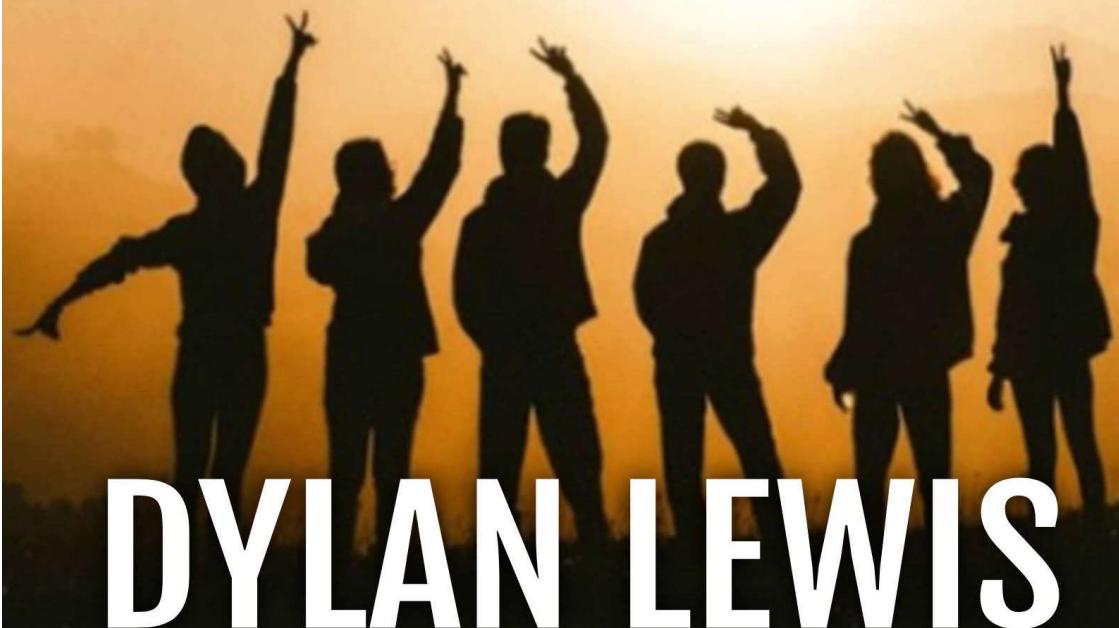


An AB Discovery Book

SIX MISFITS

Six teenagers who don't fit in, find each other.



DYLAN LEWIS

Six Misfits

By

Dylan Lewis

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Author's Note

The story is set at the present time (2018) on the northeastern, inland edge of the wheat belt region of the State of Western Australia.

The wheat belt is a vast swathe of thinly populated land fringing the southwestern corner of Australia, largely devoted to broad-acre wheat and sheep farming. It is a flat, sparse, monochromatic landscape but it has its' own beauty if you give it a chance. At its' eastern edge, close to where the story is set, runs the rabbit-proof fence immortalized in the movie of the same name. Beyond the fence, the land gives over to even more thinly settled sprawling cattle stations, amidst scrub and natural pasture and vast salt lakes.

The town of Gabberin is fictional – although you can drive through many like it across the wheat belt. The other towns are real.

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I. The Bus - [Friday]



Dylan was convinced he was going to die.

The panic inside was certainly going to kill him.

His insides were a maelstrom. He both wanted to die and didn't want to die. He didn't want to die like this, with the panic rising up, choking him, threatening to rob him of all control, safety and dignity. He wanted to die on his own terms, in control, without the gut-wrenching fear, the searing shame and the scorching anger.

He felt bereft and terrified. He was alone in the worst way; alone with others jammed up beside him and no escape to be by himself. He was terrified that the fear would get out of control and he would cry and sob shamefully. He was even afraid he'd wet himself from the fear. All the

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others would despise him as a cry baby. It's what they thought anyway. They'd reject him. Some would bully and hurt him, and he'd never be able to look them in the eye again without reliving his shame. His life would be destroyed.

