



SONYA

HARTNETT

GOLDEN

BOYS

A NOVEL

With their father, there's always a catch: the truth is enough to make Colt take a step back. There's always some small cruelty, an unpleasant little hoop to be crawled through before what's good may begin: here is a gift, but first you must guess its colour. Colt's instinct is to warn his brother—*Bastian, don't*—as if away from a cliff's edge or some quaggy sinkhole, but doing so risks leaving him stranded, alone like someone fallen overboard in the night, watching a boat full of revellers sail on. Bastian will want to play. Their mother will say, in her voice of reined-in dismay, "It's just a bit of fun."

As the eldest he gets to guess first, so he guesses, "Blue."

Their father shakes his head happily. "Nope! Bas?"

Bastian is prone to birdiness, his whole world one of those plastic kitchens in which girls make tea from petals and water. He guesses, "Yellow?" as though it's perfectly possible their father would bring home for his two boys a bicycle coloured yellow.

"Nope again!" Their father is cheered, rather than nonplussed, by the attempt. "Colt?"

Already Colt feels they've run out of colours. "Green?"

"Not green. Your guess, Bas."

Colt lets his shoulders fall. He looks at his mother, who is lingering by the leather recliner where their father would be sitting if he wasn't standing by the mantelpiece conducting this game. She wears an apron, like a mother on a television show, and doesn't look at him, although she surely feels it, his stare that is leaden even to him. And it happens again, like the clear tinging of a bell, the eerie moment when a truth breaks from the green depths into sunlight: she'll ignore Colt for the rest of his life, if the choice is between her husband and her son. His mother will cling tight to the rail of the boat. Bastian's saying, "Spotty?" and Colt, dazed, stares down at his own feet. He wonders if this is what growing up is—this unbuckling of faith, the isolation. He is only twelve, but he's not afraid. He is old enough. He looks at his brother, laughs rustily. "Spotty? Bas."

Bastian lifts his face. "Why not?"

"Have you ever seen a spotty bike?"

"I mean, all different colours—"

Colt shakes his head; his brother can be unbelievable. "It's not spotty."

"Who knows?" cries their father, reeling them back. "Who knows what's possible? But it isn't spotty. Your guess, Colt."

Colt rummages for colours—he can't remember any they've already nominated, feels only an indignation which, if it had a colour, would be a swampy scarlet. "I don't know. I give up."

"If you give up, you mightn't get the bike . . ."

“Don’t give up, Colly!” Bastian bounces on his toes.

Colt draws a breath. He wants to shout at his father that he doesn’t care, that no bicycle is worth this humiliation, that he’s not some prideless puppet. His mother has turned to him, her gaze reaching across the water, willing him to guess again: he swallows, as if it were icy air and salt water, her refusal to share or even acknowledge his affront. *It doesn’t matter*, he wants to yell. *I can be alone*. He’s not yet that courageous, but he will be. “Black?”

“Not black. Bastian?”

“Oh, I know, Dad! Purple?”

“Purple it is not. Colt?”

“Red,” Colt snaps.

“Not red. It’s difficult! Your turn, Bas.”

“Is it brown?” asks the boy.

“Sorry, Bas, not brown. Colt?”

This can’t go on all night, but it threatens to. The time has come to draw a knife through it. Colt digs his toes into the carpet and thinks about all the bicycles he’s seen. At his old school—already it seems a place from a lifetime ago, although if he returned now his friends would hardly have missed him, familiar books would be open, the same papers would be pinned to noticeboards in the corridors, it would be as if he’d never left—the boys had hooked their bikes to the chain-mesh fence, posing them like skeletal carousel horses with their front wheels bucked off the ground. Expensive bikes, all of them, and when they were not the most costly they were still the most fashionable, racers with curved handlebars and tyres as thin as plate. Colt and Bastian have, in fact,

such a bicycle each already, neat speedsters which at this moment are safe in the shed and in perfect working order, as their father maintains them. Two boys, two bikes, no need for this mysterious third; but their father heaps gifts upon them, there is nothing the brothers don't receive. Everything they own must be the biggest, the better, the one which glitters most. Suddenly convinced of it, Colt says, "Silver."

