen.

‘What else did the lawyer say, Samson?’ she asks.

Samson’s deep voice vibrates. ‘They are going to hold him until the trial. He can’t come home.’

I glance over at Eli. ‘Do you wanna go outside?’
He nods.

I know he’s upset.

Two things.

It's meant to be his day and it's ruined, but that's nothing compared to the fact Jacob could go to jail. Jacob is only nineteen and he's like Eli's big brother.

We sit on the porch. The heat of the afternoon sticks my T-shirt to my back. Turtle's front yard is wild. In the middle there's a massive fig tree, and all the leaves of the shrubs are different shades of green like a giant fancy salad. From the base of the trunk the roots splay out like octopus tentacles. We've spent hours playing and climbing on them. The big, dropped leaves are all around it and they stop the grass growing underneath.

There are always things growing and flowering and mulching here. I like his yard better than mine. Mine's like a show house. You can't move a rock without my stepdad, Terry, losing it. If there's even a leaf loose he goes ballistic. Our coconut palms have the coconuts cut off them, so they don't drop on your head and kill you. In

Turtle's yard it's every coconut for itself and once they nearly lost a cat.

'You okay, mate?' I ask Eli.

'No. I'm mad, Andy. Mad that Jacob has been charged with something he didn't do! I'm worried about him. And I'm sad for Turtle. This whole thing is breaking her heart.'

I don't say anything. I shrug in agreement because I feel terrible for my best friend.

Eli has a pack of little cousins, including Baby Morris. There's screaming and they all charge in front of us. They all seem to be about the same age, all boys, and all they do is wrestle each other. With all the grown-ups inside they're going even crazier than usual, running round and round the house. One has a bit of chicken poo on a stick and is chasing the rest of them.

'Will he really throw it?' I ask Eli as they charge past us.

Eli nods and we both smile, at least a little bit.

There's a howl from the backyard, and we hear

Samson bellow at them from the kitchen. 'Inside all of you. This is no day for fighting!'

I kick a flat soccer ball. It thuds away and my legs swing into the empty space between the porch step and the ground. Last year Eli and I dared each other to crawl under Turtle's house hunting for pythons. But I'd got bitten by something and my arm swelled up so much Mum had to take me to the hospital. Terry was furious and said I could never play there again. Of course, Mum made him give in, but by then Eli and I both realised it wasn't such a great idea to be crawling around under the old Queenslander. If you accidentally hit the wood cladding it kinda crumbles away. Terry says it's white ants. He always has something smug to say about Turtle's place.

I don't know what to say to Eli.

I don't know anyone who has been arrested and locked up. And I definitely don't know how the bag of jewellery ended up in Jacob's locker.

Eli looks awful.

‘You wanna come to my place?’ I offer.

He shakes his head and stands up to go back in the house. ‘Nah, thanks. Better stay here.’

Turtle’s crying has stopped. There’s just the mumble of adult talk and the squabbling of the cousins.

‘You know, I know he didn’t do it, right?’ I say.

‘Of course.’

‘Happy Birthday, eh.’

‘Yeah, thanks, Andy.’ Eli sighs, opens the fly-wire door, and goes inside. As it springs shut the new fishing rod I gave him rattles against the wall.

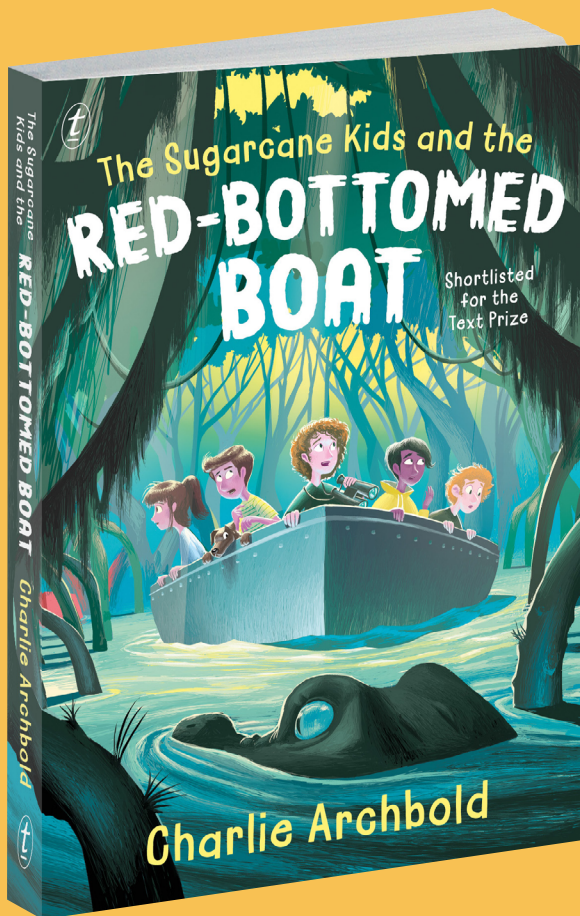
I get up and go find my bike.

Riding home from Turtle’s place I think about Eli and Jacob.

Jacob lived down south but he used to come up every summer to stay with Turtle and Eli. As soon as he was sixteen he moved up here for good. He loves the tropical weather and being out on the sea. It was a dream come true when he got the

job working with the Royce Marine Company, as a deckhand, out on the luxury boats. He wants to work his way up to being a skipper.

Something's super suss with this whole theft thing. Not once, through footy training, taking us fishing out on the reef, mending our bikes, has Jacob ever done a wrong thing. He volunteers at the youth centre and supports Turtle at home. He's always the first to help and the last to leave if a job needs doing or somebody is in trouble. So how the heck did that stuff end up in his locker? It just doesn't make any sense. Jacob Wilson is a seriously good person.



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