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MAIL ON SUNDAY

# JASPER JONES

Shortlisted for the  
2011 IMPAC Dublin Award

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 WINDMILL BOOKS

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# Jasper Jones

Craig Silvey grew up on an orchard in Dwellingup Western Australia. He now lives in Fremantle, where at the age of 19, he wrote his first novel, *Rhubarb*, published by Fremantle Press in 2004.

In 2005, best-selling *Rhubarb*, was chosen as the 'One Book' for the Perth International Writers' Festival, and was included in the national Books Alive campaign. Silvey also received a *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Novelist Award.

In 2007, Silvey released *The World According To Warren*, a picture book affectionately starring the guide-dog from *Rhubarb*.

Outside of literature, Silvey is the singer/songwriter for the band The Nancy Sikes.

## Praise for *Jasper Jones*

'Craig Silvey's *Rhubarb* was one of my favourite Australian novels of 2004 and heralded a major new voice in Australian literary fiction. His next offering in *Jasper Jones* is another beautifully constructed book with a page-turning narrative and outrageously good dialogue.'

Dr Wendy Were, Artistic Director and Chief Executive,  
Sydney Writers' Festival

'Impossible to put down . . . There's tension, injustice, young love, hypocrisy . . . and, above all, the certainty that Silvey has planted himself in the landscape as one of our finest storytellers.'

*Australian Women's Weekly*

'*Jasper Jones* confronts inhumanity and racism, as the stories of Mark Twain and Harper Lee did . . . Silvey's voice is distinctive: astute, witty, angry, understanding and self-assured.'

*Weekend Australian*

'If we see a more entertaining, heartfelt piece of Australian literature in the next 12 months, it will be a rare year indeed . . . An Australian *To Kill a Mockingbird*.'

*The Monthly*

'Craig Silvey's much-awaited second novel is very different from the elegiac *Rhubarb* - but it's every bit as good, if not better . . . Deeply thoughtful, remarkably funny and playful.'

*Readings*

'*Jasper Jones* is a riveting tale, studded with laugh-out-loud and life-affirming moments yet underpinned by clear-eyed examination of human weakness and misdemeanours.'

*Adelaide Advertiser*

**ALSO BY CRAIG SILVEY**

*Rhubarb*

Jasper Jones has come to my window.

I don't know why, but he has. Maybe he's in trouble. Maybe he doesn't have anywhere else to go.

Either way, he's just frightened the living shit out of me.

This is the hottest summer I can remember, and the thick heat seems to seep in and keep in my sleepout. It's like the earth's core in here. The only relief comes from the cooler air that creeps in between the slim slats of my single window. It's near impossible to sleep, so I've spent most of my nights reading by the light of my kerosene lamp.

Tonight was no different. And when Jasper Jones rapped my louvres abruptly with his knuckle and hissed my name, I leapt from my bed, spilling my copy of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

'Charlie! *Charlie!*'

I knelt like a sprinter, alert and fearful.

'Who is it?'

'Charlie! Come out here!'

'Who *is* it?'

'It's Jasper!'

'What? *Who?*'

'Jasper. *Jasper!*' and he pressed his face right up into the light. His eyes green and wild. I squinted.

'What? *Really?* What is it?'

'I need your help. Just come out here and I'll explain,' he whispered.

'What? Why?'

'Jesus *Christ*, Charlie! Just hurry up! Get out here.'

And so, he's here.

Jasper Jones is at my window.

Shaken, I clamber onto the bed and remove the dusty slats of glass, piling them on my pillow. I quickly kick into a pair of jeans and blow out my lamp. As I squeeze headfirst out of the sleepout, something invisible tugs at my legs. This is the first time I've ever dared to sneak away from home. The thrill of this, coupled with the fact that Jasper Jones needs *my* help, already fills the moment with something portentous.

My exit from the window is a little like a foal being born. It's a graceless and gangly drop, directly onto my mother's gerbera bed. I emerge quickly and pretend it didn't hurt.