And although he's sure his father must shout *yes! silver!* what he actually says, with no sign of wearying, is, "Not silver. Bassy?" Frustration rears crazily, before Colt can crush it. "Dad! Just tell us! Bastian can't guess anymore!"

"Of course he can —"

"I can!"

"No!" Colt storms. "Just say it!"

"Is it green? It's green —"

"You already guessed green!"

"That was a different green! Dad, is it green? No, orange? Is it orange?"

Colt claps his hands to his face. He hears his mother laugh sympathetically, but her sympathy is useless, insulting, a leaf thrown into ocean. It is stuffy behind his hands, airless in the lounge room where the sun has shone through the big window all afternoon. The walls of the house are freshly painted in a shade of sand-dune beige, and smell like something plastic lifted out of a long-closed cardboard box. From the newly-laid carpet rises an odour of chemicals and glue. There had been a different smell when he'd seen the house for the first time, the day on which he'd been told

it was to be his new home—a papery smell, like a wasps’ nest, and the walls had been the palest blue. On the mantel had been arranged a picket-fence of keys, each attached by a short string to a cardboard label. *Front door spare, screen door original, side door, garage door, laundry overhead cupboard*: he’d never known a house in need of so many keys, as if each corner concealed a secret. His father had swept the keys and their cards into his jacket pocket. Colt has no need for keys: his mother doesn’t work, so when her sons come home from school she is there; whatever she’s done that day, she has finished doing. She has a car key, and a duplicate of the front-door key. All the other keys Colt has never seen again. At the mantel, their father is laughing. “Isn’t that what postmen ride, orange bicycles? Do you want to be a postman, Bas?”

Bastian screws his face up merrily. “Dad! No!”

“If I gave you an orange bike, you might turn into a postman! Maybe that’s how postmen become postmen?”

“Don’t be silly!”

That’s red bikes, Colt thinks into his hands: it’s red bikes postmen ride, you . . . *moron*. Because on this night when truths are rising to the light, he’s seeing this too: his father can be absurd. He’s been a god and then a man of miracles and of late he has sometimes seemed a stranger to Colt, or someone he wishes were a stranger, but through all this downhill metamorphosing his father has remained a man of dignity: *absurd* comes to Colt like the scratch that makes the record player’s needle skim. He lowers his hands to consider his father in this new, diffuse light. He’s amazed

that it's taken him so long to see it, and wonders how much else he is missing. The evening is warm, but Colt feels cool. As if to halt what he's thinking dead in its tracks, their mother finally speaks. "Dinner's almost ready, Rex."

And perhaps even their father is bored, as it must be boring being ringmaster to such witless clowns: "All right," he says, pushing away from the mantelpiece, "you can give up. It's an impossible task for two intelligent boys. Dinner's almost ready. Quick then, let's look at this bike."

It is parked outside, on the porch, below the lounge-room window. The four of them crowd around it like sheep at the manger, Bastian's hands fluttering to his mouth. The bike is a BMX, with wide chrome handlebars like a stag's horns, and vinyl-covered rolls of padding press-studded to the handlebars and frame. Its crowd-dark tyres are densely, deeply knotted. The narrow seat is hardly present, not intended for sitting on; the handgrips are knobbly, the pedals serrated for grip. It has no gears, but its brake cables curve boldly, silver-threaded antennae. Not everyone has such a machine, they're a marvel seemingly just recently delivered into the world, and standing beside it Colt feels the warmth of its desirability. It smells of its newness, and in the entire world there is no better smell. But what he sees is the hook that was buried in his father's game, the treacherous seaweed beneath the waves; and in the moment when he should thank his father, what he says is, "It's black. I guessed black."

"It's charcoal," their father corrects. "What do you reckon, Bas?"

Bastian has the wide eyes of a fawn, the colour of caramel syrup.

There's a kind of trepidation in them now, an awe of how good life can get. "Oh Dad!" he breathes.

"Rex," says their mother, "you spoil them."