Every minute, every kilometre was taking him further from what was familiar, what was safe. The refuge of his room – a place where he could shut the door on the world, safe with his books and music, was now beyond reach. Worst, he was cooped up with five loonies who knew his deepest darkest secret.

"Five *other* loonies," he bitterly corrected himself.

The fact that he knew their stories and secrets didn't make him feel any safer. He was like a hermit crab without a shell. He was on the mini-bus with five other 'at risk' teenagers and a driver. The teenagers, aged thirteen or fourteen, were on their way to a retreat in the country.

Dylan sought the only safety to be had on the bus. He put his face close to the window to block out everything around him and stared through the scratched dirty glass. The country rolled steadily past with its emptiness the only saving grace. There were no people in the vast open landscape outside. Its colours were soft under the overcast afternoon sky. It was just undulating paddocks that stretch to the horizon, rich dark brown, ploughed and sown, and now left to the winter rain. The hand of man was everywhere; the wire fencing, windmills, the occasional farmstead or piece of farm machinery left in the paddock. But it was as though man had done his work and then left.

Dylan could lose himself in the empty vast solitude. The occasional block of bush was mysterious and enticing and a momentary fantasy of escaping to be a hermit living in the bush launched him into a comforting reverie. The rolling, unchanging vista of empty paddocks and grey sky was hypnotic and tranquilising. Mercifully, the fear receded until he was simply numb with misery.

They'd been on the mini-bus since early this morning. The passenger compartment in the middle, seated eight, four each side of the

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aisle. Mesh screens separated it from the driver's compartment at the front and the luggage compartment at the rear.

"Prison transfer van," some of the teenagers had joked derisively among themselves. It might as well have been with the '*Department of Community Services*' title and logo emblazoned on each side.

"I can't get a signal!" It was part wail, part imprecation, part spoiled-brat princess, part panic-stricken girl. That was Chloe Petrovic, for the umpteenth time. The mobile phone was practically glued to her hand.

Dylan recoiled from a panic that mirrored his own. He stared harder at the passing country. He heard Lily's soft voice, trying to soothe Chloe. Those two were probably the closest to being friends of any of the six of them. Dylan thought Lily was the nicest of his five fellow passengers. She was the only one he'd call friendly. She seemed gentle and afraid; just like how he felt on the inside. He wanted to be friendly back, but he wasn't sure he could.

Pretty, raven-haired, petite Lily, the most feminine one of the group, was a boy - Liam Tran. He was transgender. You wouldn't know if you saw him on the street. Dylan was afraid if he was friendly with Lily, some of the others would say he was gay. He couldn't deal with that, not on top of everything else he was dealing with.

"I still can't get a signal!" The tone was definitely spoiled princess more than anything else. Lily's words and calming presence must be working.

"We heard you the first time, you stupid bitch, why don't you just shut-the-fuck up!" shouted Daria da Costa.

Butch lesbian Daria. She was sitting in the back seat, the seat she had claimed for herself as soon as they got on the bus. It was the top dog's seat; the one furthest away from Ricky the driver; the one where she could see everyone without twisting her neck. She'd put her bag on the seat opposite, reserving the entire back row for herself.

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Daria scared the hell out of Dylan. She was a strapping girl. She wore a black fake leather biker's jacket, a T-shirt with '*what R U looking at*' on the front, jeans and black Doc Martens. Her hair was shorter than any of them, even the boys, and she had piercings in her nose. With her coffee-coloured skin, she could be mistaken as Aboriginal, although her features suggested otherwise.

Daria didn't like Chloe, not that Dylan was surprised. The two girls couldn't be more different. Chloe was a feminine girly-girl, everything that Daria wasn't.

"Shut up yourself, you lezzo," Chloe retorted, turning in her seat to glare back at Daria. Chloe was emboldened.

