Dents
by Chloe Smith

That day I was running aimlessly, just for the incredible feeling of the wind whipping wildly across my skin. I held my arms out, a grin lighting up my face because it almost felt like I was flying.

But if I was up, then, of course -

I came crashing down spectacularly, scraping my knee on the cruel ashen pavement in the process. Red blood pooled on my pale skin and I felt tears spurt out of my eyes like hot water from a tap. My mouth hung open - a plug hole, gaping, filling with the salty, bitter water that dripped down my face, as I stared down at my wound.

Then my Father found me, scooped me up softly in his big hard hands, and carried me inside.

He told me, while I was crying, that I could very easily hurt myself if I wasn't careful. ‘Like a car. How they get really bad dents.’

I nodded. I liked cars. I understood them.

From then on, I was careful to avoid getting more of these painful dents - even after the red rust on my knee fell off. For 8 years after that, in fact, I made sure to stay hidden, safe. Huddled up in the dark like cars are, to avoid getting rained on.

Then he called me into his classroom one afternoon - I think it was my second day there, in the big school. He was my English teacher, - Mr Richards. I remember because his last name was my Father's first. His forehead was creased with concern, as he had noticed that I was so withdrawn, so joyless, like a nervous plant that shies away from the sun.

'Why?' Was all he had to ask. Just that one word, in all its simplicity.

I felt the pain radiate through my knee, through that tiny scar that caused a small dip in my skin. My first, and only dent. But it didn't stop there, I felt it move like a wave, relentless right up through my bones, my nerves and into my brain. I winced, but the answer, almost triggered by this current of hurt, came easily, as I told him the whole story.

'So I just avoid the fun stuff 'cause I don't want to get hurt, Sir. I don't want any more dents.' I said when I was done.

He didn't respond. Instead, he showed me his hands, all creased and yellowed and aged, like old paper.

But more than that, I realised, when I looked closer.

His fingers were all bent, a fleshy optical illusion. Almost as if they'd broken and been put back together with glue, but whoever fixed them couldn't get them back on exactly straight.

He told me he near destroyed them in a motorcycle accident when he was driving recklessly as a teen. Then he held them up to show me properly and stared at them too, remembering, or counting the broken pieces.

‘For a while, I regretted even setting foot on my bike that day, even though before it happened I was having the time of my life.’ He said, after a moment, laying his hands on the polished wood of his desk. ‘But after a while, I realised something really important. Everyone gets these dents. And anyway, they only give things character.’ He smiled, the creases around his eyes getting deeper.

‘Character?’ I asked, wondering if this was some kind of literature lesson instead.

‘Sure, nothing goes through life and comes out spotless at the end of it, not if you've got some joy out of it, anyway. It's all just a sign of a life well lived.’ He replied. ‘Everyone gets dents, James. Even if you can't see them. So, avoiding them is silly, especially if you sacrifice happiness just to end up making them.’

I looked down, at where it would be, hidden underneath the grey cotton. That pitiful scar that was enough to write me off as scrap for so long.

Well not anymore, I thought, as I nodded at him, and suddenly mustered up the strength to pull open the large metal shutters in my mind, just by an inch, just enough to let in the sun. It’s funny what words can do, just by being planted in our minds, like seeds. What they can feed, or grow into. Because as his nestled into my grey matter, I vowed, there and then, to smile again.

Even if it cost me a little more blood, skin, or tears. Bone, even.

I started right then, tried to turn up the corners of my mouth to hesitantly offer him one. It sputtered, then faltered; I couldn't really pull it off, but it was a start.

He returned it though, fuller, proper. And then the bell rang, loud and harsh -

The lesson was over. I had to go.

But right before I did, I stopped for just a second in the doorway and watched him. Assuming me gone, he turned towards his desktop computer, while absentmindedly drumming a gentle tune on his desk as he did. His two twisted fingers looked as if they were dancing to it together, that wordless duet…

As I watched, strangely captivated, I suddenly felt a soft breeze hit me from all the students rushing past to get to their classes.

It was then, as if by some magic, that I remembered - my arms out wide, embracing the world as the wind whistled past. I could almost feel the joy coursing through me like never before as my feet left the ground, as I damn near flew…

That was worth all of it, I thought. And it was then that I felt my face split into a grin, for the first time in years.

I still look for it sometimes and smile absentmindedly, even though it's long faded. Not to worry - there's plenty more that take its place. And I love every single one of them, my dents. Byproducts of living.

Biography: Chloe Smith is a disabled writer and poet from the UK. She is a Foyle Young Poet of the Year 2015, and her flash fiction has been published in Ellipsis Zine and The Ginger Collect. For more about her writing visit her website: https://chloesmithwrites.wordpress.com/. She's also on Twitter, @ch1oewrites.