"Ah well!" Their father shrugs helplessly. "Why not? There's been a lot happening lately, new house, new school, but you've been good about it, haven't you, boys? You haven't complained. And what goes better with a new neighbourhood than a new bike to ride around on? All the kids will want a piece of this when they see it, won't they? The fellow in the shop said it's the kind all the boys want."

And Colt, who hadn't known complaining had been an option, runs his fingers over the BMX's shiny frame and perceives that this is why he—for it will be he, not Bastian, who commands this savage thing—now owns it, and owns so many good things, and only has to ask in order to receive more. Their father piles his sons with objects worth envying, so he will be the father of envied sons. Two boys, one bike: it's not for them, it's for him.

It is murky, this perception—he has a sense of something charmless shifting its position, something which sees him but which he is failing to see. He lets his hand drop. "Do you like it?" his father's asking.

"I love it," says Bastian heartily.

"It's great." Colt looks at his father, who is framed against the white sky and the last fanning rays of the light. "Thanks, Dad."

"Can we go for a ride, Dad?"

"We'll take it for a test-run after dinner," says Rex. "And there's the weekend ahead of you, remember. Plenty of time. Dinner first, fun later."

He spins his younger son around and smacks him on the tail, and Bastian, released from the spell of the marvellous thing, shoots into the house, flailing with excitement. There's the merest moment, as their father follows the boy inside, for Colt to catch his mother's eye. "I guessed black," he says. "Charcoal is black."

He sees her concede with the faintest of nods. "You've got it now," she says. "Don't make a fuss."

Freya Kiley has started to see things she hasn't seen before. Until recently she has lived as every child must: as someone dropped on a strangers' planet, forced to accept that these are the ways of this world. Being a child, she thinks waftily, is like being in rough but shallow water, buffeted, dunked, pushed this way and that. If it is sometimes alarming, there is always the sight of the beach. There's always the sand under your feet.

The problem, however, is that sand is sand. From where she sits she can almost feel it, the way the water sluices the grains away from heels and toes. It's stupid to put your trust in sand. And when you're a child, that is what you are: stupid.

When she was younger—nine, ten—Freya had tried to be holy. Piety was one of the rare things which the nuns at school approved of in a child; more than that, it seemed to be something she had no choice about. Certain traits characterised this world: the sun rose, dogs chased cats, and God lay underfoot everywhere like a clammy carpet. So Freya had tried to love the lamblike Jesus with his flowing hair, she'd strained to feel the presence of her

guardian angel. She'd dwelt upon the cloudy Heaven awaiting her at the end of her hardly-begun life. If it had always been an effort, if her thoughts had repeatedly roamed, she'd assumed it was because religion was nerve-wracking. Talking snakes, toady plagues, corpses walking, people drinking blood. A mutilated man nailed to planks, his brow pierced by infectious-looking thorns. And, overseeing everything, a vile-tempered ghost, an emaciated and rebukeful old man in a hospital gown, watching and waiting to notch up a girl's smallest mistake. A God who was always harsh and rarely fair, who would hurl even an infant to Hell.

Now she's older and smarter, and she's starting to see that the world is a castle, and that a child lives in just one room of it. It's only as you grow up that you realise the castle is vast and has countless false floors and hidden doors and underground tunnels; and that the castle is haunted, and that the castle scares even itself. And as you get older, you're forced out of the room, whether you want to go or not. Freya wants, with urgency, to go.

Already, through the first doorway, she's discovered this: the reason the angels and Heaven and the old ghost have never stuck with her is not that they're nerve-wracking, but that they are not true.

There was no particular moment of realisation: it is more like something she was born knowing, and the knowledge has been slowly making its way like a splinter to the surface, and now it has finally arrived. It's come accompanied by a sense of shame and hurt, as if she has heard at last a snigger that's been skulking behind her back. Freya glances around, and sees plain faces. No one is laughing, yet she hears it.

