



TURBULENCE

by Paul Mason

That week, an email from Cooper's dad arrived out of nowhere. It had two attachments: a photo and a plane ticket to Australia.

Cooper's mum wasn't so keen. "Unaccompanied minor," she said, reading the form from the airline. "I don't like the sound of that!"

"It'll be fine," Cooper said. He wanted his mum to feel OK about things.

The night before the flight, Cooper tried to remember what it felt like, being with his dad. While Mum packed, he studied the photo that had come with the email. It was an old one, taken the first time they went on an overnight tramp. Dad was wearing a silly bush hat. He had a big smile, with soft creases around his eyes. "Laugh lines" Mum called them. Cooper wondered if his dad still had them.

At the airport, Mum bought a hot chocolate and a muffin as a treat. "There's still a bit of time before we check you in," she said, holding Cooper's hand a little tighter than usual. They wandered over to the bookshop and looked at children's books before Mum found the one she wanted. "This was my favourite when I was young," she explained.

Mum paid for the book and handed it to Cooper. "For the plane. You'll call as soon as you get there, right?"

"Right," said Cooper, giving his mum a hug.



The first jolt hit the plane during lunch. The orange juice in Cooper's plastic cup sloshed back and forth like a wave. Another judder, more violent than the first, made the plane lurch sideways. Cooper pulled off his headphones and grabbed hold of the armrests. The flight attendants stopped serving and steadied their trolleys. Row after row of seats shook. The lockers overhead creaked. Then came the soft, almost cheerful ding of the bell, and the seatbelt light came on. All over the cabin, safety belts clicked. Was flying always like this?

The man beside Cooper leaned over. "Turbulence," he said. "If they start packing those trolleys away, you know it's bad."

Cooper stared at the flight attendants, willing them to carry on serving, willing the awful juddering to come to an end. His palms felt damp.

"Cabin crew to your stations," said the captain over the intercom.

"There go the trolleys," said the man. He chuckled grimly.

Cooper watched with alarm as the attendants bustled past. Now the plane shook even more. Outside the small window, the wings bounced. Cooper scrunched his eyes shut. Why did he ever agree to visit Dad?

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Cooper's mum never bad-mouthed his father. She just didn't talk about him that much. But Cooper knew how she felt. There used to be a photo of his parents stuck to the fridge with four little magnets. It had been taken at some party. Dad was doing the bunny ears behind Mum's head. She was laughing. Then one day, the photo was gone.

The plane gave another, much bigger lurch. There was nervous laughter. Cooper stared at his shoes – then he remembered the book Mum had given him. It was in the pocket of the seat in front of him. He let go of the armrests and reached for it.

The book's shiny yellow cover was smooth and perfect, the pages unturned. It was so much better than a movie. Cooper breathed deeply and opened at the first chapter. The words rushed at him. It was a story about a boy visiting his cousin on her farm for the summer. There was a strange, old prospector; a secret tunnel; a yellow gas that took them to another world. Cooper lost himself, ignoring the lurching and the juddering. Then gradually, everything calmed down. A bit later, the seatbelt sign switched off.

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At the airport, Dad was there to pick him up, just like he'd said. He looked older than in the photograph – and thinner. They hugged a little stiffly, then Dad signed the forms and thanked the woman from the airline. Cooper called Mum to tell her he'd arrived.

"Let's get a look at you," said Dad when they were waiting for Cooper's bag. "You've grown heaps and heaps," he grinned. The smile slowly slipped from his face. "It's been way too long."

"That's OK," said Cooper.

"No, it's not," said Dad. "It's really not."

Cooper didn't know what to say. They found his bag and went to wait for the bus.

"That was your first time on a plane, right?" Dad said after a while.

"It was real rough. The seatbelt light was on for ages. I was scared, so I read my book."

"Can I take a look?" Dad asked. He smiled when he saw the title.

"You're kidding. This was one of my favourites!"

"Really?" said Cooper.

"True story," said Dad.

"It made me forget the shaking."

"You get that," said Dad. "Some flights are worse than others."

"I guess," said Cooper. He wouldn't know.

Dad went quiet again. "I wasn't all that good to be around for a while, Coop," he said finally. "But things can change." His father wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. Then the bus came.

"Does your apartment have a pool?" Cooper asked as the bus pulled away. "I'm getting good at swimming. Mum takes me to the pool all the time."

Dad laughed. "Yep. It's as big as a lake."

"That sounds cool," said Cooper.

"Your mum always did like the water," said Dad with a smile.



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Published 2016 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 0 478 16779 5 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Jodi Wicksteed
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Ross Calman, and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 NOVEMBER 2016

Curriculum learning areas	English Health and Physical Education
Reading year level	Year 5
Keywords	books, change, divorce, family, flying, growth, loss, reading, relationships, separation, turbulence