

Excape From Mr Hate

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We was playing Excape from Mr Hate at my place. The Browns was playing with us, 'cause there's not enough normal colour kids down our street for two teams. They didn't have no shoes. I'm not allowed to play in Brown-town. There's grafeedy and broken glass in Brown-town, and all these wasps 'round the rubbish bins. We was using pinecones from my Poppa's wood pile as grenades (but don't tell him). You had to blow up the enemy and nick their soul before Mr. Hate got you. I don't like how they call my poppa Mr. Hate. You're supposed to write it *Hejt* 'cause he's from the old country but the Browns all get it wrong 'cause they're no good at our language.

Our grass was the only green grass on the street even though it had prickles. Most people had yellow grass. My poppa says they're lazy. He says gooks don't know thing one about keeping a home 'cause they all live in huts where they come from and their apartments is even smaller than my poppa's war room and that's pretty tiny seeing as it's only a closet. They make sabotage cars what'll kamikaze on you. My poppa drives a Dodge, does yours? He got it from Detroit. That's in a Merica.

Do you know how to play Excape from Mr Hate? All the brown kids were sposda go behind the gate, and us normal kids in front of the gate, to keep them in the concentration camp. The Browns weren't even playing it proply. You're not allowed to tackle people, I said, you gotta be like a cat and go along the fence, else make a distraction and run to the other guys's side before they can

catch you, and steal their blue flag - what's actually a Charlotte Hornets singlet.

The Browns had to escape the Hollowcause before Mr. Hate got home from work, 'cause he was the common dance of the concentration camp. I said the Browns had to be the Juice 'cause they had curly hair. but they didn't wanna and the biggest Brown threw a grenade and it got the girl whose birthday cake it was in the eye and she walked around the willow tree in circles like when you put Sellotape on a fly and rip its wings off. Her eyes went all hay fevery and smudged, and she got her mum's phone number off the label of her jumper but she couldn't read it 'cause she got tears on it the numbers went all smudgey, but it wasn't a actual grenade what got biffed at her, it was only a pinecone.

Big Brownie, he's so high he can honestly do a slam-dunk on the basketball hoop at school and sometimes when he talks to you, you can't see the sun 'cause he's so high. He took one of Poppa's tomato plant stakes and snapped it over his knee and started smashing the heads off mum's old flowers 'cause he said there was a bee and I was like You better not! and he was like I'm just weeding and they were looking at the colour of the skin on their palms and giggling at me and then Big Brownie started poking the normal-colour girl who was crying, with the stick, and I needed to get Poppa's Medikit for her (like GI Joe's got) but it was in the locked secret war room that looks like a linen closet... but it's honestly not a linen closet.

Big Brownie shooshed all his bros quiet while I tiptoed up the steps and crept inside. Big Brownie was like, Hurry, bro, hurry. It's not the first linen closet, it's the second one. I tiptoed over the stuff mum left in the hallway, her fossils and horseshoe-crabs and whale teeth and bromeliads and geodes and this one prolific rock with zillion-year-old water

in it. Mum always like to think about the Earth with no people on it.

It was dark and dry and Poppa's closet smelled like inside a box of leather school shoes, and there was no bees humming and everything was green and tan just like our camo curtains that made us invisible. Even the safe was painted camo. The war closet's not locked 'cause Poppa says I'm his loo tenant and he trusts me not to touch anything. I've only ever seen in, like, three times in my whole life, when Mum used to vacuum it and you snuck a peek from the laundry.

There was five medals in a glass picture frame, what used to have a picture of Mum in it from the black and white days. There was rifles, and pistols, and bullets separate, I didn't know what ones went with what, but I knew how to clip a rifle together 'cause I seen Poppa doing it for when the revolution comes. The native uprising could happen any day. And there was shells, but they were way harder and more goldeny colour than any turtle shell, and cold, like they didn't want you to touch them. And there was Poppa's flag with the bent cross sign on it that the Browns always scratch into the desks at school, I honestly seen them drawing Swosh Stickers and I wanted to tell on them. And there was a box with extra clay; Claymore it said - with wires hanging out of it. I think Claymore's like Acme, you know, that Wile E Coyote uses to blow up Roadrunner? It's the same one as Poppa tried to use on that tree stump, anyway, when Mum got hurt real bad.