She sits down, because the time has come to sit. When the priest has finished talking, she'll stand. Her fingernails carve crescents in the polished pine of the pew. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked," the priest says, reading from the Bible which is a great gilt-edged slab, a monster book full of monsterring: when Freya looks at the congregation, it doesn't seem wicked to her. Wicked would be interesting, but everyone looks dull, half-asleep, slightly angry. Her brothers and sisters are kids, and they're not wicked, only irritating, and if God were here she would tell him that nobody has her permission to say nasty things about them. The church is recently built from cream brick and too much glass, so the air is thick and overheated. It has hard-wearing brown carpet and teal-blue trim. It is meant to be modern—the crucifix above the altar is made from beams of industrial steel, so intimidating that Jesus has absented himself—yet the priest is reading the same old lines from the same old book. Freya's nails dig into the pew as if she'd screw the place up and throw it away. *This is the last time*, she swears. She will never come here again. She is not going to tell herself lies, nor accept the lies of others. From now on, she will do things properly.

And when it is finally over, the priest bowing before the altar and trudging off with his duckling row of boys into the private room where girls are not welcome, the morning is done as if packed into an elderly person's wardrobe, but at least she is free to leave. Freya would like to sprint away kicking her heels like a pony, but that's not what can happen. The aisle clogs with parishioners and she gets hemmed in, has to worm through gaps

while her siblings and mother disappear out the doors. Distance stretches like toffee, for a moment she thinks she will never reach fresh air: at the door she's caught in a blockage that has congealed in the hope of seeing the priest as if everyone hasn't seen him just minutes earlier and can't also see him in the milkbar buying cigarettes and see his underwear, too, if they so desire, hanging on the line in the yard of the presbytery, and it amazes her that with these signs they don't see he's just a human, a man of baggy elastic and bad habits, and by the time she's dodged and wriggled her way into the sunlight she feels scorched with contempt for every last living thing.

Only to find that her mother, too, has been snagged, and is stopped on the path beside the carpark with Marigold and Dorrie sagging beside her and Peter in his stroller arching his chest against the straps, and she's talking with an awkward smile to a man and a lady and two boys Freya has never seen before. The sun is warmer than when she'd last been under it, the heat drawing fumes from the bitumen; cars are reversing, people are standing about, children are beginning to cry. She tries to slip past unseen but her mother catches her—actually lunges sideways to grab her—and tells the strangers loudly and eagerly, as if only enthusiasm keeps her heart pumping, “This is another of my daughters, this is Freya.”

“Another!” marvels the man. “Quite a tribe!”

“Oh, yes.” Freya's mother shakes her head with a kind of amused hopelessness. “There's always another one coming.”

Already, after ten seconds, it is unpleasant to be waylaid in the shadeless carpark, people slamming doors around them, starting

the engines of cars. It is fummy, gritty, over-warm. Peter, having tested the strength of his bindings, has subsided in calculation: time starts ticking to the moment he'll start to scream. Freya smiles unendearingly. "Hello."

"Freya's the eldest," her mother tells the strangers. "She's—how old are you, Freya?"

"Twelve," she says. "You know."

"Hello, Freya," says the woman.

"Hello." She doesn't care that the word sounds booted out of her.

"After Freya there's Declan, then Sydney, but . . ." Elizabeth Kiley scans the crowd, "I can't see them."

"They're gone," says Marigold blandly.

"And who's this fine chap in the pusher?" asks the man.

"This is Peter. He's the baby. Well, he's nearly two."

Peter looks up beseechingly. "He's adorable," says the lady.

"He breaks my stuff," says Dorrie.

"That's what baby brothers do, don't they, Colt?" The man gestures at the boy beside him, who stands in pristine silence. "Colt is twelve, the same as you, Freya."

"Uh." She's already looked at this silent boy—he's taller than she is, and more beautiful—and looked swiftly away. "I'm nearly thirteen," she clarifies.

"I'm five," submits Dorrie.

"I'm seven," says Marigold.

The man, who is tall and quite conspicuously handsome, who looks like an action-movie actor and whose presence only makes sense if the carpark is in fact a movie set, smiles radiantly and

says, “Well, we’re delighted to meet you. I’m Rex Jenson, and this is my wife Tabby, and these are our sons Coltrane—Colt—and Bastian. We’ve moved into a house around the corner from you. It’s so nice to meet new neighbours.”

