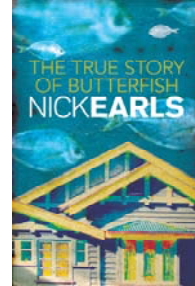




RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

True Story Of Butterfish
by Nick Earls

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SHORT EXTRACT

I was still on my guard back then, when Annaliese Winter came up my driveway in her school uniform with questions to ask about her missing dog. I had stopped work for the day, or for a few hours at least, and I stood in the dark of my loungeroom with a beer I didn't need, watching her through the screen door. A tall stalk of grass was growing between the wheel ruts and she swiped at it with her right hand. I could just make out its head of seeds bobbing in her wake as she came closer.

She had ribbons in her hair, but not in a prissy way. I was sure there was some name for it, for the style. Madonna or Cyndi Lauper had done it that way in the eighties. She was in her school uniform and it was a day in the middle of the week.

Her shoes, heavy black school shoes, clunked on the wooden steps and then on the boards of the verandah. She lifted her hand to knock and saw me inside, or saw something and pressed her face against the screen, using her hands to shield her eyes from the light.

'Hello,' she said. 'Is there someone there?'

I put the beer down and said, 'Yeah,' and didn't know what to say next.
'Yeah, hello.'



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She seemed to hover, silhouetted against the bright dry grass behind her and the harsh afternoon light. She was the first person who had come to the door.

‘Sorry. Come in, come in,’ I said, moving to the door and opening it.

She dropped her hands and stepped back and seemed to smirk.

‘I was just working,’ I said, though it wasn’t true. ‘Just doing a couple of things.’ She nodded. It was definitely a smirk. She was one of the cool girls at school, she had to be. ‘Even though you think I was hiding in the dark like some paranoid old lady watching you come to the door.’

‘Clutching a rolling pin in case I was about to attack?’ she said, and then she went ‘ha’ in a cool-girl this-is-all-the-laugh-I’m-giving-you kind of laugh. ‘I’m not about to attack.’

She smirked with one side of her mouth and looked up at me through the black spray of her fringe. Her eyes were dark and already she was playing some kind of game with me, or that’s how it seemed. Her voice was a little deeper and huskier than I might have expected, so her last line had come out with a hint of something that might have been menace or even seductiveness or just a pitch at adult banter. Whatever it was, it stuck with me and it punctuated the moment and it didn’t feel quite right for a conversation with a schoolgirl on my doorstep.

‘Well, that’s good,’ I said. ‘That’s a relief. I’m Curtis, by the way.’

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘I’m Annaliese.’

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