It's a full moon tonight, and very quiet. Neighbourhood dogs are probably too hot to bark their alarm. Jasper Jones is standing in the middle of our backyard. He shifts his feet from right to left as though the ground were smouldering.

Jasper is tall. He's only a year older than me, but looks a lot more. He has a wiry body, but it's defined. His shape and his muscles have already sorted themselves out. His hair is a scruff of rough tufts. It's pretty clear he hacks at it himself.

Jasper Jones has outgrown his clothes. His button-up shirt is dirty and fit to burst, and his short pants are cut just past the knee. He wears no shoes. He looks like an island castaway.

He takes a step towards me. I take one back.

'Okay. Are you ready?'

'What? Ready for what?'

'I tole you. I need your help, Charlie. Come on.' His eyes are darting, his weight presses back.

I'm excited but afraid. I long to turn and wedge myself through the horse's arse from which I've just fallen, to sit safe in the hot womb of my room. But this is Jasper Jones, and *he* has come to *me*.

'Okay. Wait,' I say, noticing my feet are bare. I head towards the back steps where my sandals sit, scrubbed clean and perfectly aligned. As I strap them on, I realise

that this, the application of pansy footwear, is my first display of girlishness and has taken me mere moments. So I jog back with as much masculinity as I can muster, which even in the moonlight must resemble something of an arthritic chicken.

I spit and sniff and saw at my nose. 'Okay, you roit? You ready?'

Jasper doesn't respond. He just turns and sets off.

I follow.

After climbing my back fence we head downhill into Corrigan. Houses huddle and cluster closer together and then stop abruptly as we reach the middle of town. This late, the architecture is desolate and leached of colour. It feels like we're traipsing through a postcard. Towards the eastern fringe, past the railway station, the houses bloom again and we pass quietly under streetlights which light up lawns and gardens. I have no idea where we're going. The further we move, the keener my apprehension grows. Still, there is something emboldening about being awake when the rest of the world is sleeping. Like I know something they don't.

We walk for an age, but I don't ask questions. Some way out of town, past the bridge and the broad part of the Corrigan River and into the farm district, Jasper pauses to feed a cigarette into his mouth. Wordlessly, he shakes the battered pack my way. I've never smoked before. I've certainly never been offered one. I feel a surge of panic. Wanting both to decline and impress, for some reason I decide to press my palms to my stomach and puff my cheeks when I wag my head at his offer, as if to suggest that I've smoked so many already this evening that I'm simply too full to take another.

Jasper Jones raises an eyebrow and shrugs.

He turns, rests his hip on a gatepost. As Jasper sucks at his smoke, I look past him and recognise where we are. I step back. Here, ghostly in the moonlight, slumps the

weatherworn cottage of Mad Jack Lionel. I quickly look back at Jasper. I hope this isn't our destination. Mad Jack is a character of much speculation and intrigue for the kids of Corrigan. No child has actually laid eyes on him. There are full-chested claimants of sightings and encounters, but they're quickly exposed as liars. But the tall stories and rumours all weave wispily around one single irrefutable fact: that Jack Lionel killed a young woman some years ago, and he's never been seen outside his house since. Nobody among us knows the real circumstances of the event, but fresh theories are offered regularly. Of course, the extent and nature of his crimes have grown worse over time, which only adds more hay to the stack and buries the pin ever deeper. But as the myth grows in girth, so too does our fear of the mad killer hidden in his home.

A popular test of courage in Corrigan is to steal something from the property of Mad Jack Lionel. Rocks and flowers and assorted debris are all rushed back proudly from the high dry-grass sprawl of his front yard to be examined with wonder. But the rarest and most revered feat is to snatch a peach from the large tree that grows by the flank of the cottage like a zombie's hand bursting from a grave. To pilfer and eat a peach from the property of Mad Jack Lionel assures you instant royalty. The stone of the peach is kept as a souvenir of heroics, and is universally admired and envied.

I wonder if we're here to steal a peach each. I hope not. As much as I like the idea of raising my station, I was born without speed or courage, which are both essential to the operation. Besides, even if I miraculously managed to acquire one, I'm certain that no one, not even Jeffrey Lu, would ever believe me anyway.