Freya and her mother smile as if they agree it is very nice; in truth such friendliness is disconcerting, a gust of too-strong wind. Freya has never been introduced to adults by their Christian names, and it’s as startling as hearing a swear-word. “It must be exhausting, shifting house,” says Elizabeth, grappling. “I don’t think I could do it.”

“Well, it’s not easy,” the man agrees. “Nothing worth doing is, is it? But it will be worth it. It doesn’t hurt to shake your life up a bit. Change is always good.”

“Oh, yes,” says Elizabeth hazily. These people are too elegant, too assured: Freya knows they are making her mother nervous. She’s shunting the pusher back and forth so Peter flops like a fish.

“It seems a lovely neighbourhood,” says Tabby, the wife.

“Oh, it is,” Elizabeth says, and flounders on: “A few palings get pulled off fences sometimes. Some kids were going around smashing letterboxes—remember that, Freya? When was that? People were waking up to find their letterboxes all over the footpath.”

“Ages ago,” says Freya.

“It was a while ago. A year or two ago.”

“You get that kind of thing everywhere,” says Rex. “It’s usually just kids.”

“Bad kids,” says Dorrie.

“Kids letting off steam.” Rex smiles. “Kids growing up. What’s a letterbox? It’s nothing. Something you can replace.”

Freya and her family gape at him, this man so kind and cavalier that he could forgive an awful act of vandalism. Freya’s been taught about forgiveness all her life, but she’s never actually met anyone inclined to practise it. She glances at the sons, Coltrane and Bastian, who stand beside their mother as placid as giraffes. Their father’s attitude must be wasted on them, they look incapable of committing any kind of crime. It is not possible to imagine them racing off to play the pinballs, which is undoubtedly what Freya’s brothers have done. The Jenson boys look like they should be etched into stained-glass windows, Sebastian pierced with arrows, the arrogant child lecturing the learned men. And suddenly Freya feels overcome, unreasonably hot and testy. It’s time to go, but they stand as if paralysed beneath the man’s beneficent smile. Elizabeth asks, “What do you do, Rex?”

“I’m a dentist,” he replies.

“Ook,” squeaks Marigold, and Freya likewise shrinks. There’s nothing worse than that sprawling chair, that tray of dainty tools.

“Our dentist gives us lollies,” says Dorrie.

“He yelled at me for crying,” says Marigold.

“People must talk to you about teeth all the time,” says Elizabeth.

“I don’t mind,” Rex answers. “I like teeth.”

“Mum’s got false teeth,” Dorrie informs him.

“Dorrie!” Elizabeth gags, but Freya notes that the man’s expression does not alter even minutely, that he’s deaf to anything

someone doesn't want him to hear. Freya herself can't help smirking; glancing away, she meets the eye of the tall boy, Colt. He's a slighter version of his film-star father, with the same thick chestnut hair—a *mop* of hair, like the lush pelt of an animal—worn long around his face, the same cheekbones and eyebrows and perfect nose. The younger boy has the same mahogany curls but his face is like his mother's, a pink girly mouth, a small chiselled chin. Both have their father's amber eyes and olive skin. They are well-dressed but the sense of quality goes deep, as if they are burnished right to the bone. Dorrie's revelation has brought a smile to Colt's face—Freya's heart is just starting to be stirrable, and it stirs now. He's smiling to *her*, and no one else in the world knows it. It sets her cheeks on fire, makes her head feel as if it's not reliably where it used to be. She looks for help to the last cars moving past on slow-turning wheels, to the priest standing at the church doors with the remnants of the flock, his altar boys nowhere to be seen. There is nothing to do except flee. "I'm going home," she tells her mother. "Do you want me to take Peter?"

"I'll come!" says Marigold.

Elizabeth says, "We're all coming, we're leaving now—"

"I'm leaving *now*," says Freya.

"Nice to meet you, Freya," says the man, the dentist, Rex Jenson. "Hopefully we'll see you again soon."

"Uh," says Freya. And almost runs.

