

Doug

G`day, Doug.

It's me, Mitch Webber.

Sorry to interrupt suddenly like this, but I'm desperate.

Troy and Brent Malley are after me.

They're the toughest kids in town and I've never seen them so angry.

It's really Dad they're angry with, but they've decided to take it out on me.

If they catch me, I'll be history.

They've got tractor starter handles.

Oh no, I'm getting a cramp in the leg from running.

Doug, I know it's been a long time, but you're the only angel I know.

Help.

My leg cramp's getting worse, Doug.

I can't run much further.

I know angels have got busy schedules.

I know you're probably in the middle of a dangerous flight or a difficult rescue.

But it's really urgent, Doug, really.

The Malleys are so near I can hear Brent's heavy breath.

I need you.

Jeez, that was close.

When I fell in front of that shop, I thought I was Malley meat for sure. Sometimes it's not so bad having small muscles.

If I had big ones like the Malleys, I'd never have been able to get through that hole in the fence.

Troy and Brent are back there now, shouting.

I need a hiding place, Doug.

That's the problem with living in a town with only seven shops, one pub, one bank, one service station and no thick forests. There aren't many good places to hide.

It'll have to be the park.

Hope my legs can make it.

This town's so remote, even if I survive the Malleys' attack, I'll probably still die before the air ambulance arrives.

Now I'm up a tree and I can catch my breath, a thought's just hit me.

You probably don't even remember who I am, Doug.

You angels probably look after so many kids you forget the details.

It's Mitch spelled M-I-T-C-H, Webber spelled W-E-B-B-E-R.

I'm the one who got my head stuck under that truck.

At the service station when I was little.

When I asked you for help, you made the driver drop his ice-cream outside the men's. So when he went down to pick it up, he saw my legs hanging under the truck and didn't jump in, start up and drag me halfway across Australia.

I'm desperate now, Doug.

Things are pretty crook here and I need your help.

I understand if you can't fit me in at once because you're busy rescuing a little kid from a fire or opening a crocodile's mouth to get a baby out.

But I'm hoping you're not, Doug.

Because Troy and Brent Malley have spotted me.

I suppose a tree wasn't such a great hiding place when there are only three in the whole park.

I'm jumping.

I'm rolling in the dirt.

I'm running.

Doug, protect me like you used to, please.

I thought that was it then.

If I'd taken another half a second getting across the main street, that road train would have killed me.

I was glad it came along, but.

The Malleys had to wait for it to pass, which gave me time to get in here.

The dunnies at the service station.

It's OK, Doug, it's not as bad a hiding place as it sounds.

I'm a boy and I'm in the ladies'.

If anyone comes in, I'll tell them I'm looking for the brush Gran lost a couple of months ago.

Wait a minute, Doug.

Of course.

If you don't remember me, you must remember Gran.

She was the one who told me about you, when I was little.

Oh no.

The Malleys are next door in the men's.

My breath's so loud they've heard me.

Here we go again.

I've never been that good at athletics, but I reckon if sprinting through a service station was a school event, I'd be in with a chance. Specially if I had very angry twins chasing me.

Now I remember what Gran used to tell me about you.

'He's not like one of those guardian angels in the Bible,' she used to say. 'Doug's invisible, he doesn't do violence and he's very busy. So if you need him, you've got to ask.

'I'm asking now, Doug.

You're probably wondering, Doug, why I'm not asking anyone around here for help. Why I'm not running into people's houses or something like that. Things have changed since I last gave you a call, Doug. Everyone in town hates me now. They hate Dad and Mum and Gran too. I'll explain why when I've finished climbing up into Mr Conkey's old shed.

Sorry that took a while, Doug.

I'm hoping the Malleys won't think of looking all the way up here in the rafters.

With a bit of luck.

Or I mean with a bit of help from you, Doug.

Luck's something we haven't had much of around here lately.

Remember how last time you were round this way it hadn't rained for nearly four years?

Well, we haven't had any rain for eight years now, except for a few drops last January, which everyone reckoned was from an old dunny on a Qantas jet.

It's a really crook drought, everyone says so.

Everyone's in trouble, but Dad's getting the worst of it.

Remember how he used to be one of the most popular blokes in town?

Well now everyone hates him.

I've tried to explain to people that Dad's just doing his job.

That it's what a bank manager has to do - write reports on families who are going broke because the drought's killed their sheep and dried up their paddocks.

That it's not his fault the bank gets nervous when broke families can't pay back the money they've borrowed.

That it's not his fault the bank takes their farms instead.

I've told people a million times how much Dad hates writing those reports.

I'm always reminding people that Dad's the same kind bloke he was before the drought. But every time the bank chucks a family off their land, everyone thinks it's Dad's fault. I tell them he's as upset about it as they are. I tell them it's the bank's bosses in the city that chuck people off their land, not Dad.

But they don't listen.

They just turn away and act like I'm a bus stop.

Which hurts a fair bit, because our town hasn't got any bus stops.

It's Dad I'm more worried about, Doug.

If kids chuck my bag on the roof, I can climb up and get it, but Dad can't if his customers do that to him.

He's too heavy to be a good climber.

The other kids do chuck my bag around a fair bit.

I reckon they hate me almost as much as their parents hate Dad.

I've tried not to think about it too much.

Until this arvo.

I went down to Conkey's Store for some chips.

Troy and Brent Malley were waiting for me.

When I saw the expressions on their faces and the tractor starter handles in their hands, I knew my worst dream had come true.

If only Dad had warned me the bank was going to chuck the Malleys off their land.

I could have ...

Hang on, what's that noise?

Oh, no.

Doug.

The Malleys are up here.

They must have climbed up the back of the shed.

They're coming towards me along the rafter.

Doug, help, I'm on a thin bit of wood miles from the ground with killer twins after me.

There's only one thing I can do.

Jump onto the next rafter.

The Malleys are trying to grab me.

I'm jumping.

I've made it.

I'm on the other rafter. I'm not.

I'm falling. Doug...

I'm not dead.

I can move both my arms, tad both my legs.

Doug, you did it.

Jeez, I'd forgotten how good you are at this angel stuff.

It must take years of training to make a person who's falling from that high land exactly on some empty cardboard boxes and not on the hard floor.

Thanks, Doug.

Troy and Brent can't believe it.

They're staring down with their mouths open.

Even from this far away I can see that their faces have gone white and their legs are shaking.

I'm shaking too.

On the inside as well.

Not because of the fall, Doug.

Because I'm so happy and excited.

You've come back.

Slightly adapted from: Belly Flop by Morris Gleitzman