Still, I notice that Jasper is staring intently at the house. He flicks and grinds his cigarette.

'Is this it? Is this where we're going?' I ask.

Jasper turns.

'What? No. No, Charlie, just stoppin for a smoke.'

I try to conceal my relief as we both survey Lionel's property.

'Dyou reckon it's all true?' I ask.

'Yeah, I reckon. It's all bullshit what people say mostly, but I reckon he's mad alright.'

'Fersure,' I say, and sniff and spit again. 'Completely.'

'I seen him, you know. A bunch of times.' Jasper states it so plainly that I believe him. I beam at him.

'Really? What does he look like? Is he tall? Does he really have a long scar down his face?'

But Jasper just kicks dirt over his smoke and swivels as though he doesn't hear me. We are moving again.

'Carn,' he says.

I shuffle on.



We link back with the river. We walk east along its worn banks for some time. Neither of us speaks. The paperbarks and floodgums that shroud us look eerie and ethereal in the silver light, and I find myself matching Jasper's step.

I begin to recognise the landscape less and less. The banks become more littered and cluttered as the river thins, and small shrubs frost its edge. Soon we're confined to filing along the narrow kangaroo tracks further from the water.

Jasper's stride is long and strong. I walk behind, watching his calves clench in the gloom. His sureness and his presence make him easy to follow. I'm still afraid, of course, but something about being in his bubble is reassuring. I trust him, straight up, though I have no reason to, and it makes me one of few.

Jasper Jones has a terrible reputation in Corrigan. He's a Thief, a Liar, a Thug, a Truant. He's lazy and unreliable. He's a feral and an orphan, or as good as. His mother is

dead and his father is no good. He's the rotten model that parents hold aloft as a warning: *This is how you'll end up if you're disobedient*. Jasper Jones is the example of where poor aptitude and attitude will lead.

In families throughout Corrigan, he's the first name to be blamed for all manner of trouble. Whatever the misdemeanour, and no matter how clear their own child's guilt, parents ask immediately: Were you with Jasper Jones? And of course, more often than not, their kids will lie. They nod, because Jasper's involvement instantly absolves them. It means they've been led astray. They've been waylaid by the devil. And so as the cases are closed, the message is simple: *Stay away from Jasper Jones*.

I'd heard Jasper Jones described as a half-caste, which I'd never really understood until I mentioned it one night at the dinner table. My father is a serene and reasonable man, but those words had him snapping his cutlery down and glaring at me through his thick blackrimmed glasses. He asked me if I understood what I'd just said. I didn't. Then he softened and explained.

Later that night, he came into my room with a stack of books and quietly offered me the very thing I'd wanted all my life: permission to read whatever I liked from his library. My father's rows and stacks of novels had awed me since he taught me to read, but he always chose the volumes he thought were appropriate. So it felt important, and it was clear to me that he thought it was significant too. But I wondered if it came about because he thought I was growing up, or if he worried that Corrigan might be luring me towards things that troubled him.

Either way, something forbidden had been lifted. He gave me a leatherbound stack of Southern writers to start with. Welty, Faulkner, Harper Lee, Flannery O'Connor. But the biggest portion of the stack was Mark Twain. There must have been a dozen of his books in there.

As he laid them gently on my desk, my father told me Twain was the single reason he taught literature. He said there was nothing he couldn't teach you, and nothing he didn't have an opinion about. He said that Twain was as wise a counsel as any, and that if every man read at least one of his books at some time in his life, it would be a far better world for it.

He pressed his thumb on my cowlick, as he sometimes did, and ran his hand through my hair and smiled.

That was winter. By now, I'm halfway through that bundle. I understand why he chose them. I enjoyed the Harper Lee book the best, but I told my father that *Huckleberry Finn* was my favourite. I started *The Sound and the Fury*, but had to abandon it. To be honest, I had no idea what the hell was going on. I refused to ask my father though. I didn't want him thinking I wasn't smart enough.

