

Hypothermia

By Nicole Leong, Hornsby Girls High School

Tamin decided to take the low road that twisted, snake-like, through the tangle of bush alongside her back fence. Stopping to close the gate, she looked towards her house and almost went back inside, but she didn't. She had come this far.

Tamin zipped her parka up to her neck against the cold, rubbed her gloved hands together and watched her breath form fleeting white clouds in front of her as she walked. Her footsteps seemed louder in the winter stillness; her boots crunching on the gravel at first, and then mulchy undergrowth as the road ended and a dirt path completed the distance to the river. Tamin's thoughts were louder, her heart was louder. Her breathing determined.

There was always something washed up in the river, caught in the bramble of stones and sticks that clumped together where the river narrowed into the slip of water forming Haggarty's Creek. A dead dog, dissected parts of an old refrigerator; leftovers and lots things. The river, and the creek the river turned into, was part of Haggarty's attraction to the wider world. Her waters were deep and dark and mysterious, and rumours and myths about her secrets were passed down from father to son, mother to daughter, neighbour to neighbour. But it was Tommy who shared the secret with Tamin, which had her taking the low road to the river. Tommy who said he'd meet her there. Tommy who had promised her the gift—a gift so incredible she could not turn down.

The early morning sunlight cast tall shadows onto the muddy path, black spirits that guarded the river. '*You remember the way, don't you? Take it,*' Tommy's voice murmured in her mind. Tamin swallowed but followed this voice obediently, tracing the footprints that lead straight through the tress, only stopping to look longingly back at the winding dirt path.

Tamin winced as her fawn-coloured fleecy boots stained brown with the gloppy mud, but she continued walking, determined to find Tommy. The mud became thicker and Tamin had to stop twice, holding onto snow-covered eucalypt trees to pull herself out of the sticky mass.

'The marked eucalyptus tree,' his voice whispered, *'turn left at it.'*

The wind was biting into her cheeks, staining them bright red and her eyes were watering in the freezing wind. In desperation, Tamin closed her stinging eyes and felt blindly in front of her. Her hand hit a small dent on a smooth trunk and she opened her eyes, using her gloves to dust powdery snow off the glossy surface.

It was a beautifully carved symbol, some exotic letter which had been scraped with a paring knife. The gentle curves, the straight lines; they reminded her of Tommy, perfect in every aspect. This had to be the symbol. Realising that she was sinking in mud again, Tamin reached for a branch above her and yanked hard, freeing herself from the sludge.

That was when she saw him.

He was standing still, his face so pale it was almost luminous in the sunlight. His lips were perfectly symmetrical, and his face was framed by a mass of curls, raven-black and glinting. 'I knew you would come,' he said. Tamin bit her lip. What was wrong with him? Was it the perfect face? Or the voice—oddly high pitched, clear and ringing? Or was it his eyes, which were not his normal clear blue, but murky and faded, as if somebody had swilled them in dirty paint water? No, it was his expression.

'Hi...Tom...Tommy,' Tamin said, her teeth suddenly chattering. She vaguely wondered why she was so cold and decided it was because she hadn't bundled up warmly enough. 'Are you go...going to g...give me what you prom...promised?'

Tommy smiled. Tamin was instantly reassured and walked closer, stumbling on a small stick. 'Yes,' he said, 'are you ready?' He drew a little closer. Tamin tried to speak but the syllables came out slurry, as if she was drunk. She couldn't think, either. She wanted to huddle up and stay warm. She was so cold she did not notice Tommy smirk and edge closer to her. Finally, she found an enclosed space, a small gap in between two large trees. Tamin squeezed in between them and buried her head in her lap. She closed her eyes.

'Cold now, are you?' Tommy laughed cruelly, 'I am so cold that I radiate it. I create the snow on these trees and the ice that freezes on the flowing river. I am the god of the river, Tamin, and I am immortal, but without a life and memories I am nothing. So I steal. I took the memories from lost things, and life from that dumb dog. Now I will take yours, memories and life all in one.'

Tamin moved but didn't respond.

'You are my next prey, Tamin.' Tommy looked at her mercilessly. 'Did you really think I would grant you immortality?'

Mustering her last strength, Tamin spoke. 'I was stupid, Tommy, but so are you. If you are as cold as you say my skin will scald you no matter what.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Tommy scowled as he strolled over to her. He was so light he did not sink into the mud. *My first human prey*, Tommy thought. He touched Tamin's hand.

It was hot. So hot it was like a branding, white-hot iron. Tommy screamed, the piercing sound echoing through the trees. Then he began growing dimmer, his handsome features twisting, his features distorted as he turned paler and paler, fading...

Then he was gone.

Tamin wasn't, though. Not yet, although her skin was blue, her breathing laboured. Her mission fulfilled, Tamin gave a final gesture, a smile of victory. It was a slight twitch of her lips; nothing more, for her energy was drained. Then, her head lolled and her eyes ceased to blink as she slipped into an eternal sleep.

She had died of hypothermia, from the cold Tommy had radiated.