I could smell the cold chemicals as I opened the MediKit and rust-dust was falling off the latch when this cape of light was dumped on my shoulders and Poppa put a crab-pincer on my ear, and his bike helmet bumped on the front door as he marched me outside and he pulled my pants down and smacked my bum in front of the Browns

and bent my thumbs 'til I let go of the Medikit and the bandages spilled down the steps and Big Brownie was like, Honest Mr Hate, I need it for my mum, and Poppa glared at him mean-as. 'She needs it for her smoking, Mr Hate,' Big Brownie went and my Poppa was like, 'She does not NEED this thing, she WANT this,' and his chest was going up and down like when you jump on a waterbed and he went and stood in the middle of the street until the Browns had all cleared off and the normal girl'd got picked up and he didn't even see me hide the claymore box in the bushes and when he came back, he was going, This, you stay out of, and dabbing the shininess off his brow with his hanky. I'm pretty sure he was saying to stay out of the war room but it looked like he was saying Stay outta his head.

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The native warriors came to raid us that night.

I heard this swooshy, sliding sound, then I saw this yellow fuzz growing around the edges of this big, scary, guy coloured in black. The sweeping sound was Poppa's army socks. They were really thick and warm and they swept dust as you went, which was good 'cause Poppa hardly had time to do the cleaning no more. Big Brownie's mum used to do it but then, nah. I asked Poppa every spring if I could pretty please do the cleaning and I even put the apron on and everything but he said 'Take zis off. There is whole tribe of people who they should do for us, yes?'

'What's that sound?'

He unbuttoned my jammies and put his hand on my chest. His palm felt like warm sandpaper. 'Breathe,' he went, and I gasped. The whole bed groaned as he sat down. 'I want you should give this back.'

'Give what back?'

'You know what.'

'But I don't, honest.'

We could both hear my heart slowing down. Poppa went, real calm, 'I am going to giff you three, and then I'm going to take you out there and giff you de rubbing on de backside. Now: One, Two—'

'I DON'T HAVE IT!'

'THREE.'

'OKAYOKAYOKAY!'

I started pulling the rifle out by the barrel and it seemed to go on forever, it was so long it reached right down to where my blankets were tucked in, and the wooden handle had got all warm against me and suddenly I was cold without it. The *tock* and *fffflud* noises meant that he was breaking the rifle down, and you could sort-of see what he was doing with the outiest reach of the kitchen light making the wood glow. My Poppa can break down a rifle in forty seconds, can yours?

I pulled the cover back to get a better look, and this whole case of bullets fell out and donked on to the floorboards and rolled 'round, louder than ever. It was forever before they stopped.

'What is? What is?' He was pulling a stuck round out of the chamber.

'It wouldn't go in so I hit it and it got stuck...'

'NEFFER NEFFER NEFFER force de bullet.'

He did this boxer pose in front of my face and I didn't even see the slap, it was lightning, and this burp of air came out of my mouth, but I didn't cry. My cheek went all hot and it felt sorta nice.

'Neffe neffer neffer. Blow up in de face, ja?'

'SHOW ME HOW! Show me how to load it!'

'You want other slap? Hrmn? Go to bed.' There was a squeak as he got up off the bed, then the sweeping noise again in the blackness.

'Are they coming back?'

'No.'

'Can we go after them?'

'Go to bed.'

'I'm in bed, already.'

'Bed for you, ja?'

'When are we gonna get 'em?'

The yellow fuzz flickered out, and everything was black. I thought about what Big Brownie was up to. D'you reckon he's ever shot any guys?

