

small  
ACTS





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*To Kate G,  
Thank you for helping me navigate this strange world.*

*To Mum,  
Thanks for always being there.*



*To Kate F,  
For embracing the mess and chaos and neuroses  
that come with working with me. Love your guts.*

*To Dad,  
For embracing the mess and chaos and neuroses that  
come with being my dad. Love you more.*





# Chapter 1

*Josh*

*Term 3. Week 1. Friday.*

Josh stared at his laptop which sat open on the desk, his eyes wide and heart beating like the flapping wings of a humming bird. The video had stopped playing on the screen but not in Josh's brain. Over and over again images repeated in his mind of smiling children and adults all around the world – smiling because someone, a stranger, had done a thing so kind and selfless and unexpected that they were overcome with gratitude and joy.

He forced down a swallow, fingers digging into his thighs, and blinked, a strange emptiness burning in his belly.

Wow.

There were so many amazing humans making big differences every single day. People donating money or goods to charity, rescuing animals in need, delivering food to communities – even spending time with elderly people and taking them shopping. Why had he never done anything kind like this before?

He was kind, wasn't he?

Josh took in a deep breath, and then bent and straightened his fingers over and over, trying to loosen them. Mr Parham's voice grew louder, and he looked up.

'Okay, hopefully this news bulletin has given you all something to think about, even maybe inspired you to help out here in the classroom,' the teacher said, hopefully, standing in front of the whiteboard, red marker wiggling between his chunky fingers.

Mr Parham had only been Josh's year five teacher for a week when Josh worked out that red was his favourite marker pen colour. And now at the start of term three, he knew it was Mr Parham's favourite colour overall. The teacher wrote in red way more often than blue or black. Josh liked red but if he were the teacher, he'd use black the most. He liked the colour black best. And dark grey second. Silver third. Red was his neighbour Andrew's favourite colour and so, for their own club,

Andrew had designed a cool logo that had black and red swirls intertwining – their two favourite colours together.

Josh tensed his fingers again. He missed that club. He missed hanging out with Andrew since Andrew won a scholarship and moved to a high school in a different town at the start of the year.

‘And, as I mentioned,’ Mr Parham continued, ‘every Friday afternoon for the next two terms, we’ll spend some time looking at the worldwide news. It’s important everyone understands and learns about some of the events going on in other countries.’

Josh couldn’t wait for next week’s news bulletin.

Laptops snapped shut around the room, the rest of Class 5P following Mr Parham’s next instructions to prepare for art class. But not Josh. His arms and hands and legs were numb, and he felt like a stick insect on a branch, not moving, mimicking its surroundings.

Eyes back on the laptop screen, the white triangle in the middle of the video lured him in, tempting him to press play again. But Josh’s brain was stuck on loop, running through the faces, the smiles and the laughter, and sometimes tears of joy. There were even kids younger than him working in their local communities to improve lives and look after the environment.

‘Josh, you all right?’

Josh blinked and peered up. Mr Parham was crouched in front of Josh’s desk, which was located at the front of the classroom, scratching at his thick, black, curly hair. It was the same shade as Josh’s and Josh’s dad’s hair, but there was a lot more of it.

Josh looked back at the screen, at the paused video.

‘You ready to head to art? Last lesson of the day!’ Mr Parham had a soft smile in his voice, and Josh relaxed his tense hands on his lap.

‘Of the week,’ Josh added, nodding.

‘Yeah, what a way to end a school week.’ Mr Parham laughed once, a bit too sudden for Josh’s ears, the only loud thing about his teacher. ‘You like art, right?’ he asked.

Josh watched Mr Parham gently close the lid, pushing the inspirational people away from view – but not from memory. His hands and forearms stiffened again. He needed to see it again but also he needed to come up with his own ideas and he needed to get home to his notebooks to write down those ideas. His brain was very mixed up.

‘I haven’t shut down the screens,’ Josh said, pointing at his closed laptop.

‘That’s okay, I’ll do that for you.’

Josh believed Mr Parham. He was a very trustworthy kind of person. Mr Parham was new to the school this year, but apparently, he'd taught autistic children at his previous school, so he had experience and knowledge of things to help Josh most days. He, and Mum and Dad, had all been pretty happy when they found out Mr Parham would be his teacher for grade five.

'So have you got your art case ready?'

Josh pointed to his bulging blue striped art case sitting in the corner of his desk. He dragged it forwards, feeling the drawing and colouring pencils inside.

'Great,' Mr Parham said, standing again. 'Have fun. We're very lucky to have so many wonderful artists in this class, right?' He stepped away before Josh could respond, taking his deodorant smell with him, and raised his voice to address the class. 'Okay 5P, you may head off to the art block. Quietly,' he added as chairs scraped and plenty of chitter chatter erupted.

Josh stood too, holding his art case to his chest and joined the back of the line of kids in their red school jumpers and grey trousers filing through the door. A few boys threw their cases up in the air and caught them. A group of girls with matching high ponytails and yellow scrunchies huddled and showed each other the stickers they'd stuck to theirs. And the small girl,

Ollie, right in front of Josh, wound one pencil round and round between the fingers of her right hand.

He let out a long sigh as he followed his classmates across the chilly playground, the July winter wind whipping across his cheeks. He shivered and looked down at the grey concrete, his mind replaying bits of the video.

It wasn't *just* a video. It was ... it was ... what was it? He didn't have the words, but he knew it had changed him somehow. Josh had to be kinder. He had to do more for other people. When he got home, he'd see how much money was in his money box. His tenth birthday had been only a couple of weeks ago, in June; maybe he could spare some of his money and donate to charity.

He sighed again as his tummy tightened. What about the new camera he'd been saving up for? He finally had enough to buy the Mikicam DB780 which came with a shoulder strap, LCD screen, and multiple movie functions. He couldn't wait to try out some time lapse movies of butterflies and skinks.

Josh chewed his bottom lip. He'd look anyway. Maybe he could donate a little bit of money and then do some jobs at home to earn it back.

Yes, that's what he'd do:

- 1. Go home*
- 2. Count his money*
- 3. Compare Mikicam DB780 prices online*
- 4. Look up charities to donate to*
- 5. Help Mum and Dad around the house.*

Oh no! He also needed to prepare his chart for next week so he could decide on a school club to join. Because he absolutely had to join one this semester. He so wanted to be part of a club again. It was unfortunate that he hadn't seen anything on the noticeboard about a photography club; otherwise he'd have added his name straightaway, without even taking an ant-sized breath to mull it over. But the only other kid he knew into photography was Andrew.

Josh tweaked the plan in his head:

- 1. Go home*
- 2. Count money*
- 3. Compare Mikicam DB780 prices*
- 4. Look up charities to donate to*
- 5. Help Mum and Dad around the house*
- 6. Create a club comparison chart.*

Josh let out a long breath. He felt better. Solid plans always made him feel better, more in control of his thoughts and worries.

5P continued their walk past the toilet block to the art hut, the kids not being quiet at all like Mr Parham had asked. Some of them were even running and leaping and playing tag. Josh hugged his art case tighter to his chest, his hands stinging from the cold, only relaxing fully when the thin, pencil-like art teacher opened the hut door and called them in.

Ollie held the door open for him with the same hand that clutched her single pencil. The end of it was really chewed and Josh shuddered. Pencils did not taste nice.

It was amazing to think that Ollie was so good at art when all she had was a pencil like that.