Chloe was sitting in the front row, closest to the driver, with others in the middle between her and Daria. In particular, Steven Kickett, Daria's rival for top-dog was between her and Daria. That counted for something. Steven was a big boy, an Aboriginal with the muscular build you'd expect of someone who was a good Australian Football player. Dylan envied Steven. Steven was a boy's boy; confident in his body. It made Dylan conscious of the hesitant awkwardness that made him feel his masculinity was never good enough. Dylan had been shocked when Steven declared himself gay. Though Steven was bigger than Daria, she still seemed to have him, and everyone else, psyched-out. Steven sat in the row ahead of Daria. The seat opposite him was vacant. No one else dared put themselves in Steven and Daria's league for top dog.

Unfortunately for Dylan, he was also in the middle of the argument. He was sitting in the next row, immediately ahead of Steven and behind Chloe and Lily.

Martha McCorkell sat opposite Dylan. She was quiet, like him, and withdrawn. She seemed to despise everyone else, Dylan only a bit less than the others. She was tall and slim with short blonde hair. Dylan thought she looked the most normal of any of them. That is if you didn't look at the scars on her arms. Martha was a 'cutter'. Self-harm the psychologists called it.

"Gonna make me are you, Barbie?" Daria taunted.

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“Oooh... Daphne, why so angry?” Chloe retorted with dripping sarcasm.

Chloe’s somewhat pretty, albeit slightly heavier featured face, was twisted with spite. Instead of an angry insult in reply, there was a pregnant silence. Everyone - even Dylan - turned to look. Daria’s face was stricken. Everyone could tell this was sadistic ‘paper cut’ bullying – public ridicule of private anguish.

Daria’s ‘real’ name was Daphne. Horrified fascination held the group’s attention, but Chloe hurried on with her revenge.

“Daphne’s such a pretty name, don’t you think? Such a feminine name,” she asked the group at large with eager sarcasm.

“I’ll kill you, you bitch!” It was a howl of anguish and rage.

Daria flung herself down the aisle between the seats. Chloe saw the rage on Daria’s face and knew she’d gone too far. Chloe screamed at the top of her voice.

“Oh shit!” exclaimed Steven.

He grabbed the back of Daria’s jacket as she flew past him. It slowed her, but the force of her lunge still carried her forward. She flung her fist hard at her target. Chloe screamed again and curled up, putting her head in her lap and her hands over her head. Chloe wasn’t much smaller than Daria, so it wouldn’t have been a completely unfair fight. Chloe however, was such a girly-girl, she had no chance against rough, tough Daria. Pulling Steven behind her, Daria rose over Chloe poised to punch her tormentor.

Dylan looked on, frozen in his seat. He knew this retreat was a mistake. They’d only had a few sessions as a group. There was all the difference in the world between having Georgia the social worker in the room and leaving this group of heaving emotions and hormones to their own devices. Georgia had a gift of making you feel safe. This, however, was a total, uncontrolled nightmare.

In the seat opposite Dylan, Martha was similarly frozen. Martha was horrified and terrified at the chaos of erupting emotions.

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"These people were out of control! Lunatics!" Martha thought to herself.

To Martha's mind, this group of teenagers on the bus gave themselves the most terrifying licence to say and do whatever they wanted. Most of them were what she thought of as *unnatural perverts* who defied the Law of God: boys who fancied boys, girls who fancied girls, and boys who wanted to be girls. What was wrong with them! Her parents and the elders of her church had been right. She was alone in the midst of a virtual Sodom and Gomorrah!

Martha had been shunned, cast out of the closed Exclusive Brethren community in which she had spent her whole life. All she wanted to do was to wear jeans, have short hair and ride trail bikes. She didn't want to be a boy and she didn't fancy girls. To her, it wasn't fair that so little had gotten her shunned when these *lunatics* around her openly flaunted their perversions. Instinctively, she tried to put a barrier between herself and the chaos by pulling inside herself, trying to fight off the awful, enveloping despair.

Suddenly, Daria was flung forward down the aisle. The rest of them were pushed forward hard in their seats. Seeing the brewing conflict, Ricky the driver had stood on the brakes hard. Daria was sprawled, winded and stunned on the floor of the aisle. Suddenly, the side door was violently slid open.

