

REVIEWS OF NEANDS

I read this cover to cover ... The imagery is well crafted and relatable. The story features three young teenagers and their characters develop well throughout the novel ... I would enjoy another read from Dan Salmon. — (Karen Davies) Read NZ

This book is perfectly pitched to its audience, the climate change generation. [...] I really enjoyed it. It is well paced, controlling the emotions of its readers well, and hope is provided by the love story that grows throughout the overall narrative. — The Sapling

Teens who like dystopia, sci fi and adventure will find something of all three in [these] pages. [The] story is pieced together with chat room conversations, jotted notes, and newspaper clippings between the chapters. These add another dimension to the story, making the world in which it is set feel very concrete.

It is very much a coming of age story – or coming of age too quickly. Charlie and his friends must face [...] an uncertain future, all while the normal emotions of teendom intervene. — NZ Booklovers

PRODUCED WITH THE SUPPORT OF



ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TOI AOTEAROA

For Theo, Spike, Hattie and Barney. — DS

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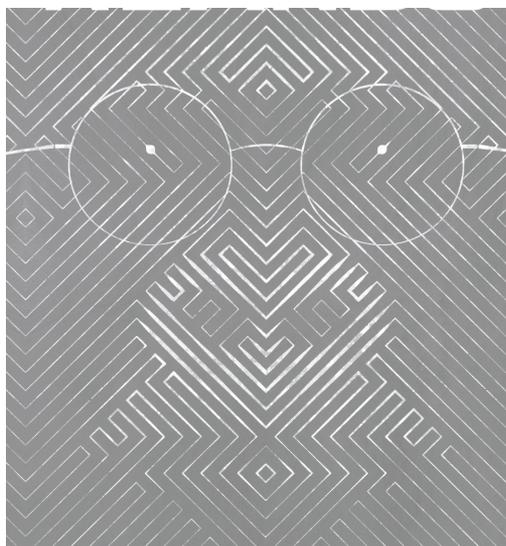
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NEANDS



DAN SALMON



Some mornings you forget.

You wake up and for a few moments it could be a normal day. Maybe you manage to grab breakfast and get all the way to the table without thinking about anything other than that first mouthful.

On these mornings the outside world returns like the tide, washing away your forgetting until the constant hum of anxiety that was buried by sleep has recoated everything.

Worse are the mornings you wake from a night of bleak dreams to a bleak reality with that trapped feeling that follows you on long aimless walks and even on the hard-out runs that used to empty your mind. It clings to you when you dance with your friends, and in your most lonesome solitude.

But the very worst mornings are when you can't get out of bed. You know the thing you want to escape will be everywhere, so what's the point of moving? It's with you in sleep, in every waking second, in the times between. So you make yourself get up. You move reluctantly, telling yourself that even if the old normal is gone there are still things worth living for.

Sometimes you find those things and for a moment you can forget. On a good day, I find them with Pru and Ivy. A laugh, a slip, a smile, a dive into the sea that ends up

charlie

a bellyflop. I find them in Pru's touch and Ivy's stinging humour.

I'm lucky.

I'm lucky because some mornings I feel hope. Those are the best mornings. I've learned to cling to those precious moments, to stretch them until they break and the new world and the Neands living in it come flooding back in.

ONE

Miro and another kid were playing in a corner of the lunchroom. Other kids watched, sideways, nervous, smiling like old people recalling an ancient memory. The air was heavy with steam and grease, with wafting detergent smells, dish sounds and the mumble of the washing-up team. On their knees, with pieces of cardboard they'd torn into tiny skateboards, Miro and the kid were doing finger tricks and flips across the floor and up the wall, making the sounds of the wheels and the clacks of their boards with their mouths. I wanted to tell them to stop, but Miro's eyes gleamed under his dark fringe as if his soul hadn't been crushed by everything we'd lost and all the crapness that had replaced it, so I just watched. Banking every second.

'What are you girls doing?' The guard closed in from the side.

I caught the burned-wire fumes of his anger as I moved towards them, trying to steer the guard away before Miro made it worse.

I was too slow.

'I'm not a girl,' said Miro, simple and matter of fact. He flicked his fringe back from his eyes, puzzled by the guard's mistake, oblivious that it might have been an insult. He looked so young and naive, for a moment I thought the guard might laugh and walk away.

Stupid me.

The guard brushed me out of the way, his wide Neand mouth twisting. His eyes were bloodshot and his breath scorched the back of my neck. ‘We better cut that girly hair then.’

‘I like my hair,’ said Miro.

My little brother was the kid who kept putting his hand in the fire expecting something different to happen each time. *Look at that pretty fire. Ow, that hurt. Look at that pretty fire. Ow, that hurt.* That was him. He was always shocked when things didn’t happen as he expected, but he never learned.

The Neand guard looked incredulous. We never talked back. His anger drenched him in hot sweat, and in the cold room tiny wisps of steam clung to the top of his head.

‘He didn’t mean it.’ My voice sounded tiny.

The guard hauled Miro to his feet by his hair.

I tried to grab his wrist, but I could have been an insect for all the difference I made.