Because that's all I've ever had, really. Corrigan is a town whose social currency is sport. That's where most kids find and hold their own. The mine employs most people, and the power station herds in the rest, which means there isn't much class divide. And so kids have established a hierarchy based on their skill with a ball, rather than their clothes or their family car. I'm lousy at sport, and better than most at school, which garners me only ire in the classroom and resentment when report cards are issued. But at least I have something over them, even though it's a lonely celebration.

Of course, it also means I'm mostly ignored. It's worse for Jeffrey Lu, my best and only friend, who is younger and smaller and, if I'm honest, smarter than me. Jeffrey has been moved up a year, and he's my main competitor for primacy, other than Eliza Wishart. But I don't mind either of them in the race. Least of all Eliza.

Jeffrey's parents are Vietnamese, so he's ruthlessly bullied and belted about by the boys at school. He probably cops it worse than Jasper. But he takes it all astonishingly

well, which has always eased my guilt given that I'm never brave enough to intervene. Jeffrey is unflappable. He has a smile that you can't wipe or slap or goad off his face. And unlike me, he never stoops to sycophancy or spite. In a way, he's more assured than any of those vindictive bastards with peach pits in their pockets. But I'd never tell him that.



When Jasper Jones stops and grabs my shoulder, I jolt like he's shot volts through my body. I point the bridge of my glasses further up my nose and wait. Jasper pushes through a bush and ushers me through. We're moving off the path. I hesitate.

'Where are we going? What do you need me for?'

'S'not far now, Charlie. You'll find out.'

I trust him. I have to. I've come too far. If he were to leave me here and now, I'd never make it back.

I can't hear the river anymore, and the canopy overhead has stolen the moonlight. As we press further, I'm finding it harder to imagine what kind of help Jasper needs. I don't understand what particular unique skill I bring to the table. It's a strange coalition, me and Jasper Jones. We've never really even spoken before. I'm surprised he knew my name, let alone where I lived. He's rarely at school, just long enough to qualify for football. I've only ever caught glimpses of him from a distance, so I can't help but thrill in this sense of inclusion. In my head, I'm already composing my recount to Jeffrey.

We are in fairly thick bush now. It's unearthly quiet. Jasper still hasn't said a word without my prompting, and his replies have been nothing but brusque bursts. Despite the absence of any landmarks, he seems to know exactly where he's going, and I'm grateful. I stick close behind, like a loyal and leashless dog. My anticipation is growing. I wonder if my parents heard me leave. I'm not sure what

they'd do if they found my room empty. Sheets bunched, bed pared bare, louvres stacked. They'd have to assume I'd been snatched. Kidnapped. They'd never believe I had slipped out of my own accord. This is, by far, my worst-ever transgression. Probably my only ever transgression. And if I am caught out, I'd probably be the only kid in Corrigan who could truthfully argue that they'd been led astray by Jasper Jones.

He's starting to walk faster. Branches and shrubs snap back at me with more force. My arm has been scratched by bracken. I don't complain. I just adjust my speed to match. Our feet share the same crisp military rhythm. I'm sweating.

Then Jasper Jones stops.

Right here. At the foot of an enormous old-growth jarrah. The tree has an astonishing girth. I can't help but stare straight up, to see how far it reaches into the sky. I can feel my pulse thrumming my temples. I'm panting. I need to clean my glasses. When I glance back down, I notice Jasper Jones is staring at me. I can't place his expression. It's as though he's about to leap from something very high. I tilt my head to the side and I'm suddenly very fearful. My anticipation is usurped by a sense of dreadful foreboding. Something is wrong. Something has happened. My weight is on my heel. I don't want to be here anymore.

He motions towards a curtain of wattle to the left of the giant jarrah.

'It's through here,' he says.

'What? *What* is?'

'You'll see it, Charlie. Shit. You'll've wished you dint, but you'll see it. It's not too late but. Are you sure you're gonna help me?'

'Can't you just *tell* me? What is it? What's through there?'