The intimidating figure of the driver Ricky filled the doorway. He was a big man with broad shoulders, a beer gut and short-cropped grey hair. His face was florid as though he was habitually angry and he had big threatening hands.

"What the hell's going on?" he demanded.

He scanned the faces of the six teenagers. Several sullen faces stared back. Other scared faces looked away. No one spoke.

"I hate these stupid whiny kids!" he mumbled under his breath.

Over twenty-five years of it was enough for anyone. If it wasn't for his pension, Ricky would have decked a few and told the Department

what it could do with its job. With a bully's instinct, he picked out the faces he could intimidate.

"Was she attacking you?" he demanded of Chloe, pointing at Daria who was still lying on the floor.

Chloe looked terrified as Ricky stood over her. He was forced to bend his head under the low ceiling, forcing his frog-eyed face into hers. The rest of the teenagers watched in fright.

Chloe burst into tears and buried her head in her hands.

Ricky turned on Lily. "What happened?"

Lily simply shrugged her finely chiselled shoulders.

"Tell me what happened!" Ricky repeated, raising his voice.

"Didn't see," said Lily in a small voice.

"What the hell happened?" Ricky shouted at Dylan.

"I was looking out the window," said Dylan hesitantly. He was terrified of Ricky. The man's brutal manner made him feel like a small child. He wished he had the courage to defy the man openly, instead of lying.

"Fucking kids! Loonies and losers the lot of you!" Ricky shouted.

He stood over Daria. His fists were clenching and unclenching. Dylan thought he was going to lose it and start laying into the girl. Daria's face crumpled. She started sobbing.

"Shut up," Ricky commanded her. "Get back in your seat and stay there. If I hear a peep out of you again, I'll turn you over to the cops at the next town and they can sort you out. There are no bleeding-heart social workers out here. And that goes for all of you!"

He turned and made his way out of the passenger compartment, slammed the door shut and walked further down the gravel shoulder of the road. Facing away from the bus, he lit a cigarette to calm his anger.

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Daria got into her seat and turned away, into the corner. Her shoulders shook.

“Bastard!” murmured Steven, fervently.

“I thought he was going to lose it,” said Lily fearfully. She took Chloe’s hand to comfort the still sobbing girl.

“He’s a psycho,” said Steven.

Dylan found the courage to nod his agreement. Martha and Lily followed. Dylan was even more scared of Ricky now, but he was proud he’d not told the driver anything.

Chloe held up her head. She looked with puffy eyes at the others, evidently expecting to draw their sympathy. Dylan couldn’t hide his disapproval.

“It wasn’t my fault the driver got stuck in,” Chloe told him. She could see from the faces of the others that she had exhausted their sympathy, as tears welled up again in her eyes.

“She was going to kill me. It’s her fault. Blame her,” Chloe spat.

Daria had retreated into herself and stayed silent, but Chloe’s words were too much for Dylan.

“You didn’t have to be so cruel,” he told her. Chloe could see from their expressions that the others agreed. She was surprised by their reactions.

“Why are you sticking up for her? Do you think sucking up will stop her picking on you when she feels like it? Or does the *whittle baby girl* want the lezzo for her mummy? Do you think she’s going to change your whittle baby nappies?” Chloe taunted Dylan.

Dylan blanched. He felt light-headed. This was his worst nightmare. Girls terrified him for just this reason. With a few clever cutting words in public, they could cut him down to nothing. He couldn’t hit girls and he couldn’t match their cruel words, so he was defenceless like a tethered goat.

Dylan was a Teen Baby.

He had a compulsion to wear nappies and pretend he was a baby, preferably with all the paraphernalia like dummies and bibs. In his case, he felt he was a baby girl. When he dressed up, he felt transformed into an adorable cute toddler. All his fears and worries were momentarily gone. He was as deeply ashamed of himself, as he was powerless to stop.

