

THEATRE OF CONFLICT

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ONCE . . . A VERY LONG TIME AGO . . . BEFORE PEOPLE started believing in science and laws . . . our dreams were a lot closer and a lot more real. They lived in the same places we did: the caves, the forests, even the towns and cities.

“Sometimes they *were* us, and sometimes *we* were *them*. Sometimes *they* were real and *we* were imaginary. Like I said, this was a very long time ago.”

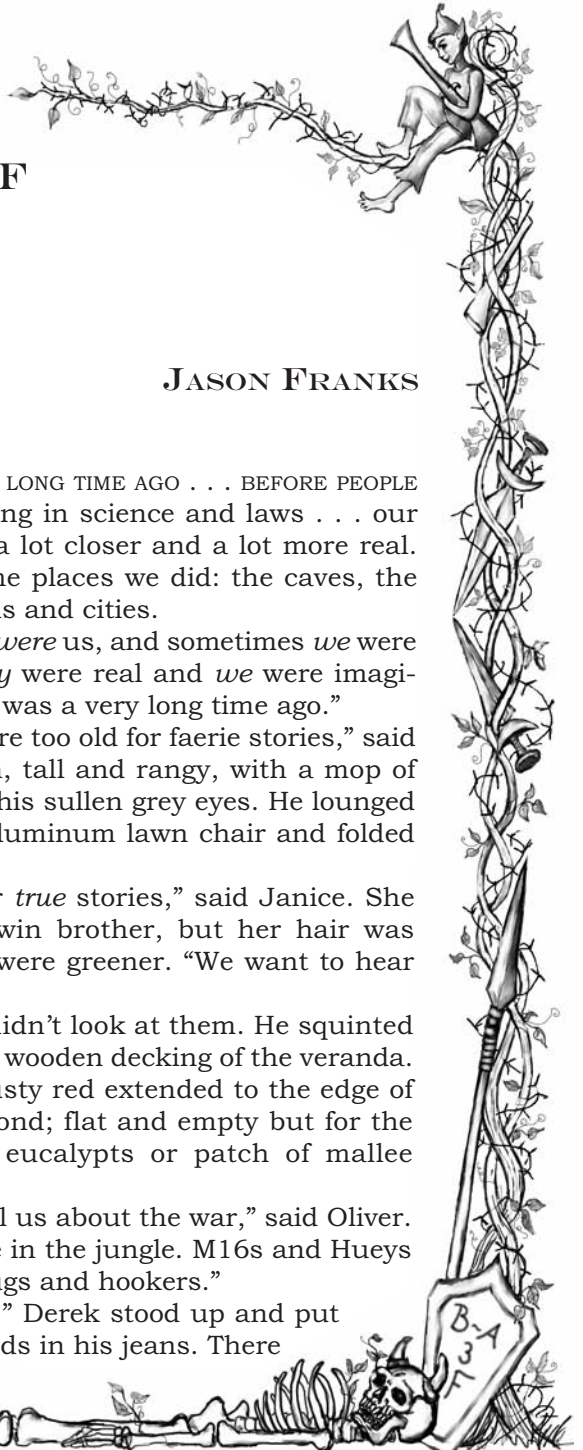
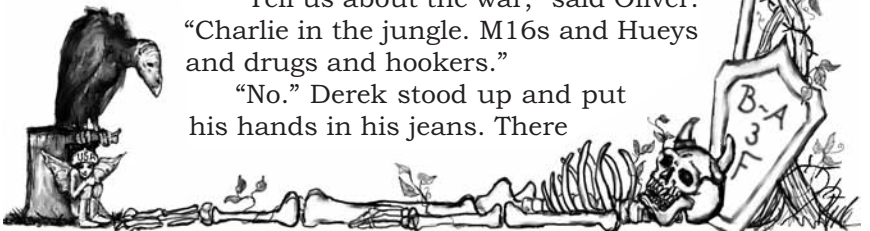
“Uncle Derek, we’re too old for faerie stories,” said Oliver. He was fifteen, tall and rangy, with a mop of dark hair hanging in his sullen grey eyes. He lounged back in the wobbly aluminum lawn chair and folded his arms.

“We want to hear *true* stories,” said Janice. She was as tall as her twin brother, but her hair was darker and her eyes were greener. “We want to hear about the war.”

“I know.” Derek didn’t look at them. He squinted out past the bleached wooden decking of the veranda. Miles and miles of dusty red extended to the edge of his property and beyond; flat and empty but for the occasional stand of eucalypts or patch of mallee scrub.

“Tell us about the war,” said Oliver.
“Charlie in the jungle. M16s and Hueys and drugs and hookers.”

“No.” Derek stood up and put his hands in his jeans. There



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was no expression on his seamed face. “It wasn’t anything like that.”

“Like what?” demanded Janice.

“Like what you’ve seen in the movies.”

“Well, if you had a TV maybe we could watch some,” said Oliver.

Derek shrugged. “There’s a cinema in the town.”

“I already saw *Free Willy II*,” said Janice.

“So what are we gonna do all week?”

“Well, since you don’t wanna listen to my stories—”

“We were being polite,” said Oliver. “But that was before we got bored.”

“Since you don’t wanna listen to my stories, I have only two suggestions.”

“Yeah?”

“Read a book?”

“Suggestion number two?” Oliver asked.

“Well.” A toothy smile spread seams across Derek’s face. “Either of you city slickers know how to ride a motorbike?”



Derek kept the pair of bikes in the back shed, covered by a dusty canvas tarp. They were a bit dinged up and scratched, but he assured the twins they were mechanically sound. What was left of the paint showed that they’d once been done up bright and gaudy. When they pressed him about it, Derek said “For a brief time I thought about a career in motocross.”

“What happened?” said Janice.

“Didn’t like the crowds,” he said. “I wanted to ride bikes, not perform in a monkey show.”

“But—”

“You want to learn or not?”

Derek took each of the twins as passengers on a slow lap of his property, showing them how to operate the throttle, how to change gears, how to go with the bumps and bounces instead of fighting them. Then he took them each on a faster, wilder lap, out of the front gates and down to the dried up lake-bed; slewing and skidding and jumping the bike, stirring up dust.

“Can we go by ourselves?” said Oliver, eager to demonstrate his immediate mastery of the vehicle.

“One at a time,” said Derek. “Stay alongside me and don’t do anything stupid.”