'I can't. I can't, mate. But I can trust you, Charlie. I reckon I can trust you.'

It isn't a question, but it seems like one.

And I believe if it were anyone else, I would choose to step back and turn away right now. I would never bow my head and push through that wattle, and its golden orbs would never shake loose and nestle in my hair like confetti. I would never grab at its rough trunk to save me from tripping. I would never part its locks of foliage. And I would never lift my head to see this neat clearing of land. I would never look past Jasper Jones to reveal his secret.

But I don't turn back. I stay. I follow Jasper Jones.

And I see it.

And everything changes.

The world breaks and spins and shakes.

I'm screaming, but they are muffled screams. I can't breathe in. I feel like I'm underwater. Deaf and drowning. Jasper Jones has a hand pressed over my mouth, another across my shoulder pulling me in towards him. My hips lurch back, back, back out of here, but my feet are rooted to the clearing. Blessedly, my eyes cloud over with tears and obscure it all until they are blinked away. And it's there before me again. Jasper has me hard. He covers my thin frame easily. It's horrible. Too horrible for words.

It is a girl.

It is a girl and she is in a dirty cream lace nightdress. She is pale. In the silver light I can see she bears scratches down her arms. And her calves. And her face is smudged and bruised and bloody. And she is hanging by the neck from a thick rope tied to the bough of a silver eucalypt. She is still. She is limp. Her feet are bare and turned in. Her long hair is trapped tight under the noose. Her head is to the side, like a piece of biblical art. She looks disappointed and sad. Surrendered.

I can't look away. Jasper can't look. He holds me like that, his back to the girl, absorbing my movements until I

fall quiet. I am breathing very quickly. And quaking. I don't understand. He *knew* this. He knew and he brought me here. To see a girl hanging from a tree. She's dead. She has died. Jasper drops his arm from my shoulder as I speak. I can barely stand.

'Who is it?'

Jasper Jones takes some time to answer.

'Laura Wishart. It's Laura.'

It takes me a moment.

'Oh my god. Oh my god. It is. It *is* her.'

'Yeah,' Jasper says softly. He's observing her now. Out of the corner of my eye, I see his head shake softly. He looks so skinny now. And slouched. Like a boy. I am completely lost. Everything seems slow and dreamlike. It really does. Like I'm not really here, and it isn't happening. It is all apparition. I am removed from it. Spectating from beyond my body, watching it all on a screen.

'I'm sorry, Charlie. I'm sorry about this, mate. I dunno what to do.'

I am hugging my elbows. I turn to Jasper Jones.

'Why would you bring me here? I shouldn't be here. I have to go back home. You have to tell someone about this.'

'Wait. Charlie, not yet, mate. Not yet.' It's a firm plea. We fall silent.

'Why did she do this? What is . . . ? I mean, *what?* I don't understand. What *happened?*' I am almost whispering.

'She dint do it. Herself, I mean. It weren't her.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean she can't have, Charlie.'

'What? Why?'

'She can't have. For starters, look. Look at that rope. See? That's mine. That's my rope. Use it to swing into the dam there. Look. See? But I always hide it after. I wrap it way up there on that branch so you can't see it.'

Jasper speaks fast. Too fast to absorb. And for the first time I observe the surrounds. Behind the eucalypt, which is

broad and hollow at the base, like an open tent, there is a small waterhole. In front of that, the space we are standing in is perfectly cleared and ringed by high shrubs and trees. It's a strange little enclave. I imagine it might be something rare and amazing during the day. A quiet bush oasis. But right now it just seems sinister and suffocating. I need to leave. I can't be here. Laura Wishart has died. And she's right here. I can't look.

The eucalypt rises bare for over fifteen feet before it extends the thick arm the rope is tied to. Save for a fat black burr about halfway between, there are no footholds or grips.

'And it's fucken hard to get up there,' Jasper goes on. 'You got to almost sort of shinny up. Like those coconut trees or whatever. See? No way Laura could have got up there and brought it down herself. No way.'