The church isn't far from their home, which is the only good thing about it. Marigold skips to keep up with her sister, and the street streams past them as lines in the footpath, gates in fences,

telephone poles planted in naturestrips. Jogging along, the girl tells Freya, “I liked that lady with a name like a cat.”

“*Tabby.*”

“*Tabby.*” Marigold meows.

They pass a pole and a pole and another pole before Freya slows down. She wrinkles her nose, shakes her hair. “Those people were strange.”

“How come?”

“Well. He talked and talked, but the lady hardly said anything, and those boys just . . . stood there.”

“Rude?”

“Not rude,” Freya judges. “Just strange.”

Marigold flies her palm above the peaked top of a brick fence, thinking about this. She’s young, but she is clever. “They were like those people in Mum’s knitting magazines.”

“Exactly!”

“Robots.”

They have reached Freya’s favourite house, which has a population of repellent concrete gnomes arranged in its front yard. Normally they’d slow or even stop, but Freya marches on. “Not robots. More like . . . aliens. Aliens trying to be humans.”

“Creatures from the black lagoon,” says Marigold, a movie fan.

“They wear skin to look like people, but they don’t know how to *be* like people. They’re learning it.”

“Strange!” agrees Marigold. “Spooky.”

“They *are* spooky. I mean, how did they know we live around the corner from them?”

“They saw us walking to church. That’s what the man said, that they were walking behind us.”

This is plausible, which is disappointing, but Freya’s mind catches on the thought of Colt walking behind her, seeing her without her seeing him. She wishes she could go back in time to hover over that oblivious girl, tweak her hair, do something. She’d given Dorrie a cuff: knowing he must have seen it makes her feel harassed. “Well, why did they come here?” she asks hotly. “Dentists are rich. They make lots of money. So why are they here?”

Her sister is too young to have much concept of the wider world—Freya knows for sure that she thinks the starving Africans live near enough to have her leftovers delivered to them on a plate—and asks, “Where should they be?”

“Somewhere fancy! Where rich people live. Not here.”

Marigold ponders. “Maybe they don’t want to be fancy?”

“Everyone wants to be fancy.”

“Maybe they’re hiding.”

Freya smiles, pleased by the idea of aliens hiding in a non-descript suburb, laying out their plans on a speckle-topped kitchen bench. In truth she admires strangeness, and likes the new neighbours for it. She strides along, ignoring her sister’s scrabble to keep up, the air balmy as it weaves between her fingers, the sun a molten crown on her head. In a minute they’ll be home—once they cross this road she will be able to see the white post-and-rail fence of their house. If her brother Declan were a friend of Colt Jenson’s, he would bring him to the house sometimes. That’s a fact, but Freya knows little about the friendships of boys, how they

meld or repel. A stringy green weed pokes over the path and she plucks it as she passes, swishes it violently. “Well, who cares,” she says, and doesn’t answer when Marigold asks, “Who cares about what?” Instead she will think of what she does know, the sturdy posts in her life. The year is coming to its close: soon the long school holidays will begin, stretching past Christmas and into the new year when, returning to classrooms, she will be starting secondary school, the baby of the schoolyard but a baby no more. She’ll be thirteen, a teenager, a creature of change. Already atheism sits inside her as comfortably as an egg in a nest. Next Sunday, when she refuses to go to church, her mother might rage, and to defend her position Freya will call upon the example of her father, which is something she would only do in an emergency and actually has never done before. And it will feel like a betrayal, using him against her mother. It *will be* a betrayal. The heart is wicked. Freya sighs.

They are within reach of their house—the spindly pine in the front yard, the clangy metal letterbox, the rut in the naturestrip where the station wagon cuts the corner; no sight makes her happier than the sight of home—when thoughts of her mother make Freya think of something else. She remembers Elizabeth saying, “There’s always another one coming.”

The words are written on one of the imaginary castle’s innumerable doors, a warped and ponderous door which requires a mighty shove before it will open; but when it does, and when Freya sees what’s behind it, the dismay dazes her.

Golden Boys

Sonya Hartnett

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