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I found this thing in Dad's war room called a canteen. It's like what it would look like if a drink bottle was hard and bulletproof and had metal inside and it takes ages to screw the cap off and if you drop it, it goes 'DONK', a totally different sound to a normal drink bottle. When you put regular water in, it turns into war water. The Brown kids just had a two-litre Coke and they all slurped it out of their hands at playtime going Gizza sip else I'll smash you. Big Brownie did the pouring. He poured these real exact amounts and didn't spill none. I was like, What's that you wrote on your knuckles? and he jabbed me in the face and it looked like the F word but it might've been his mum's name and I went You're gonna get in sooooo much trouble and I wanted to say I'd snuck the Medikit somewhere secret but he pulled his hood over his head and went, 'Tell Mr. Hate wassup.'

'Um, okay. Tell your mum - wassup too.'

'You getting smart?'

The Browns got in trouble 'cause we was drawing pictures of our family and the teacher said they had way too many people in their picture and their poppa wasn't even in it, plus you weren't allowed to draw gang stuff at school and Big Brownie said it wasn't a gang, and Miss said Well, tell me why it is that they're all wearing the same colour?

and Big Brownie said Cause we're at a funeral, and he got sent to the office, and Miss saw my drawing of me and Poppa and tonnes of empty room around us and gave me a gold star sticker. It was like getting one of Poppa's medals, but not as good.

Halfway through lunch, a Brown kicked the ball over the fence into that factory with all the dumpsters so we played Cowboys and Indians instead, and the Browns was sposda be the Indians but they didn't wanna and I was like, But you're Indians, and they all said they didn't wanna be the bad guys, and I was like, But you're sposda, and Big Brownie threw bark in my face and I sneezed heaps and my bogies came out all black and I had to swig heaps of war water from the canteen and he robbed it out of my hands and his bro ran away with it and I called him a Richard Head and he called me a Homo Sapien so I went, 'I HOPE YOUR MUM'S DEAD ALREADY.'

After lunch my poppa coached rugby in his prison-guard uniform and gave each of us a slice of lemon at half time, and we had to pull our shirts over our heads for shade, and no one ate the lemons, and the Brown kids waited for their coach as the caretaker mowed the grass. Their uncle was the league coach and he was late but when he came, he was completely black and shiny, like the leather sofa in the waiting room, and his back had a giant fist on it, and there was two other coaches too, wearing black jeans and all them boys got ice cream but we didn't, and I could see them spitting in the war water canteen and flicking it on each other and kicking the canteen.

Poppa was trying real hard to show this one boy how to catch the ball real good but the boy was hardly even listening, just staring over at the Browns at league practice, and Poppa just kept saying stuff into the boy's ears and a ball hit Poppa in the side and Poppa got mad and Poppa

saw me standing there and said, 'You heff misplace your drink?' and he pushed a drink bottle into my hand and I thought about losing his canteen and I pretended I had hay fever 'cause my eyes went all pink 'cause I didn't even want a drink but I didn't want to hurt Poppa's feelings. I kicked one of Poppa's medicine balls and it hurt my foot. Man I was thirsty, it was so hot your spit fried on the netball courts and all the bubblegum looked like melted ice cream, but I didn't wanna drink normal dumb tap water. I stared over at the Browns. They hardly even had to do any training, it looked sweet, but then Poppa clamped his fingers on my shoulder and squeezed. 'First to shoot,' he said, and his breath made my ear hot, and he said 'Pop-pop,' pointing his finger like a gun across at the far side of the field, where the people rippled in the heat.

The league practice finished early 'cause Big Brown started smashing one of his cousins. He kicked the swings as he raged out through the playground. Then all the little Browns followed him, spitting these big hoikers of snot on the concrete as they went, and kicking something hollow and metal as they went. Their auntie picked them up from the edge of the motorway. She tipped her fish bones out of the van window but she didn't get out of the van. When she pulled away, one of them was doing the browneye against the window but I didn't know whose bumhole it was. His bumcheeks went normal colour against the glass. His bumhole was bright red. I wondered what colour mine would be if I done a brown-eye, 'cause you can't see your own bum.