Everyone on the bus knew his deep dark secret.

Georgia the social worker had gotten all of them to declare their secrets and shame in the counselling group. Now, Chloe was using it to ridicule him in the worst way he feared. He wanted to hit her, but after Ricky's last intervention, that was out of the question and Chloe knew it. With no recourse, Dylan couldn't stop the tears. In abject misery, he turned to stare unseeing out the window.

"Damn Chloe, you're a bitch," said Steven.

Chloe finally realised that she had pushed it too far. There were none left on her side. Even Lily had withdrawn her comforting hand. Chloe felt alone and friendless. All she was doing was defending herself against people who didn't understand the refinement she loved and who were rough and crude. They all hated her. She hadn't been able to transform herself and put on her lovely dresses and shoes for just so long. Chloe suddenly burst into tears and put her head in her hands.

Chloe was a fervent devotee of *Sweet Lolita* cosplay. After hours of setting her hair in ringlets, precisely applying her makeup and finally putting on her beautiful and expensive little-girl dresses and shoes, she felt like a princess. She considered it a beautiful passion that harmed nobody, and yet here she was, lumped together with a butch lezzo, a boofy Abo gay, a 'cutter' and stupid immature boy who wanted to go back into nappies. Only pretty, kind and dainty Lily understood and yet, even she was siding with the louts.

By the time Ricky had finished his second cigarette and gotten back in the driver's seat, they were all silent and withdrawn. The driver glanced at the sullen faces and grunted his satisfaction. He'd stamped his

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authority before this pack of delinquents had gotten out of hand. He'd have some peace now.

Ricky wanted to be at the reunion in Dalwallinu tonight. Getting there on the Department's fuel was the only reason he'd taken this nightmare trip to nowhere in the first place. The sooner he could drop his passengers off, the sooner he could head off for Dalwallinu. It would be tight for time, but he should just make it.

With a splatter of gravel, the mini-bus moved off the shoulder and accelerated up the road that ran in a long straight ribbon into the far distance. There were no other vehicles in sight.

The six teenagers stared out the windows. The awful confrontations had shattered any semblance of trust or confidence in the group. Each was certain the week's retreat was going to be a torment. Each was there because they trusted Georgia, not each other. They referred to the group, with some recrimination, as 'The Misfits'.

"What do we have in common?" each asked themselves silently and emphatically answered, "Nothing!"

Their aspirations for adult independence were real but fragile. Now, those aspirations had been defeated and they waited upon Georgia's arrival to recreate any civility or purpose. She was going to meet them when they arrived at the retreat. It was a Department of Community Services camp in the middle of the Western Australian Wheatbelt.

For most, the sense of desolation deepened when the mini-bus turned off onto a side road. It was obviously less used and cared for than the road they'd been on. The bitumen was narrow so that two cars could only just pass each other. It was a weathered grey with the occasional pothole that indicated it was many years since it had last been re-sealed.

It looked just how they felt.

II. Gabberin



Sitting at the front on the passenger's side, Lily had the best view forward. She saw the eighty kilometre per hour speed limit sign and knew it signified they were coming to a townsite. Shortly after, there was a sign with the name 'Gabberin'.

It was peppered with bullet holes.

"Not a good sign," she thought.

It didn't get better further on. The outskirts presented a vista of rusty corrugated iron sheds, tired houses in unkempt yards and abandoned rusting vehicles. Lily had to grudgingly concede that the best country towns were scrupulously clean and kept, attesting to bright communal pride.

This, however, wasn't one of them.

There was a single main street running straight as an arrow. It ran parallel to the rail line. All the commercial and communal buildings seemed to be on the main street, mostly on the side opposite the rail line. At the far end of town, stood a shiny corrugated iron grain storage

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revetment. The few side streets were laid out in a regular grid pattern and ran between houses and yards until they gave way to the paddocks beyond.

“What a dump!” Lily thought to herself.