'What about with a stick or something? Or it might have just come loose. With the wind. I don't know.'

'I don't see any sticks about, Charlie, dyou? Or wind. And it can't have come loose, cause I wrap it up and tie it. Cause I don't want anyone to know about this place.'

I nod, dazed. I can't think properly.

Everything falls silent again.

'So what are you saying? What does this *mean*?'

'Charlie. Listen. I'm saying *she dint do it*.'

'So who *did*?' I ask, before a cold feeling of terror and dread suddenly has me backing away from him. I gag on the word:

'You?'

He turns to me. He looks baffled and disdainful. He shakes his head impatiently. His chin kicks.

'What? Shit, Charlie. I thought you were smart, mate. You reckon this was *me*? You reckon *I* did this? Is that what you think?'

'I don't *know*. I don't know what I think.'

And it's true. I don't. I just feel ill and very tired. I want to leave.

But Jasper turns and shakes his head again. He spits.

'Listen, Charlie. I got to explain. This spot here, this space, it's sort of mine. See, I'm not the only one who's bin here, but I'm the only one who knows how to get here. No one has bin here without me. Ever. Well, till now. Till tonight. But this is sort of where I stay. I sleep here and eat here when I'm not at home. It kind of *is* my home. You unnerstand?'

He pauses to scratch the back of his hair and slide his arm across his forehead. He clears his throat.

'Anyway, I come here tonight. And first thing,' Jasper pauses and shuffles, his voice gets thick. 'Fucken hell, first thing, I saw her up there. I saw it was Laura, straight up. And I run over there and grab her legs and I try to hold her up. I try to stop her. But she was gone already, Charlie. I could feel that she was gone, right?'

It is all coming at me in a dim rush. My mouth is ajar.

'So what did you do?' I ask.

'Well, I dint know what to do. I just sort of backed away and looked at her. But I couldn't stay here. I just couldn't. I got out. And that's when I come to your place.'

'And you think somebody did this? Somebody hanged her?'

'I do, Charlie. Look at her face. It's all beat up. She dint do that to herself, did she? Someone's done this to her.'

'Who?'

'I don't know.'

At this point I shrink away and scan the trees. My knees actually tremble. This is a nightmare. It has to be. I'm not living it.

'Christ, Jasper! What if they're still out there? What if he's watching us right now? What were you thinking? Why would you bring me here?'

I keep scanning. It feels as though the trees are closing in.

'Easy, *easy*. It's orright. Charlie, it's orright. There's nobody around now.'

'How? How do you know that?' I'm shrieking. Like a girl.

'I dunno. I just do. I can tell,' he says calmly.

But my fear is itching me. A sickly buzz on my skin. I feel as though somebody is watching us. Listening intently. The body of Laura Wishart is haunting and surreal. It is so *close*. The fact of her death still hasn't entirely occurred to me. That it isn't Laura Wishart anymore. It's an empty bag. A wax doll. A sloughed shell. It is so strange. I can't muster any tenderness for it. It's as though there's a part of me up there, limp and unfeeling.

But it's clear that something very violent has happened in this still place. And we are here in its wake, in its passing. Bucked by its ripples. Laura Wishart is dead. Look. Dead. She is right there, hanging from that tree. Right there. In the centre of Jasper Jones's part of the world. Hovering above his piece of earth.

Two boys and a body.

There are drums in my head. Doom doom doom. It's so difficult to breathe in this little clearing. Something has shifted. A bubble has burst. I want out. I feel faint. I've got to be away from this. I want to be back at home, but that seems very far away. And I'm so threatened by the fact that even if I broke out of here, I couldn't get back there if I tried.

No, it's too late. Like Jasper Jones, I have seen what I have seen. I am involved.

'Jasper, I don't know what to do. I don't know why I'm here,' I say, observing Laura Wishart's bare, grubby feet. 'This is horrible. We've got to go tell somebody.'

Jasper looks at me with unnerving intensity.

'No, we can't. We can't tell anybody. We can't tell *anybody*, Charlie,' Jasper presses his lips firm, his eyes

wide and white.

