

DON'T TALK TO STRANGERS

Don't talk to strangers.

Olivia's mum drilled that into her as she sat on her bike, the soles of her sneakers grazing the concrete of the driveway.

Dad was more practical. "Of course you can talk to them," he said, "but don't get in their van when they offer you lollies."

Olivia rolled her eyes and pushed off, the bike wobbling before she found her rhythm. The wind swept through her hair, pulling it behind her like streamers, and she wanted to throw her arms out and hug her new freedom.

She took the long way to Sophie's house, cruising the quiet back streets instead of the main road, rolling into each cul-de-sac and out again to make the most of the journey. At the bottom of one cul-de-sac, she leaned too far as she took the corner and her wheels slipped.

She was going down, and she couldn't do anything to save herself.

The concrete stripped the skin from her knee and elbow as her legs tangled in her bike frame, and she slid to a stop in a painful bundle.

Olivia hiccupped a sob as tears blurred her vision.

“Ow, ow, ow,” she muttered. There was no point in crying like a baby. There was nothing to do except pick herself up and wheel her bike home, where Mum would patch her up and kiss her better.

“That was some crash, girly,” a man’s voice said.

Olivia’s eyes flew open and heat burned her cheeks worse than the graze on her knee, knowing someone had seen her fall.

An old man stood beside his letterbox, a bundle of circulars in his hand. Dirt stained the knees of his trousers.

Olivia sat up and pushed her bike away, her elbow protesting.

The old man let out a low whistle. “Why don’t you come inside? I’ll grab the first aid kit.”

Olivia’s knee throbbed. Walking home would be slow and painful, but Mum’s warning rattled in her head.

“Um...no, thanks,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

The old man chuckled and gave her a shrewd look. “Parents told you not to talk to strangers, huh?”

Olivia stared at her sneakers. Blood trailed down her leg and painted her laces red.

“Wait here.” The old man rocked as he walked up the path to his house, like he’d spent his life on ships or horseback.

Olivia looked back up the road. Before she could decide whether to start for home or wait for the old man, he returned with a small, red bag.

“Always be prepared.” He gestured to the solid brick fence in front of his house. “Have a seat.”

Olivia sat quietly as he cleaned away the blood, and she only winced a little bit as he dabbed Savlon on the grazes and covered them with plasters.

“There you go,” he said, giving her hand a pat. His skin felt dry and rough against hers, and his swollen knuckles stopped his fingers from straightening all the way. “All better.”

“Thank you,” she said. She picked up her bike. Her knee only stung a little as she rode to Sophie’s, but going on was better than going back now she was okay. If Mum knew she’d crashed on her first trip, it could be her last.

The next time she biked to Sophie’s, Olivia stopped at the old man’s house. He was kneeling in the garden. She showed him how well her grazes had healed.

“You were bloody brave,” he said. Olivia grinned because Mum didn’t let her say words like that. “Here, would you like a lolly?”

Olivia glanced at the old man’s garage, but the door was shut so she didn’t know if he had a van. She was about to say, “No, thank you,” just in case (Dad had warned her, after all) when he pulled a crumpled packet of Mint Imperials out of his trouser pocket and laid them on top of the fence.

That was pretty safe, Olivia figured. They were probably a hundred years old, but she took one anyway. The mint flavour tickled her tongue.

“That’s pretty,” Olivia said around the lolly, pointing to a red and yellow flower beside the fence. “What’s it called?”

The old man swiped off his flannel hat and scratched his bald spot. "I've got no blimmin' idea," he said with a laugh. "My wife, Francie, planted them all. Now she's gone, I do my best to keep them alive."

Olivia's lips curved up, though sadness kept the smile from blossoming into a full-blown grin.

After that, Olivia stopped by every time she biked to Sophie's. She brought home-made gingernuts, a picture of the nameless flower she's drawn at school, a poem she'd written about the seasons.

The old man told her about fertiliser (he liked sheep poo – ew!) and all the countries he'd visited when he used to be a pilot. One day, when sweat cascaded down to his eyebrows and soaked the front of his shirt, he offered Olivia a glass of lemonade then rocked inside to get it.

Olivia prepared herself for something made from real lemons with too much water and not enough sugar, but the old man came back with a bottle of Sprite and two colourful plastic cups.

Another time, Olivia stopped outside his house but the old man wasn't in the garden. She rolled her bike back and forth, bounced her heels on the footpath, and pumped the brakes.

He was *always* in his garden.

She leaned her bike against the brick fence and checked the letterbox. Circulars were bursting from the slot. She wrangled them out, taking care not to rip them in case he liked to read every single one.

She walked up the path and knocked on the front door. When there was no answer, she followed the path down the side of the house, past the washing line where the old man's brown trousers, plaid shirts, and gigantic white undies hung.

Olivia pressed her nose to the glass of the back door and shaded her eyes with her hands. When she spotted him, the mail tumbled from her fingers.

She hammered on the glass and, when he didn't respond, yanked the door open.

She dropped to the floor beside him, careful to avoid the pieces of broken cup, but her knee landed in a damp spot of cold coffee. She laid her head on the rough fabric of his shirt, and caught the erratic ba-bump of his heart and the whistle of his breath between his lips.

She found a cordless phone on the kitchen bench and pressed the buttons slowly. One-pause-one-pause-one.

As the call connected, she took a breath. Held it. Let it out. Tried to remember what they'd been told when a police officer had visited school last year.

She returned to the old man's side as she listened to the calm voice on the other end of the line and tried her best to explain what had happened.

She stretched out her shaking fingers and lowered them over his. His skin was grey and rough and, at her touch, his eyelids fluttered. She snatched her hand away.

She opened the front door and waved at the ambulance when it arrived.

Mum wouldn't let her bike to the hospital. Too much traffic. But she did drive Olivia to visit the old man.

He was propped up in bed, the sheets stark white and crisp. Machines beeped and flashed.

"Hey there, girly," he rasped. "That was some crash I had."

Olivia handed him the box of chocolates and Get Well Soon card she'd drawn and perched on the edge of his bed.

A tube threaded its way from a clear bag of fluid on a pole into the back of his wrinkled hand. She didn't want to hurt him or accidentally pull out the tube, but she held out her hand like she'd seen adults do.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Olivia."

The old man slid his hand into hers and gave her a firm shake. "I'm Trev," he said. "Nice to meet you."

THE END