Miro’s body followed his hair like he was trying to minimise his pain; his skater memory kicking in. He knew this was going to hurt, but he wasn’t going to show it. His eyes locked on mine, challenging me to back him up, say he was right. He did like his hair. He wasn’t a girl. He’d told the truth.

‘Scissors!’ The guard barked at me.

My throat closed in. I couldn’t move. Anything I did would only make it worse.

All the kids in the lunchroom were silent, still. Tables were half-cleared, soapy water dripped from half-washed plates. The smell of fear rose from millions of tiny pores. One little boy started to snivel. An older girl put her hand across his mouth.

‘Scissors!’ The guard’s moustache almost disappeared up his nostrils, his open mouth so wide I could see the darkness inside. I imagined it pouring out into the lunchroom, coating the dozens of us who were too scared to move, hating ourselves almost as much as we hated him.

‘Scissors or I’ll tear it out.’ He spun around, dragging Miro by his hair.

Miro looked like a dog on a choke chain, trying to keep it from shutting off his air. I could see the resistance fading from his eyes. My brother was strong, he was bloody strong for thirteen, but he was still a little kid. ‘Em,’ he mouthed. But even hanging by his hair, with his feet bouncing off the ground through two more full spins, Miro didn’t cry.

‘Scissors!’

The guard might as well have been calling for a pavlova. We’d been banned from having sharps after a couple of kids had used scissors to self-harm. Apparently, we weren’t allowed to hurt ourselves. Only the Neands were allowed to do that.

A second guard used a knife to hack between the guard’s hairy knuckles and my little brother’s scalp. The guards were laughing, their pupils large, their eyes glistening and hungry,

when the knife sliced into Miro's skin and blood welled like oil on the side of his head.

Miro didn't cry when he hit the ground, or when he touched his naked scalp and his hand came away red. He didn't cry when the guard kicked him for not crying, or when they made him clean up his own hair and wipe his own blood from the floor. He hated them too much to cry.

I thought his hatred might get him through.

Maybe he was already asleep that night, wrapped in the privacy of his musty grey blanket, and his tears surprised him. Alone in his narrow wooden bunk, in a bare-walled room that amplified his pain, the sound carried to the girls' dormitory, burning a hole through my heart. I lay in my own too-narrow bunk wishing it would burn the whole place to the ground.

I'd imagined escaping since the day they took us. The violence, the bullying, tormenting us as we cleaned and punishing us when they dirtied our just-mopped floors, leering at the older girls ... and worse. Every single moment was another reason to escape. Even the food (which we cooked for ourselves) was enough to make you want to run.

And if you had a brother or sister, it was a hundred times worse. Watching the bastards strap my little brother to a chair the first time was way worse than when they did it to me.

But you live through it. You line up for food. You clean the toilets. You wear the stupid clothes and learn not to react. And you watch the hope slowly disappear from the eyes of

the kids around you.

I could live with my own humiliation, but I never got used to the screams – the sounds of kids’ nightmares and them waking to worse; the bruises, limps, and cut lips they brought to breakfast. Every night I worried it would be my brother bleeding into his plastic breakfast tray. And a few days after the haircut, it was.

He was carrying his tray to the boys’ table when a guard’s foot went out. He laughed as Miro stumbled, laughed as Miro’s fast feet found their balance, laughed as Miro’s tray tipped his beans and white toast, cereal and milk, and sugary fruit drink down his trousers. But when the mess hit the floor, the guard drew his stick.

When the stick cracked against his head, Miro went down, his nose exploding as he hit the ground. By the time I got to him, he’d peed himself and was lying in a mess of blood and milk and tears and piss.

‘I’ll clean up,’ I said.

The guard was still laughing that hungry, lip-licking laugh Neands have when one of us is hurt. I wanted to launch myself at him, but someone did that once and we never saw them again. Miro needed me here, alive.

It was time to stop dreaming about escaping and to get the hell out of here.

•••

‘Hold the window, Miro,’ I hissed.

‘It’s you, Em. It’s you being noisy.’

It wasn't, but I wasn't going to argue. The guards' toilet block stank of bleach and Neands and I was trying not to imagine what would happen to us if we were caught.

'Just put it down quietly.' I could hear my voice heading up an octave. 'Please?'

'They won't hear me over you, Em.'

There was never any point arguing with Miro. His elephant brain never let anything go.

I slipped the edge of the spoon under one of the thin pieces of metal holding the next pane in place, hoping the three sections of louvre window would create enough of a gap to climb through, and that it wouldn't be too far to the ground outside.

'I don't think we should do this, Em.' Miro touched me gently on the arm. 'What if they catch us?'

Miro was losing his guts. Who wouldn't in this place?

The second pane made a slow scraping sound as I slipped it out.

'One more.'

'You're too noisy,' he said. 'They'll hear us.'

'They might hear us, brother of mine, but they won't catch us.'

He took the pane and I climbed up to get at the third, my knee on the sill, my other foot on the edge of the toilet. I wasn't quite high enough, so I stood up on my toes and the toilet seat twisted, my foot went sideways and my knee slid off the sill. I caught the window frame with both hands, but the spoon hit the floor like a gong.

