

Roar by Adam Jeffrey

A red bucket sits in the middle of the sandpit, its matching spade dispatched to the corner. Nearby, two collided yellow trucks, one overturned and rusting. The scattering of twigs and gumnuts wedged into the surface remind you of choc-chip dough.

Outside the timber border, blue and white-chequered tape flaps like a kite tail. It loops around the playground, behind the slide, between the trunks of white gums, across to the climbing equipment.

The concrete paving at your feet is often chalked with kid's sketches. You recall stick figures topped with round faces and pointy hair. Suns and moons with eyes. Triangle-shaped rooves on squared houses.

But now, none of these are visible. Just one clear white marking. An unmistakable outline.

Few would be able to tell if its the shape of a boy or girl. But you know. You know, because he was your son.

You drove him to school yesterday morning. The wind whisked Alistair's yellow hat off his head. Just as you lifted him out of his booster and swung him onto the verge. Light rain pock-marked his lunch bag. You never bother with an umbrella on blow-out days like these. He held your hand as you walked together, both twisting a little sideways up the path between the fence and the kindergarten. His fingers were warm and yours cold, but he didn't seem to mind.

When the door opened, too-hot air pushed out, and you rushed in, thinking only of how quickly you could get away. To your work and the to-do list you never get through. But Miss Tina's eyes caught yours as she crouched in front of your son, and parted her widest smile. So you had to slow down.

Alistair said *Mummy I want to show you something*. His arm reached back towards you but his head didn't turn. You followed him across to his pigeonhole where he placed his lunch then scurried across the room, through the double doors.

He said something excitedly up to the clouds, but the words flew off before you could catch them.

You made it into the playground, stepping over a boy building a tower from timber offcuts. Then almost got collected by a girl pedalling her tricycle like a circus monkey. The rain had stopped and your son stepped into the sandpit. He stood quite still, pointing to where your eyes needed to go. He lifted his foot, revealing a print in the sand made with the patterned sole of his shoe. *Tiger paws* he said, followed by his loudest *Roar*. You lifted him, swung him in the crook of your arm, into your chest and hugged him hard. He wriggled free and ran off, so you seized the moment to leave him. Forever.

When the policewoman told you *no one could have done anything* she might have been right. Even if you were there and not sitting in a boardroom looking at a big screen split four ways, showing people just like you. It probably happened right about the same time you were wondering whether everyone else in the meeting was just as exasperated. Wasting time here, when so much more important things were left, unattended. Things that actually could make a difference to peoples' lives. Isn't that what *public servants* are meant to do?

But now, your doing feels done. Instead, you're going to keep rolling that last piece of his story around in your head. Maybe for years. The one Alistair told you right after dinner a few nights before. About that new boy, the one with the same name. *Alistair*.

He told you how Miss Tina had made them shake hands. *Like grown ups do Mum*. Then he told you he'd still be called Alistair, and the new boy *Al Just to tell us apart*. You breathed out and then in again slowly when he said he thought the boy didn't like it. Because he'd run to the corner and hid his face for a little bit, then came back towards your son and threw a green stool. *But he missed. Mum*. You sniffed at the scent of cooked cauliflower and knew you needed to speak to Miss Tina about it. You would have said something the next day, except you didn't want to be one of those mums.

Yesterday's damp morning lit slowly and before you'd peeled back Alistair's Toy Story doona, or ruffled his ginger hair, or took the washer and rubbed the sleep off his cheek or gave him breakfast or buttoned his raincoat, he'd asked you *Will that boy... will the other Alistair be there today Mum?* But you never really answered him. *Let's get moving* came out instead.

Later, when you left your son, you didn't even take a moment to consider if that other Alistair was there. Or notice that the other boy was still angry, deep inside. But Alistair did, right through little lunch when Al stared at him the whole time chewing on a vegemite crust. Then after, when he pinched him hard, then chased him fast around the edge of the sandpit where his little shoe – that's now in your hand - must have come off. Chased him to the slide and up. Then Alistair went down the slide, head first. Faster than ever because the stainless steel was oily-damp from that morning rain. And towards the metal A-frame climber that Al had moved there just before. To the landing spot in front of the slide.

Alistair's head hit the bar hard. The playground went quiet. Miss Tina's smile vanished, but standing high on the top of the slide, Al held his smile tight. Miss Tina ran towards your son, just as you walked out of your meeting and you felt somehow, right then the world had changed forever.

So now, you take his lost shoe and press it briefly into the surface of the sandpit. The little paw prints appear. Your tears fall, and vanish.

And you *Roar*.