'We have to find out, Charlie.'

'What do you mean *find out*?'

'We have to find out who did this. Who killed Laura. We have to find out who come here and done this to her.'

I shake my head briefly before I reply.

'What are you *talking* about? No we don't! We go to the police! That's what we do. We go to the sarge and we tell him what happened and where she is, and *they* find out. That's their job. We can't keep this a secret. Her family have to know. It's got nothing to do with us.'

'Shit, Charlie. You got no idea, do you?'

'What? Why?'

'Open your eyes, mate.'

'What does that *mean*? They *are* open! What are you trying to tell me?'

Jasper sighs heavily.

'Bloody hell. Listen, Charlie, we can't tell *anyone*. No way. *Specially* the police. Because they are gonna say it was me. Straight up. Unnerstand? They're gonna come here, see that it's my place, they'll see her face, they'll see she's bin knocked around, they'll see that it's my rope. And they're gonna say it was me that lynched her up. They'll charge me and put me away, mate. No questions.'

'What? *Why*? That's bullshit, Jasper. That's not going to happen.'

'Really?' And Jasper points at me now, rising like a snake. 'Who was the first person *you* thought of? Who was the first person who come out of *your* mouth?'

And it happens like that. Like when you first realise that there is no such thing as magic. Or that nothing actually answers your prayers, or really even listens. That cold moment of dismay, where your feet are kicked from under you, where you're disarmed by a shard of knowing. He's right. Jasper Jones is right. He's really in trouble.

Of course this town will blame him. Of course Corrigan is going to accuse him of this. And it doesn't matter what he says. His word isn't worth shit. All that matters is the fact of this girl's death and this town's imagination. He'll be cuffed and led away. The outcast that killed the shire president's daughter. He doesn't stand a chance.

'Then what do we do? And what about Laura?' I ask. 'They'll start looking as soon as they notice she's gone. They're going to find her here anyway.'

Jasper shakes his head shortly as he pinches out a cigarette. I notice he is quivering slightly. He doesn't answer my question. Instead he pulls at another thread of thought. 'That's what I don't get, Charlie. Why *here*? How did it happen *here*? Someone must've follered me. Someone else knows about this place. I don't think it's chance. It can't be.'

'What, you think someone is trying to set you up?' I ask. Jasper offers me a smoke, and again, for some reason, I gesture to suggest I'm too full to accept.

'Yeah. I reckon they might be, Charlie.'

I narrow my eyes.

'But you said earlier that people had been here before. With you. Like me, tonight.'

'Sure. I know. But you're the only bloke who's bin here, and I can count on my hand the people who have.'

'Did you ever bring Laura Wishart here?'

Jasper Jones pockets his hands and looks at the ground.

'Yeah. Yeah, I did. A few times, Charlie. A lot actually. But I always took her a different way through the bush, so she'd never know how to get here on her own.'

'Why would you do that?'

'Well, why dyou reckon? I don't want anybody knowing how to get here. It's hard to explain. It's orright to share it sometimes, but I also want to keep it to meself.'

I nod.

'But it wasn't like how you're thinking with Laura,' he goes on quickly, though I have no idea what he's presuming. 'She weren't the same as other girls round town. She was smart, Charlie. Not smart like you. Different. Sort of *wise*. We got on real good. She always wanted to come here. She was always on at me. But I liked to let her. You know how you meet someone and you feel like you've known them all your life? That's how it was. Real easy. It wasn't like those other girls that come here. We never really fooled around much, even though she were older. She was strange about all that stuff. But I never cared really. It's not why I brang her here anyways.'

None of this clears my confusion. Jasper's shoulders have eroded. He looks defeated and sad.

'Who would do this, then? Who? You knew her, is there anybody who could do this? Who would want to?'

'I have a suspicion,' he says, and lights another cigarette. Despite the stillness of this place, he shields the tip with his curved palm. He doesn't offer me one, though this time I almost wish he had. 'I think I know who could have done it. It came to me straight away, and I can't shake it off. I keep thinking about it. And I reckon I might be right.'