‘Shit.’

We froze, thinking how much worse it would be if they caught us trying to escape. But there was just the sound of our own breath.

At least the spoon hadn’t fallen out the window.

‘Pass me the spoon.’

Miro handed it to me without speaking, our hands touching in a flicker of apology.

We used to fight like cats; now all we had was each other. People sometimes thought we were twins. We did kind of look the same, even though I was nearly two years older. After years of hand-me-downs from my older brothers and wanting to be like them, I kind of looked like a boy. When I was nine, I’d even tried to get everyone to call me M instead of Em, but Dad got pissed off. Now I could be called M for Martian for all anyone here cared.

Miro and I had had the same haircut for years. Mum used to cut it. Long, straight, messy, with a fringe, like the guys in that band the Ramones. It was useful to have hair like that in the ‘home’ – boyish and androgynous. It meant the Neand guards had mostly left me alone. I swear, they looked at the other girls like they were shopping.

‘Good!’ I said under my breath, loosening the third one, and then brought Miro into the conversation I was having with myself. ‘Take this. Last one. Hurry up.’

He took it around the corner. I heard it clink against the others.

He didn't come back.

'Miro,' I hissed.

Nothing.

'Miro?' I waited, wondering if he'd done something nuts like stop to use the toilet. If he had, I was going to kill him.

'Miro?'

'What, Em?' He joined me at the window like he'd been there the whole time. 'I can't see the ground,' he said, squinting into the darkness. 'It looks like it goes on forever.'

He was right. We'd never been allowed down this end of the building. It could have been six feet to the ground or it could have been twenty. I hoped it wasn't so high we'd break something when we landed.

'Do you want me to go first?' I asked. 'Big sis duties.'

He nodded, his eyes glistening in the moonlight.

'Okay then, watch your big sis.'

Head first would have been easiest, but pretty dumb since I didn't know what was at the bottom. A ten-foot fall onto my head on a concrete path would be the wrong sort of escape.

Using the window frame to take my weight, I stepped onto the toilet cistern, wiggled my legs out, slipped down to my bum, and sat there staring out into ... what? Escape or injury?

I leaned back, whispering, 'Miro, you've got to climb out how I did. Okay? I won't be able to help you.'

'Okay, Em,' he whispered.

I looked him hard in the eye and pushed myself out, twisting to catch the sill with my hands. I hung down the

outside of the building trying not to think too much. And then I let go. A short drop to a grass bank so steep my legs went out from under me. I fell backwards, rolling down the hill, trying not to make a sound, and landed on a concrete path at the bottom, trying not to breathe too loud, checking I wasn't broken.

Then the toilet flushed.

It was the loudest toilet I'd ever heard, roaring into the night like a waterfall.

Idiot. Miro must have used the flusher as a step.

I lay there waiting for lights and guards and alarms.

Nothing.

'Em?' Miro's scared, pale face was framed in the window, caught in a dull splash of moonlight.

'Hurry,' I hissed.

His face disappeared. Then his feet and legs poked out, and soon there was the dull thud of boy landing on lawn. I should have known he'd manage to stay on his feet. I sensed he was about to say something and shook my head, catching his hand, and hurrying him to the edge of the compound. We tucked into the tight space between the fence and a small shed that hummed with electricity.

Hard against the fence, in complete darkness, I whispered, 'You okay, bro?'

'Yeah,' he answered. 'But Em, I wish I hadn't put the spoon in my pocket.'

My heart sank. 'Did it cut you?'

‘No, Em, it’s a spoon. But I’m going to have a bruise.’

‘Nothing you haven’t had before,’ I said. ‘I wish you hadn’t flushed the toilet.’

‘I had to.’

‘Why?’

‘I had to poo.’

‘You’re such a dick, Mir.’

I was laughing as I started to climb the wire fence. It was tall, like they have around sports grounds to stop stray balls hitting cars in the street, but the diamond links were big enough to get the toes of my shoes in and there was no barbed wire. They weren’t expecting us to try and escape. My body felt heavier on the way down and the wire pressed into my fingers like it was warning me not to run. Near the bottom, I jumped, staggering as I landed. And then we were running, sucking the warm night air into lungs that had been locked up too long, expecting lights, expecting sirens and cars and dogs and shouting, but there was just the sound of our sneakers hitting asphalt and the jagged breath of two out-of-shape kids.

‘What took you so bloody long?’ I panted.

‘When?’

‘When you were putting the last window down.’

‘I wrote “Later losers” in the dust,’ he said.

I could hear him giggling as he ran ahead and even though I was pissed off, I felt proud. After all the things they’d put him through, he was still Miro.

I smiled, imagining the guards when they saw how easily we'd escaped. The dust writing would make them even angrier. I stopped smiling when I thought about them taking it out on the other kids.

They'd pull them out of bed and line them up. Then they'd choose some as an example and take them into the room. The others would have to stay lined up, waiting, listening to the kids cry, scream, and finally whimper.

They'd done it to me.

They'd done it to Miro too, taken him into the room and connected wires to his head. Afterwards, his face had been set hard, determined not to cry.

Of course, I'd heard him later that night.