Most of the commercial buildings were disused with fading hoardings and boarded windows. They cast a forlorn and derelict shadow, even over the half dozen businesses that were still open. It didn’t even have a proper railway station, just a bare raised loading platform in a vacant lot in the centre of town, now mostly given over to wild grasses.

To Lily, it evoked isolation and desolation.

“What kind of people live out here? This isn’t living,” she mused.

To her mind, it would be all closed minds and hostile stares, or worse. In the City, in the suburbs, she could be herself, protected by anonymity among strangers. On those anonymous streets, few suspected she was anything but the petite Asian girl she looked. It didn’t need much. A ribbon or headband in her long hair, a bracelet on her wrist, pink laces in her trainers and even in jeans, people saw what they expected to see. She didn’t even think twice about using the ladies’ toilets when she needed to go. Even when she spoke, her soft feminine tones didn’t give her away. Only if she accidentally encountered other Vietnamese or south-east Asians would some of the glances narrow, sometimes followed by a disgusted frown. Only then would she have to hurry away, blushing red with shame and fear. But out here, there would be no anonymity, no hiding, everyone would follow her with withering cruel stares.

Lily expected this was just another one of those blink-and-you’d miss-it towns they’d drive on through. She was therefore surprised when the min-bus slowed as they approached the single service station. Ricky pulled in next to the petrol bowser. He got out, walked around stiffly, and slid the passenger door open.

“We’ll be here for twenty minutes. I need to stretch my legs and have something to eat. We can’t all be chauffeured around. Do what you

want but be back on the bus in twenty minutes sharp. Anyone not back can make their own way home. Got it?"

Seeing the blank, sullen faces he added, "And don't make any trouble. These hicks around here don't take kindly to blow-ins, especially not your kind."

With that, Ricky went off to the toilet around the side of the service station.

"What a prick!" swore Steven.

The others were silent, but Steven had spoken for all of them. They piled out of the mini-bus and looked around. The mini-bus was the only vehicle in the service station. The station itself looked like the old-fashioned sort that didn't sell anything but car oil and fan belts. There were a handful of people and maybe a dozen parked vehicles up and down the street.

"Stupid old ghost town," spat Daria. She zipped up her leather jacket. The wind was chilling. Under the overcast sky, the town seemed even more forlorn and the landscape sullen.

Dylan was busting to pee. The first thing he did on getting out of the mini-van, was to look around for the toilet. He felt like he was always needing to go. It was always on his mind when he was beyond the knowledge and reach of a nearby toilet. The need to go would start out as an intermittent irritation and then grow to a constant ache in his thoughts. It felt unmanly. He was sure real men could hold it without the worry that would fill his mind. It made him feel like a girl.

"That's one of the advantages of wearing nappies," he thought to himself ironically. "At least you can pee anytime, anywhere. How good would it be to be free of the constant worry about finding a toilet before you bust?"

Dylan never had the opportunity to wear nappies for long, but it was a nice thought just the same.

He spotted a brick building that looked like public toilets across the road, on the other side of a gravelled parking area by the rail line. He

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felt embarrassed to be the first to head that way. He feared it said, *'look at me, I can't hold my piss like a real man, I've got to run to the toilet like a girl.'*

That was another thing that was unmanly to Dylan. Real men probably didn't even think about what other people thought. They just went when they wanted. But the ache in his thoughts was insistent.

He looked at the others. They were still flexing the life back into their legs. He paused, wondering if he should tell the others he was going to the toilet. He didn't want to seem like he was ignoring or dissing them. On the other hand, he didn't want to seem like he was a little kid putting up his hand asking the class teacher if he could go to the loo.

Dylan quickly mumbled, "I'm going for a leak," safe in the knowledge that his words were either inaudible or indecipherable, and set off across the empty road.

Chloe recognized Dylan's destination and was relieved at the sight. She threw a silent question at Lily and together, the two of them followed in Dylan's trail.

Martha looked around uncertainly. She didn't want to stay with the two perverts, but she didn't fancy being in the ladies at the same time as Lily.