'Who?' I lean forward.

He taps his cigarette, holds it by his thigh and turns to me.

'Jack Lionel. I reckon it was Jack Lionel.'

My eyes widen.

'See, Charlie, when I say I seen him a bunch of times, it's because he's got it in for me, more than anyone else in this town. For certain. He's a bloody madman. Every time I pass his house on the way to here, and I mean *every* single time, he comes out on his porch wavin and yellin, callin out my name. Real strange. He knows my *name*, Charlie. I reckon he's out to get me. Got to be. For sure.'

This is all too much. It's all too fast. I'm hopelessly lost. And afraid. I really feel like that cigarette now. I watch its amber ember rise and fall with each toke. It looks comforting. I feel tired. I want to sit. Or to lie down on this soft bit of earth. But I can't. I'm involved. That's what I don't understand: that somehow I've become enmeshed in this.

'But what has this got to do with Laura? If Mad Jack Lionel is out for *you*, why would he do this?'

'Because he were out on his veranda hollerin every time I walked past with Laura. So he's seen her. He knew we were together a lot. And she's seen him too. She got really afraid of him. He got her all worked up and tense. So maybe *he* followed us. He's the only one I can think of who might've. Or maybe he knew somehow where we were going. Maybe he knows about this place. Maybe it was him, Charlie.'

Jasper anticipates my next question.

'Every night he sees me, he runs out and screams and yells and carries on. Every single night. Every night except *tonight*, Charlie. Remember that? Not even a light on. Nuthin. And we were out there *waiting*. Not a word.'

I frown. I don't feel so removed anymore. I bite at the inside of my cheeks. Sudden tears sting my eyes. I really don't want to cry, but I'm angry. And stunned. And I'm very afraid. I don't know. I feel betrayed. Or something. But mostly just scared. My voice cracks and breaks.

'Wait, after you had a suspicion that Mad Jack Lionel had just *killed* someone, you came to get me, and then you took me straight to his house? Without telling me *why*? And then you bring me here, to see this! And there's a chance this crazy bastard is still around here, waiting for you or for the both of us? Why? Why would you do that to me? Piss off. And . . . fuck *you*. I'm going. I'm fucking *going*.'

I grind my teeth hard to stop the tears from coming. My nostrils flare and my tongue grows fat and my mouth tastes

sour. I've never really sworn like this before. It feels strange. And of course, I'm not going anywhere. I'm trapped here. There's no avenue for escape. From anything. This place, this mess. Jasper Jones is my return fare.

And he walks tall towards me, his smoke resting between his lips. He extends a hand to my shoulder and it is immediately calming.

'Don't go yet, Charlie. Please, mate? I need you to help me. I dunno what else to do. I really don't. I'm real sorry. I really am.'

I blink hard. I sniff and spit and readjust my glasses. Jasper's hand stays on my shoulder.

'Listen. You're safe here with me, Charlie. Trust me. You got to trust me. Like I trust you. I know you're a good sort. I know it. We're gonna do the right thing. We are.'

I shake my head.

'But *what?* What are we going to do? Don't you see how hopeless all this is? We're not detectives! This isn't Nancy Drew! This is serious. We can't conduct interviews. We can't *talk* to people about it. We can't *do* anything.'

'But we can still try. And that's more than the Corrigan police are gonna do if I go walk in there right now and tell them what's happened. It'll be case closed before it's even opened, Charlie. There'll be a fucken court date before there's a funeral. You know it. You *know* this town. I don't have to do nothing to get into trouble here. So we got to find out who done this. We *got* to.'

And as much as this is absurd and illogical, there is something in Jasper's reasoning that is irresistible. It's easy to accept that he really could be right. That he *will* go to prison for something he didn't do. That this town *is* that crooked and low. That Mad Jack Lionel could really be responsible for this. That it *is* up to us. That the curse over Jasper's head is that thick and evil. And maybe we *can* solve this and set things right. Maybe I am the only person