The canteen, they must've been kicking.

When I was sure the guy's bum-hole couldn't see me, I aimed at the van with my finger.

'Pop-pop.'

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The night was too thin to snuggle up in. Every little smidget of light like from the stars looked tonnes brighter than it shoulda been. I couldn't sleep after story time. I didn't hear if the gooks won or the good guys won in Poppa's story, 'cause there was a helicopter hovering over Browntown, all this light and noise but then it brummed away and a minute later the dogs shut up and I needed to pee really bad. I couldn't even remember what story Poppa'd read to me, Excape from Colditz, I think. I heard these crisp clompy footsteps like the Clydesdales at History Mysteries and the door opening and did you know the rumbling was coming from the street? I peeled back the curtains and I could see elbows sticking out of a low, growling car. It rumbled like after a huge bomb in those brown and white movies Poppa always put on. I saw a shadow wriggling and it was Poppa crawling along the driveway with the rifle slung over his shoulder and in his hands was the box, and one of the men jumped out of the car, saw the box, and jumped back inside and they revved real hard and it sounded like a chainsaw and Poppa was trying to put the Claymore box on top of the back wheel but they drove forwards then squealed in a circle and it stinked like the fires at the rubbish dump and Poppa picked the box up and he stood there for like a whole hour as my breath turned into drops on the window then he marched back up the driveway and I had to slip the curtains shut again 'cause if he saw one whisker of light, he'd tell me off so bad, and I heard him slam the door and do up all the latches and the chain and then these empty, asthma sounds and then this tinkle. Dad was drinking regular water from the tap. He needed his canteen so bad.

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When I went to wee in the boys' toilets at lunchtime, Big Brownie was holding his next biggest bro's

arm out and the brother was crying and Big Brownie had a actual smoke, not a candy one, and he was pressing the smokey end on his brother's arm and lucky they didn't see me and I ran into a stall and I needed to poop but he might hear me so I held it in and it hurt, sharp, like Jap bamboo torture. There was just the sound of wet lips and the boy blowing his nose and the coughing urinals getting wet.

When I came out, I had a heart attack. Big Brownie was just standing there, on his own. His arms was swaying by his sides like the wind chimes Mum left. His arms had spots on them, like dark chicken pox. His eyes was black and cold, like the barrel of Poppa's rifle. He took a five buck note out of his pocket. Have you ever seen one of them? Me either. I took the five bucks. I went and got my bag from the hook room and pulled the box out and gave it to him. He sniffed it and went,

'She don't need no clay.'

'It's medicine. You just undo that thing and pull this thing.'

He squinted at it. He's real good at inventions and he can get Miss's desk drawers open when she's not looking. He put the box in a shopping bag. The five bucks was dirty and oily and smelled like Big Brownie's pockets. I don't get how come you can eat that much fried chicken and still always be hungry. I was washing it in the hand basin when he came up behind me and clamped his elbows over my ears and I thought he was scalping me like a Indian and I stamped on his foot and screamed, I'LL GET MR.HATE ON YOU! Then he let me go, and we stood there 'til we got our breath back, then he walked out into the light, clutching the Claymore mine for his stupid Mum.

The top of my head was all warm, after. He was only giving me a noogie.

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The motorway was so wide and loud like when that brown lady used to do the vacuuming and the motorway had so many broken headlights on it that I wanted to just sit down and close my eyes in the middle of the road and cry until when I opened my eyes. Poppa would be standing there, but I had to find Big Brown. I headed straight towards the prison. Heaps of boys's dads are in that prison. It's higher than anything, you can't miss its walls. I couldn't wait.