"No!" she reminded herself. "His name is Liam."

She had seen him/her use the ladies at previous stops. She decided that she'd go over and just wait outside the ladies until he/she came out.

Daria and Steven found themselves left by the bus. There was an awkward silence. They watched the others disappear around the other side of the toilet block, presumably where the entrances were.

"You okay?" Steven asked. His tone was even and careful.

Daria was glad of his care but embarrassed that he might think she wanted it.

She shrugged.

“Stupid princess bitch!” she said.

Steven nodded his agreement.

More awkward silence.

“Got any readies?” he asked, adding, “I’m skint.”

She shook her head.

Ricky came out of the station toilet and filled the petrol tank, studiously ignoring them. They walked over to the roadside as Ricky went and paid in the office. When he came out, he went down the footpath in the direction of the store and the café several lots down.

A battered black ute slowed down on the street opposite Steven and Daria. It had a throaty growl like the muffler needed fixing. A youth leered out the passenger window. He had a checked red flannel shirt, close-cropped hair and a twisted grin.

“Fuckin’ welfare bus is in town!” he exclaimed loudly to the driver.

“Looks like a Black Bastard bus to me!” hooted the driver derisively. Steven clenched his fist. How many times had he lived this before? How many times had he been called Black Bastard or far worse?

“Let it go,” said Daria out of the side of her mouth, “You don’t know how many friends they got to back ‘em up.”

“Fuck... one of ‘em’s a dyke. A Black Bastard dyke!” said the passenger glaring at Daria.

She recognized the menace in the faces of her tormentors and the fear rose up in her mouth. She’d heard that menace before. It meant that if you got caught on your own, or outnumbered, you were up for a belting... or worse.

“It’s the fucking loonies and Black Bastard’s bus,” chortled the other.

“Eh retards, better be out of town before dark, if you know what’s good for you!” shouted the passenger and with a throaty roar, the ute accelerated sharply up the street.

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“Shit,” swore Daria, pushing the fear away. She was shaken and Steven was ashen-faced. They were both scared but hadn’t disgraced themselves - and that was something. Daria looked over at the toilet block. None of the others were in sight.

“What the hell are we doing here?” Steven exclaimed.

“We’d better keep an eye on the others. God knows what they’d do to Lily,” said Daria, shrugging.

“Or the princess, if she tried any of her lip,” agreed Steven. Daria shrugged, indicating she cared little for Chloe’s potential fate.

They looked up and down the empty street. There was no sign of the ute and they waited for the others to come around from the other side of the toilet block.

When Dylan came out of the toilet, Chloe and Martha were standing outside. He didn’t want anything to do with Chloe, ever, and so he ignored her.

“You can use the gents. It’s not too bad. There’s no one else around,” he told Martha, adding, “I’ll stand outside and make sure no one else comes in.”

At least doing something helpful made him feel a little better about himself. Martha nodded her gratitude and followed his suggestion. He and Chloe stood together, ignoring each other. Chloe wanted to say sorry for her taunts on the bus. She didn’t want to be hated. She didn’t know her words were going to make him so upset and make him cry. Boys weren’t supposed to cry anyway, but she didn’t know what to say and so she stayed silent.

Then Lily came out and it was Chloe’s turn.

“I’m sorry for what Chloe said to you,” Lily told him.

Dylan looked at her warily. She had a kind look on her face and he was cheered by her sympathy.

“Maybe she doesn’t despise me!” he thought. “Maybe she likes me after all.” He gave her a weak smile.

"Chloe just loses it and says whatever's in her head. She doesn't mean it," explained Lily.

Dylan was disappointed and angry. Lily was sticking up for Chloe, not him. "She's a bitch!" flared Dylan.

An unhappy expression covered Lily's face. "I'm sorry," she repeated, wanting to placate and soothe his anger.

Dylan was horrified to feel fresh tears filling his eyes and they stung badly. He shrugged and quickly turned away. Lily's face fell. She had wanted to make it better and now she'd pushed him to tears.

