

Surface

Stuart Wilkinson

Tools and spare parts hang from the walls of the garage and the air smells of motor oil. Dogs bark like mad out back. The roller door is open and there are six beat-up old cars on the lawn out front. In the dim light of the garage Dad crouches at eye-level with the chest and runs his hand over its surface. He feels for flaws, warps, splinters and joins, but he looks to be listening for some hidden music in the wood that only he can hear. He puts his ear down, wraps his knuckles on the top and listens like a doctor with a stethoscope. He takes deep breaths as he inspects the chest of drawers, head to toe, and I can tell something's not right.

My dad is a man of principle. He looks the seller in the face for a moment and studies him. He's bearded, has wild grey hair like a kooky scientist, and wears jeans and a plain shirt smeared with grease.

'You want fifty?' Dad asks.

'I could go as low as forty,' the seller replies, 'but that's a steal. A man's gotta eat.'

He's talking to Dad, but he's so cock-eyed you wouldn't know it. One eye holds Dad, the other rolls over me and out the drive.

'What type of wood is it?' Dad asks.

'Pine.'

'What type of pine?'

'Queensland.'

'And it's wood right through?'

'That's right, mate, only the best.'

'Have a look underneath, Liv,' Dad says. This is my job, on account of I can always get my head underneath and my hands in all the nooks and crannies. I squeeze my head under and Dad tilts the chest back to let the light in. There's no pine under here – this guy's shiftier than a broken gearbox. I stand to attention and report to Dad. 'Chip-board!'

'I had no idea,' the seller says. 'I bought it off a bloke who said it was solid pine.'

'You smell that?' Dad asks me, opening a drawer.

'Yeah, fresh glue.'

Dad pulls the drawer out and sits it on the chest. Sure enough, the back and sides are only chipboard with a thin pine veneer. He runs his finger across the join and holds it to the light. A drop of wet glue shines on the tip. He shakes his head.

'You wasted our time calling us out here for this. I'd sooner go hungry than swindle a stranger with dodgy goods.'

'I didn't know it was fake.'

'Yeah, strange how it glued itself together in your garage.'

The guy just stands there and stares, nothing to say for himself.

'Come on, Liv, let's go get breakfast.'

The rest of the morning will be more productive.