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THE
SPECTACULAR
SPENCER GRAY

Deb Fitzpatrick



FREMANTLE PRESS

for Jerry and Pippa

1

It was ten minutes before the end of lunch, and Spencer was taking the corner for his team of three. The Brazuca World Cup soccer ball curved beautifully off his foot, and was gliding towards the goalmouth at about head height. Charlie was there in readiness, being jostled by Riley. Leon was jumping around trying to dodge Sam, and Isabella was hopping from foot to foot in the goal. For Spencer, the rest happened in slow motion. Charlie's blond curls bouncing up towards the ball, his forehead craning forward to meet the wet leather, the smack of connection ... the long, breath-holding silence as the ball travelled towards the goal. Then Isabella's gloved hand reaching up like a small white bird. The ball connecting with it and changing path, angling just over the crossbar.

Spencer's hands fell down beside him as howls of victory went up among the others. Isabella and Sam were high-fiving like maniacs and Riley ran around in a small circle, fist-pumping the sky.

Spencer threw his head back in good-hearted dejection and said in her direction, though not very loudly, 'Great save, Bella,' before jogging into the scrub behind the oval to retrieve the ball.

And that is where his day changed. It would be fair to say: that is where *everything* changed.

As he pushed into the bush to get their ball, between the flaking white trunks of paperbarks, and banksia cones like sleeping owls, Spencer saw a man scurrying away, as though Spence had interrupted him somehow, disturbed him. And, a moment later, Spencer heard the sound of a motorbike, or maybe it was a quad bike, burning away at top speed into the distance.

And there in the bush behind the school, Spencer felt uneasy. He reached down and took the ball in both hands, keeping his eyes upwards, and then backed out towards the bright green grass of the oval.

2

Spencer ran back to the others, clutching the ball in sweaty hands, just as the siren wailed. Everyone scattered like rabbits for their drink bottles and jackets. Heart thudding, Spencer followed Leon and Charlie over to their lockers, the image of the man running away through the bush playing on high rotation in his head.

What was the man doing there? Was Spencer reading too much into it — being paranoid maybe about a harmless bushwalker? But if the guy hadn't been doing something he shouldn't have, why did he run away? Surely if he was a bushwalker he wouldn't have sprinted off when he saw Spencer? He'd have just said hello or g'day and kept on his way.

The bush behind the oval was out of bounds to kids during school time. The Grammar students were

told this at the beginning of every year; no one was allowed to go in there without an adult. Apparently there were snakes and things.

Things.

But what about after school? Spencer considered this as Ms Greigan introduced the afternoon's topic: how to calculate the area of the class's veggie patch.

He could go into the bush *after* school; there was no rule about that, as far as he knew.

He settled on it. He'd take the long way home today, via the bush behind the oval. The Bush Behind the Oval: the BBO. He'd check out the BBO. Just to have a better look.

'Spencer?'

Hmmm? Oh no. Spencer was looking at Ms Greigan as though he was listening, but he hadn't heard a word she'd said.

'Sorry, Ms Greigan, I didn't hear the question.'

'I was just asking the class, Spencer, how we might go about calculating the amount of pea straw we'd need to mulch the area after we've planted it up.'

'Ahh ... what area would that be?'

A couple of kids snorted.

'Veggie patch, Spence,' Leon hissed.

‘Ahh, are we talking about the veggie patch?’

Spencer asked more brightly.

Ms Greigan gave a slow, tired nod.

‘Well ... you’d need to work out the area you’re covering first.’

‘Which we’ve just done. And which you’d know, had you been paying attention.’ She looked around for a more reliable student. ‘Cassie. Can you help Spencer here please?’

Cassie blushed. And then quietly explained how to multiply the area that needed to be covered by the depth of mulch needed.

Which was all the more excruciating because Spencer liked Cassie. He liked her quite a bit. She was smart, in a non-showy way. And her wavy hair curling over her shoulders made him feel sort of warm inside.

After school, Leon and Charlie teased him about zoning out in class. ‘And in front of Cassie, too, Spence — how could you?’

‘Put a sock in it, Leo,’ Spencer growled. He shoved his books in his bag. ‘Mum wants me to collect Pippa today,’ he lied, heading towards the junior classrooms — and the bush behind the oval. ‘See you tomorrow.’

‘See ya, Spence,’ called Charlie.

‘I might swing past your place in the morning,’

Leon called. ‘Just in case your mum’s made porridge.’

‘Sure, okay. See ya!’

3

Spencer looked back over his shoulder and tried to walk casually to the bush end of the oval. Kids were about, kicking balls, playing chasey and heading home in every direction, but no one was looking at him. He slipped into the sudden thick of the bush, leaves swiping him as he went in.

Spence argued with himself: you could have told Charlie and Leon about this, then you'd have their company now.

Yeah, but they'd charge around in here like lunatics and blow your cover. No, you just need to keep this to yourself until you know exactly what you're dealing with. It's probably nothing, anyway. Probably just another example of your overactive imagination, as Mum calls it. He reasoned: if it is anything, then you can bring in the boys.

It was quiet in the BBO. And dark. The trees met above his head, branches intertwining like arms around mates' shoulders. The canopy blocked out much of the sun. Spencer waited for his eyes to adjust. The school oval was in a shallow valley, and the bush climbed up gently around it, like seating in a stadium. Spencer peered into the depths of it, let his eyes sweep around where he had seen the man. He couldn't see very far ahead. He couldn't see anyone there now.

There was a lightly worn track leading further into the bush. Small plants were flattened down in a line to make the path, and the limestone was crushed and hard. Branches had been snapped away and there was brown foliage next to the living greens of plants. The deeper into the bush Spencer went, the clearer the path became. A couple of birds fluttered away suddenly above him. Spence looked up and saw the tomato-red underbelly of a rosella parrot. Which was probably why it was on the tomato sauce bottle, he realised for the first time.

He looked back. He couldn't see the exit to the oval any more. But he hadn't crossed any other paths, so getting out of there would be as simple as going back the way he'd come. He took a long calming breath.

Spencer moved on. As he rounded the trunk of a

marri tree he saw something on the ground ahead. A big dark shape that flapped. He stopped, and dropped to a crouch behind the tree. His heart was beating hard in his chest.

Off the track, and now deep in the BBO, he saw the flapping thing again. It looked like a piece of olive green canvas, the kind of material army tents were made of. The canvas, which flapped with the occasional twist of wind that came through, looked like it was draped over something.

What was it? And what was it doing there, in the bush? Had someone camped there and left it behind? *Was* it someone's camp? Or was it covering something? Hiding something?

Spencer felt alarmed by that idea, and swallowed hard. His ankles were beginning to hurt from squatting, so he dropped onto his knees. Leaves and sticks crackled loudly. The canvas flapped again. He thought he heard a sound. A strange cry or squeal.

Spencer launched up, backing away from the flapping thing for a few steps, before spinning around and running fast along the track till the light at the other end glowed warmly at him. The BBO seemed to spit him out into that light, glad to have him out of there.