Martha and Chloe finally emerged, and they all walked back to the service station, along with Steven and Daria.

"I'm going to get something to eat. I can get you something if you want," Chloe declared, adding, "I'll buy."

The others looked at her. It was evidently a goodwill gesture. Chloe had correctly guessed that the others didn't have the money she did. Her dad was a soft touch and she got some from her mum too.

Daria scowled. Dylan just looked into the distance.

Steven nodded, saying, "If they've got any sausage rolls or chips, I'll have some. Or anything. I'm starving." Martha and Lily nodded their agreement.

Chloe brightened at their acceptance. At least not *everyone* hated her.

"Keep an eye out, everyone. Two wankers in a black ute tried to give us a hard time. They promised trouble if we stayed in town. Real redneck bastards," said Daria.

Daria looked pointedly at Lily.

Lily blanched.

"For real?" asked Lily.

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The looks Daria shot back told her more than she wanted to know. Despite their pretended nonchalance, Daria and Steven looked a bit scared. Lily didn't need to be told what rednecks would think of a pretty little Vietnamese transgender.

"We'll be outa this dump in fifteen minutes," said Chloe, "Come on Lily, come and give me a hand with the food. I won't be able to carry everything myself." Lily looked uncertain and afraid and she looked a mute appeal to Daria.

Daria nodded, saying, "I'll come and keep an eye out." Lily's face brightened, but Chloe scowled.

"I'll come too, I wanna get some Mars Bars," Dylan announced. He was hungry and he didn't want to chance accepting food from Chloe. He thought she might play games and withhold it, making him vulnerable once again. He tagged along, walking with Daria behind Chloe and Lily.

Martha was conscious she didn't have any money. She didn't want to be embarrassed and so she stayed near the mini-bus with Steven. She felt awkward being alone with him.

"You're from out here, aren't you?" Steven asked her, nodding his head at the distant horizon. He looked like he wanted to be friendly.

She nodded saying, "I used to be. Not here exactly, down south. Gnowangerup."

"Me too. Moora," he replied smiling at her. "I miss the country a lot. This town's a shithole, but it's nice to be out in the open where you can see the horizon in every direction."

Martha smiled her agreement. It was the first genuine smile Steven had seen on her face. It made her look pretty he thought, pretty in a good way, not girly-girly. They talked about the country and she started to relax.

"He seems nice and friendly," she thought to herself. "A bit less boofy than I expected. He might be a pervert, but at least I don't have to worry that he will hit on me."

Six Misfits

Martha wasn't used to how boys were with girls outside her closed community. It seemed to her like they thought they were supposed to be trying to hit on girls all the time. It scared her and it was a nice relief to just talk.

"You can't go back?" Steven asked her, and she shook her head sullenly.

"Me neither. Shitty huh?" he said. Martha nodded her agreement.

"Me, I get. But they threw you out just 'cos you wanted to wear jeans sometimes and cut your hair short? Man, that's really screwed up," he said.

Martha liked his sympathy. "I rode trail bikes too, don't forget that," she said, smiling.

"You weirdo," he teased. She grinned as they began to talk trail bikes and tractors – a safe easy topic of conversation.

Chloe and Lily went into the café. Daria could see Ricky inside eating at one of the tables and she stopped outside on the footpath while Dylan went next door to the store.

The café was a bit down at heel. There was a middle-aged woman behind the counter whose careless appearance seemed better suited to doing the housework. The sausage rolls in the warmer and the chips in the bain-marie looked a bit dry. Chloe looked at Lily and shrugged. She ordered all the sausage rolls and chips as there wouldn't be time to wait for more.

Ricky was sitting with a map open beside his plate talking to a man. They were evidently discussing the route to the Department camp where they were going for the retreat.

Dylan came out of the store with a plastic bag of his purchases. He didn't have much money and he was always careful to make it stretch. Money was independence. Needing to ask for more, wasn't. He guessed Daria that didn't have much, perhaps any money as he knew she wasn't living with her family anymore.