The Browntown streets was empty, I think they musta all been at choir or something. It felt like I was the only boy on Mars. The grass had lots of mud and puddles in it. Did you know that's what No Man's Land looks like? There was paint on the things that shouldn't've had paint on, like the footpath, and there was no paint on the stuff that should've had paint on, like people's fences. The cars were all blue or black, and people had ginormous Mack trucks parked on the sidewalk outside their houses (I didn't know you were allowed to do that) and all the washing on people's lines was black, there was heaps of those blue scarves with the white patterns, flapping in the gentle wind. There was bags of rubbish on the strip of council grass even though it wasn't rubbish day. It was hot and sticky and there were locusts and grasshoppers and flies, and t-shirts in the gutters, and I checked all the packets of smokes but there weren't any smokes in them. Big Brownie would have a smoke, I betcha. Didju know he said you can get free refills if you take the empty smoke packs back to where you bought 'em?

I found the Browns's house. It's just one of those things that you know. I think I must've been there when I was a little baby, for a party or something. Everyone knows where everyone lives, just like everyone knows about the rudie-nudie calendar in the shed, where the caretaker parks

the ride-on mower, and everyone knows about my Poppa's secret room.

The Browns had a weird green and yellow flag nailed into their porch with Bob Mar Lee on it. The porch steps were all crumbly. They had heeeeeeeaps of bottles on the porch, in these wooden boxes. I had a hammer in my bag and I wanted to smash the bottles. I got a massive fright 'cause there was this tiny little boy on the lawn, pushing a lawnmower that was way too big, and it wasn't fair, it was real grinding and squeaky and kept getting stuck and it wouldn't budge and the boy was grunting.

How come you got a wheelchair? I said to him. The wheelchair was just on the porch. I'd never seen one without someone in it.

The boy didn't say nothing. He was fighting with the lawnmower. I pushed the front door open and when it banged on the wall, I pooped myself, just about. I heard each footstep groan. My heart was slamming and my ball-sack was all thick and hard like a tennis ball. My backpack was feeling real heavy. I tried to step over all the cigarette butts but I couldn't, and not just those, there was little brown bottles, and Band-Aids and tubes too. There was this door in the hall saying NO ENTRY so I pushed it open. It was like the gateway to Narnia or something. Down some steps was this jungle of plants even taller than me and real hot lights above, like the fireworks were gonna be tonight. But I could tell there were beasts hidden in the thick rows of bushy, stinky plants so I turned and sprinted back up out of there to the porch where it was shaded, away from those real bright lamps over the plants. I had to dump some ballast. I had to go number twos soon as I found Big Brown.

Poppa always says when you're on Covert Ops you have to dump something. I didn't need the grenade so

when I got back on the porch, I chucked it in the long grass. The boy could grind it up with his lawnmower. But I went out into the silent street then came back. I asked the boy where everyone was. He said they were all at awake. I was like, Awake? He said They're over there. He pointed to the pointy top of a church.

I started sprinting towards it. I could see Poppa pinning the medal on my chest and going, 'Pop-pop-pop'. I ran into a alleyway and got to a safe spot and found somewhere with no dog poop to kneel and my panting slowed down. I looked around and realised it wasn't a church, it was a corner of the prison.

I pulled out the stock and barrel and had the rifle together in about two minutes. My hands were all slippery and I nearly stuffed it up. I'd oiled it real nice, kept the dust off. I screwed a bear-net on. It was real heavy and bulky and cold, like a heavy fishing rod. A bear net isn't like a net for catching bears, it's a long sharp knife you put on the end of your rifle to poke bears. I put a bullet in the chamber but it wouldn't close. I tried to close it again and again. My heart was beating and my bum-hole felt like having a baby. I had to hurry. I'd have to hammer the bullet in to make it fit, that must be how you do it. I forced the bullet in as much as I could, then took out my hammer, and moved my thumb out of the way, and held the rifle real stiff, and held my arm back, aimed the hammer at the bullet and took a humongous swing.